

United States Labor History: Wobblies Past and Present - The demise of the original IWW

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Radical historian Staughton Lynd on the lessons we can draw from the demise of the original IWW.

Contents

- [1. Macho Posturing](#)
- [2. Avoiding Controversial](#)
- [3. Falling Into the Divide-and](#)

The Wobblies are back. Many young radicals find the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) the most congenial available platform on which to stand in trying to change the world. This effort has been handicapped by the lack of a hard-headed history of the IWW in its initial incarnation, from 1905 to just after World War I. The existing literature, for example Franklin Rosemont's splendid book on Joe Hill, is strong on movement culture and atmosphere. It is weak on why the organization went to pieces in the early 1920s.

Eric Chester's new book, *Wobblies In Their Heyday*, fills this gap. It is indispensable reading for Wobblies and labor historians. One way to summarize what is between these covers is to say that Chester spells out three tragic mistakes made by the old IWW that the reinvented organization must do its best to avoid.

1. Macho Posturing

At its peak in August 1917, the IWW had a membership of more than 150,000. Nine months later, Chester writes, "the union was in total disarray, forced to devote most of its time and resources to raising funds for attorneys and bail bonds." This sad state of affairs was, of course, partly the result of a calculated decision by the federal government to destroy the IWW. But only partly.

According to Chester another cause of the government's successful suppression of the Wobblies was that during and after the 1913 Wheatlands strike in California hop fields, some Wobblies threatened to "burn California's agricultural fields if two leaders of the strike were not released from jail."

For years, Wobbly leaders had insisted that sabotage could force employers to make concessions. But what Chester terms "nebulous calls for arson" and "macho bravado" only stiffened the determination of California authorities not to modify jail sentences for Wobbly leaders Richard Ford and Herman Suhr.

Chester finds no credible evidence that any fields were, in fact, burned. But after the United States entered World War I in April 1917, this extravagant rhetoric calling for the destruction of crops apparently helped to convince President Wilson to initiate a systematic and coordinated campaign to suppress the Wobblies.

2. Avoiding Controversial Stances to Avoid State Repression

International solidarity and militant opposition to war and the draft were central tenets of the IWW. Wobblies who had enrolled in the British Army were expelled from the union. At the union's tenth general convention in November 1915, the delegates adopted a resolution calling for a "General Strike in all industries" should the United States enter the war.

What actually happened was that general secretary-treasurer Bill Haywood and a majority of IWW leaders agreed that the union should desist from any discussion of the war or the draft, in the vain hope that this policy would persuade the federal government to refrain from targeting the union for repression. At the same time, the great majority of rank-and-file members, with support of a few leaders such as Frank Little, insisted that the IWW should be at the forefront of the opposition to the war.

Self-evidently, what Chester terms the IWW's "diffidence" was the very opposite of Eugene Debs's defiant opposition to the war [\[1\]](#). When Wobbly activists "flooded IWW offices with requests for help and pleas for a collective response to the draft," the usual response was that what to do was up to each individual member.

Haywood, Chester notes, "consistently sought to steer the union away from any involvement in the draft resistance movement." Debs notwithstanding, the national leadership of the Socialist Party, like the national leadership of the IWW, "scrambled to avoid any confrontation with federal authorities." Radical activists from both organizations formed ad hoc alliances cutting across organizational boundaries.

The IWW General Executive Board was unable to arrive at a decision about the war and conscription, and a committee tasked with drafting a statement that included both Haywood and Little failed to do so. In the end, Chester says, "the IWW sought to position itself as a purely economic organization concerned solely with short-run gains in wages and working conditions."

3. Falling Into the Divide-and-Conquer Trap

The reluctance of the Wobbly leadership to advocate resistance to the war and conscription carried over to a legalistic response when the government indicted IWW leaders. Haywood urged all those named in the indictment to surrender voluntarily and to waive any objection to being extradited to Chicago. In the mass trial that followed, the defendants were represented by a very good trial lawyer who was also an enthusiastic supporter of the war and passed up the opportunity to make a closing statement to the jury.

The judge's superficial fairness deluded Wobs into hoping for a good outcome. The jury took less than an hour to find all one hundred defendants guilty of all counts in the indictment. Ninety-three received lengthy prison terms. They were imprisoned in Leavenworth, described by Chester as "a maximum-security penitentiary designed for hardened, violent criminals." Forty-six more defendants were found guilty after another mass conspiracy trial in Sacramento.

Thereafter, Chester writes, the “process of granting a commutation of sentence was manipulated during the administration of Warren Harding to divide and demoralize IWW prisoners.” The ultimate result was “the disastrous split of 1924, leaving the union a shell of what it had been only seven years earlier.”

Executive clemency, like that granted to Debs, was the only hope for the imprisoned Wobblies. President Harding rejected any thought of a general amnesty, obliging each prisoner to fill out the form requesting amnesty as an individual. The application form contained an implicit admission of guilt. (The newly created ACLU supported this process.)

Twenty-four IWW prisoners opted to submit a form requesting amnesty. A substantial majority refused to plead for individual release. More than seventy issued a statement in which they insisted that “all are innocent and all must receive the same consideration.”

The government insisted on a case-by-case approach. Fifty-two prisoners responded that they refused to accept the president’s division of the Sacramento prisoners, still alleged to have burned fields, from the Chicago prisoners. Moreover, they considered it a “base act” to “sign individual applications and leave the Attorney General’s office to select which of our number should remain in prison and which should go free.”

Initially, the IWW supported those prisoners who refused to seek their freedom individually. Those who had submitted personal requests for presidential clemency were expelled from the union.

In June 1923, the government once again dangled before desperate men the prospect of release, now available for those individual prisoners promising to remain “law-abiding and loyal to the Government.” This time a substantial majority of the remaining prisoners accepted Harding’s offer, and IWW headquarters, in what Chester calls “a sweeping reversal,” gave its approval. Eleven men at Leavenworth declined this latest government inducement. In addition, those who were tried in California did not receive the same offer.

In December 1923, the remaining IWW prisoners at Leavenworth, including twenty-two who had been convicted in Sacramento, were released unconditionally. The damage had been done. Those who had held out the longest launched a campaign within the IWW to expel those who had supported a form of conditional release. There were accusations against anyone who had allegedly proved himself “a scab and a rat.”

When a convention convened in 1924, both sides claimed the headquarters office and went to court. An organization consisting of the few hundred members who had supported the consistent rejection of all government offers “faded into oblivion by 1931.”

It is not the intent of Chester’s book, or of this review, to trash the IWW. This review has dealt with only about half of the material in the book (for example passing by the story of Wobbly organizing in copper, both at Butte, Montana and Bisbee, Arizona). Moreover, anyone who lived through the disintegration of Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panthers is familiar with tragedies like those described here.

The heroism of members of all three groups who were martyrs — such as Frank Little, Fred Hampton, and the Mississippi Three (James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner) — remains. The vision of a qualitatively different society — as the Zapatistas say, “un otro mundo” — remains also.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.06.2014:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/wobblies-past-and-present/>

An earlier version of this post appeared at MRZine.

* Staughton Lynd is a historian and a lawyer. His most recent book, *Doing History from the Bottom Up: On E P. Thompson, Howard Zinn, and Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below*, has just been published by Haymarket Books.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/court.htm>