

Peter Cole, David Struthers, & Kenyon Zimmer (eds)
Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW
London: Pluto Press, 2017, 312 pp

Fellow Worker

BARRY PATEMAN

Formed in June 1905 at a Chicago conference, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) immediately set out to break up the existing US labour landscape. In his opening address to the conference, William Dudley 'Big Bill' Haywood of the Western Federation of Miners stated that 'We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have as its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism'. This preamble to the formation of the IWW made it clear that 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common'. As well as taking aim at US capitalism, the conference also attacked what delegates saw as the inadequacy of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the principal US labour organisation of the period. As a craft-based organisation, the AFL, by design or default, excluded the majority of US workers from its ranks: women, those who were unskilled, migrant workers, and, of course, recent immigrants. The IWW aimed to go out and recruit those workers into the struggle against capitalism and to avoid all forms of conciliation with their employers. This meant organising in areas that had never been organised and working with ethnic groups in which the AFL had no interest and whose presence in the US

some of its membership actively opposed.¹

After a stuttering start, the IWW grew into an impressive and, it might be argued, rather prescient organisation. It soon showed itself capable of remarkable tactical creativity. Banned from speaking on street corners in a city, the IWW would create a battle over free speech. Every time an IWW member was arrested for speaking, another would take their place, aiming to flood jails and jam the legal system. The IWW employed the use of song and cartoons to rouse members and mock opposition. It practiced sabotage while also encouraging and supporting strike action whether or not it was organised by them. IWW members (self-styled ‘Wobblies’) deliberately courted publicity and were not shy in extolling the organisation’s qualities in as many places as they could. It operated from the bottom up and this autonomy enabled a speed of action that was rather unique in US labour history. We would be remiss, also, not to mention the personal bravery of some of the membership in the face of brutal and murderous attacks engineered by local employers, local and national media, and the US state. Underpinning all this was the almost conscious myth-making about the organisation and its individuals from members and supporters, myths made around campfires, on trains and boats, and in local halls. For some, the IWW existed as a mythical entity just as much as a real one.

It appears to have been a challenge for historians, and radicals for that matter, to research and write about the IWW. After an initial flurry of books about them, it was not until the 1960s that historians made any real attempts to understand the organisation and its culture. Three major works attempted a general history and overview of the IWW, instigating a more contemporary analysis of its activities and ideology. Joyce Kornbluh’s *Rebel Voices*, a documentary-based history, showed evidence of wonderful research but concentrated only on English-language sources.² Philip Foner’s history

1 See, for example, the career of Olav Tveitmoe, editor of *Organized Labor*, newspaper of the San Francisco Building Trades Council. General Secretary of the Council from 1901–1922, Tveitmoe and other San Francisco AFL members played leading roles in the Asian Exclusion League.

2 Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965).

of the IWW is an infuriating read.³ Foner couples some new research with a sloppy approach to facts and an overarching thesis in which he argues the IWW was a brave and bold precursor to the Communist Party (of which he was a member) that made essential errors because it was lacking the dose of Marxist-Leninism so necessary for a fighting union. Melvyn Dubovsky's *We Shall Be All* attempts an organisational history of the IWW and covers many of its historical bases but is essentially a top-down history (which in the case of the IWW leaves so much out) again relying on English-language sources.⁴ All three are worth reading, if only to understand the challenges the IWW presents for historians in attempting to capture its realities. The uninitiated reader might like to start with Fred Thomson's *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years*, which adopts a chronological approach to the organisation and is a reliable guide to its activities.⁵

There are, of course, other works. Abandoning an overall history, many writers concentrated on key events in IWW history—Everett, Centralia, the great strikes at Lawrence and Paterson. But it is only in the last 30 years or so that we have been presented with a more complex and dynamic understanding of the IWW and some of its membership.⁶ Much of this rich understanding has come about because of a growing awareness of the organisation's international constituency. It is salutary to realise that, although three of the IWW's newspapers before World War One were in English, eleven were for readers who spoke other languages—Italian, Finnish, Swedish, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian, Polish, Czech, and Portuguese. That alone gives us a sense of the rich cultural mix of the organisation as well as the difficulty one would face in writing about it without understanding this breadth. We have also been helped by

3 Phillip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume 4: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965).

4 Melvyn Dubovsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1969).

5 Fred Thompson and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First 70 Years* (Chicago: IWW, 1975).

6 For a detailed bibliography of writing on the IWW see Steve Kellerman, *A Century of Writing on the IWW, 1905–2005, An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston: Boston General Membership Branch, IWW, 2005).

excellent biographies of some IWW members and a ground-breaking book by Salvatore Salerno which concentrated on the grassroots membership, detailing the relationships between American workers and transnational comrades and the political ideas that sprang from these relationships.⁷ Of all the recent books on the IWW, Salerno's was the most responsible for changing the way we look at the organisation.

Alongside non-English newspapers and pamphlets, the concentration on more local histories of the organisation opened our eyes to the remarkable progress the IWW made between 1905 and 1917. The IWW's 1905 constitution asserted that 'No working man or woman shall be excluded from membership in local unions because of creed or color'. In line with this approach, the IWW made sizeable progress in working with Japanese agricultural workers and fruit pickers in California. It worked with the ethnically diverse Brotherhood of Timber Workers in the American South, as well as forming the Marine Transport Workers Local No 8 on the Philadelphia waterfront, which was a mix of African-American workers, Irish-American workers, and recent European immigrants. The IWW also worked with Mexican copper miners and workers in the southwestern states and played a key role in the strikes in the textile mills of Paterson and Lawrence, where Italian immigrant women were prominent in organising and speaking. Its members agitated among the unemployed in New York City and founded the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO) in April 1915, a move that brought thousands of itinerant rural workers into the IWW. Countless other examples indicate the inclusiveness of the IWW both in recruiting its membership and in its support of strike actions by non-members.

When we write about the IWW in this context, we need to emphasise that it is usually the Chicago IWW and not the Detroit IWW that we are writing about. The latter was expelled from the IWW in 1908 over the

⁷ See, for example, Franklin Rosemont's monumental study of Joe Hill: *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2003). It is both a biography of Hill and a study of the IWW as an organisation of cultural opposition. Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

question of the usefulness of political action. The Chicago IWW supporters argued that it was economic and not political action on the part of workers that would bring about a better world. It would be workers themselves who would make this new world, not their representatives in parliament. This approach saw writers agonising about whether the organisation was industrial-unionist or syndicalist or not. One cannot help but feel that, because of what now seems a rather sterile debate, something of the IWW was lost, something that this recent volume edited by Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer attempts to recover.

The name Industrial Workers of the World adopted at the founding conference was a carefully considered one. ‘The emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism’ would not take place only in America; it would take place throughout the world. At the conference, Lucy Parsons, wife of the legendary Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons, thought that the organisation should be the American Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World.⁸ *Wobblies of The World: A Global History of the IWW* uses that idea as a platform to ‘proudly proclaim itself the first-ever global history of the Industrial Workers of the World’ and begins with a most informative and helpful introduction, covering IWW history and historiography. This is supplemented by 19 essays from different scholars examining the role of the IWW on the international stage. The book is divided into three sections: ‘Transnational Influences on the IWW’, ‘The IWW in the Wider World’, and ‘Beyond the Union: The IWW’s Influence and Legacies’.

The first section certainly adds to our understanding of the complexity of the IWW in the US. Zimmer offers a detailed assessment of immigrant-anarchist influences within the IWW; his piece is followed by a nuanced discussion from Dominique Pinsolle on how the IWW re-interpreted the concept of sabotage. Tony Khan discusses early-20th-century IWW–South East Asia connections, an informative read offering potential for further fascinating research. Struthers essay on interracial organising in the

8 *Proceedings of the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Labor New Company, 1905), 295, 299.