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The U.S. government's war against the IWW

A Symposium on The Wobblies in their Heyday

Anarcho-Syndicalist Review

2015

Eric Chester, *The Wobblies in their Heyday: The Rise and Destruction of the Industrial Workers of the World during the World War I Era*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014. 316 pages, \$58, hardcover.

Eric Chester's new book on the IWW focuses on the period leading up to the U.S. government's decision to crush the organization, and to the massive repression unleashed against the union during World War I. Based upon an impressive array of archival sources, many previously unavailable, Chester argues that the IWW appealed to many workers precisely because of its radicalism but that IWW leaders made a series of strategic errors that undermined their ability to build the broader radical coalition necessary to prevail.

ASR has published three articles by Eric Chester: two on IWW history (one on the Wheatland Hops case appears in longer form in this book; the other examined IWW membership levels from World War I through the mid-1920s) and an analysis of a Danish

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general strike for shorter hours. His previous books include *True Mission: Socialists and the Labor Party Question in the U.S.*; *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic*; and *Covert Network: Progressives, the International Rescue Committee and the CIA*.

Chester offers detailed accounts of the Bisbee and Butte mining strikes, offering a sympathetic portrayal of IWW organizer Frank Little in the process, though he is critical of Little's proposal to resume picketing when strike support waned (strikers originally decided against picketing in order to avoid confrontations with gun thugs), and seems to suggest that Little should have heeded warnings to go into hiding at a critical moment in the strike. (Little was lynched two days later.) He discusses California Wobblies' resort to empty threats in a counter-productive effort to free Ford and Suhr (imprisoned for their role in a strike of hops pickers) – substituting rhetorical bluster for the power they had been unable to build in the fields. (The argument that national IWW leaders supported this, or that government officials were provoked to crush the IWW by this campaign is less persuasive.)

Chester also offers a detailed analysis of the IWW's legal strategy, which he argues exhibited a naive faith that justice could be had in the U.S. courts. He demonstrates that the Chicago espionage trial was a show trial whose outcome was pre-arranged by prosecutors and the judge and presents evidence suggesting promises of leniency if the Wobblies played along. (Instead, the judge handed down savage sentences that shocked many observers.)

The book focuses on IWW activity and government repression in the Western United States; the IWW looks like a very different organization when examining its work in the maritime, textiles and timber industries, or its substantial membership among the immigrants who made up so large a share of the U.S. working class. (The claim that the IWW failed to sink deep or lasting roots in working-class communities, for example, ignores textile, longshore and seafarers branches that lasted for decades, as well as a network

of Finnish branches that sustained a daily newspaper, several large halls, a traveling theater troupe, etc.) And while Chester is surely correct that the union suffered a far more devastating blow than is acknowledged in its official history, it remains true that the IWW was far from crushed. The IWW launched several major organizing drives in the 1920s and 1930s, reopened its halls and newspapers, and maintained a significant industrial presence in manufacturing and maritime.

We offer four takes on this important addition to the historiography on the IWW. We asked each reviewer for critical reflections on the book and “what this history can tell us about the challenges and prospects facing those trying to rebuild a labor movement that envisions itself as part of a broader emancipatory project.”

Staughton Lynd has written countless books on history, labor law and political theory; is a longtime advocate of solidarity unionism; and a life-long participant in and student of radical social struggles. His books include *Doing History From the Bottom Up*, *The New Rank and File*, and *Wobblies & Zapatistas*.

Peter Cole is professor of history at Western Illinois University, wrote *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive Era Philadelphia* (University of Illinois) and edited *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly, including Fellow Worker Fletcher's Writings & Speeches* (Charles H. Kerr). He is currently working on a book titled *Dockworker Power: Struggles in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*.

Gerald Ronning is chair of the liberal arts department at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. His dissertation explored the IWW in the West and offers the most authoritative available account of IWW martyr Frank Little.

Steve Kellerman is a longtime Wobbly, retired machinist and compiler of *An Annotated Bibliography of Books on the IWW* (2007), a comprehensive list of books published in the IWW's first 100 years with brief but useful assessments of each.