

Why I Joined the Industrial Workers of the World

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Back in probably 2004, maybe 2005, I was working in Portland, Oregon as a landscaper. It was a small crew, just three of us and our boss. Our boss was, for the most part, pretty cool. He didn't work us to the bone. He was flexible about time off. He was down to call me Magpie. He paid us under the table. Sometimes he'd cancel work to go surfing. That kind of guy.

In fact, after my first week of work, I told him: "hey I'm going to leave for about a month to go block roads in Southern Oregon to stop this old growth timber sale, maybe do some treesitting. When I come back, can I have my job back?" and he said yes, and so I left for a month, and then I came back and got my job back. One morning, he called me before work and said "hey you don't have to come into work today if you don't want to, we're going to be taking down a tree." I told him my problem was with old-growth logging, not all cutting of trees, but I appreciated his concern.

But one day, we discovered a problem. There were three of us on his crew. I wasn't out as trans yet, so I was a boy, and there was another boy, and there was a girl. The girl was the tallest and the strongest of the three of us. We found out she was getting 25 cents less an hour than I was. This wouldn't do. All three of us were anarchists, so we marched on down to the Red & Black Cafe, where we knew we'd find some wobblies... some people from the Industrial Workers of the World. "The anarchist union," we saw it, though that's only half true. "The anarchist-friendly, direct-action-focused union that was started by a combination of anarchists and socialists a hundred years ago" would be a more accurate, but wordy, way to describe it.

We marched on down there, went up to the wobblies, and said "we are 100% of our workplace and we are ready to go on strike tomorrow to demand equal pay for women and men."

The wobblies looked over at us, and one of them said "yeah, cool, we have our open meetings for new members the first Sunday of every second month, and last one was next week, so come back in seven weeks and we'll get you signed up."

So on that day, I didn't become a wobbly.

Instead, the next morning, the three of us reported to work and told our boss "you've got a choice. Either you pay her the same rate you pay Magpie, or you don't have any employees anymore."

So she got a raise, and I went back to digging holes for \$10 an hour, and I learned something simple and universally true: there is power in a union.

Then, being me, I successfully saved up enough money for a plane ticket to the Netherlands, I quit my job, and flew across the ocean to live in a squat and try and fail to fall in love.

The history of 19th century unionism in the United States is, frankly, appalling. As often as not, unions acted more as white supremacist organizations than as instruments to advance the interests of the working class. When you have a union that excludes non-white workers, which was most of the unions, you've got an organization whose purpose is to maintain the white supremacist power structure. It's as simple as that.

There were exceptions to this explicit racism, of course, but overall, the first unions in the US are not looking good.

Then, in 1905, a group of socialists and anarchists met up in Chicago and formed the Industrial Workers of the World, a syndicalist, antiracist, anti-sexist union. They spread like wildfire, organizing people traditional unions had rejected or ignored—migrant laborers and hoboes and immigrant workers from the “bad” parts of Europe countries like Italy and Eastern Europe as well as folks from China and Mexico.

When I first heard about the IWW, I was confused by the name. I'd assumed they organized laborers who did “industrial” work. People who, I don't know, melted metal in furnaces or hit things with hammers. People who listened to Nitzer Ebb and Nine Inch Nails, maybe, or at least the people who *made* nails.

That's not the idea behind industrial unionism at all. “Industrial” in this context means “entire industries.” This is compared to “trade unionism.” In trade unionism, you might have a brakeman's union and a conductors union and “people who lay the railroad tracks” union that are all separate from each other. In industrial unionism, everyone who works at the railroad at all is in the same big union.

This removes one of the primary means by which bosses can break the union. You can no longer negotiate separately with the conductors and therefore pit their interests against the brakemen.

The antiracism and antisexism of the IWW functioned to stop one of the other ways in which the working class was divided: white supremacy has long been one of the most effective tools capitalism has to wield against the working class, and whenever white workers would strike, bosses would bring in Black (or Chinese, or Mexican, depending on which region of the country) strikebreakers and stir up a little race war.

As a result of the IWW's organizing, you have places like the Philly docks, where in the 1910s Black and white longshoremen organized together. Everyone who worked on the dock organized together, from those that worked the deep sea docks (who were previously paid the best) to the dock's firefighters, all in Local 8 of the IWW. They were democratic, and they weren't afraid of direct action, and they dramatically improved their own lives by working together.

The history of 19th century unionism in America is embarrassing due to how unions functioned primarily as agents of white supremacy. Mid-20th century unionism doesn't have a much better reputation, because unions, once they were entrenched, became their own power structure prone to their own corruption. Their ties to organized crime got deeper, and some even got

in bed with the bosses. Even despite the corruption, a union job has always been better for the worker than a non-union job, and many of the major unions did eventually drive out their own corruption. But still, the early 20th century work of the IWW stands out shining bright in contrast to the majority of union organizing that came before and after.

The wobblies were and are people who had no interest in building corruptible structures, who had and have no fear of actually fighting.

In my research for my history podcast, the IWW came up over and over again. Some of it I knew about—like the free speech fights out West where hoboes would show up by the hundreds and thousands to get arrested for organizing in boom towns, getting themselves thrown in jail until eventually the town would have to free them all and allow free speech again. People died during those fights, owing to mistreatment in the jails. Others were assaulted and tortured by right wing mobs. But they won.

Other times, the IWW would show up in my research where I wasn't expecting it at all. Like how influential they were in the Mexican revolution: shortly before the Mexican revolution, a massive anarchist faction sort of ironically called the Liberal Party, led in part by an indigenous anarchist named Ricardo Flores Magón, staged armed uprisings around the country. In the end these uprisings collapsed, but they paved the way for a more liberal revolution within a few short years. A great deal of the organizing for those revolutions happened just across the border in the US and was done by the multiracial, international IWW who were heavily involved in organizing immigrant and Mexican mine workers at the time. Which means you've got German anarchists, rifle in hand, next to their Mexican fellow workers, fighting to free Mexico from oppression, which is a cool image.

Sometimes the threads that led back to the IWW stretched longer. The IWW's founding absolutely changed the course of history, around the world. Its ideas were revolutionary, not just in that they advocated revolution, but that they revolutionized what unionism could be. They brought the ideas of syndicalism to the forefront, and across the world people started organizing along industrial unionist and syndicalist—often anarcho-syndicalist—lines.

I can draw a direct line, for example, from the Black and indigenous anarchist Lucy Parsons, one of the founders of the IWW, to how in the 1920s in Germany, the anarcho-syndicalists built hundreds or thousands of underground abortion clinics, providing millions of abortions. I can draw a line from Lucy Parsons to the German anarcho-syndicalist Rudolph Rocker, who went and organized in England for a few years one time in the 1910s, bringing together Irish and Jewish immigrant laborers. The Irish dockworkers had been on strike, so they sent their kids to be fed by the Jewish tailors. In the 1930s, when British fascists tried to turn the Irish against the Jews, the Irish would have none of it, and together the Jews and the Irish beat the ever loving shit out of the fascists at the Battle of Cable Street, which put a nail in the coffin of street-level fascist organizing in 1930s England. I can look at that and say "that happened because a woman named Lucy Parsons was born into slavery in the United States and, when she was freed, dedicated her life to developing strategies by which all of us will be free not just from chattel slavery but from capitalism."

I found more and more of these threads. The IWW kept cropping up in the unlikeliest of places.

A few weeks ago, while researching that Local 8 union, the one in Philly, I decided I'd be a hypocrite to not join, and I joined the IWW.

That first heyday of the IWW came crashing down during the first red scare of 1917 or so, when anarchists and wobblies were arrested or deported en masse. The union soldiered on, but the political landscape of America was forever changed. One of the core ideas of the IWW was to unite workers along leftist ideological lines as well, but after the Russian Civil War, when the Bolsheviks crushed their fellow leftists, the idea of what it meant to be a Leftist, or Communist, or a Socialist, was forever changed as well. The Bolsheviks actually didn't much care for the IWW, it was too democratic and too hard to influence, so they backed the more liberal unions instead because they were easier to control.

The IWW's star receded. More liberal unions claimed a greater share of the working class. Eventually, those unions also became multiracial, of course, and it was still better to have a union job than a non-union job.

The IWW never went away, though. I know less about its resurgence, but I know it happened, and for decades I've been watching the IWW get things done I never thought possible. Maybe the single most impressive achievement of the IWW is called the IWOC, the incarcerated workers organizing committee. The IWW is organizing prison labor. And this isn't a top-down thing... prisoners themselves are organizing on the inside, while organizers on the outside lend their support.

I'm a freelancer without a traditional workforce, but the FJU, the freelance journalist's union, represents, well, freelance journalists. It fights, often successfully, to get unpaid wages paid. It is working on setting standards for outlets that publish freelancers.

To be honest, I don't need a union myself. My clients tend to themselves be pretty radical and pay me on time and as well as they can. It's always nice when people have your back, so I'm glad I now have this large, horizontal organization in my corner, but I didn't join the IWW for me. I joined because I believe in its mission—to organize the working class to better its own conditions and eventually do away with wage labor entirely. I joined because I believe in the work they're doing, organizing traditional and non-traditional workplaces alike.

And yeah, it was still annoying that 20 years ago the first wobblies I met weren't exactly on the ball. I'm glad I learned that direct action is more important than institutional backing. But what if our boss had said "fine, you're all fired." What then? Would the three of us have had the experience necessary to file a complaint, or the backing necessary to pressure him into paying us our unpaid wages? (The answer to both of these questions is no.)

The IWW seems to be an imperfect organization, and it's not currently at the peak of its power. But it's having a resurgence, and it's more necessary than ever. More and more people work in non-traditional workplaces, and it takes a flexible, fighting union to organize the people that traditional labor unions ignore.

So I joined the wobblies. You can too. If you sign up and pay your dues (which are sliding scale, based on your income), someone will be in touch with you to talk about what's happening locally and how you can get involved.

The preamble of the constitution of the IWW was written by Thomas Hagerty, an itinerant Catholic preacher who was kicked out of the church for his political organizing and wound up a mystic on the streets of Chicago. How can I not love it?

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.

There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the earth.

We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the evergrowing power of the employing class.

The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars.

Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to *one* an injury to *all*.

Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword,

"Abolition of the wage system."

It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.

The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown.

By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.

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