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Proposals for the Regeneration of the IWW

Addressed to the Members and Branches in
Preparation for the 1975 National Conference of the
IWW

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Photocopy from 1975 IWW Conference

Notes by Jeff Stein. This discussion paper was circulated by rank and file IWW members at the 1975 IWW Conference in Chicago held over the Labor Day weekend. The IWW was undergoing a revival due to an influx of young members and was trying to reestablish itself in US industries. A conference is different than a convention because its decisions are non-binding on the union members and officers.

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The IWW is more relevant now than ever. The IWW must *go all out to reach these rebels and foster the growth of this guerilla movement!* The IWW will retain the respect of the workers and rally the best elements of the labor movement into its ranks if it remains true to the principles so eloquently summed up in its Preamble.

As noted above, we have neither the resources nor the manpower to compete with the class-collaborationist union on *their* terms. But we can again become a powerful minority movement on *our* terms. Such a goal is not beyond the capacity of our few hundred members.

None of us has all the answers, but a wide-ranging, constructive discussion of what we can do, given our capacities, is imperative. We must explore new possibilities and collectively work out better ways of building the IWW than have so far been advanced.

Sam Dolgoff, July 1975.

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Whether they were on the payroll of the union or not, all officials and delegates had to carry out the instructions of the membership, by whom they could be recalled at any time. Decisions affecting large groups of workers were decided by referendum vote of all the members. All negotiations with the bosses, the calling and settlement of strikes, were matters to be decided directly by those on the job. The terms of the agreement were enforced by the workers themselves and the grievances were settled by means of sit-downs, slow-downs, boycotts, walkouts, or whatever means deemed desirable. These, and many other safeguards against the usurpation of power, were developed by the workers in the course of their struggles.

Whether they know it or not, today's rebels are acting in accordance with the revolutionary traditions of the American labor movement. The truest embodiment of this tradition is the IWW. Today's rebels are most receptive to our message because the IWW is itself a pioneer wild cat organization and relates best to their own experiences. The IWW is more relevant now than ever.

We have already remarked that in the course of their struggles the rebel workers have unconsciously developed IWW tactics and its grass roots forms of organization. Hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file militants in "...thousands of industrial establishments across the nation [remarks a keen observer] have developed informal underground unions...they conduct daily guerilla skirmishes with their employers and often against their union representatives as well...the informal unions are the micro-organizational units that are behind all wild cat strikes...these groups are the power base for insurgence from below..."

Another capable historian of labor notes that "...dual forms of organization – shop and factory committees, wild cat strikes, shop stewards' movements...may become important in labor movements of the future..."

In short, a vast rank-and-file mass guerilla movement is emerging.

The question of recapturing control of the unions by their membership is inseparable from demanding the independent control by the workers of their own welfare program. Mutual aid and welfare arrangements are necessary. But such matters should be handled separately and apart from the union as such. The decentralization of power and control of the union is impossible if this issue is not faced squarely.

The IWW should demand that wages, siphoned off into “fringe benefits” and “welfare” funds be paid [to workers] in cash; and urge the workers to finance the establishment of cooperative societies of various kinds which will be adequately respond to their needs.

Long before the labor movement was corrupted and government stepped in, the workers created a network of cooperative institutions of all kinds – schools, summer camps for children and adults, homes for the aged, health and cultural centers, credit associations, insurance plans, technical education, housing – The IWW should encourage the revival and expansion of such cooperatives as a realistic alternative to the “welfare” racket.

The history of the American labor movement has been largely a history of rank-and-file revolts against opportunist class-collaborationist policies and the centralization of power. Like all great popular movements, the unions could be built in only one way – from below – by the organization of the workers on the job. Hence the labor movement naturally took at its inception a decentralized federated form, with autonomous organizations in various shops, localities, trades and industries banded together in solidarity for mutual support. Within the local groups there was direct face-to-face personal contact among the members. All decisions were arrived at through common agreement. Most of the organizational work was voluntary and the few paid officials received no more than the average wage of the members. Their terms of office were limited and they were required to go back to work in production for a definite period before they were allowed to run for office again.

STATEMENT: We have not been able to organize (or hold) a single job [union shop] in over 20 years because the unorganized worker who is only interested in “What’s in it for *me*?” does not believe the IWW can “bring home the bacon” and fulfill any of his expectations that a “legitimate” labor union is able to offer him: strike benefits, insurance, pensions, sick benefits, health, social, and welfare programs; an adequate legal staff to represent the union in the courts with plenty of money to pay for these services, etc. Our enemies argue that the bosses prefer to bargain and sign contracts with a “responsible”, “respectable” union rather with the revolutionary IWW and stress the point that irrespective of our glorious record (which is “ancient history”) we have no job control anywhere. As a labor organization we “just don’t count.”

The brown-nosing scissorbill who is afraid to defend his [her] rights as a human being against the boss and his stooges, the union officials (whom he envies), is just as corrupt as they are. We must face up to the fact that the conservative wage slave is not going to join the IWW and quit wasting our meager resources and manpower trying, in vain, to do so. We have neither the resources nor the manpower to compete with the class-collaborationist unions on *their terms*.

COMMENT: Capitalizing on the spontaneous mass movement of the unorganized workers into the CIO, AFL, and independent unions the IWW from the 1930s to the mid-1950s succeeded in organizing about 1,500 workers in the Cleveland area (mostly in the Metal and Machinery Workers Industrial Union #440). This last serious and heroic attempt to put the IWW “on the map” failed; largely for the reasons outlined above. Fred Thompson in the official history of the IWW, *The IWW: Its First Fifty Years 1905–1955*¹ explains:

¹ The Cleveland IWW shops affiliated with the MESA in 1954. MESA affiliated with the AFL-CIO in 1956. Fred Thompson was one of the original organizers of the Cleveland IWW shops, along with the Cedervall brothers, Frank and Tor.

[In 1943, to cater to the prejudices of the patriotic scissorbills who did not like the Preamble of the IWW] "...pressure developed in the Cleveland branch to change the Preamble or even sever IWW connections..."(p.185).

[In 1950, the opportunists made good their threat and the] "...entire branch withdrew from the IWW...because efforts were being made by other competing unions to raid IWW shops in Cleveland..." (p,196).

The illusion that the Cleveland IWW would survive and successfully compete with the class-collaborationist unions by also signing Taft-Hartley was shattered when the former Cleveland branch of the IWW, not being able to survive as an independent union (even after signing Taft-Hartley joined the independent Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA).

Unfortunately, not even the 50,000-member MESA, a relatively radical minded union, could compete. Both the MESA and the former Cleveland IWW were swallowed up by the AFL-CIO² and disappeared without a trace. "...the loss [read, *capitulation*] of the Cleveland membership (writes Thompson) checked a possible reorganization of class-struggle unionism..."(p.197).³

Assuming, even, that our mere handful of members should miraculously organize and hold a few shops, a similar disaster awaits our organization, if it adopts the same disastrous policies.

STATEMENT: We should not compete with the class-collaborationist unions on *their terms...even if we could, because we are a revolutionary organization*. The economic organization of the working class into revolutionary industrial unions automatically *excludes* cooperation with the employers and submission to the mass of laws legalizing the regulation of the labor movement by the government. It places the IWW in unflinching opposition to the conservative unions whose very existence depends upon

² *The IWW: Its First Fifty Years 1905–1955*, by Fred Thompson. Chicago, 1955.

³ *Strike!*, by Jeremy Brecher, Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, 1972.

II) Agreements should not be legally binding and subject to repudiation when violated.

III) The responsibility for agreements does not rest with the national organization, but solely with the workers on the job who are directly concerned,

IV) *Providing* that such agreements must in no way restrict solidarity with other workers in strikes, boycotts or other forms of direct action.

Our traditional policy toward other unions should be defined in the following respects:

In unorganized jobs where the IWW is not in a position to organize we should oppose affiliation with the AFL-CIO and favor independent unions of rank-and-file workers in each plant or establishment and to achieve coordination, councils of workers' factory committees. If this is not possible, the IWW should remain neutral, stressing its own program.

We relate only to the struggles of the rank-and-file against the pie-cards and in strike situations. Under no circumstances should the IWW lose its identity by confusing job solidarity and support of strikes with the official union fakerdom.

Union welfare and pension funds constitute one of the bulwarks of present-day business unionism. Through this means the labor autocracy extends its control over the workers, not only on the job, and in the union, but also in the private life of the worker. The union member comes to expect his union's welfare department to furnish medical attention, old age pensions, accident and life insurance and other conveniences and necessities. The welfare department in business unions is controlled by the labor bosses in collusion with the employers and insurance trusts. Through manipulation of funds, granting or withholding benefits, the workers dependent on these services dispensed by the union dictators, develops a servile attitude. The worker is afraid that he will lose the benefits if he antagonizes the leaders. The emphasis on welfarism within the union saps the revolutionary vitality of the working class.

ment organization to turn the sparks of revolt into a steady flame. There are no organizational organs to unite rebelling local unions in different workplaces owned by the same employer; or to unite locals in the whole country on an industry-wide basis. It should be stressed that the *IWW is that organization*.

We should point out the need for wider solidarity and stress in this excerpt from the IWW Preamble that:

“These conditions can be changed and the interests 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 any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all.”

More and more people concerned with the problems of the labor movement are belatedly confirming the traditional IWW opposition to long term contracts and contracts in general – our position on this question remains relevant, as can be seen from this quotation: “...Long term contracts which have become the standard practice in American industry, have robbed the rank-and-file of considerable power to deal with its problems within a framework of collective bargaining. Workers have been forced to act outside of approved procedures [read *revolt*] because they know instinctively that the union has become an inadequate tool to conduct struggles even where they have not yet perceived the unions as an outright opponent of their interests...” (Stanley Aronowitz, *Workers’ Control*, Pp. 63–64).

A similar opposition to the dues checkoff and industry-wide bargaining is also being emphasized.

Since strikes and grievances must eventually be settled the following IWW procedures are realistic alternatives:

1) Direct negotiations and settlements between workers and bosses in each plant without intercession of any intermediate body – union hierarchy, arbitration boards, government agencies, etc. automatically excluding industry wide bargaining.

the renunciation of the class struggle and achieving “harmony between labor and management”. Compliance with regulations (Taft-Hartley, Landrum-Griffin, etc.) is not a mere tactic, but an outrageous violation of *principle*. The integrity of the IWW as the *conscience* of the labor movement is involved. There can be no separation of means from ends, for *means become ends*.

COMMENT: These principles are proclaimed in the *Preamble of the IWW*: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common...Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system...the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class has interests in common with the employers...”.

These principles have been repeatedly stressed and put into effect throughout the long history of the IWW. With respect to government regulation of labor and class-collaboration, the classic policy of the IWW is restated by Thompson:

“The IWW was much concerned with the developing pattern of unionism and alarmed at its tolerance of government trespass and its solicitation of such intervention...pointed out that it was part of the drift to give unions the status of public institutions, and thus deprived them of their rights as voluntary organizations.” (p. 188).

“...when the Supreme Court ruled that the United Mine Workers must not even by beck or nod approve a strike [in violation of government law], the IWW press said that this decision offered up the working class to the employing class on the terms of a forced sale, and this, like all anti-labor decisions, was premised on the extensive “rights” given to the unions, confirming Gompers’ dictum that when the government gives, it can take away, and take away even more than it has given.” (p. 189).

“...the IWW objected to the Taft-Hartley Act chiefly on the grounds that it initiated a system of unionism by permit...[which] guaranteed harmless and useless unions...” (p.191).

“The IWW felt that the labor movement was veering in a disastrous direction, growing into a big business of labor brokerage, suppressing the organized self-reliance that is the yeast of unionism, and becoming increasingly a pawn of the government in both internal and world relations.” (p.190)

The 1946 General Convention stated its opposition to the dues check-off form of class collaborationism: “It transfers to management an important function of the union. It takes from the hands of dues payers their control over their own organization. It tends to make union officials more concerned with the good will of the company than with the good will of the members.” (p. 189)

STATEMENT: This uncompromising policy will appeal to the new breed of young rebels who are most likely to join the IWW. Important as wage increases and fringe benefits are, these young rebels (unlike conservative workers) value their dignity as human beings more. They are revolting against the bureaucratic structure of modern industry. The rebellious worker feels that he has less and less to say about his own life and interests in the workplace as the union picards, in league with the employers, dictate the conditions under which he must labor.

These rebels are *unconscious wobblies* who are raising hell and making the revolution on the job. They are not afraid to lose their jobs. They challenge the power of their foremen and supervisors. They refuse to work overtime. They refuse to ratify agreements made in their name by the union officials. They defy their “leaders”. To enforce their demands, they resort to direct action. They start wildcat strikes and work stoppages in violation of union rules, contracts and government regulations. In the course of these struggles these rebellious workers have unconsciously developed IWW tactics and forms of organization.

COMMENT: Douglas Fraser, a vice-president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) complained that: “...these young workers have different values than people of my generation...” and Walter Reuther (recently deceased President of the UAW) complained

While recognizing the necessity of IWW members belonging to other unions; to forbid, on pain of expulsion, any member of the IWW to become a paid official [of the business unions].

Not to confront the workers with a ready-made program to be foisted on them but to proceed on the assumption (as Aronowitz put it so well) “The spontaneous revolt will have to develop its own alternative forms of collective struggle and demands...” (*Workers’ Control*, p.106).⁵

The IWW will now, as in the past, encourage them to do so and avoid, like the plague, all forms of *elitism* and *vanguardism*.

Practical Measures to Implement These General Policies

The revolutionary character of the rank-and-file movement must not be exaggerated. The militants are not determined to overthrow capitalism. They are not social-revolutionaries. By far the greatest number seek only to reform the system and to affect more radical changes, not outside of, but within their unions.

Most of the revolts are of short duration. They usually flare up when new contracts with the employers are being negotiated. In the period between contracts, apathy sets in. A report of the four-day wild cat strike in 1974 against Chrysler’s Dodge Truck plant concludes that: “...the simple fact is, that a wild cat strike, by its very nature is most likely doomed to failure. Just too many forces are arrayed against a single group of workers.”

A wild cat strike is necessary to spark action but must eventually go further than that and be superseded by coordinated action on a wider scale. There is no long-range perspective or an overall program capable of inspiring the workers. Nor is there a perma-

⁵ “Trade Unionism and Workers’ Control” by Stanley Aronowitz, *Workers’ Control: A Reader on Labor and Social Change*, Gerry Hunnius, ed. Vintage Books, 1973

miners to settle local issues by local strikes without sanction or permission of the national, district or local union bureaucrats.

There have been massive strikes even among Public Service workers who were traditionally the least militant and even anti-union. Post office workers staged a nation-wide strike (1970) not only in violation of the Federal anti-strike law which prohibits a strike against the State (an offence punishable by 1½ years in jail and \$1,000 fine for each striker), but also in defiance of their leaders.

Striking teachers in New York, Newark and other places were not afraid to go to jail for strike activity in defiance of injunctions. Teachers' local unions were heavily fined for violations of anti-strike laws. For example: The Detroit Federation of Teachers was ordered to pay over one million dollars for their six week strike. The New York Teachers Local was fined \$245,000 and the Philadelphia Teachers Local \$250,000 (*The New York Times*, Oct.30, 1974).

Tentative Proposals for the Regeneration of the IWW

The following propositions are meant to stimulate discussion to collectively work out better ways to build the IWW.

Issue a manifesto or policy statement repudiating all connection with governmental regulation of the labor movement:

Reaffirming our opposition to all forms of class-collaboration.

Reaffirming our dedication to the class struggle and the principles stated in the Preamble.

Emphasizing that the IWW refuses to represent the workers and insists that the workers must represent themselves.

Demonstrate that the tactics and organizational principles of the IWW are relevant to the problems of today's labor movement.

“...the new breed of worker in the plant is less willing to accept discipline. He is unwilling to accept corporate [employer's] decisions...”

In the spring of 1970, at the Chrysler plant near Detroit, worker rebels, refused to work overtime. One of them told Fraser that the company had no right to “deny me my social life”. Absenteeism in the plants on the weekdays rose from 2% in the 1950s to 5% in 1970. On Fridays and Saturdays the absentee rate soared to 15% of the workforce.

A reporter who interviewed rebellious young workers describes the situation: “...the younger generation, which has already shaken the campuses, is showing signs of restlessness in the plants of industrial America. They are better educated and want treatment as equals from the bosses on the plant floor...for example, a steel worker recalled that young workers sparked several wild cat strikes over the way an employee was treated by a foreman...They want to be *asked* what to do. Not *told* to do it...last month young workers led a three day strike in a brick making plant after the foreman disciplined a worker for carelessness in operating a lift-truck...” (quoted from the *New York Times*, June 1, 1970 by Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* Pp.264–265)

The significance of these seemingly trivial incidents multiplied by tens of thousands of similar “minor” protests cannot be overestimated. The government and the capitalists sounded the alarm. A massive study entitled “Work in America”, issued by the U.S. Government Department of Health, Education, and Welfare concludes that: “...job discontent is hurting America. Economic and social harm is linked to dissatisfaction at all levels...A changing American work force is becoming pervasively dissatisfied with dull, unchallenging and repetitive jobs...the discontent of trapped, dehumanized workers, is creating low productivity, increasing absenteeism from work, more workers quitting their jobs, wild cat strikes, sabotage and poor quality products...(New York Times Dec. 22, 1972)

A headline in the *New York Times*, on May 26, 1973 read: “GENERAL ELECTRIC WORKERS ARE DISCONTENTED WITH WORK ITSELF”.

The spontaneous revolts of the rank-and-file militants against the triple exploitation of the labor bureaucracy, the employers and the state took on the character of a mass insurrection, shattering the myth of the happy, uncomplaining American worker satisfied with his [her] lot. In 1950, the UAW signed a five-year pact with General Motors which outlawed strikes, ignored the demand of the workers to stop speed-ups and insure quick settlements of complaints. To force the corporation to grant these demands the workers were forced to take direct action outside and against the union pie cards. Seventy per cent of the workers repudiated the agreement and staged spontaneous wild cat strikes.

The rank-and-file revolts of 1953–1954 which spread to all the auto companies and all sections of the country finally forced the union in the next contract to restore the right to strike and shorten the duration of the agreement.

Even a larger percentage of workers wildcatted after the 1958 national UAW contract was signed. The 116-day steel strike in 1959 was fought to deny the right of companies to change work rules and institute automation without consulting the union.

In 1961, “wildcatters” completely shut down a large part of Ford Motors production for the same reasons: the right of workers on the job to regulate the rate of production, to curb the abuses of the foremen, supervisors and other tyrants, and for speedy settlement of grievances.

In the winter of 1971, the General Motors Lordstown, Ohio plant was shut down by a massive wild cat strike. Most of the workers were under 25 years of age. Wages were good. A variety of new types of power tools and other automated devices eliminated much of the heavy physical labor. Clearly, the rebellion stemmed from something deeper than the traditional question of wages. It raised the question, which promises to be the major issue, not only

in Lordstown, but in the whole labor movement, a “new” trend: workers’ demand for a voice in how, and under what conditions a job is to be done; the burning issue of “workers’ control”; the daily living relationship with supervisors in their place of work where they spend so much of the best years of their lives.

One of the great achievements of the sweeping rank-and-file revolts in the trade unions is the victorious revolt of the coal miners which led to the ousting of the corrupt, entrenched, class-collaborationist, criminal regime of the United Mine Workers’ Union despot, Tony Boyle, convicted for plotting the murder of his rival, Jack Yablonski, and members of his family. Boyle pledged that the UMW would not abridge the right of the mine operators in running the mines. He did nothing about the safety in the mines, the fatal “black lung” disease and the right of the miners to correct these and other grievances by local strikes.

The miners resorted to wild-cat strikes which the union could no longer control. Fortune Magazine, in a long article declared that the “...miners were no longer under union discipline...” The wild cat involved 42,000 of West Virginia’s 44,000 coal miners and thousands of miners in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky and other high production coal places. (see Jeremy Brecher: *Strike!*, Pp.276–277)⁴

The miners served notice on the new Miller administration that they would not again tolerate the dictatorial procedures instituted by John L. Lewis and his successor Boyle, by staging a massive wild-cat strike involving almost 100,000 miners for the right of the

⁴ Thompson and the Cedervall brothers were advocates of the effort of some of the radical unions not under the control of the Communist Party to work around the provisions of Taft-Hartley by signing the anti-Communist affidavits with the excuse that technically the union wasn’t Communist nor had any Communist officials. This would have allowed the IWW to continue to participate in NLRB union certification elections. This was the policy of the MESA, which had formed an independent federation of non-Communist left-leaning unions. The IWW rejected this in a union-wide referendum causing the Cleveland IWW to split from the main organization.