

A History of Anarcho-syndicalism

Unit 8: USA 1886-1930 - The Wobblies

This Unit aims to

- Look at the development of anarcho-syndicalism in the United States.
- Give an overview and analysis of the influences tendencies within the IWW.
- Discuss the IWW attitude to political parties.
- Examine the conflicts that arose within the IWW over internal democracy.
- Look at the success of the IWW in creating a distinct ,working class revolutionary culture.
- Examine the reasons for its decline.

Terms and abbreviations

AFofL: American Federation Of Labor. Reformist union federation that organized solely amongst the white working class in the United States.

GEB: General Executive Board. Executive of the IWW.

SLP: Socialist Labour Party. Party influenced by Daniel de Leon that sought to be the political expression of the IWW.

SPA: Socialist Party of America.

WFM: Western Federation of Miners. Union based in the Western States whose leader 'Big Bill' Haywood was to become the leading light of the IWW.

IWW: Industrial Workers of the World.

PLM: Partido Liberal Mexicano.

Introduction

The US as a state began to develop a sense of its own self during the 19th Century, and rapidly extended this to an identity as a world-dominating power. By the turn of the century, the US economy was indeed the most powerful in the world. Its Gross Domestic product (GDP) exceeded that of Germany and Britain combined and US iron and steel production surpassed all of Europe's. The process of industrialisation led to capitalist power concentrated in ever fewer hands. To meet this power concentration, the impoverished workers began to consider seriously the idea of concentrating their power by organising one big industrial union that could organise all workers. At this point, revolutionary syndicalism started to play an important role in the development of industrial unionism in the US.

In the late 18th Century, European immigrants with anarchist ideas combined with strong anti-statist traditions of US workers to create a burgeoning anarchist current. By the 1880's, anarchist-influenced ideas dominated the emerging US revolutionary movement, with anarchist groups developing across North America, producing a diverse range of papers and magazines in a myriad of different languages.

Though many of these anarchist groups promoted the idea of insurrection and viewed seeking day-to-day improvements as reformist, industrialisation soon ensured that anarcho-syndicalist ideas began to take hold. One of the first solid indications of this occurred in Pittsburgh in 1886, where Johann Most, a former member of the Zurich Section of the First International (see Unit 3), organised a conference at which the International Working People's Association (the 'Black International') was launched. At the Pittsburgh conference a motion was passed stating that unions were both the instrument of social revolution and formed the nucleus of a new co-operative commonwealth. The conference rejected the idea of forming a revolutionary party of the proletariat, instead favouring direct action in industrial unions as a means of seizing power. These motions, effectively calling for an anarcho-syndicalist movement, become known as the "Chicago Idea" and were to become highly influential in the development of the IWW.

US Anarcho-syndicalism

After the Pittsburgh conference, a loose federation of autonomous groups was organised, linked to an information bureau located in Chicago. These "syndico-anarchist" groups, as they were known, were soon producing a number of papers, including; "The Alarm", an English language weekly; "Arbeiter-Zeitung", a German language paper published on week days; "Verbote", published on Saturdays, and "Fackel", a Sunday paper.

It was no accident that anarchists in Chicago found themselves at the centre of the movement that looked to the unions as a means of bringing about an anarchist society. They had been active in the workplace struggle for many years, and had taken a prominent role in the struggle for the 8-hour day. They had organised a demonstration at Haymarket, Chicago, in 1886 as part of this campaign. At the demonstration, a police agent threw a bomb, killing a number of people. Eight anarchists were framed and arrested as part of a campaign to stem the growing power of the anarchist movement. They were duly convicted of murder and hanged. The victims were to become known as the Haymarket martyrs. The death of the Chicago anarchists led to the creation of May 1st as international Labour Day, as a monument to their life and in memory of their death. It also influenced generations of militants. As Bill Hayward, a prominent member of the IWW, later wrote; "it was the turning point in my life."

Anarcho-syndicalist ideas also developed in numerous anarchist groups across the US. In Paterson, New Jersey, the silk centre of America, Spanish and Italian anarchists produced the paper "La Questione Sociale". Increasingly drawn to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, they published numerous articles reporting the development of European revolutionary syndicalism, and created a silk workers' union which was to later join the IWW.

The Paterson anarchists were also important in helping to spread anarcho-syndicalism amongst western mine workers who were to play such an important part in the development of the IWW. After working with striking Colorado miners, one of their members, Pedro Esteve, undertook a speaking tour of mining communities in the western and eastern states. La Questione Sociale started carrying a regular column entitled "From the Mining World" and by the early 1900's it was able to boast a readership among mining communities stretching from Colorado to Newcastle, Pennsylvania.

Emma Goldman was also a major influence on the growth of

anarcho-syndicalism. She was a powerful speaker and nationally known figure, who attracted massive working class support and was imprisoned on a number of occasions simply for supporting causes ranging from birth control to anti-conscription, before eventually being deported. She had come in contact with the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism at an anarchist congress in Paris in 1900, and later wrote of it;

"...in essence, it is the economic expression of anarchism. It represents the revolutionary philosophy of labour conceived and born in the actual struggle and experience of the workers themselves"...On her return to the US, she "...immediately began to propagate syndicalist ideas especially direct action and the general strike."

So, numerous anarcho-syndicalist tendencies and influences scattered across the US and Europe came together to play an important part in building the IWW. Many histories of the IWW play down the European syndicalist influence, arguing instead that the US struggle evolved as a direct result of the local social and economic conditions. They point to the fact that prominent members of the IWW often went to great lengths to deny they were syndicalists, preferring to call themselves Industrial Unionists. While anarcho-syndicalists in the US drew on ideas and experience from Europe they did not simply copy European syndicalism. They developed and applied them in the North American context. Thus, the IWW reprinted many of the articles and works of the European anarchists and syndicalists, absorbing the ideas of European syndicalism, such as the general strike, and further developing those ideas in the process.

January Manifesto: IWW

Basic principles of anarcho-syndicalism were clearly evident at the meeting called on January 2nd 1905, that led to the creation of the IWW. The main purpose of the meeting was to establish industrial unions. However, the influence of anarcho-syndicalism was clear from the manifesto drawn up at the meeting, which went on to form the basis of the IWW preamble. The main author of the “January Manifesto”, as it became known, was Thomas J Hagerty, who had come across anarchist ideas during the 8-hour day struggle. He reported on the European syndicalist movement at the meeting. His anarcho-syndicalist influences are evident from his articles in the paper “The Voice of Labour”, which he edited, in one article he wrote;

“..workers must organise in proportion to capitalist concentrations in industry irrespective of trade or tool, that when they shall have acquired a sufficient class conscious majority in every industry they may be able to take over and collectively administer the machinery of production and distribution in the co-operative commonwealth.”

In the January Manifesto, he expanded on these ideas, producing an analysis of capitalism and the failing of craft unionism similar to that of the British Syndicalists (see Units 5-6). The craft union American Federation of Labour (AFofL) was attacked as outdated and lacking class-consciousness.

Instead, he argued, in the face of monopoly capitalism, workers should concentrate their economic power into *“one big industrial union”* embracing all industries. The original manifesto by Hagerty saw no role for political parties, arguing that workers should organise industrially to “take and hold that which is produced through an economic organisation of the working class”.

On the basis of the January Manifesto, a convention was organised on the 27th June 1905, again in Chicago. Among the 200 delegates were a number of anarcho-syndicalists representing various groups and papers. These included a number of Industrial Workers Clubs in California, which had PLM members who had fled repression in Mexico (see Unit 7), and who were later to form a Spanish-speaking local of the IWW in California. The prominent anarcho-syndicalist Lucy Parsons also attended as a keynote speaker, having been active in the Chicago labour movement for many years. The Western Federation of Miners (WFM), led by Bill Hayward, who chaired the convention, provided the largest presence. The WFM was

a radical western industrial union that had in recent years been involved in a number of bitter disputes with owners who had engaged private armies against workers. There were also in attendance delegates from socialist organisations, including the two main US socialist parties (and bitter rivals), the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the Socialist Party of America (SPA).

The convention produced a preamble that sought to link the immediate struggle to the wider aim of overthrowing capitalism. The main tactic was unambiguous; the newly formed IWW was to set about organising workers into “one big union”, whose aim was revolution, after which the union would take over the running of society in the newly established co-operative commonwealth. In the build-up to the revolution, the IWW would wage class war against the capitalist class, developing workers’ revolutionary consciousness in the process.

From the outset, the new union condemned racism; in fact, the convention declared that any wage earner could be a member of the new organisation regardless of occupation, race, creed or sex. Anti-discrimination and internationalism quickly became part of its culture and two of its major strengths. Racism especially was recognised as a major factor used by capitalism to divide the working class, affecting both black Americans and newly arrived Europeans and Asians. The AFofL was openly racist - for example, it produced stickers drawing the consumer’s attention to those goods that had been produced by white workers.

From the earliest days of the IWW, one source of controversy that was to take up much of its time was its stance regarding political parties. The clause excluding a role for political parties in the workers’ struggle had been dropped from the January Manifesto prior to the conference on the insistence of Daniel de Leon, leader of the SLP. De Leon, a recent convert to industrial unionism, argued successfully for political action through the ballot box backed by the power of industrial unions. De Leon was much admired by Lenin, who was later to develop his idea of using workers’ economic power to win himself state political power during the Russian Revolution. De Leon succeeded against serious opposition. Hagerty argued that politics had nothing to do with political parties, and that political ends could only be gained through economic action. As he argued:

Political Parties & the IWW

“The ballot box is simply a capitalist concession. Dropping pieces of paper into a hole in a box never did achieve emancipation for the working class and to my mind never will”.

Lucy Parsons backed Hagerty. She argued for a form of general strike where the workers would occupy the factory “taking possession of the necessary property of production”. This call for the general strike tactic to be included in the IWW constitution was backed by Hayward of the WFM who, though an executive member of the SPA, saw the general strike as the principal revolutionary weapon. After much debate, a compromise was reached under which the general strike was included in the constitution as well as a role for political action.

Reflecting on Lucy Parsons' views of the time, here is a striking example of how anarcho-syndicalism constantly evolves. In the first half of the 19th Century in Britain, the general strike was the “Grand National Holiday”, where workers were to leave the workplace for two weeks, thus causing the collapse of capitalism (see Unit 2). Later, the CGT in France developed the idea into “a peaceful folding of arms”, during which workers would lay down tools, causing production to stop and forcing capitalism to capitulate. Now, the IWW were to take the idea further. Instead of walking out, workers would seize control of production on behalf of the working class, effectively locking the capitalists out of the production and profit process.

The IWW that emerged from the convention was based on a structure which divided workers up into a number of industrial sections, under the control of a central administration. It should be stressed that the IWW was (and still is) an international organisation seeking to unite workers across the globe.

Following the compromise over the inclusion of political parties in the IWW, the first two years of the organisation were marked by decline and bitter infighting. The WFM, the biggest grouping, and in reality, the only industrial section, left the organisation. This was precipitated by the activities of de Leon's SLP, who sought to gain control of the IWW. The SLP clearly intended to act as political mentors to the unions, and thus treated them in a similar fashion to the Marxist-Leninists after the Russian Revolution.

The SLPs antics led Emma Goldman, who remained a supporter of the IWW, to bitterly criticise it, declaring that it was becoming a “mere appendage” of the SLP. She went on to ask whether or not anarchists who have “aided so actively” in creating the IWW should remain as members. In reply, in the same anarchist paper, “Mother Earth”, Jean Speilman defended the organisation, arguing that although the infighting was problematic and the organisation was not “completely imbued with anarchist views”, anarchists should remain within it.

At the 1908 IWW convention, a Chicago motion was passed which called for all reference to political activity to be taken out of the constitution. In response, the SLP delegates walked out to form a rival IWW based in Detroit. The rival IWW had little impact, being little more than an extension of the SLP. The 1908 convention proved a turning point. Detached from the SLP, the IWW was able to develop its core revolutionary policies over the next few years.

The IWW strategy that emerged from the 1908 convention stated that, in building “One Big Union”, the IWW would seek to “form the new society inside the shell of the old”. In time, the point would be reached where the workers' organisation would be powerful enough to use the general strike to take over the means of production and abolish the wage system. In a nutshell, this would lead to the establishment of industrial democracy, in a workers' commonwealth. The voting strength that had enabled the organisation to free itself from the influence of the SLP had come mainly from the west coast groups. Over the next few years, it was this vibrant part of the IWW which would create the culture of struggle that formed the central essence of the organisation.

Culture: West and East

The Pacific coast delegates at the 1908 convention attracted the nickname "Overalls Brigade" and were dismissed by de Leon. They had "rode the rails" from the west to attend the convention, covering 2,000 miles and holding 31 meetings along the way. Comprising miners, loggers, sawmill workers and seasonal harvest workers, this migrant workforce came from the most exploited sections of the working class. They were the product of a tough frontier culture, and had experienced an all-powerful capitalism, which aided by the state, had used private armies and state militia to imprison, deport to other states, physically assault and occasionally murder striking workers. Often politicised by anarchism, they despised both capitalism and the state. They also had a deep mistrust of politicians and leaders in general - a mistrust that extended to the leadership of the IWW.

The eastern-based newspaper "Solidarity" described the typical western US IWW member thus:

"The nomadic worker of the west embodies the very spirit of the IWW...their frank and outspoken contempt for most of the conventions of bourgeois society, including the more stringent conventions which masquerade under the name of morality, made them an admirable exemplar of the iconoclastic doctrine of revolutionary unionism."

The eastern-based radical intelligentsia did not always see the western workers so favourably. Nor was criticism of them confined to the socialist intelligentsia of de Leon. Writing in Mother Earth in 1913 one anarchist wrote:

"I saw how little regard the delegates had for grammar and truth...I marvelled that this bunch of pork-chop philosophers, agitators who have no real, great organising ability or creative brain power, are able to frighten the capitalistic class more than any other labour movement in America."

Ignoring their alleged lack of brainpower, the western workers went on to create a working class culture and build a mass-movement of unskilled workers, which did indeed seriously frighten the most powerful capitalist system in the world.

It was these western workers who made the IWW the organisation of the unskilled, the unorganised, the non-white, the "new" immigrant, the female, the child and, above all, the oppressed - all of whom were spurned by the likes of the socialist parties and the

AFofL. At the founding convention, Hayward had argued that the IWW would "go into gutter to get at the mass of workers and organise them". It was the spirit of the western workers that enabled the IWW to achieve this.

To organise unskilled workers in the west was no easy task. The western US was far less industrialised than the east. The workers were largely migrant and so had no permanent workplace through which they could be physically organised. As an alternative, western workers made the "mixed local" the basis of their organisation. Centred on the union hall, the mixed local was a geographically based organisation, which included both the employed and unemployed. This contrasted with the workplace-based locals in much of the eastern IWW.

Being based outside any particular workplace type, the mixed locals involved themselves much more in community and social struggles, in addition to the workplace. For example, western locals became increasingly involved in birth control agitation. They circulated "Women Rebel", printed the first 1,000 copies of "Family Limitation", and challenged the legal prohibition against its distribution. The locals provided a network that actively sponsored rallies and meetings, and generated solidarity and support for legal defence of birth control advocates. Locals in California, Arizona and Texas also aided the PLM in Mexico (see Unit 7), providing support and protection from the authorities for PLM members as well as acting as recruiting centres for IWW members who joined the PLM guerrilla army.

The union hall began to evolve as the centre of working class organisational life, and developed into the local intellectual and cultural centre. Here was to be found the basis of an alternative working class culture centred on the idea of solidarity and struggle. Combining art and politics, the western IWW groups produced plays, poems, songs and cartoons. In meaningful, emotional and personal expressions, wobblies (as IWW members became affectionately known) sought to analyse the world from a working class perspective and create a rich culture of both unity and diversity.

It is difficult to overestimate how important this cultural anarcho-syndicalism was to the IWW's success (or indeed, how important it remains today). Through it, the IWW was able to unite migrant workers hailing from very diverse backgrounds. With 60 papers, a

Free Speech

famous songbook, and many pamphlets and books, the IWW constantly hammered home the idea of solidarity as the founding principle on which the new world would be built, while exposing the hypocrisy inherent in the dominant values of civil society. Through practice, it proved the possibility of creating an anarcho-syndicalist culture within the current culture imposed on society by government and business elites. The wobblies saw this as not only crucial to the growth and integrity of the organisation, but as the beginning of the evolution of the culture of the future society.

So, with basic cultural and political tools, the IWW set about organising the migrant workforce within the so-called “jungles” that grew up on the outskirts of towns and beside railroads. As one commentator wrote at the time, the IWW “put a song in the mouth and solidarity in the heart of the hobo”. The IWW attracted the illiterate, despised, half starved migrant workers not so much on the basis of its economic power in the workplace, but through its ability to give the down-trodden a sense of worth, self-respect, hope - and even restore and engender confidence.

From the culture of solidarity and self-respect emerged the famous free speech campaign which propelled the IWW to national prominence prior to the First World War. More specifically, it grew out of the struggle against employment agencies (or employment sharks, as they were more commonly known). These agencies operated out of gateway towns and cities for the mining, lumber, and agricultural industries in the west. They charged workers a fee for sending them to non-existent jobs, or to jobs where the manager would (for a cut of the fee) sack workers on their first day, in readiness for the next day’s supply (of workers and fees). These and many other tactics of daylight robbery of the least well off led the local IWW to launch a campaign against the agency in Missoula, Montana and Spokane, Washington. They called for a boycott of the agencies and for workers to be recruited from union halls - in a similar fashion to the CGT’s campaign that had been recently successful in France. As part of the campaign “soapbox orators”, the most common form of IWW agitation, were set up outside employment agencies denouncing their corrupt practices. In response, the state police prohibited street speaking.

There followed a number of articles in the IWW paper discussing the tactics of French, Italian and Spanish workers in upholding free speech. Soon after, the tactic used by Italian workers was adopted, whereby workers were arrested until all the jails were full.

The call went out in the western-based paper Industrial Worker (IW) to all “who hate the tyrannical oppression of the police” to go to Missoula. In both Missoula and Spokane workers used songs, many rapidly written and tailored to the situation, to expose and ridicule the employment sharks. They were promptly arrested and the prisons rapidly became full, forcing the authorities to back down.

In the process of winning the campaign, the IWW was also able to expose the brutality of the US prison system. In Spokane, having been arrested, Elizabeth Flynn found that the police used the jail inmates as captive objects for their sexual gratification, and they routinely raped inmates. The resulting publicity caused an outcry, furthering the cause of the IWW and putting the state on the defensive.

The tactic of literally forcing their way into prison fitted the culture of the western IWW, as it enabled it to demonstrate its

contempt for the capitalist and legal system. In the period 1908-16, the free speech campaign became the focus of a bitter battle between the IWW and the US state, during which some 5,000 IWW members were imprisoned. The battles became increasingly violent, as state and capitalist newspapers ran headlines such as “hanging is too good for them” and “they would be much better off dead for they are useless to the human economy”, thus whipping up racism and prejudice across North America. The state violence against the IWW was culminated in the Everett massacre in 1916, when police and vigilantes opened fire on unarmed workers in cold blood.

Industrial Direct Action

The emphasis on community, culture and free speech did not prevent the IWW from also taking on the capitalists in the workplace. After a difficult few years, by 1910 the IWW had recovered some of its early strength and had organised at least 20 strikes, ranging from Mexican gas workers, to farm hands in Oregon, to window cleaners in Providence. Perhaps the most prominent strike of this year took place in Goldfield, Nevada, where the IWW had attempted to organise all of the 30,000 population. They won an 8-hour day and a minimum wage of \$4.50 in the town, before being brutally repressed by the state militia. By 1912, the IWW was strong enough to embark on what were to become 2 of the most famous strikes at Lawrence and Paterson.

Lawrence was a textile town in Massachusetts, where some 30,000 mainly newly arrived immigrant workers toiled in appalling conditions. Organising was particularly difficult, as the workforce was made up of men, women and children from over 12 countries, most of whom spoke different languages. Gurley Flynn, one of the main IWW organisers during the strike, estimated that only 8% of the strikers were born in the US. At the start of the dispute, the IWW already had 400 members in the town.

Within a few months they were organising a dispute involving 30,000. The Lawrence strike took on an insurrectionary nature from

the outset. The IWW made no attempt to play down its revolutionary ideas; on the contrary, they sought to raise revolutionary consciousness among workers. The state brought in 1,500 militia, backed up by the police.

During the months-long bitter dispute, these forces used guns; bayonets and clubs to try and force workers back to work, resulting in a number of deaths. Hundreds were arrested, some on false murder charges. Despite this repression, the IWW was able to organise a tremendous victory, with the pay of unskilled workers being raised by 25%. As a result, the American Woollen Federation was also forced to increase wages by 8% across 32 American cities. The strike sent shock waves across American capitalism and acted as a rallying cry for the unorganised.

Paterson was next, in 1913. As already noted, this silk weaving centre on the outskirts of New York already had a strong anarchist tradition. The IWW sought standardised improved wages and conditions for the town's 25,000 workers. However, after months of strike action, with ruthless state militia activity, several workers killed and hundreds imprisoned, the workers were forced to return to work and the strike ended in failure. This was a bitter blow for the workers, the consolation being that both Lawrence and Paterson had received national coverage, ensuring that the IWW was now seen as the formidable organisation of the unskilled worker.

Centralisation

Behind the growth and success of the IWW, controversy was beginning to grow regarding internal democracy in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. The concern of the western locals was that the IWW was too centralised. At the 1911 convention, western delegates had attempted to pass resolutions calling for the power of the General Executive Board (GEB) to be reduced and devolved to the regions. Though defeated, the resolutions reflected a growing rift between the eastern and western wings of the organisation. Reporting on the convention, the eastern based IWW paper *Solidarity* argued:

"We see in the west individualism...that scoffs at group initiative by general officers and executive boards...and conceives...of 'direct action' in all things through the 'rank and file'" adding that; "in the eastern industrial centres there is a need for a centralised union."

At the following convention in 1912, centralisation again reared its head. This time the eastern sections put forward motions arguing for the free speech campaign to be brought under GEB control. This outraged the western delegation and reinforced their fears of increasing centralisation. However, soon after, the controversy regarding centralisation was temporarily dropped, as the west and most of the east coast united against moves to change IWW tactics.

The issue was whether to change the IWW approach of building one big new union to one of working within existing unions to make them revolutionary (the so-called 'boring from within' approach – see Unit 6). The British syndicalist Tom Mann, on a speaking tour of the US, raised it. Critics of the IWWs dual union approach pointed to the growing success of the British Syndicalists, whereas the dual unionist British section of the IWW remained tiny. However, as Hayward was quick to point out, conditions were different in the US in that the only major union federation, the AFofL, refused to organise unskilled workers. Thereafter, the attempt to alter IWW strategy was soon defeated and, by the 1913 IWW convention, the bitter conflict over centralisation had resumed.

The 1913 IWW convention is often portrayed as a conflict between anarchist de-centralisers on the west coast and the more socialist centralisers of the east coast. This assessment is too simplistic. The division between east and west in many ways reflected two different cultures based on different conditions. To the

eastern IWW, workplace organisation was far more important. They argued for far greater central organisation that would concentrate on workplace issues as a way to ensure a stable membership in the workplace. Though the IWW had steadily grown, its inability to establish long-term workplace membership once local disputes were over was of major concern to the eastern organisation. The west was far less industrialised, with a large migrant workforce who campaigned on a wide range of issues to recruit members.

Undoubtedly, anarcho-syndicalism was and remains anti-centralisation, so it is not surprising that many found the IWW over-centralised. That is not to say that anarcho-syndicalists would have backed many of the one hundred motions put forward by the western delegates at the 1913 convention aimed at curbing centralisation. If passed, these would have reduced the IWW to a loose-knit confederation of autonomous groups, with the attendant difficulties of maintaining organisational cohesion or theoretical and tactical unity.

The central problem for the IWW was that its constitution was hugely centralised, mainly due to the fact that it did not have a geographically based structure. The mixed locals were geographical in nature but they were only considered to be a transitional form of organisation. Under the constitution, workers with no existing industrial union organisation in the locality would organise in a mixed local until enough members were recruited to form the industrial organisation. Otherwise, all workers would be organised in industry alone. In the event, the 1913 convention ended in defeat for the western delegation. Not only did their motions fall, but also evidence that their fear of increased centralisation was justified can be gauged from the fact that a motion bringing all IWW publications under the supervision of the GEB was passed. Worst of all, due to the acrimonious nature of the debate, the whole organisation suffered, as the exchanges left the IWW deeply divided. These divisions never left the organisation, and would later rise again to the surface of acrimonious debate.

Rural Organisation

Ironically, in 1914, the very tactics that the east had argued were preventing a long-term industrially based organisation led the IWW to establish its first large industrial section since the loss of the western miners. It began with the introduction of a new system of jobs delegates based on a decentralised system of collective leadership. The target was to organise the farm workers of the mid-west.

The mobile job delegates followed the harvest across the mid-west states, accompanying the seasonal migrant families, who worked in conditions that condemned them to virtual slavery. The IWW developed the idea of organising disputes just as the harvest was ripe, maximising their chances of forcing concessions from the farmers. The IWW also used a favoured tactic of western wobblers of organising IWW "Jungles", where they attempted to improve the appalling living conditions. They also developed a system of only allowing IWW members to ride in IWW box cars. Through organisation and strength of numbers, they were able to intimidate the railway police and rail bandits, ensuring that the IWW card became a passport for free and safe travel.

By 1916, the success of the campaign was evident. The IWW had raised living conditions of farm workers significantly, and the Agricultural Workers' Organisation of the IWW had grown to 18,000 members. Despite this, the campaign had its critics in the east, particularly from the GEB, who opposed the IWW agricultural workers' attacks on machinery during a number of disputes. By this time, Joe Hill, one of the most gifted of the many IWW songwriters and poets, had already had his song Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay taken out of the Little Red Song Book by the GEB.

State Repression

The outbreak of the First World War in Europe led to increased economic activity and a shortage of labour. The IWW was able to take advantage of this to win concessions and recruit workers, and so entered its heyday period. By 1917, membership was at 150,000, with large industrial sections in mining, agriculture and forestry, as well as unions in marine transport, metal workers and railways. From this point on, its success and revolutionary politics combined to bring it into ever-increasing direct conflict with the state.

From the start, the IWW voiced its total opposition to the war. When the US entered the war in 1917, it again announced its opposition. Hayward declared that it was better to be a traitor to your country than a traitor to your class. The IWW continued to organise militant strike actions wherever possible. The state response was a wave of repression.

In September 1917, the state authorities raided all the national, regional and local offices of the IWW. They seized everything they could lay their hands on and arrested every IWW member they could find to serve a warrant on. Literally thousands of IWW members, along with other anarchists and socialists, were harassed, arrested, imprisoned and/or deported as the state attempted to destroy the IWW; 200 IWW members were given prison sentences of up to 20 years. In California, 43 IWW defendants sneered at the state and its laws and refused to bow to the court's authority; immediately after being sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, they left the court singing "The Union Makes Us Strong". The intense, sustained tide of state repression continued throughout the remainder of the war and after.

As well as direct state terror, the IWW was also subject to violence from state-backed vigilantes. In just one such example, 1,200 striking IWW miners in Arizona were rounded up at gunpoint by vigilantes and herded on a cattle train to New Mexico. At the end of the journey, they were placed in a Federal stockade with little food and regular beatings for 3 months. Being a wobbly during the war meant risking vigilante beatings, shooting or lynching.

In a cynical political move, the state moved to enrol the support of reformist trade unions, while simultaneously continuing the terror campaign against the IWW. Federal labour laws were introduced under which state mediation, the right to collective bargaining for AFofL affiliates; minimum pay and the basic 8-hour day were introduced. The reformist unions were quick to respond to the state

Communist Takeover

attempt to win them over to the war effort. As one AFofL leader commented;

“...after the war we came out greater, grander and better understood than ever before.”

In 1919, 23 states introduced criminal syndicalist laws. Overnight, the IWW found itself liable to prosecution all over the country simply for existing. Over the next 5 years, in California alone, 500 IWW members were arrested, 164 receiving long prison sentences. In 1919 and 1920, the so-called “Palmer raids” took place.

Attorney General Palmer instigated raids on radical organisations across the US from coast to coast. In January 1920, in one raid, 10,000 people were arrested. Hundreds of IWW members, communists and anarchists were deported, among them Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

The impact of the state terror campaign on the IWW was serious, but amazingly, not terminal. In May 1919, the membership was already down to 30,000, the majority being forestry workers. They still produced a Finnish daily paper, two monthly English magazines, plus a number of weeklies in various languages. They were also active in a wave of militancy that swept the US after the war, including the general strikes that occurred in Seattle, Vancouver and Winnipeg.

Where state repression had failed to destroy the IWW, internal division was soon to succeed. The dispute was triggered by attempts by the communists to take over the IWW, which in turn opened the wounds of the bitter debate over centralisation. The western sections bitterly opposed the communist influenced GEB and their attempt to affiliate the IWW to the communist Third International in 1919, and they demanded the expulsion of all communists from the IWW. The communists concentrated their efforts on attempting to win over the eastern sections to the idea of statism, though ultimately they were to fail in this endeavour.

The GEB pursued a strategy based on the idea of left wing unity. In 1920, a communist who was attempting to take over the Philadelphia dockers' local accused the IWW of loading arms for the interventionist troops in Russia. This was a long-standing local, which had been successful in uniting black and white workers. Though the accusations were later to be found groundless, the damage was done.

The GEB immediately suspended the Philadelphia dockers local who, appalled that they could have been suspended on the say of one communist, left the IWW stating:

“The history of the Philadelphia longshoremen's union is one of unswerving loyalty. Some have died while hundreds have been jailed as standard bearers of the IWW.”

The IWW began to publish reports of the repression of workers in Russia, which had begun to appear in anarchist papers around the world. Those responsible were then condemned as traitors to the revolution by the growing communist movement within the IWW. The dispute came to a head at the 1924 convention, which soon descended into chaos as fighting broke out between centralisers and de-centralisers.

While the de-centralisers put forward the “Emergency Programme”, which advocated that the GEB should be abolished, the centralisers sought more control at regional and GEB level. The communists, who were now openly siding with the centralisers, made the atmosphere worse. Not surprisingly, the convention ended in a decisive IWW split, with a ‘real IWW’ being set up in Utah (while the Chicago based IWW continued). The split, so soon after the state repression, and coinciding with the growing popularity of communism,

Postscript

proved too much. While the Chicago-based IWW was able to resist communist infiltration and did go on to organise major strikes in the coalfields, in Colorado (1927) and Kentucky (1930), these were temporary high points in the decline of the IWW.

The IWW grew from humble beginnings and, in a few short years, was able to shake the foundations of the world's most powerful state and capitalism's powerhouse - the United States. In the process, it drew on anarcho-syndicalist ideas from Europe and adapted them to its own unique conditions.

The single greatest strength of the IWW was its emphasis on the culture of revolution. Unfortunately, in a relatively short time period this strength was overcome by a combination of state oppression and internal weakness. While the former was clearly inevitable and unavoidable, the latter was borne out of an uncomfortable alliance between an anti-authoritarian, pro-autonomy camp and a centralist camp - a situation made worse by the efforts of the opportunist authoritarian communists. In a nutshell, the IWW's apparent early strength of appealing to all sharing the same goals and economic tactics, irrespective of political agenda, soon turned into a fatal weakness, as party political opportunists sought to take over and undermine the deep revolutionary politics of the organisation.

Key points

- The growth of the anarchist movement in the United States in the late 18th Century was due to the combination of European immigrants with anarchist ideas and the strong anti-statist traditions of US workers.
- Anarcho-syndicalism developed through the central involvement of the anarchists in workers' campaigns.
- Anarcho-syndicalist tendencies and influences throughout the US and Europe came together to play an important part in building the IWW.
- The IWW was the only labour union to allow membership to all regardless of race or sex.
- In 1908 the IWW split over the issue of political action and political parties.
- There were differences in the IWW over the 'dual unionist' or 'boring from within' approaches.
- There was often a conflict of ideas between the eastern and western membership of the IWW around the issue of centralisation.
- After America's entry into the First World War the IWW came under increasing state repression.
- After the Russian Revolution the Communists tried to infiltrate and take over the IWW.

Checklist

1. What influence did European anarchist ideas have on the development of the IWW?
2. How did the debate over the role of political parties affect the IWW?
3. What were the main characteristics of IWW 'western culture'?
4. In the Free Speech campaign what form of action did the IWW undertake?
5. What were the main arguments in the issue of centralisation in the IWW?
6. What were the major factors in the decline of the IWW?

Answer suggestions

1. *What influence did European anarchist ideas have on the development of the IWW?*

Many European immigrants brought with them anarchist ideas and ways of organising. They combined this with the anti-statism of many American workers to influence the growing revolutionary movement in the United States. The anarchists were in the forefront of campaigns such as the Eight Hour Day movement and developed anarcho-syndicalist ideas. 'Syndico-anarchist' groups were influential in the founding of the IWW. They also introduced many of the ideas that were developing in Europe of anarcho-syndicalist organisation.

2. *How did the debate over the role of political parties affect the IWW?*

From the beginning political parties, such as the SLP, were involved in the founding of the IWW. Anarchists opposed their involvement arguing for a purely union-based organisation based on direct action. A compromise was reached but a split occurred over the role of the SLP. This was not serious as the Detroit IWW, controlled by the SLP soon faded into insignificance.

3. *What were the main characteristics of IWW 'western culture'?*

IWW members in the west were the product of a tough frontier culture, and had experienced state aided capitalism using repressive measures such as, private armies and state militia to imprison, deport to other states, physically assault and occasionally murder striking workers. Politicised by anarchism, they despised both capitalism and the state. They also had a deep mistrust of politicians and leaders in general - a mistrust that extended to the leadership of the IWW. The workers were largely migrant and so had no permanent workplace through which they could be physically organised. As an alternative, western workers made the "mixed local" the basis of their organisation. Centred on the union hall, the mixed local was a geographically based organisation, which included both the employed and unemployed. The mixed locals involved themselves much more in community and social struggles and the union hall began to evolve as the centre of working class organisational life, and developed into the local intellectual and cultural centre.

4. *In the Free Speech campaign what form of action did the IWW undertake?*

They adopted a tactic, first used by Italian workers, whereby agitators would set up on soapboxes demanding the right to free speech and wait to be arrested. This would continue until all the jails were full.

5. *What were the main arguments in the issue of centralisation in the IWW?*

The issue was based around the internal democracy of the IWW. The concern of the western locals was that the IWW was too centralised and they attempted to pass resolutions calling for the power of the General Executive Board (GEB) to be reduced and devolved to the regions. The eastern locals were then to argue for the free speech campaign to be brought under GEB control. This was a difference that was never resolved and at the 1913 Convention it reached a head. The division between east and west reflected two different cultures based on different conditions. To the eastern IWW, workplace organisation was far more important. While the west was far less industrialised, with a large migrant workforce who campaigned on a wide range of issues to recruit members. In the event, the 1913 convention ended in defeat for the western delegation. Not only did their motions fall, but also evidence that their fear of increased centralisation was justified can be gauged from the fact that a motion bringing all IWW publications under the supervision of the GEB was passed.

6. *What were the major factors in the decline of the IWW?*

The issue of centralisation was never resolved and left divisions and distrust. Then, with the entry of America into WW1, state repression increased due to the anti-war stance of the IWW. This was to weaken, but not destroy, it. The success of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 had a profound effect on the revolutionary movement in America as it did all over the world. Attempts were made by the communists to take over the IWW, which in turn opened the wounds of the bitter debate over centralisation. The communist influenced GEB attempted to affiliate the IWW to the communist Third International in 1919 and turn the IWW to statism. This was opposed and defeated but the dispute continued and came to a head at the

Discussion points

1924 convention, which soon descended into chaos as fighting broke out between centralisers and de-centralisers. The communists sided with the centralisers and precipitated a decisive IWW split, with a 'real IWW' being set up in Utah (while the Chicago based IWW continued). The split, so soon after the state repression, and coinciding with the growing popularity of communism, proved too much.

- Was the IWW too centralised to be considered an anarcho-syndicalist organisation?
- What is the relevance of the IWW and its ideas for the present day revolutionary movement in the United States and worldwide?

Further Reading

Salvatore Salerno. Red November, Black November: Culture & Community in the IWW. State University of New York Press. ISBN 0791400891. -LI-

Especially covers the early period of the IWW, and outlines in detail the role of revolutionary culture in the organisation. A key text by any standards.

Stewart Bird. Solidarity Forever. Lawrence & Wishart. ISBN 085315689. £9.95 -AK-

A collection of interviews with IWW members combine to form a useful and personal oral history of the wobblies.

John Breche. Strike! South End Press. ISBN 0896083645. £14.99 -AK-

Somewhat of a classic American working class history. Well-written and hence readable, yet detailed, especially of the periods of mass-unrest.

Howard Zinn. A Peoples' History of the United States. Harper Perennial. ISBN 0060926430. -AK- -BS-

Like Brecher, somewhat of a classic epic of American working class history, from a heavyweight thinker with a clear and quite accessible style.

Paul Brissenden. IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism. Columbia Univ. Press (1919). -LI-

One of the first in-depth studies of the IWW, especially on the debates in the early years. Contemporary, and detailed in some areas, although rather patchy on the role of European anarcho-syndicalism in the IWW.

Kornbluh. Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology. -LI-

Excellent selective reproduction of original IWW published material. Even includes some IWW cartoons, etc. - an invaluable primary source, though little critique (only an introduction has been added).

Patrick Renshaw. The Wobblies. Eyre and Spottiswoode (1967). -LI-

Covers the whole period, including the post-First World War IWW. However, rather shallow and lacking in clarity compared to Brissenden.

Sam Dolgoff. 'Revolutionary Tendencies in American Labour' In: Sam Dolgoff. The American Labour Movement: a New Beginning, LLR pamphlet. £3.95 -AK-

One of 4 essays which together contrast the revolutionary and conservative tendencies of the American labour movement. Good background and overview.

Dean Nolan & Frank Thompson. Joe Hill: IWW Songwriter. Pirate Press pamphlet. £1 -AK-

Primer- sized biography of the life of Joe Hill - and tragic death at the hands of the state. Don't mourn - organise!

Jon Bekken. The First Anarchist Daily Newspaper: The Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung. Anarchist Studies, Spring 1995, Vol.3, No.1. -LI-

Fairly recent article about the famous anarcho-syndicalist daily paper in German.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).