

THE IWW LEGACY

By Dick Meister

The Occupy Wall Street Movement and the other anti-capitalist forces of today could find no greater inspiration than the Industrial Workers of the World – the IWW, one of the most influential organizations in U.S. history, that was founded in Chicago in 1905 by a band of fiercely dedicated idealists.

The Wobblies, as they were called, battled against overwhelming odds. Their only real weapon was an utter refusal to compromise in a single-minded march toward a Utopia that pitted them against the combined forces of government and business.

Their weapon, their goals, the power of their opponents, the imperfect world about them made it inevitable that they would lose. But this is not to say the Wobblies failed because they didn't reach their goal of creating "One Big Union" to wage a general strike that would put all means of production in the hands of workers and transform the country into a "Cooperative Commonwealth of Workers."

To say the Wobblies failed would be to misinterpret the history of the Wobbly battle that left the world, as few battles leave it, a little less imperfect.

You need not believe in the simple Marxism and direct action techniques of the Wobblies to appreciate their great contribution to democracy, to union theory and practice, to folk music and literature, to the American idiom.

The IWW was founded by a group of socialists and dissident union organizers as an alternative to the American Federation of Labor, which they saw as an elitist and racist handmaiden of the capitalist class that controlled the economy. They denounced the AFL for ignoring the racially and ethnically mixed mass of unskilled workers in favor of the far fewer skilled and semi-skilled white craftsmen who were organized into separate unions according to their crafts. The Wobblies would bring all workers, all of them members of the working class, into the "One Big Union" regardless of their race, nationality, craft or work skills.

Wobbly organizers crisscrossed the country on freight trains to spread their message. They mounted street corner soapboxes in many cities, often battling police and vigilantes who tried to silence them. They organized lumberjacks, mine workers, farm workers, factory and mill hands. They led strikes.

The speeches, the written statements and the songs of the Wobblies were powerful, simple, direct and moving. So were the cartoons, posters and other material that filled the IWW's tremendous outpouring of publications, among them a dozen foreign-language newspapers that were distributed among the many unskilled immigrants from European nations where unions had similar goals.

Much of what was said and sung and written is still with us, a century later. Probably most important are the brilliant insights of the IWW's chief leaders, Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and the songs of famed IWW martyr Joe Hill, those simple satirical rhymes set to familiar melodies that focused workers on a common body of ideals.

You've probably heard at least one of Hill's songs. Remember? "You will eat, bye and bye/ In that glorious land above the sky/ Work and pray, live on hay/You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

The IWW legacy goes far beyond words and song. There's still much of value that we can draw from its history, sadly including what the IWW's ultimate fate tells us about how excessively undemocratic our government can be if left unchecked.

The Wobblies' refusal to support U.S. entry into World War I and their refusal to abandon strikes and other organizational activities during the war were used as an excuse by officials at all levels of government to side with employers. They called out troops and police to attack non-violent IWW strikers and raid IWW offices. They encouraged vigilantism and lynching and generally raised public hysteria against "IWW terror" that allegedly hampered the war effort.

After the war ended in 1918, officials seized on the IWW's open support for the Bolshevik revolutionaries in Russia as an excuse to crush Wobbly strikes and organizing efforts by mass arrests and imprisonment of strikers and IWW leaders for engaging in "Bolshevik conspiracies."

The IWW was all but destroyed. Membership shrank steeply and steadily, to the point that today the organization has only a relative handful of members, most of them employed at coffee shops, bookstores and other small businesses, their message spread primarily via websites.

Make no mistake, though. Employers did make some concessions in response to the IWW, and the very example of the Wobblies, their spirit of protest, their tactics, their history, and their courage continue to inspire labor and political activists worldwide.

As author Joyce Kornbluh notes in her magnificent IWW anthology, “Rebel Voices,” the Wobblies made “an indelible mark on the American labor movement and American society” – laying the groundwork for later mass unionization, inspiring the formation of groups to protect the civil liberties of dissidents, prompting prison and farm labor reforms and leaving behind “a genuine heritage . . . industrial democracy.”

This is Dick Meister.

Thanks for listening.