

## BOOK REVIEW

**Wobblies of the World: a global history of the IWW. Cole, P., Struthers, D. and Zimmer, K. (eds) (2017), Pluto Press, 2017, 312 pp, ISBN 978-07453-9959-1 Paperback £10, ISBN 978-07453-9960-7 £75**

Grassroots unions have seen a resurgence in recent years in the UK, partly as a response to the gig economy, with notable cases including large groups of traditionally non-unionised workers, particularly cleaners and couriers (Woodcock, 2014; Rogers, 2018; Pero, 2019). The two unions at the forefront are the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and a group who split from the IWW in 2012, the IWGB (Independent Workers of Great Britain).

The IWW was formed in 1905 in Chicago as a syndicalist union and held most sway in the period from 1905 through to the mid-1920s (Dubofsky, 2005). This book presents a global history of the IWW, which is in three parts: part 1 covers the internationalist ideas that influenced the formation of the IWW and its development in the United States; part 2 focusses on international organising under the banner of the IWW; and part 3 relates to the influence the IWW has had on trade union organising.

Syndicalists believe that revolution can be brought about by taking control of the means of production, rather than through armed struggle. The 1908 conference preamble urged all 'wage workers to organise ... [and that] ... the employing class and the working class have nothing in common..'. The IWW also stood apart to mainstream labour unions of the time as it declared equality for all based on gender and race, and the IWW constitution stated in Article 1 that 'No workingman or woman shall be excluded from membership in local unions because of creed or colour' (IWW, 1905). This declaration came right in the middle of the Jim Crow era when segregation was commonplace, even within trade unions.

At its inception in 1905, the involvement of recent immigrants to the United States gave the IWW its strong international focus. The first part of the book highlights the influences of global industrial union movements on the IWW by workers from all over the world from its formation. Zimmer (chapter 1) summarises this internationalisation based on migration listing migrant workers from Europe, Russia, Latin America and Asia. This internationalisation of workers brought modes of organisation from their countries of birth, one example being French workers' acts of 'sabotage' during the 1911 railway strike (Pinsoll chapter 2). By the 1912 'Bread and Roses' strike, big names in the IWW Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn included sabotage amongst their four tactics for victory in strikes (the others being solidarity, passive resistance and direct action).

Migration was two-way, and knowledge and influence of the IWW and syndicalist forms of anarchism spread outwards from the US-based IWW to movements like the Ghadar movement which fought ideas of British Empire in India (Khan chapter 3), and through Spanish-speaking maritime workers around the Atlantic (Alonso chapter 5).

The second part of the book details how many members of the IWW (known as 'Wobblies'1.) took the organising style of the IWW out of the United States and more broadly internationalised it. Thorpe (chapter 6) gives an overview of the internationalist labour movement at the time and outlines the reasons why the IWW never formally joined any of the Labour Internationals of the period. The closest the IWW came was in links with the French CGT, the Italian ISU and the Spanish CNT, but this was derailed by the outbreak of the war in 1914. Ultimately, the tensions between socialist, communist, syndicalist and industrialist organisation tactics meant the organisation was

unable to commit to join any one international. The rest of the second part of the book goes on to outline how and why the IWW held so much sway internationally, despite not being within a formal Labour International. Much of this was to do with involvement in work around shipping and docks. Dockers and ports are key within the internationalisation of the IWW as physical goods were being moved internationally through ports, but also as ports were multicultural places where sailors and dockworkers met and ideas spread (see also Alonso in chapter 5). Aguilar (chapter 7) discusses strikes in Tampico in Mexico, where disputes broke out partly in response to the movement of oil for WW1. It is no surprise that dockyards and the maritime industries were a focus for organising, as they are where both large numbers of working people meet in harsh conditions at the behest of international trade. Broeze (1991, p.170) described this as being at a 'economically strategic location' with a sphere of influence within their urban port location and internationally.

In the interwar period, White (chapter 13) recounts the experience of the Wobbly Marine Transport Workers heading to the civil war in Spain to form the Debs column (named after Eugene W Debs another early IWW leadership figure). However, this did not get off the ground, so they joined the International Brigades, and again came up against the disagreements between the Communists and anarchists of the IWW, alluded to by Thorpe in chapter 6.

Although the role of women is woven throughout many of the chapters, chapter 14, by Heather Mayer, is a portrait of Edith Frenette who was active in many campaigns around free speech. Mayer contrasts the treatment of the women of the IWW with that of male union members, and suggests that women were treated more favourably and received lesser sentences. However Mayer does suggest Frenette was subject to a patriarchal judgement, which suggested that women who were politically active were likely to have loose morals. This sometimes culminated in threats of sexual violence in custody made towards women active in the IWW around this time (Trasciatti, 2018).

The third part of the book deals with the IWW's influence and legacies. Three chapters act as case histories of different national and geographical areas, namely Ireland (Murphy, chapter 15) Sweden (Pries chapter 17) and South Africa (van der Walt chapter 18).

The importance of creating and communicating a shared IWW cultural understanding throughout the book is manifest in the detailing of the number and variety of IWW papers and publications, which were about sharing news in a variety of languages across members of the IWW. Another important aspect which is covered by Halker in the final chapter is around the way the message of the IWW spread through song, the Little Red Songbook and the songwriting of Joe Hill. As Joe Hill himself said in a letter to the Solidarity paper in November 1914 'A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over'. (in Foner, 2015, p. 11)

Wobblies of the World contains many stories of IWW activists and their struggles. From those who have made the better-known history of the IWW like Joe Hill, 'Big' Bill Hayward and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, to a wide variety of lesser known activists, some of whom are covered in careful historical detail (Tom Barker by de Angelis chapter 16 and Edith Frenette by Mayer chapter 14 to name but two). Whilst obviously an academic study, the book could have benefitted from some more recent history. It would have been good in a concluding chapter, to bring the ideas of the IWW forward towards and into the twenty-first century. After some years of declining trade union membership, new ways of organising within workplaces are gaining ground particularly to fight against the erosion of workers' rights and the growth of the gig economy. There is an emerging literature (Woodcock, 2014; Rogers, 2018) about precisely this issue and in the face of increasing national and international uncertainty, most of which serves only to turn the screw on working people in the

interests of capital, the history of the IWW shows a model of grassroots organising which may promote real change.

#### Note

1. The origin of the term Wobbly is contested—the IWW has four different explanations of where the name may have originated at <https://www.iww.org/history/icons/wobbly>

## References

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