

Think It Over

An introduction to the Industrial Workers of the World

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Solidarity

Working people have only one real option in today's economy. We have to resist, with all our might, the big business program of further and deeper poverty for working people.

For the first time in modern history profits are going up while wages and benefits are going down. In the past the two have always been tied, however unequally. Now the game has changed. Worse impoverishment and more of it is the wave of the future if we don't stand against the tide. The working conditions we see today in Asia and Central America are a good indication of the future of our own working lives in the "Western Democracies."

We have only one hope of fending off this tidal wave of misery. That hope, that tool, is solidarity. Every working stiff must stand up for every other working stiff, no matter where you live or where you come from, no matter if you are male or female, young or old, we must stand together. Every loss to any worker is a loss to us all, and every gain by any part of the working class is a victory for us all.

We must stand together. We must refuse to handle scab goods, to buy scab products, to cross the picket line. We must extend our hands across the borders and across the seas. We must support each worker's struggle as if it were our very own because that is exactly what it is.

Together we can win. Together we can make this world a better place to live, to raise our children, to spend our old age.

Direct Action

Direct action can be defined as the use of any tool, tactic or strategy that you can control yourself. It means using tactics, which directly address your problem. It's straightforward and simple and you can trust it. It succeeds or fails according to how good your idea is, how forcefully it is applied, how appropriate it is to the situation.

Voting for candidates who promise to fix your problems for you is not direct action. To strike, to slow down, to sit down on the job are direct actions. To symbolically protest for the purpose of getting press coverage, in hopes that it will build support or sympathy for your cause is not direct action, no matter what the tactics of your protest may be. To walk the picket line with a fellow worker from a different trade, from a different shop, from a different nation is direct action.

It takes only the briefest glance at history to see that what is given to us can be taken away. The only gains we can hope to hold are those that we take and defend with our own hands and hearts. Those crumbs that are thrown to us from time to time by the rich and their government are always taken back.

The government serves the interest of the ruling class, and will always do so. We can expect the same from them in the future as we have gotten so far, a sop once in awhile perhaps, to confuse us and weaken our resolve, but mostly the boot, the club, and the clanging of cell doors. Direct action plus solidarity equals success.

The only tactics of struggle and defense that we can trust are those that we, the working people, control. Direct action gets the goods. To defend ourselves we need to stand together and stand up for ourselves.

Every Worker Needs a Union

In recent years union membership has steadily dropped. It's no real wonder, given the bureaucratic nature of the union movement and the frequency of sellouts, that most working people today don't have much faith in the union. How could we?

Nonetheless, the need still exists for a working class organization to defend and further the interest of the working people at their jobs. That's union. We need it. Nobody is going to stand up for us. The political parties will court our votes and our donations, but real money talks, and for now the bosses have the real money. They call the tunes in politics. Our only option is union.

We need to build these unions right. We need to build them so that we can control them, so that we can trust, them, so that they will serve our needs only, not the needs of bosses and bureaucrats and political hacks. That means union democracy. It means recallable elected officials who report directly to the rank and file. It means that all-important decisions are made directly by the membership. It means any job or action or strike is controlled by and settled by the workers on the shop floor. It means full disclosure on financial matters and rank and file control over the union funds.

It means doing things very differently than they are done in the business unions. It means doing things the way we do them in the IWW.

Union Democracy

The unions that most working people belong to today, if they belong to any union at all, are among the most undemocratic organizations on earth. Officials are appointed, not elected. Settlements are arrived at behind closed doors and presented to the rank and file for approval. Maverick locals are put into receivership by the internationals. Union bosses are entrenched for life, never facing the possibility of returning to the shop floor, if indeed they've ever been there in the first place.

Is it any wonder that union membership is down and workers' confidence in their leaders is almost nonexistent? Is it a miracle that we are losing the gains we fought for in years past? Is it a surprise that the sellout and sweetheart contract, the union thug and the wealthy union bureaucrat are clichés that all associate with the modern labor movement, while the fighting union militant rank and file organizer is seen as a quaint concept from a bygone era?

In order to defend ourselves and our families we need to join together in unions. We need our combined strength to face the rich and their government. We need the union, but the union we need is a democratic union. How else will it defend our needs and not those of our bosses? How else can we control our own struggles, choose our own goals and our own issues. We need democratic unions, rank and file control, shop floor direct democracy to fight our fights. No union bureaucrat ever stood up for the workers, and none ever will. We have to stand up for ourselves, together, in democratic union. If we can't control our union and its leadership, then we can't trust them. It's just that simple

Wobble is a Verb

The essential value of union lies in what it can do. What it can do for you and yours and for your class as a whole. What you can do with it. How you can use it to do what you need to do. To do is a verb. Action is what we're talking about.

When we come together on the job to address our common problems with the shared strength or our common action, we are doing something. We're not talking about it, though that's important, and we're not seeking publicity and making a big show of it, though those things can be valuable in their place. We are acting on it. Doing. We are the subjects, to put it in grammatical terms, and the problem is our object, upon which we, in common activity, act to change. That's action, Verb.

In the construction trades the verb "to wobble" is commonly used to describe a group action that seeks to address a problem on the job, a problem with the boss, as on the job problems tend to be. To wobble the job is to walk out, slow down, or all go to the boss for a "chat" on work time. Straight up, to come together to address the problems by direct means. That's what it's all about.

It's happening all the time, all over the place. It's a necessary part of daily life on the job. You can do it too. You and your fellow workers, on your job, can wobble the situation to make it better. That's job control, and that's the thing we need to establish and protect, for our own safety and health, to ensure good compensation for our precious time, for fun and profit and relief from the boredom and loneliness that pervades our lives in this modern workaday world.

The key to good wobbling is union. That's small union, meaning cooperation and concerted effort amongst fellows, people with the same needs and circumstance, i.e.: the people you work next to day after day. Alone we are weak and ineffectual. Together we are awesome in our power. We have only to organize this power and to wield it, for our common good, to make this world a better place. Together we can win. We just have to do (verb) it. Let's act now.

The Working Class and the Employing Class Have Nothing in Common

"The working class and the employing class have nothing in common" Says the preamble of the constitution of the IWW. That's the basis of our approach to labor relations and unionism. Let's look at this statement for a second.

It doesn't mean that workers and bosses are a different species, that they don't breathe the same polluted air and drink the same water, though the air and water in a working class neighborhood are a damn shit filthier than they are up on the hill. It means that the two classes, which first of all do exist, are in opposition, by their very nature.

What's good for the bosses – cheap labor maximally controlled and passive, is bad for the workers. What's good for the workers – maximum control over the job, job conditions, objectives and methods, and maximum compensation for our precious time is death to the bosses, and they will fight it tooth and nail. It's nothing personal, no more than a lion hates a gazelle, it's just a natural, impersonal, economic enmity that can't be gotten around nor safely ignored. It's the principle that runs our lives, capitalist and drove alike.

If a boss gets too chummy with the workers and tries to be their pal, his/her business will suffer. If the worker gets too palsy with the boss, s/he'll be even more easily exploited and betrayed.

Natural enemies on the impersonal plane of economics. You can belong to the same church and even drink at the same bar, but you can't look out for each other's interests for long without endangering your own. This is pretty simple and obvious to any working stiff that pays attention to daily life. Smart bosses never forget it. It's not esoteric at all; it's pragmatic and common good sense.

What it implies in terms of unionism is very radical, i.e.: oriented toward the root cause and cures. It implies class solidarity. All workers have the same interests as well as the same class enemy. It implies union democracy. We're in it together and only real rank and file control can guide the union steadily and reliably. The only ones we can trust are ourselves, and a union we don't control directly is a very real danger to our interests.

It implies militancy, because it illuminates a situation of ongoing class war (not really too strong a term if you look at the destruction that results) that must be won to come to an end. We have to fight tooth and nail to defend our interests and our safety. It's war, fellow workers, and ugly as it is, we're stuck with it and can only go forward by organizing right and fighting the good fight.

The working class and employing class have nothing in common. It's the obvious common sense truth, and we can't afford to ignore it.

Labor Law in a Nutshell

Labor law is a branch of study that a person could go to college and get a PH.D. in, and base a pretty lucrative career on. You could buy a car every year, live in a big fine house on the hill, support a wife or husband who never had to leave the home to earn money, be a member of the country club, wear really nice clothes, and send your kids to Vassar and Yale. In fact, the whole shooting match. Of course you wouldn't have a hell of a lot in common with the people you spent your day advocating for, but then, what lawyer does? It's a specialized profession, and it pays well.

Don't get me wrong. We appreciate our lawyers, especially when it's our butts on the dock. We want them to be real sharp and to know every nuance of that complex tangled web of labor law.

But you and me don't have the time and money to study labor law or go to a big college. That costs money. We do, however, need to understand the basic facts of labor law and how it affects our daily work lives on the job.

Well, here it is in a nutshell. Labor law is set up by the bosses and their government and courts system to keep you and me, the working stiffs, from coming together and fighting for our piece of the pie, for fear that we'll want, and some day be able to take, the whole thing. That's the essential data. The basic idea behind Taft Hartley, Landrum-Griffith and all the rest is that you can have a union if you really want one bad enough but it can only fight for certain things, address certain issues, and it has to wear leg weights and boxing gloves and follow an elaborate set of rules that don't really, in practice, apply to your boss and his friends at the country club. You have to wait, but he or she can get snappy service in court. You have to limit your activities to these certain legal forms, but he or she can do just about anything and get away with it. Their lawyers are bigger than ours, every time out, because they cost more. You ought to see the cars they drive!

Does this come as a surprise to you, here in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave? I certainly hope not. You see, this isn't really a democracy, because the economic decisions aren't made that way, and they underlie all the other decisions that get made. The flow of money, products, goods and services, food and housing, medical care and vacation fun, that stuff falls under the other system of decision making. You can call it capitalism, or corporate rule, or business, or whatever you choose, but you can't really call it democracy. Everybody will laugh at that. So, the law isn't the law of the people, by the people, for the people, no matter what your teacher may have told you. Sorry, but it's just not that way.

Labor Law is the product or the influence of big business interests on government and the court system, and it means you have to watch you head and the other end, too, and be real careful what you say and do. If you want to play it their way, just go along with the set-up system. Get your cards signed, call for an NLRB election, wait it out. There may be times when this is the smart way to go. But don't let the boss define the playing field and call all the shots.

This is a street fight, a mugging, a cold and calculated assault, and you need to defend yourself as best you can however you can. Watch you head, and the other end too, and use your creativity and especially the help of your fellow workers, and every strategy and tactic and clever idea you can get your hands on. If you let them define the playing field and make the rules, you simply haven't a prayer of winning. It's that simple. And that, fellow workers, is labor law in a nutshell.

It's not, however, the only game in town, the only way to proceed, the only solution to your common problems. Check out the IWW. Think it over, join the union of your class and fight for the full product of your labor, the wobbly way. Don't let them call the shots and make the rules. This is our game. We do the work. We make the stuff and haul it around. We control the economy. If we will organize ourselves democratically to advance our own interest, we can share the wealth that we already produce, and have enough for all that do a share of the work.

We Never Forget

"We Never Forget" So it says on many of the older IWW stickers and posters, especially those from the 1920's when the prisons of America still housed hundreds of our members arrested in the late teens and early 20's on charges of criminal syndicalism, sabotage and sedition. Obviously, one meaning of the slogan was that we would never abandon these precious fellow workers until they all walked free in the sunlight again. And to our credit, we never did. We kept on doing everything in our power to free our brothers and sisters, locked down in the class war that burned so hot in those long gone days. But, the slogan has another meaning. One that runs deeper and applies even more poignantly today, when the class war is just heating up again. It's about what late Fellow Worker and sage mentor Bruce "Utah" Phillips called "The Long Memory" and which he describes as our most dangerous weapon, our greatest tool.

How can that be? Maybe it's that old thing about history either informing or entrapping you. In these times anything old is disrespected and cast away, to our great misfortune and loss. The old stories are forgotten, the old people ignored. Not so with us in the IWW, and that's one of our strengths. An ace up our sleeve when one is sorely needed.

What can we gain by this long memory, this unfashionable occupation with the past? These stories contain abiding truths, examples of how the working class coped with the higher level of struggle, a hotter brand of trouble, a more naked fist of attack, in times gone by. We can't

copy these old actions or treat them as blueprints to be followed with exacting accuracy. That would be foolish. But the core information, about how the wobblies of yesteryear looked at the problems they faced, and how they applied the principles and knowledge of their many struggles and many battles, that's the gold we must mine and refine.

How these long dead fellow workers went at it, in their daily lives, their mental processes and attitudes, their shared world view, if you will, that this is what we need today to guide us through the broken glass and sharp rusty metal of our ugly-industrial wasteland pathway.

Times have changed and things are different, but the essentials remain the same. The class war still rages, hotter now, cooler for a bit, then hotter again. The same madness still drives our class enemies to the wanton destruction of all that surrounds them. The same danger and evil still stalks the days and nights of our lives. The same rules apply, in different wording and with different application perhaps, but more the same than new and different.

The long memory, the wisdom of experience accumulated over 105 years of active participation in the class war, bought with the blood and suffering, the days and years of experience of fellow workers numbering more than 1 million (the "x" in our card numbers signifies one million, thus I, #X344468, am the 1344468th working stiff to take out a red card, to commit myself to the battle between boss and worker, capital and labor).

It's mostly lost already, these stories and moments, these long past lives of simple fighters and brilliant thinkers, fiery talkers and dogged organizers, yet when we take out the red card and pay the monthly dues, we carry on the same struggle, lift again the same red banner and carry it along a little further toward "that commonwealth of toil that is to be." We join the unbroken chain of class warriors that stretches across a century, through the generations. My grandfather wasn't a Wobbly, but many were. We seek to carry on their knowledge and their thoughts, to see how they came to their decisions, in hopes that these insights will guide us forward into the light of a new day, in a new world of peace and prosperity, joy and sharing.

Help the Work Along

William D. Haywood, AKA Big Bill, used to sign his letters and correspondences "Help the work along, William D. Haywood." He was a founding organizer and the General Secretary Treasurer of the IWW for many years, through our most turbulent times, and a great leader. That closing formula tells you a lot about his method of leadership, and the union of the time.

Help the work along. We joined together, then and now, to do a job of work, to accomplish a task, for ourselves and each other, for our class and for generations to come. That task, simply stated in the preamble, is the Abolition of the Wage System. Building a new society within the shell of the old. Ending, once and for all the tyranny of money, boss over worker.

It's a big job. Too big by far to be accomplished by any one hero or small band of heroes, no matter how mighty. Help the work along. It's a big job that takes however long it takes, however many battles and however many hours of volunteer labor and thought. However many tasks, small or large, completed. Hours of travel, putting the paper out on time issue after issue, year after year, however many meetings and discussions, ballots printed and mailed and counted, dues stamps sold and licked and stuck in however many little red books, moneys counted and accounted for.

Not all that sexy, most of it. Business like and often plodding. Hard work lightened by many hands, shared hours, and little steps. Sometimes just holding the line against setbacks. Sometimes not even that. Some leaps and bonds.

“Every member and organizer,” “We are all leaders,” “If each wobbly would make a new wobbly once a week we’d have the cooperative Commonwealth in a few short years.” Help the work along.

The work: Education, Organization, Emancipation. Those are the names of the three stars on the IWW emblem on every dues book and button. Education, both of self and fellow workers. Organization, both of self and fellow workers. Emancipation of a class in struggle, at war, and of the earth that feeds and holds us all.

Won’t you join us in our work? Help the work along? What else is there to do?

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