

Life-long Wobblies



An article by J Pierce and Sadie Farrell about life-planning for revolutionaries and how the IWW has attempted to address this with Junior Wobblies.

Two IWW dreams came true for me at Mesaba Co-op Park this summer. One was to lead a conversation about being life-long revolutionaries. The other was to teach IWW principles to kids in a memorable way. The Work People's College Committee approved the workshop I co-led with FW Linda called "Che Guevara vs. Mr. Rogers: Long-Term Planning for Lifelong Wobblies" (hereinafter referred to as "Life Planning"). The Junior Wobblies counselors gave me the opportunity to design some curriculum for the kids. These two experiences, as it turned out, went hand in hand.

The IWW has always been a multigenerational organization—something we are all very proud of. However, the union is entering a newer stage of retention since our gradual resurgence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many of our 20-something- year-old-members from that time are now 30- and 40-somethings with kids, partners and the stresses of being

grown-up trouble-makers. Life Planning and Junior Wobblies are two exemplars of our readiness for the new IWW.

Life Planning

I've been promoting the idea of "IWW career counseling" for a while. In numerous conversations, fellow workers expressed their frustration at dedicating years of their work lives to IWW organizing. When it was all over, they had little to show for it: no money, no job prospects, and no marketable skills—nothing that meant "success." The only viable career path, at that point, was to work for the business unions, which are constantly tempting IWWs with a mirage of security and respectability. Wobblies have also quit the union in order to "become their own boss," ascend into the left intelligentsia, or graduate to being a "real" union member in a trade. This led to the idea that we should be helping each other build toward a career that allows us to stay in the IWW and work a job we might actually enjoy. Life planning combines "career counseling" and "life coaching" and draws out the contradictions and complexities that a Wobbly encounters as we progress through years of struggle.

Entanglements that we covered in the workshop included raising Wobbly kids and supporting Wobbly parents; finding life partners and maintaining those relationships; overcoming burnout, mild and severe depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental illness; struggling with work, criminal records, lack of money or jobs, housing problems, prison, deportation, retirement; and more. As we invent collective solutions to these highly personal problems, we are forced to be honest with ourselves about what it really takes to be a life-long revolutionary.

Junior Wobblies

As we examined various collective solutions to life planning, we discovered that the single best "long-term plan" is already in full bloom: it's the Junior Wobblies! A youth and family component to the IWW addresses an infinite amount of concerns, and is fun too. The first Junior Wobblies camp took place last summer, July 1 through July 5, 2012, at Mesaba. The Junior Wobblies camp is run by parents, counselors and increasingly by the Junior Wobblies themselves. Junior Wobblies programming runs at the same time as Work People's College workshops, giving Wobbly parents the opportunity to participate in Junior Wobblies activities, attend workshops or do a combination of both!

For this year's Junior Wobblies camp, we dreamt up an extended role play to get the kids doing the principles of the IWW. We did this by preparing a "Spanish Revolution" theme and using "living history"—playing dress-up and reenacting (an inspired version of) Spanish Civil War history. We tied the activities together with the idea that the kids were an anarchist youth collective building toward the revolution of 1936. We discussed regimentation and racism in the schools. We discussed how boring "robot" schools prepare kids for boring "robot" jobs. We practiced breaking down racial barriers and standing up to bullies. We worked in a mind-numbing paper airplane plant and had silent agitators encourage other youth to fight for the good things in life: "Stop cleaning the litter box and read!" "No—Sleep! Yes—Swim!" "Eat the rich and your pizza!" "Stand up to the bullies and join the Junior Wobblies!" "Capitalism sucks!! Join the Junior Wobblies!" We sewed red-and-black neckerchiefs and practiced union songs. And we defeated the fascists at the barricades thanks to disciplined production of water balloon munitions and the creativity, unity and spirit of the workers in battle.

Instead of instructing the kids in "politics," the trick was to get them to feel what we feel as class-conscious workers. By using living history, role plays and interactive scenarios, the kids get to use their own thinking to arrive at their own conclusions. Simulations such as the

barricade activity allow people to make mistakes and learn from them ahead of time while preparing for the real thing. Many of the kids won't fully grasp the ideology behind the barricade activity, but they will remember the experience, the process and how it made them feel. The adventure of fighting alongside the "union" and the Junior Wobblies against these people called "fascists" and then singing "Solidarity Forever" and "A las Barricadas" in triumph— these are not political ideas. They are visceral sensations that will stay with them for a long time.

The secret is that adults need to have multi-sensory experiences, too. Adults learn the same way children do; it's just less embarrassing if we can pretend the dress-up is for the kids. Educating children, or adults, in IWW values is not about convincing ourselves intellectually. It's about creating experiences that engender the positive feelings of solidarity and cooperation while practicing good habits like befriending people who are different than you and standing up to the bullies together. The Junior Wobblies talked about how we needed to demonstrate the principle of solidarity by helping each other and having each other's backs while showing each other kindness and respect if we were going to organize successfully for the revolution. The Junior Wobblies lived the principle of solidarity all week long. Older kids helped younger kids participate in activities. Veteran Junior Wobblies helped new recruits learn the ropes at Mesaba, and the kids took care of each other if one of them was hurt or upset. It's easy to feel a sense of solidarity when working with the Junior Wobblies, and supporting our union parents is the best way to transform the IWW into the organization we all want to see.

The New IWW

At Mesaba this year, and in every branch, we have ample real-world evidence of the phenomenon of life-planning or the lack thereof. We had organizers who were stressed out, broken down, and burning out fast. We also had fellow workers who were working their plan, staying healthy, and supporting others to do the same. But the days of leaving our members to "sink or swim" on their own are coming to an end. As a union, we must find collective solutions to the challenges our members face. The more we transition to a family-oriented, healthy-habit, long-term-planning IWW the better we are going to be at building and sustaining life-long Wobblies.

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