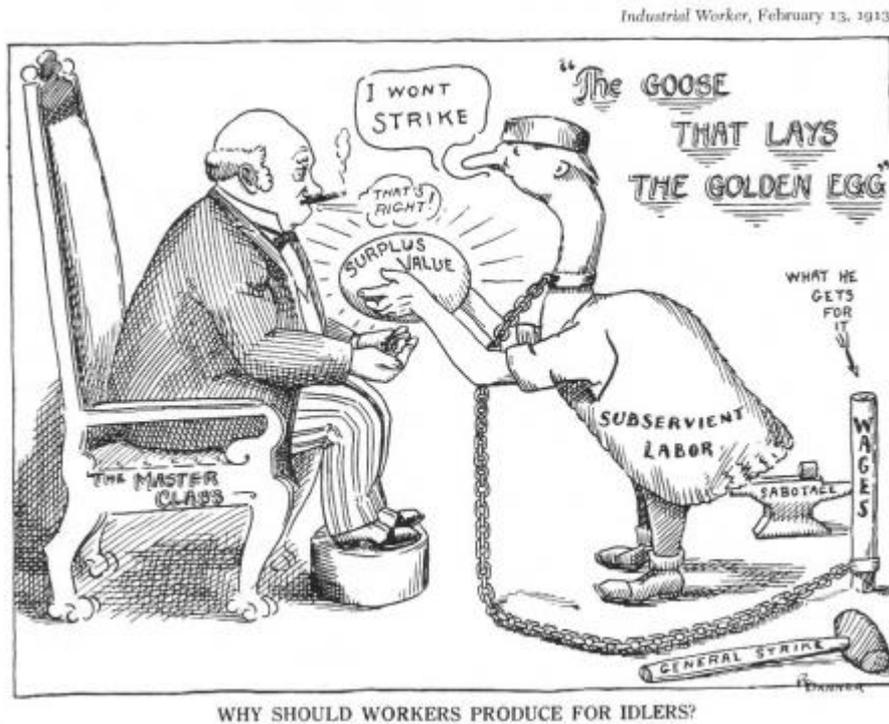


Wobbly Fred Thompson on the 30s depression - Studs Terkel



The late Wobbly veteran, in conversation with the late Studs Terkel, looks back on his experience in the class struggle.

Source; *Hard Times - An Oral History of the Great Depression*; Studs Terkel, Pantheon Books, NY, 1970.

Fred Thompson

"I'm just as old as the century." He is a member of the [IWW \(Industrial Workers of the World, popularly known as the Wobblies\)](#). He joined in 1922.

In his younger days, he had been a construction worker: tunnels, irrigation ditches, dams, quarries, laying track. "We always boxcared from one job to another, never paid any fare. I had heard of the Wobblies . . . weird stories, that they were a bunch of nuts trying to change the world by burning haystacks and stuff like that.

"I found a tremendous difference between this myth and the reality. They were a very serious bunch of men with understanding: even if we'd win our immediate demands, the boss and I will still have a fight. Let's run the works for our own good, so we won't have to fight any more. They had this notion: someday . . . But, right now, let's clean up these camps, let's raise the wages.

"There's a belief that the [IWW](#) was killed by the repression following [World War I](#), when a lot of us, including myself, were arrested for criminal syndicalism. The facts don't correspond. Our membership was at its peak in the summer of 1923.

"In 1924, we had a catastrophe, when an internal factional fight split us in two. But we built up again, following the [Colorado Coal Strike of '27](#)."

IN THE THIRTIES, our biggest growth was in Cleveland. As soon as this Depression got going, we hammered away at one theme: people who didn't have a job would do far more for themselves by going to every worker who still had a job, and saying, "If you strike, we won't take your job away from you. We'll come there and beef up your picket line." We put out a leaflet, I remember writing it myself: Bread lines, Picket lines. The theme was that bread lines lead to despair and picket lines lead to hope.

I was on a soapbox circuit. I used to go from Duluth down to Minneapolis, over to Milwaukee, down to Chicago. We'd usually hit places like the iron country in Michigan and Minnesota. In Chicago, we'd hit Swedetown, around the North Side. They'd be mostly men. The home guard. The fellows who weren't migratory workers, who didn't ramble around, who had a stationary job.

Henry Ford changed things for the [IWW](#). We used to be rather strong with people who worked the wheat harvest. They went there in boxcars. But the combines [machines for harvesting and threshing wheat] shut out the demand for extra harvest labor. Plus the fact that people became "rubber tramps," in broken-down tin flivvers. This meant our organizing technique was no longer workable. We had to go to the flivver jungles.

In '22, at the construction camps, you didn't see any females around unless they were visiting with their business agent (laughs), for short durations. You didn't see men and wives.

In '27, I had a little holiday that the State of California gave me for criminal syndicalism. When I came back, two years later, I found the whole industry had changed. Every camp had provision for married couples, but their children had to be working.

Quite a few people were living in nearby towns, if there were decent roads between town and job. The automobile made it possible for a man to live a fairly settled life and fill these out-of-town jobs. The migratory worker had practically disappeared in '26. You didn't hear much about him again until the Dust Bowl days. And a new kind of mobility arose.

Did the Communists or Socialists try to win away your members to their causes during these years . . . ?

The radical movement waxes and wanes. They jostle each other. We like to grab each other's members and things like that, sure. But the over-all anti-capitalist movement grows and declines together. They all get bigger at the same time, they all get smaller at the same time. (Laughs.)

In general, there was cooperation - not entirely so. The [IWW](#) has always tried to avoid being dogmatic, doctrinaire. We don't ask a guy: what are your political beliefs? We ask 'em: what kind of work do you do? What industry are you in? We have never prevented any person joining because of his beliefs.

The Communists wanted us to join them in 1920. They had a misapprehension over in Moscow, where they got their orders, that we were a secret underground. Heywood [Big Bill Heywood, a top leader of the IWW] went over and tried to explain to [Lenin](#) that we had a great big printing plant in Chicago, where we put out twelve different weeklies and a bunch of magazines and so forth. We had trouble with the Government, but we were certainly not hiding. They knew we were doing these things. (Laughs.)

The [IWW](#) did not engage in internecine warfare, say, the way the other groups did . . . ?

We were forced into a certain amount of it. By 1923, the Communist Party had decided that we should be allowed to exist in agriculture and in the woods, but should not be allowed into any other industry. And if their members did join us, they should do what they could to

disrupt us. Naturally, that gave us some concern. But even at that, we tried to get them to see the common sense, is all.

What did happen to the [IWW](#) membership in the Thirties?

We had lean years. But we did get to far more people. People had time, all kinds of time. In the early Thirties, up to '35, everybody might be flat broke, but they'd find a way of gettin' to a meeting.

In the depths of the Depression, did you hear much talk of revolution?

Oh, there was a lot of talk. But there was no anticipation that we were about to take over the works and run it. The [IWW](#) felt only an organized working class could do it. A working class that wasn't allowed to eat the food it produced . . . that had to go with patches on its ass after it had made too many clothes . . . was a working class that could be brow beat. A working class that had to beg for a soup bone wasn't a class that could take this world and run it. They had to organize first.

I ran into some ill-informed people who used the word revolution very carelessly - that things were so tough, we were going to have a revolution and so forth. I didn't run into any person who had given serious thought as to how you make one. I'd want a revolution. Sure, I'd like one now. But the circumstances are not propitious for havin' one, and they weren't in 1931, '32. It isn't just a bunch of starving people that are going to make a revolution. It's gonna be a people that have been asserting themselves. . . .

How did the [IWW](#) feel about F.D.R.?

When he died, I remember an obituary in our paper: "He was hated by those he had helped and loved by those he had harmed." A good many Wobblies felt that was hitting it right on the head. He made a big hullabaloo about what he was gonna do for labor. After he had labor by the tail, he seemed to figure he could disregard it and favor our enemy instead.

What were your feelings toward the New Deal?

Here was an economic system that had quit work. The logical remedy would have been for a working class to assert itself: we want at least enough of what we produce so we can keep on working. But you didn't have that kind of labor action. Consequently, the pigs who had been stopping the things from working by their own greed didn't disgorge anything. But certain adjustments were made that allowed people to eat. At the time of Hoover, you could use federal funds to feed animals, but not to feed people. It was up to your neighbors, he said.

You think, then, Roosevelt hurt the radical movement . . . ?

I don't know as he hurt it. He changed the situation. He did cause most people to feel if you could only find a good man and put him in office, he'll fix everything for you, and you can go back to sleep now. He certainly didn't help radicalism.

The kind of labor movement that grew up, that we have today, still has this birthmark. Unionism by permit - the NLRB, things of that sort.

In the early Thirties, there was a resurgence of an almost dead labor movement. There were various radical activities: the Trotskyites up in Minneapolis, the Communists over there in Toledo, the Socialists there, Wobblies in Cleveland, Detroit and so on. The union literature was like the labor literature of a century ago - looking toward a successor to capitalism. Industrial democracy. In which you have a cooperative commune, you have a brotherhood of man. Even though the issue of the moment was five cents more an hour or better files for metal finishers to work with. ... The literature carried a vision.

But then you saw, in the coal towns of Pennsylvania - Lewis and the CIO - great big banners: "The President Wants You to Join the Union." It worked. So radicalism was replaced by something else. The Government had set up a way. Just sign your name, your authorization card. You can do it quite secretly, you don't have to be a hero any more. We can all vote in a union election, and nobody will know how you voted. Of course, the boss will have to recognize the union, and nobody will really have had to stick his neck out.

When I was a kid, if somebody asked me to define a grievance, I'd it's something we don't like. Today, a grievance is something not in accordance with standards of arbitration. We're even *told what* the hell to be dissatisfied with these days. (Laughs.)

When I was a kid, the union was *us* guys, what *we* collectively did. Nowadays, people don't speak of the union as *us*. Almost everywhere, the union is *it* or *they*.

There is a growing perception that we should have something other than capitalism. But people aren't excited about it. It's a strange thing. I hardly find anybody today who doesn't agree that the ledger should not determine how we live. Most people think it's terrible that the pollution of Lake Michigan is being decided by how much it'll cost companies to cure it. People are realizing that an environment is being created that will be as dangerous for capitalists to live in as well as for working people . . . that it's insane to let major things be decided on the basis of black figures and red figures.

I find temperate people saying today that the business-motivated system isn't a safe thing to have around. (Laughs.) But I think there is less intensity of feeling.

I think a sense of powerlessness, of fatalism, has been growing from the Thirties. Then, we just felt we didn't have the power, the organization. We never felt we were *inherently* incapable of achieving it.

The thing that gives me the most cheer are the young people today. You find them all over the world, having a sense of common fate. They're the least bookish radicals I've ever known, but the most literate. In the Thirties, a guy read some kind of book and he wanted everything to go according to that text. Today, these college kids use books simply for insights. They don't have a dogma. They're far more flexible, far more open-minded, far more feeling. *They* have the feeling