

A Brief History of the IWW outside the US (1905 - 1999)

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By F.N. Brill - January 1999

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F.N. Brill's Introduction:

The International aspects of the IWW is something that has escaped most labor historians. While widely acknowledged as an important labor movement, it in many ways has been relegated to either an infantile expression of the proletariat or the inspiration for the "successful" unions of the 1930s.

For those hostile to it, the liberals and Stalinists, it was more convenient to proclaim it dead in 1919 and sweep the possibilities of the IWW under the carpet. Even though Lenin greatly respected the IWW, the Stalinist labor historians have needed to erase the differences between the IWW and the Communist's organizing practices of the 1920s and 30s. While superficially similar in style and rhetoric, the IWW and Stalinists differ in the IWW's insistence of a rotation of leadership from the rank and file. The communists, with the hopes they would be the leaders, helped build the entrenched labour bureaucracies we see today.

But even IWW historians have ignored the ramifications of the IWW's organizing on an international basis.

Sadly, even Fred Thompson, author of the IWW's wonderful official history, The IWW: Its First 50 Years only glosses over the tremendous impact the IWW had internationally and focuses only on the US. To be fair, the IWW's resources were tremendously limited at the time of the First 50 Years leading to a much more condensed book.

The IWW was a major movement in a number of countries and upon the high seas. It had probably more lasting importance in Australia and Chile than it was in the US and Canada. At points the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union stood poised to control much of the world's shipping, while in Australia the IWW effectively halted the Dominion's World War I military efforts.

While not organized, or only briefly, the IWW also held a significant influence upon the development of the workers movements in Ireland, South Africa, Scandinavia and China.

This (page) is a broad overview of all the information I could gather, thanks to IWWs from around the world. I was unable to get much information on the IWW in Sweden, and the Central European nations. Future editions should fill in those missing histories.

I hope this overview is a start to a new appreciation of what the IWW has accomplished. I also hope it is a provocation to rebuild the IWW internationally and win what our Fellow Workers weren't able to accomplish.

History of the IWW

Argentina

- November 1919. The Marine Transport Workers had established a branch in Buenos Aires with its own paper.

- Within a month the IWW had ended impressment of seamen at the Port through direct actions.

Australia

"Nobody has exercised a more profound influence on the whole outlook of labor in Australia (than the IWW)"

--Gordon Childe

"It's 1000 times better to be a traitor to your country than a traitor to your class"

- Australian IWW "clubs" formed in 1907
- July 1907 Coal Miner Strike in NSW and Victoria led by IWW
- 1908 IWW leads Sydney transport strike
- 1909 strike at Broken Hill, workers locked out for a year and IWW leaders tried for sedition.
- 31 January, 1914 *Direct Action* newspaper first appears.
- 1915
 - Brisbane -- Prime Minister Hughes' speech is drowned out by crowd led by IWWs. IWWs decide to 'count him down' and the audience joins in, by the number ten Hughes is speechless.
 - Victoria region -- Fruit pickers get wage increase when IWWs post signs in orchards "Please don't drive copper nails into fruit trees as it will destroy them."
- 1916 IWW leads New South Wales Railway workshop slowdown
- 1916 Broken Hill Miners take Saturday afternoons off, giving themselves a 44 hour week. Then strike for 8 hour day. Miners strike spreads to 11,500 miners demanding "bank-to-bank" 8 hour day, virtually shutting down coal mining nationally for 2 months.
- Aug. 13, 1916 IWWs speak to 80-100,000 on Sydney Domain against war effort.
- Sept. 30, 1916 Raids on IWW headquarters and arrests of key members.
- Dec. 3, 1916 7 IWWs sentenced to 15 years in prison for anti-war efforts. Others sentenced to 5 and 10 ❖?years.
- "A group of aggressive newsboys informed employers that they had joined the IWW and intended in the future to do as little as possible."
- Aug. 27, 1917 IWW made illegal and membership rolls made available to employers.
- Despite widespread repression, the IWW helps lead the General Strike of 1917.
- 1924 Melbourne IWW reformed.
- 1927 Sydney IWW reformed.
- 1928 May, Adeldale IWW forms Australian Administration, starts publishing *Direct Action* newspaper. In August, *Direct Action* is banned.
- IWW agitates during the '30s for "Not a minute on the day, not a penny off the pay, Fight against 48 hours and Wage cuts".
- IWW protests World War II and is made illegal
- 1946 Australian IWW reformed in Sydney

- 1964-65 IWW Pat Mackie leads major mining lock-out/strike at Mt. Isa
- Two IWW Regional Organizing Committees exist today, in Australia proper and Tasmania.

Canada

- Five Branches were formed in BC in 1906, including a Lumber Handlers Job Branch composed of Indigenous Canadians.
- By 1911, the IWW claimed 10,000 members in Canada, notably in mining, logging, Alberta agriculture, longshoring and the textile industry.
- In 1912 the IWW fought a fierce free speech fight in Vancouver, forcing the city to rescind a ban on public street meetings.
- Organizing began in 1911 among construction workers building the Canadian Northern Railway in BC. In September a quick strike of 900 workers halted 100 miles of construction.
- February 1912, IWW membership on the CN stood at 8,000.
- March 27, unable to further tolerate the unbearable living conditions in the work camps, the 8,000 "dynos and dirtheads" walked out. The strike extended over 400 miles of territory, but the IWW established a "1,000-mile picket line" as Wobs picketed employment offices in Vancouver, Seattle, Tacoma, San Francisco, and Minneapolis to halt recruitment of scabs.
- August, 1912 they were joined by 3,000 construction workers on the Grand Trunk Pacific in BC and Alberta.
- (According to legend) CN strike also spawned the nickname Wobbly. A Chinese restaurant keeper who fed strikers reputedly mispronounced "IWW" in asking customers "Are you eye wobble wobble?" and the name stuck.
- "Scab on the job" tactic created, by sending convert Wobs into scab camps to bring the workers out on strike.
- The IWW established an Edmonton Unemployed League, demanding that the city furnish work to everybody regardless of race, colour or nationality, at a rate of 30 cents an hour, and further, that the city distribute three 25-cent meal tickets to each man daily, tickets redeemable at any restaurant in town. On January 28, 1914 The city council agreed to provide a large hall for the homeless, passed out three 25-cent meal tickets to each man daily, and employed 400 people on a public project.
- On September 24, 1918, a federal order in council declared that while Canada was engaged in war, 14 organizations were to be considered unlawful, including the IWW. Penalty for membership was set at 5 years in prison.
- In 1916, virtually extinct in the rest of the country, the IWW had moved from the Minnesota iron fields in the Mesaba Range northward into Ontario and had gained a large following in the northern woods.
- In 1919 the Ontario lumber workers joined the OBU, but Wobbly delegates continued to bootleg union supplies to the minority who wanted to keep their IWW membership books as well, as well as did OBU-IWW delegates in B.C.
- April 2, 1919 the ban on the IWW was lifted. Two branches were formed in Toronto and Kitchener.

- By 1923 IWW had three branches with job control in Canada: Lumberworkers IU 120 and Marine Transport Workers IU 510 in Vancouver and an LWIU branch in Cranbrook BC for a total of 5,600 members.
- 1924 marked a peak year for the IWW in Canada. 8,000 in Northern Ontario, the Canadian Lumber Workers vote to join the IWW.
- On January 1, 1924, IWW Lumber Workers IU120 struck the British Columbia lumber owners, calling for an 8 hour day with blankets supplied, minimum wage of \$4 per day, release of all class war prisoners, no discrimination against IWW members and no censoring of IWW literature.
- Fighting a mandatory dues check off to the United Mine Workers, Alberta Coal miners joined the IWW in 1924. The mine company unsuccessfully offered a 10% wage increase if they agreed to accept the UMWA.
- Canadian delegates met in Port Arthur September 20, 1931, and voted to form a Canadian administration to coordinate specifically Canadian industrial activity.
- IWW unemployment agitation generated a number of arrests. Ritchie's Dairy in Toronto was unionized IWW for a time, and a fisher's branch formed in McDiarmid, Ontario.
- Organizing was undertaken in the Maritimes but did not sustain itself. In 1935 the IWW had 12 branches in Canada with 4,200 members.
- IWW agitation continued strong in Canada until 1939, especially in northern Ontario. Wobbly units in Sudbury and Port Arthur were mixed membership branches of scattered lumbermen, miners and labourers.
- During the Spanish Civil War 1936-39, the IWW in Ontario actively recruited for the revolutionary union militias in Spain.
- In 1949 membership in Canada stood at 2,100 grouped in six branches; two in Port Arthur and one each in Vancouver, Sault Ste. Marie, Calgary and Toronto.
- IN 1968 it was decided to sign up students alongside teachers and campus workers into Education Workers IU620. There followed a wild and erratic campus upsurge, two notables being Waterloo U in Ontario and New Westminster BC.
- 1974 In Vancouver a construction crew in Gastown was signed IWW -- but certification was denied, the IWW declared not a "trade union under the meaning of the Act."
- 1988 Student newspaper at Simon Frazier university organizes IWW.
- 1998 IWW organizes at Harvest Foods in Winnipeg, first legal Canadian IWW union in decades.
- 1999 IWW organizes series of shops along Whyte Avenue in Edmonton.

Chile

- The founding congress of the Chilean IWW took place in Santiago, in 1919. Upholding the principles and tactics of the international IWW, the Chileans were able to regroup radical teachers and longshoremen, along with most of the scattered Chilean anarcho-syndicalist movement.
- During the 1920s, the IWW published 10 different newspapers in five cities in Chile. The central newspaper, *Accion Directa*, appeared from 1920-26. During times of

repression, the Chilean papers were printed at the Chicago IWW printing plant and smuggled into Chile by wobbly sailors.

- Through the summer of 1920 the Chilean union conducted a three month strike to prevent the export of grains from the country at a time when this export was producing famine and famine prices and profits.
- On July 22, 1920 police conducted a raid on the Santiago headquarters. In Valparaiso, the police planted dynamite in the wobble hall and arrested most of the IWW organizers for terrorism. The reasons for these raid was the successful strikes against the exportation of grains during the famine.
- 1924 4000 Santiago IWW bookbinders win strike for 44 hour week.
- The Chilean administration of the IWW remained united until 1925 when the unions representing Port, printing and bakeries split to form the anarcho-syndicalist Federation Obrera Regionale Chile (FORCh). Objecting to the IWW's industrial unionism, these unions opted for regional/federalist organization according to craft.
- The IWW was the only labor group to openly oppose the military coup of 1927. In contrast, the Communist Party 'was at first evasive, but then listed certain demands of the new regime...' Only when the CP's demands weren't met, did they decide to oppose the military dictatorship.
- Both unions were silenced in 1927 by the Ibez dictatorship. In 1931, the Ibez government fell and former IWW and FORCh members formed a new anarcho-syndicalist union, the CGT.
- After the military coup of 1973, an American IWW, Frank Terrugi, was shot to death by a Chilean death squad. Terrugi, in Chile studying workers movements, had been detained in a soccer stadium during the coup with hundreds of other radicals and unionists. He was found dead soon after he had been 'released' from the soccer stadium/prison. Turrugi is the sidekick to the missing American being sought by his father in the Oscar winning Costa Gavras film, "Missing".

China

- During the period 1910-1916 Australian IWW helps get IWW materials translated into Chinese and distributed into China. These were published by Liu Szu-fu ("Shih-fu") and IWW ideals became influential in Canton and Shanghai.

Ecuador

- Administration chartered 1922.

Fiji

- 1916 IWW fishers strike.

Germany

- 1924 Marine Transport Workers Union Branch formed in Settin, Hamburg and other ports. Over 10,000 members at founding. The IWW continues a open organizing until Hitler and continued underground.

High Seas

- 1924 IWW calls International Marine Transport Workers Conference in New Orleans. Delegates from Argentina, Canada, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico and US.
- 1925 IWW controls all Scandinavian/US shipping through job actions and quick strikes.
- November 1925 East coast IWWs strike in support of UK, Scandinavian, New Zealand and Australian sailors in first international maritime strike.
- Second International conference held in Montevideo, Uruguay.
- April 9, 1930 IWW organizes 1700 member crew on the Leviathan, then the world's largest vessel.

Ireland

- 1913 IWWs James Connolly and Jim Larkin found the Transport and General Workers Union as the basis of an Irish IWW.
- During 1917-23 civil war period Ireland experienced outright insurrection, collectivization of transport in Cork, uprising of landless labourers, the establishment of Soviets and dual power situations in many cities...
- Recession and a state clampdown knocked the union off course in 1923. A split movement still carried on a local variant of revolutionary unionism in the Workers Union of Ireland but was numerically weak.

Japan

- 1924 Marine Transport Workers Branch formed in Yokohama.

Mexico

- Ties with Mexican revolutionaries date to the founding of the IWW.
- Riccardo Flores Magon was an IWW and used the IWW press and organization to build support for revolutionary movement in Mexico.
- In 1911 the Mexican Liberal party (PLM), an anarchist formation, invaded Baja California in an effort to set up a workers' republic. The campaign was run out of an IWW hall in Holtville, CA. 100 IWWs, including Joe Hill and Frank Little, were part of the insurrectionary force.
- July, 1912 several trade unions unite under IWW preamble.
- In 1917, when many of the wells closed down as a protest of the American owners against a tax imposed on oil and the wage demands of the workers, the leadership of the movement was almost entirely in the hands of the IWW."
- During the later phase of the Mexican revolutionary process, IWW locals in Arizona endorsed the Zapata movement.
- Dec. 1919, Mexican IWW Administration is chartered

- On June 2, 1921 the IWW hall at Tampico, Mexico, was raided, and the IWW called a general strike in the area which won them the right to have their hall.
- 3000 IWW miners strike and win in Santa Eulalia.
- Mexican Administration of the IWW continues until early 1960s.

New Zealand

- IWW administration organized 1912
- IWW organizer Tom Barker arrested for sedition during great Strikes of 1912-13, subsequently escapes to Australia to organize there.

Nicaragua

- While in exile in Mexico during early 1920s, Sandino participates in strikes led by the IWW. Inspired by them he returns to foment revolution in Nicaragua. He adopts the IWW's black and red colours.

Peru

- In 1923 the IWW led a strike on the Peruvian Central lines when a railwayman with 20 years good service was sacked. Within 24 hours the entire railway system...had struck in accordance with the IWW motto "an injury to one is an injury to all." The workman was reinstated, having first rejected a \$50,000 bribe from the company to accept dismissal.

Russia

- 1919 16,000 Miners in Siberia form a union and adopt the IWW preamble.

Sweden

- 1971 Branch formed at Malm. shipyards.

Sierra Leone

- 1996 Diamond and Gold miners organize into IWW.

South Africa

- South African Administration founded in 1911.
- IWW campaigns to convince white workers "that their real enemy is not the coloured labourer, and that it is only by combining and co-operating irrespective of colour that the standard of life of the whites can be maintained and improved."
- 1912 IWW leads strike of tram-drivers in Johannesburg, the first multi-racial strike in that country's history.

United Kingdom

- The IWW in Britain has been around in one form or another since 1906. It started with small groups of seafarers in particular bringing the message of industrial unionism to these shores from the USA.
- In 1908 the union split along the same lines as in the USA. The IWW members who followed Daniel De Leon formed the British Advocates for Industrial Unionism and organized some major strikes, particularly in the industrial belt in Central Scotland. The strike at the Singer Sewing Machine Factory in 1908 was the most famous. The IWWs who stuck with the non-De Leon faction formed the Industrial League.
- IWW involvement in a 1909 strike at Ruskin College, Oxford, which led to the creation of the revolutionary education movement "The Plebs League" and the marxist "Central Labour College". IWW members were also involved in the establishment of the "Daily Herald", the first working class controlled newspaper, which carried much labour news.
- In 1910 Bill Haywood toured the country and in South Wales he spoke at a very large meeting of striking coal miners in one pit and urged them to spread their strike across the entire industry and occupy the pits. His influence is credited with an explosion of militancy in the area and was one reason why former IWW members in the mines produced and circulated "The Miners Next Step", a pamphlet aimed at turning the South Wales Miners Federation into a single region-wide industrial union. It is regarded as the most important piece of Industrial Unionist literature of the period.
- In 1913 the Union granted a charter to a British Administration of the I.W.W. which ran as an essentially independent body. The union had strong branches in major cities, although there is no evidence of an IWW strike as such.
- Prominent supporters of the IWW such as Peter Larkin and James Connolly were active in dockers and other transport workers strikes during the period.
- The union was involved the years of unrest leading to the first world war through organisations such as the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL), the Industrial Democracy League and the League of Revolutionary Unionists. The ISEL was prominent in efforts to build industrial unions through mergers of existing trade unions and was at the forefront of the creation the National Union of Railwaymen and the Transport and General Workers Union.
- The National Conferences of Trades Councils in 1919 and 1920 endorsed the principle of the One Big Union as a means of uniting the working class and establishing Industrial Unions. Shop Steward movement's cards were made interchangeable with IWW cards.
- The Union stayed barely alive in the 20s and 30s having retreated to the cities of Liverpool, Birmingham and London with very little influence elsewhere.
- In 1946 fortunes turned up and a new British Administration was chartered which played an active part in the dock strike of 1947.
- In the mid 1970s a Workers Centre was set up in Oldham and a British Section remained active until the early 1980s. The IWW was particularly involved in efforts to spread the idea of rank and file control of the unions and IWW organisers were at the forefront of the National Rank and File Movement.
- A new period for the I.W.W. started in 1993 when a small group met in London to re-establish the union. Membership has grown towards the hundred mark and branches have been established in a dozen or more cities.

- In 1995 the union established its first "job branch" at Stevenson College in Edinburgh, which has played a significant role in fighting redundancies and exposing the crass nature of sectional unionism in education.
- In 1995 members agreed to establish the first Regional Organising Committee and this came into being in 1997, shortly after the union launched its new quarterly magazine "Bread and Roses".
- 1998 IWW organizing Grocery and Pharmaceutical workers in Devon and Dorset.

This pamphlet is dedicated to the memory of Fellow Worker Tom Barker, who organized for the IWW in New Zealand, Australia, Chile, Argentina, the US, the UK, Russia, Germany and upon the High Seas. For the One Big Union!