

Learning from our mistakes: IWWs criticize and reflect on their organizing



Adam Weaver, in response to an insinuation that the IWW criticizes every union but itself, lists some of the publicly available debates, discussions and criticisms about IWW organizing and strategy.

The other day a friend posted a question along the lines of “The IWW seems to put out a lot of criticism of other union’s organizing, but it doesn’t seem like they are willing to criticize their own organizing publicly.” I thought that would be a fair point- if it was true of course.

There’s actually a pretty robust level of discussion in the IWW around the failures, victories and the organizing models the IWW uses. Naturally not every member is engaged with these discussion and as well some of that discussion takes place in internal forums. For instance in Portland members circulate a booklet called “Learning from our mistakes” that discusses their campaigns and their pitfalls but this would be an example of something not circulated publicly.

But most important is that these criticisms have helped shaped and evolved the IWW’s model of organizing. As well many in the IWW see this as contributing towards a working class intellectual culture- one where shop floor organizers and participants in the organizing are creating the lessons from their experience instead of relying on professional thinkers and academics to do this work for us.

Below is a short and incomplete annotated guide of sorts to writings by IWW’s discussing their own organizing efforts:

-First is [the discussion paper “Direct Unionism”](#) grouping of IWWs which came out failures and problems that many Portland IWW’s dealt with after a wave of successful contract shops were organized in the late 90’s/early 00’s, though IWW’s from a number of cities contributed

towards. The authors develop the concept of what they call “direct unionism”, which for a period co-existed with the term “solidarity unionism” until it was decided to reduce confusion and stick to the later. The piece [spawned nearly a dozen different reviews and responses](#), including one from radical labor academic Staughton Lynd. You can order a hard copy of the piece [here](#).

-Next would be the collection of [Workers’ Power articles](#) which has been a regular column appearing 2007 in the IWW’s official newspaper the *Industrial Worker*. This description sums it up well: “The Workers Power column aims to offer a space to share organizing stories and thoughts on strategies and tactics for building power on the shop floor.”

There’s a wealth of stories, organizing concepts/advice and debate about strategy that can be found in the archives, but I’d like to highlight a few of the particularly more reflective pieces that are directly critical around our organizing. The first is “[Potentials for Solidarity Unionism](#)” by Todd Hamilton which draws from and outlines in short form many of the same points to be found in the Direct Unionism paper. Next are two more recent pieces by Kevin S. of Minneapolis, which just went through several organizing campaigns. “[Wobblies and unfair labor practices](#)” talks about the problems in using Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs) in organizing campaigns and “[Small Time Unionism](#)” speaks to the contradictions between being a union with an experience base of fights with smaller employers and growing to be able to take on fights with bigger targets. Lastly is a reflective piece “Towards an organizational theory” by Colin Bossen that looks at the growth of the IWW since the late 90’s, largely a collective of various radicals with little organizing experience, into the organization it is today.

-Many IWW’s across the US are involved in various ‘solidarity networks’ inspired by the Seattle Solidarity Network (SeaSol) which wages fights around workplace issues such as harassment or wage theft as well as tenant issues. “[Solidarity Network or Solidarity Service?: On the challenges of building a solidarity network](#)” by R. Spourgitis of the [Wild Rose Collective](#) is formally a review of the pamphlet published by SeaSol called “[Building your own solidarity network](#)” but offers critical reflections of applying the model in Iowa City.

-The IWW featured prominently in the 2011 uprising of sorts that happened in Wisconsin in reaction to proposed attacks on public sector workers. The image of the black cat with red back drop and the potential of a called for general strike was electrified much of the left for as long as a month. “[The General Strike that didn’t happen: A report on the activity of the IWW in Wisconsin](#)” by two IWW organizers who spend a fair amount of time on the ground and involved in the struggle wrote this reflection piece discussing lessons and pitfalls.

Originally posted: September 7, 2013 at [Machete408](#)