

The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia - Ian Bedford



A short critical, but generally sympathetic, assessment of the Australian Wobblies.

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THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD IN AUSTRALIA

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The occasion for this article is the publication of a second book by Ian Turner dealing with the Industrial Workers of the World. Strictly speaking, *Industrial Labour and Politics* is about the labour movement in the first quarter of the twentieth century, while *Sydney's Burning* is about a cause celebre; neither Turner nor anyone else has attempted to study the I.W.W. in its own right, and the topic - the I.W.W. as social history - has not yet been carried to the point of the definition of terms. Scholars have been heard to complain that the I.W.W. is 'over-rated' - by this they mean that the role of the organisation in the development of the labour movement is not so important as to warrant the attention that Turner and others have paid to it. Perhaps a man is a little soft in the head to be forever worrying about the I.W.W. It may not be enough simply to reply that the I.W.W., as the local form of a movement whose ideological premises were tested in France, Spain and Italy as well as in the United States and Canada, will repay investigation for a long time yet, and that study along comparative lines will one day teach us something that we don't know about forces that have continued to shape temperament and society in Australia.

For want of detailed knowledge, I do not propose to review Turner's books; neither do I wish to adopt the tone of the good-natured amateur who has ambled along to make sure that somebody if not he has his nose to the grindstone. Owing to the requirements of treatment and subject-matter, a number of suggestive observations about the I.W.W. have been confined by Turner to a sentence or two in passing, or even to the footnotes of *Industrial Labour and Politics*. My intention in this article is to point to two or three aspects of the experience of the I.W.W. in Australia which are apparent on a longer view.

Industrial Unionism

The term 'industrial unionism' is used to refer both to the organisational procedure of the I.W.W. - methods of obtaining a uniform structure for the entire labour movement -and to the attitudes and philosophy of members. For the time being, it will be convenient to deal with the organisational question alone. As has often been remarked, the I.W.W. bears a family resemblance to the anarcho-syndicalist movements in Latin countries. Although there can be little doubt that the I.W.W. grew quite naturally out of local American conditions - and

survived transplantation from the Chicago headquarters to Australia - the simultaneous development of forms and tendencies within the labour movements in countries remote from one another is much too striking a fact to have escaped commentary. W. D. [Big Bill] Haywood of the American I.W.W. visited France as a Socialist Party delegate to the Second International in 1910, and after his return, the I.W.W. newspapers initiated a prolonged discussion on the methods of French syndicalism, while such staple fare as the pamphlet 'Sabotage' by Emile Pouget-as well as Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* - was distributed among American wage-workers for the first time.[1] Tom Barker, deported from Australia for his activities with the I.W.W., had no trouble in fitting in with the syndicalist Federation of Labour in Buenos Aires.[2]

The fundamental distinction between the anarcho-syndicalist movements and the I.W.W. lay in the attitude to the labour movement as a whole. The distinction can be pointed out by comparing France and America. The Confederation Generale du Travail was established in Paris in 1895 for the purpose of linking the trade unions (the subject of an earlier federation) in a national council along with the Bourses du Travail, regional associations founded by the anarchist Fernand Pelloutier, and regarded by him as the basic units for the collectivisation of society. This work was accomplished to a radical programme. Although by 1914 only a little more than a tenth of the working force was unionised, and of this proportion about one in two - 600,000 members - came under the C.G.T.,[3] no rival institution was strong enough to challenge the C.G.T. on its own ground, and the syndicalists were active - and influential - in the most populous sector of the French labour movement. One factor in their supremacy was the reputation among workers of the Bourses du Travail, acquired over many years, and far greater than the reputation of the I.W.W. 'mixed locals' or of any other institution in America which encouraged united action among workers of various occupations in a given locality. A second factor was the composition of the French working class. Perhaps the most important factor of all was the relative absence of 'progressive' legislation, the hostility of the state and the employers to trade union activity even among moderates: compromise, the signing of *quid pro quo* agreements and the practices of 'selling out' so generously tolerated by workers in Anglo-Saxon countries were not prevalent among the representatives of the Confederation Generale du Travail, which is to say the French employers had not yet discovered a sophisticated method for fighting the working class.[4]

In America, the I.W.W., although the greater part of its membership was recruited among foreign or itinerant workers with whom the American Federation of Labor (founded 1886) wanted nothing to do at all, laid itself open from the start to the charge of dual unionism. I.W.W. delegates set up 'locals' of their own in industries where craft unions affiliated with the A.F.L. were already established. At Lawrence, Massachusetts, where the I.W.W. carried their most successful strike action in the woollen mills (1912), the United Textile Workers, affiliated with the A.F.L., had organised only two hundred out of a work force of 30,000 through a craft subsidiary, the Mule-spinners' Union;[5] the situation was no better in Paterson, New Jersey, and other textile centres where the I.W.W. took on itself the task of organising immigrant labour along 'industrial' lines. All the same, the A.F.L. was able to document cases of body-snatching and to publicise the complaint among unionists in the more settled industries. Candidates for membership were required to throw away their craft union cards on joining an I.W.W. local: and of course the policy of exclusion worked both ways. William Z. Foster, who visited France in 1911 to study syndicalist methods at first hand, was advised by Louis Jouhaux, Secretary of the French C.G.T., to 'tell the I.W.W. when you return to America to get into the labour movement'.[6]

This system of competing unions was not simply the result of shortsightedness or grandiose ambition on the part of the I.W.W. organisers. It was an expression of the radically divided

nature of the American working class. As ill-fortune would have it, the discovery by the A.F.L. of labour contracts and of the possibilities of job control (which in America means the competence of the union to retain jobs for its members) coincided with an unparalleled expansion of the immigrant working force checked, at the level of employment, by the financial crises of 1907-08 and 1913-15. Although the I.W.W. is celebrated for its activities among the unemployed, these crises were the tourniquet which inhibited the circulation of ideas and opportunities throughout the labour movement, and prepared the withering away of the I.W.W. The A.F.L. confined itself to that section of industry where contracts could be signed and kept. The Bakunins of the I.W.W. wasted themselves in exploits of heroic militancy which built no unions because the orchards, the lumber camps, the steel and textile mills were areas where strikes could be won, but gains were neutralised under the conditions imposed by a recurring surplus of labour.[7] This would not have mattered so much if the same conditions had prevailed all over the country, and the I.W.W. had been able to count on an identity of outlook among wage-workers; but solidarity with bums, Dagoes, Hunkies, Negroes (and Japanese, organised by the I.W.W. on the Pacific Coast) proved to fall under the terms of the contract negotiated by the A.F.L. unions towards their entrenchment in felt-hat making and other essential industries. From 1912 I.W.W. membership (nominally twenty-five thousand in that year) started to decline; the formation of an Agricultural Workers' Union on the eve of W.W.I. lifted the membership, but this was merely to repeat the pattern of first-up successes followed by disillusionment in any field of organisation. The I.W.W. was proscribed by way of a contribution of the State Governors to the war effort.

When we compare the I.W.W. in Australia and America, a difference in function is apparent; this difference may be considered first of all on the level of organisation. As in America, the I.W.W. over here aspired to reorganise the labour movement along the lines of industrial unionism, and was fully equipped with a diagram which explained, not how to do it, but what it would look like when it was done. This diagram was presumably confiscated when the police raided the I.W.W. headquarters in Sussex Street, Sydney, on 23 September 1916, along with 'correspondence, file and account books, an allegorical picture, "The Paris Commune", the charter of international affiliation for the Sydney local of the I.W.W., and the big red banner.'**[8]** It is very much to be doubted whether the police uncovered any secrets of organisation; for, whatever the currency of its ideas among workers, the I.W.W. had not succeeded in founding even a rudimentary structure of its own. At no time does the I.W.W. seem to have been in a position to set up more than one or two locals in an industry in a given area; and as a rule, these locals were formed inside an existing union. At Broken Hill, where, in Turner's words, the victorious strike of 1916 represented 'the most considerable impact made by the I.W.W. on Australian industrial life', the I.W.W. appears to have come to an agreement with officials of the Amalgamated Miners' Association whereby the I.W.W. red card was regarded by the Association as the equivalent of a union ticket, and I.W.W. members worked alongside regular unionists in the mines. The Australian Workers' Union was less accommodating, but appears to have tolerated double-ticket holders on a number of occasions." Turner cites the example of William Teen, one of the I.W.W. members tried for conspiracy, whose union, the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Servants' Association, tried to get him reinstatement after a sacking although probably aware of his allegiance to industrial unionism.**[11]** Since one can find no record of a disagreement with the American I.W.W. over this tactical issue, it is to be supposed that the renouncement of a dual structure in Australia reflects, not a greater ideological affinity with the French syndicalists, but two material facts: the relative solidarity of the Australian labour movement (a point emphasised by Gordon Childe)**[12]** and the relative structural weakness of the I.W.W. The former point can, of course, be easily deduced from reference to more general conditions: the racial and national homogeneity of the labour movement, the existence of trade unions to be joined in

every branch of industry, and so on. But in America precisely the opposite state of affairs had brought about the formation of the I.W.W. in the first place.

Attitudes

Its failure to set up an industrial union organisation is not the most important respect in which Australian I.W.W. may be distinguished from its counterpart in America. Even during the first eighteen months of the war, the I.W.W. betrayed a comparative lack of interest in matters of central importance to the trade union movement. The Trades Hall and Labour Councils in the capital cities, rather than the I.W.W., expressed the concern of the organised body of workers over the ratio of unemployment and wage and price levels. I.W.W. members did of course associate themselves with demands for wage increases and so on, but not as a rule outside the circumstances of a particular conflict. The bread-and-butter preoccupations of a majority of workers were not shared by the direct actionists. To an even greater extent than in America, the Australian I.W.W. was a voluntary association of free-floaters, the aims of which were not strictly material, and were often at variance with those of the labour movement -workers as well as representatives. In Australia, to join the I.W.W. was to follow either the line of least resistance, or a vocation.

From 1909, the Australian administration of the I.W.W. was affiliated with the 'Chicago' section which opposed political action on revolutionary principles as a waste of the energies of the workers. This attitude, though common to all anarcho-syndicalist movements, was not an essential factor in industrial unionism. The C.G.T. in France, the Confederacion Nacional de Trabajos in Barcelona on the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, each guided the destinies of several hundred thousand unionised workers; in both countries, polling day was associated with the bitterest memories. Among the founding members of the I.W.W. in America were delegates from the Socialist Labour Party.

At the second (1906) convention of the I.W.W., the resolutions committee was persuaded by a section of members to refuse to recommend the adoption of sick and death benefit funds, on the grounds that such measures were liable to weaken class-consciousness and to confer a longer life on the capitalist system.[13] Two years later the organisation split in two. or many of the immigrant and Negro workers who joined the I.W.W. in the Western and Southern states, there was no alternative to 'industrial' action: they were not even on the rolls. To follow the 'political' preamble in America was not much different from recommending the adoption of benefit funds: the socialist parties were of moderate importance in only a few states,[14] and if the trade unions could support particular items of legislation and instruct their members on how to vote, the task of building 'the industrial and political organisation of the workers' so strenuously undertaken by Daniel de Leon, lay a long way ahead of them (or more strictly, as time has shown, it did not lie ahead of them at all).

A programme of abstention from political activity involved considerations of a very different kind in Australia. One of the dizziest processes in Australian history is the transformation of attitudes in the labour movement worked within a few years of the founding of the political party. By 1904, the arbitration of differences between trade unions and employers had been made compulsory by an Act of the Commonwealth Parliament, and in Western Australia and New South Wales. When the Labor Party came to power in N.S.W, in 1911, the Premier, J. S. T. McGowen, carried out some amendments to the Industrial Disputes Act, but did not get so far as to abolish the penalty clauses; for, as Turner points out, 'by now most Labor politicians had come to agree that arbitration was unworkable unless strikes were punished.'[15] The point was that 'the 1912 N.S.W. Trade Union Congress, by thirty-five votes to twenty-eight, agreed with them.'

It is not difficult to understand why Australian workers should have accommodated themselves so quickly to the demands imposed on their credulity by the operation of a Labor Party and compulsory courts of arbitration. The trade union movement had schooled workers in the principles of class solidarity; yet the successes that came their way through the second half of the nineteenth century had encouraged them to think of the movement in terms of the united pursuit of ever-increasing wages and an ever-diminishing working week, rather than as the prototype of an advanced order of society or as the embodiment in itself of an irreplaceable ideal. When strikes began to fail in the 1890s, trade unionists renounced neither their expectations of material advantage nor (for very long) their habit of winning: the goal was in sight, and it was simply a matter of looking around for another vehicle to carry them.

I.W.W. ideas circulating in the labour movement after 1907 were the expression of two principal tendencies: of an inclination on the part of unskilled and semi-skilled workers towards the reorganisation of existing unions, partly along industrial union lines, and of the rejection of the political party and the courts of arbitration by a rearguard. Both these tendencies were clearly displayed in the affairs of the miners' union before the strike of 1909.[16] Following Childe and Turner, it should be unnecessary to point out that the former tendency prevailed and that the Australian Workers' Union, for example, became bigger and better than ever; this was one of the games played by destiny for the amusement of the historian - if he can manage to smile - and was in no sense a fulfilment of the wishes of the industrial unionists. The most one may add is that the second tendency, their relation to which properly distinguishes the I.W.W. from all other factions of the Australian labour movement, has never been entirely eliminated.

The Australian I.W.W. was probably the first revolutionary association in the world to be founded on the aspirations of trade unionists who saw their main enemy as state paternalism, democracy in its 'enlightened' aspects, and who opposed the measures of representation and social justice favoured by a strong and cohesive labour movement in the name of initiative and workers' control. The fact that the I.W.W. was not itself a trade union or any other kind of institution enabled this point of view to be expressed with a minimum of qualification: 'The I.W.W. holds that there is nothing to arbitrate about.' It seems probable that sentiments of this kind were shared by many thousands of individual workers who were not themselves members of the I.W.W.: but direct action on a sufficient scale was never undertaken in the twentieth century in Australia. To match an excess of government on the political level, initiative in the labour movement was resigned more and more into the hands of elected officials who are not simply delegates of the men but delegates of the courts as well, treasurers of union capital and hostages for the good behaviour of the rank and file. The familiar spectacle of workers watching a television programme in a bar, growing sceptical and even a little impatient, but unwilling to touch the knob, may stand as a convenient image of the labour movement under a system of compulsory benefits, compulsory arbitration, where even voting is compulsory: this was the visionary republic founded by Labour between the defeat of the Maritime Strike and the first world war, and opposed by the I.W.W.

The Tradition

One of the best-known passages in Marx describes his impression of the Italian followers of Bakunin in the International: 'lawyers without clients, physicians without patients and without qualifications, students devoted to billiards, pedlars and shopkeepers and especially journalists of the small press, of more or less dubious fame ...'[17] This is by no means adequate for the I.W.W., but from the short biographies supplied by Turner in *Sydney's Burning* it would seem that leading activists, while members of the working class and not physicians or intellectuals, had led lives of a different sort from the majority of their fellow

unionists, and that experience had helped determine their attitudes to such questions as security of job tenure, for example. The anarcho-syndicalist movements in France, Spain and Italy were to a large extent made up of first and second generation industrial workers whose point of view was derived from their acquaintance with other styles of work and with a community life at once more personal and more comprehensive than that provided by the factories. The France of the *Bourses du Travail* was a country of skilled workers in small shops and factories in the preliminary stages of industrialisation. Barcelona owed its reputation for trade union militancy partly to the continued immigration of displaced farm workers from the south of Spain. No census of I.W.W. card-carriers was taken, but it is possible that a very high proportion indeed had at some time in their lives carried the point of view of the bush worker into a job in one of the settled industries.

Although Tom Glynn and other members of the I.W.W. joined the Communist Party as soon as it was formed, the two organisations would appear to have little in common. The Communist Party of Australia works with existing institutions, and its influence in the labour movement has long depended on its success in winning elective posts in trade unions, rather than on a numerous following. It is doubtful if there is any sense in which the Communist Party can be regarded as a revolutionary organisation at all. The I.W.W., on the other hand, had no sense of strategy, and the dissatisfaction of its members with capitalist society was radical and intuitive, and not a question of the size of pay packets. The willingness of the I.W.W. activists to say what they had to say and go behind bars, that 'death by immolation' which Turner characterises as 'stupidity', was a function of the profound isolation of a band of volunteers and preachers who witnessed the beginning of the long hike of the organised labour movement down a blind alley. The descendants of the I.W.W. are to be found nowadays among the rank and file in some unions. The informal structure of maritime industry - the pick-up system on the wharves, the lunch-hour meetings, the lapse of the function of a particular job delegate when the job ends - has kept the spirit alive longer in the Waterside Workers' Federation than in most places. Now this situation too is being brought to an end, with the connivance of the union officials.[18] Yet it would be premature to suppose that the spirit of direct action will be thoroughly extinguished among Australian workers. The example of the I.W.W., who fought when they had no chance of winning, may one day be remembered with gratitude by those looking for a sign.

NOTES

1. Philip S. Foner, **History of the Labor Movement in the United States**, Vol. IV, '**The Industrial Workers of the World, 1906-19**', New York, 1965, p. 159.
2. E. C. Fry (editor), **Tom Barker and the IWW**, A.S.S.L.H., Canberra, 1965, p. 35. See p. 34 for Barker's narrative of his encounter with the I. W.W. in Valparaiso, Chile.
3. Lorwin in Walter Galenson, **Comparative Labour Movements**.
4. The deliberate policy of the C.G.T. in limiting the size of the bureaucracy probably contributed to the general militancy of the Federation and the sense of participation among members.
5. Foner, pp. 313-14.
6. Foner, p. 418. Compare the apocryphal story of the advice of a Communist delegate to a youthful Communist joining the Watersiders' Federation in Sydney: 'You want to get out into the working class.'
7. This is what happened at McKees Rock (steel) and Lawrence (textiles), the two largest strikes successfully pioneered by the I.W.W. in the settled or 'Home Guard' industries: Foner, pp. 304-05, 348-49. The Steel Trust and the American Woollen Mills were the adversaries at

McKees Rock and Lawrence; in lumber and agriculture, the problem was essentially that of organising itinerant labourers.

8. **Direct Action** (weekly journal of the Australian I.W.W.), Sydney, 30 September 1916.

9. Ian Turner, **Industrial Labour and Politics**, Melbourne, 1965, p. 88.

10. V. Gordon Childe, **How Labour Governs**, 1st edition, pp. 164-5.

11. Turner, p. 143.

12. Childe, pp. 149-50.

13. Foner, p. 77.

14. The first Socialist Party Congressman was elected for Milwaukee in 1910. The national convention earlier in that year had rejected a proposal to commit the party to the principles of national unionism as opposed to craft unionism.

15. Turner, p. 38.

16. For discussion, see Robin Gollan, **The Coalminers of New South Wales**, A.N.U./M.U.P., 1964, pp. 125-134.

17. Marx, 'The Social-Democratic Alliance and the IWMA,' Quoted in English in Daniel L. [? Surname missing in original.]

18. The watersiders in the port of Melbourne voted against the proposals for the overall reorganisation of wharf industry. The other ports voted in favour. In the opinion of some watersiders, these differences are a function, not of the attitudes of the men in the various points, but of the manner in which the issue was presented by the local branches of the union.