

The Wobblyist Writing Group

**Wobblyism:
revolutionary unionism
for today**

“...revolution is not a question of the form of organisation [...] the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on the precise ends defined by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and sacrifices...”^[2]

Amadeo Bordiga “Partito e classe,” *Rassegna Comunista*, no 2, April 15, 1921

“...the end in view is well worth striving for, but in the struggle itself lies the happiness of the fighter.”²

A. S. Embree, Wobbly, Letter to the Editor, *Solidarity*, Sept. 19, 1917

“...you cannot destroy the organization [...] It is something you cannot get at. You cannot reach it. You do not know where it is. It is not in writing. It is not in anything else. It is a simple understanding between men (sic), and they act upon it without any evidence of existence whatever.”³

U.S. Senator William Borah, on Wobblies’ “conscientious withdrawal of efficiency”, 1918.

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1. Introduction

We would like to take a moment to set the tone for the following article, and help get you on a solid footing to understand and appreciate its contents. *Wobblyism* is our effort to stir up some dust in the workers' movement and get people talking - in a comradely way of course. It's high time to take to task the conventional wisdom of the Left (from center to far), and propose concrete forward movement for revolutionary organization that is relevant for our time. Thankfully, we're not the only ones talking about this; Wobblies and "fellow travelers" are studying their history, re-evaluating political dogmas, and shaping a vibrant discourse on what is to be done today. We would like to stake out our own specific approach within this discourse - arguing for a revolutionary unionism that is holistic, life-affirming, relevant, and effective. We hope that this piece will be shared and discussed widely throughout the revolutionary movement, within and *beyond* our organization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, aka "Wobblies"). Indeed, while this piece deals specifically with the IWW, we believe its content can be appreciated much more widely. As for the significance we attach to this work, no illusions are entertained. It is not pompous self-indulgence that

motivates us here, but an earnest yearning to build a working-class movement that is capable of advancing us all beyond this shit-hole we call capitalism and into a qualitatively new and free society. We do not consider this piece the last word on this subject, but we do hope that it will be received as a sincere contribution to a comradely discourse on revolutionary organization for today. Further, this is a gargantuan undertaking for the Wobbly writers; our experience writing has overall been limited to brief articles focusing on one aspect of organizing. Also, the fact that we are full-time workers, organizers, parents, partners and so on - and that most of us are *not* trained writers - means churning this out has been all the more challenging. We expect readers to note that we have missed some key areas that need attention, and that some parts could be conveyed more clearly. The chronology of IWW events may be a bit off in places, and other details might not be quite correct. We have taken great care to avoid these errors, but we're bound to have left some mistakes intact.

As to who we're reaching out to with this piece, we should state straight up that the target audience is small. This piece is probably not going to be read widely throughout the working class at this point. Most of our brothers, aunts, co-workers, or our friends, generally

speaking, are not going to pick this up and tell us later that it changed their life. That's ok. This piece is written by and for worker-organizers who can relate on this subject and communicate through this medium to carry our conversation forward. This piece is a contribution to the development of a small but burgeoning current of working class organizers⁴.

Finally, while we hope that many revolutionaries (and soon-to-be-revolutionaries) read this, it is especially to the active worker-organizer we appeal. Much of this can be understood by those engaged in some level of political work. But nothing shapes our consciousness and theory like experience, and it is experience of a specific kind that has allowed us to convey these ideas. The ideas in this article are indeed informed by recorded history (books), but would never be possible without the writers' on-the-ground experience, the sweat, tears, victories, and failures of revolutionary organizing at the workplace. We invite comradely critique of this piece, and hope to continue fleshing these ideas out more on an ongoing basis as active organizers.

Some Background

The IWW has in recent years made a long-overdue return to the stage of history. Since the 1950s, we Wobblies barely plodded along - almost for the sake of just existing - but gradually got back on our own feet as an organization that *organized*. Small skirmishes with employers - and some victories - occurred here and there over the last decades of the 20th century. Wobblies made short-lived but impressive advances in the courier industry and among restaurant workers; put the IWW on the map for non-members when they organized low-wage baristas into the Starbucks Workers Union; developed an organizer training program to share past organizing lessons and improve organizers' skillsets, and engaged in much other significant activity. The generation of Wobblies who established these developments broke new ground on a long-dormant tradition of revolutionary union organizing.

Alongside an uptick in membership and activity in the late 1990s and early 2000s came the prominence of "Solidarity Unionism,"⁵ a grassroots organizing approach which put workers themselves in charge of their own struggle for justice in the workplace. A relative flurry of activity and a wave of new members accompanied this

significant new development. Naturally, this activity waxed and waned, but the IWW and its practice of solidarity unionism established itself in the contemporary labor movement (even if it's still on the margins). Much has happened in and around the IWW in the last several years. New high-profile organizing drives have taken off, some won, and some failed (though we challenge rigid discernments between victory and failure). The Starbucks campaign, for example, inspired new organizers to establish similar unions in several low-wage workplaces that most other unions ignored.⁶ Where Wobblies worked in unionized workplaces, they organized among the rank-and-file along IWW principles, winning gains through direct action that their "official" union could not or would not pursue. On the national scale in the US, IWWs played visible roles in both the Wisconsin Uprising and the Occupy Wall Street movement that swept the country and brought an unprecedented many thousands of everyday working people onto the streets and into political life. Through all this, the IWW has learned much, and organizers have improved their skills a great deal.

Toward Synthesis, and Something New

Each step the class struggle takes forward owes itself to the step taken before it. As Rosa Luxemburg related waves of struggle in revolutionary Russia in her essay *The Mass Strike*, each wave recedes but leaves “sediment” behind for the next wave to rise from. As it is for Wobblies. The last few years of struggle have washed to shore a great deal of sediment packed full of invaluable “nuggets” of organizing wisdom. Revolutionary organizers would do well to mine these nuggets out, analyze their content, and synthesize the best of it. They can compare these nuggets from different waves of struggle and single out some similarities which they can apply to practice. They test them, share them with other organizers, synthesize what they learn, and develop a distinct, transmutable organizing approach - or *method* - over time. We believe that we are beginning to establish this method now.

Let us clear the air ahead of time and say that we don’t believe that an organizer can apply the exact same practice to any and every situation and expect the same results. We could not seriously claim to have a “copy and paste” approach to organizing, even if that’s what we set out to do. To be *gratuitously* clear, we do not set out to

do that. But a revolutionary in any setting acts in that setting according to some core values. The way those values are implemented will vary with the circumstance, but all the more successfully when done in concert with other revolutionaries in other unique settings. Thus we attempt to establish an organizational methodology for revolutionary workers at every place in the economy. While we're at it, let's nip some other misunderstandings in the bud. This essay critiques different organizing approaches that we have seen play out in practice. We make no bones about this. However, without these approaches, and without the practical experience that came of them, we would be in no position to advance new ideas. Indeed, while we critique certain organizing approaches, we are also critiquing ourselves. It is the spirit of camaraderie, synthesis, and the further development of the IWW and the class struggle generally that motivates us here.

The period the working class is in right now represents a historical marker for struggle. It is plainly evident that the IWW is experiencing a crux as well. This crux presents itself in the worldwide arena, and the workplaces Wobblies organize. From here, there are many different directions the IWW can go. Before embarking on one or a number of different directions, we propose a collective

pause to reflect and look ahead through a grounded, pragmatic lens (of course, with a revolutionary compass).

In the following pages we attempt to dissect the varied stages of growth the union has progressed through since its revitalization, focusing on the period of the 1990s to the present. Understanding what truths can be extracted from previous practices, while minding which theories and strategies impinged progress is crucial to evolving the way Wobblies organize. We will analyze three dominant paradigms that have taken root over the last several decades in the IWW to foster an understanding of their benefits and limitations - both theoretically and as shop-floor practices. These are: Radical Service Unionism (RSU), Solidarity Unionism (SU), and Direct Unionism (DU). On the shoulders of these prior practices, we argue for a new paradigm built on Revolutionary Unionism (RU). The methodology that underlies this model of organizing and the steps we think need to be undertaken for its implementation will follow.

2. How Did We Get Here?

A Brief Critical History of the IWW7

The IWW is not what it used to be. The organization has gone through stages of historical evolution, and in order to understand the current situation it's necessary to be aware of its place in this history. The early IWW of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Vincent St. John, Ben Fletcher and so on, from which Wobblies draw so much pride and tradition, no longer exists. It is a memory - one that is essential to hold on to because of its importance to the history and culture of the working class, but as an organization it is no more.

Decades of ruling class repression, containment of working class rebellion through state (legal) channels, capitalist advancements in managerial control and internal IWW conflict--subjects critical to an understanding of *how the IWW got here*, but which are beyond the scope of this piece--drove the IWW to a point in the 1980s where it could claim few members, little activity, and almost no power in the working-class. Though the union still held on to relics of the original IWW in the form of Joe Hill's ashes and membership records, and on paper the organization was technically the same one that was founded in 1905, its content had

drastically changed. What was once a powerful, revolutionary force for organized class struggle, stretching across the continent with influence throughout the world, had long since faded to a withered husk - an organization better characterized as a labor history club than a revolutionary union.

Let's stop to note that this observation is not meant as an attack on anyone who was a member during the 80s, or an attempt to say that everything after World War I isn't the "real" IWW. It is just as real of an organization, but a different organization, which changed over time due to a multitude of historical factors, not least of which being the relative strength and consciousness of the American working-class, which had reached a similarly low point in the 1980s. Individuals who were members of the organization had ultimately very little capacity to do much within those limits, and can't be held responsible for what was the product of historical dynamics far out of their control. But it's important to recognize that the IWW had reached a demise. Though not a final demise, since it was brought back from the brink and into a new stage of development in the 1990s.

The Activist Turn

Rising class-consciousness and growing interest in “radical” politics attracted more members to the IWW starting in the 1960s, with membership spiking in the mid to late 90s. The spike in the late 90s was largely activists - some of them politicized workers - immersed in the anti-globalization and anti-war protest movements. But while the organization’s membership scale increased, its content was still fundamentally different from the content of the union that led the Bread and Roses strike⁸. Those traditions of struggle had been broken and the union was forced to re-establish itself in a barren terrain. The 90s IWW largely functioned as a history club of greater size, but took on another dimension that sharply diverged from the union's organizing roots; increasingly (but not exclusively) the IWW became an activist organization. Here we use the term “activism” critically, in our examination of a kind of activity that is not rooted in class struggle, but instead devoted to expressing moral outrage at the capitalist system's superstructural contradictions.

Activism comprises of *protesting* against the many different ways in which the social antagonism of capital

manifests in society, usually through the staging of demonstrations, marches, and “actions” targeted against particular individuals, bosses, companies, organizations, or institutions that are deemed especially heinous. Activists usually analyze the world through the prism of “issues,” which are generally (though not always) treated as their own separate sphere of oppression, with their own separate roster of activists, more or less independent of others (e.g. regarding gender, the environment, etc). Time and resources are spent devising and executing ever more sophisticated ways of condemning manifestations of oppression in the eventual hopes that if enough people were to yell at them loud enough, the structure of oppressive social relations would collapse and give way to a better world. Generally speaking, activists poorly understand, if at all, the historical roots and context of the issues that they're trying to address. Efforts to resolve the issue(s) therefore tend to remain fixated on surface manifestations of a deeper exploitative system, and often give way to burnout or demoralization. (Take for example protesting against the excesses and violence of the Iraq war without an understanding of the origins and purpose of war in this society. Slogans like “War is not the answer!” convey this well.).

Activists generally joined the IWW not to advance the class struggle towards revolution and the destruction of ruling class exploitation, but because of an interest in “labor issues”, as an activist might say. Sporadic organizing did occur - passively - primarily based on solicitation from workers in workplaces close to established General Membership Branches (GMBs). Overall there was little scope for strategic organizing, initiated either from within the ranks of current membership, or directed at serious workplace targets within the reach and scope of branch capacity. However, by and large the membership activity within the union was (and unfortunately still is to a large extent) defined by attendance at monthly GMB business meetings and promoting the history and continued existence of the IWW at tabling events, marches, and demonstrations.

Looking back at the decline in organizing and the growth of an activist milieu in the IWW, we also see a concurrent development away from an explicitly revolutionary trajectory and toward the ubiquitous *radicalism* that persists today. For our purposes here, we contrast radicalism with revolution. Radicalism is a frustratingly vague concept commonly defined as “getting to the root.” The root of what often remains unclear, but we understand it in this context as having *methods and*

strategies unequipped to challenge the ruling class, generally stemming from a poor understanding of the system as a whole. Many well-meaning radicals fall in this trap, citing the *structure* of this society as the source of its evils, rather than the exploitative *content* that gives this structure its *form*. Unfortunately, many self-styled revolutionary groups today adopt non-revolutionary radicalism in shaping their goals and activities, which has been a common ailment of the IWW over the last few decades.

Indeed, increasingly, radical IWW activists sought to develop a more and more sophisticated method of activism by agitating around myriad forms of oppression. From this perspective, oppressions are divided up among their special interest groups (at best “intersecting” and influencing each other from time to time, at worst seen as entirely independent sociological systems), leaving revolutionaries struggling to synthesize a coherent theory and practice of struggle against them. Within this framework “class” and “class struggle” are their own specific arenas of interest that a specific species of radical can opt into or out of. In this way, the content of those terms is completely distorted. Consequently, “class” becomes a form of oppression and is added to the laundry list of other forms of oppression (e.g. sexism,

racism) which, despite the best intentions, tend to pay lip service to those oppressions and help little to address them in a meaningful - let alone revolutionary - way. Radicalists aimed for the root, but were shy of the mark: they did not succeed in articulating the causes or remedies of those forms, let alone a strategy to fight oppression and win. Thus there was a clear break from the traditional theory and practice of the IWW⁹. Attempting to be a revolutionary organization with reformist political content created a contradiction that members of the union failed to resolve. This new strong current of radical activists eclipsed the Wobblies' revolutionary traditions based in revolutionary class struggle organizing.

In contrast, revolution has vision that, in addition to structural and tactical considerations, takes a stance on the content of struggle, as well as organizational methodology, strategy, and trajectory. Let us clarify that we often sympathize or even coordinate with activists in certain endeavors, and we do not necessarily see ourselves as better than activists. For many in the IWW, activism was an important part of their development as revolutionaries. To be sure, valuable work has been achieved within this framework (e.g. groups of Wobblies addressing sexist behavior patterns within their

branches, etc). We would like to retain those achievements and synthesize them with a revolutionary *Wobbly* theory and practice of struggle. But the IWW must move past the limitations of activist culture and fulfill its own distinct role as a powerful organization of the revolutionary working class.

3. Redefining 'Unionism'

It's important for us to spell out what we mean by "union" in the first place, as well as what we *don't* mean. Today, most people's understanding of unionism is very limited. For some, unions act as an organ for self-defense from employers, which is an activity necessarily separate from workers expressing their political will¹⁰. For others, unions act as labor cartels, taking dues money from hard-working people to squander on political lobbying and the lavish lifestyles of the union's top officials. Of course, there are interpretations of what unions are that lie everywhere in between. But all these views share the assumption that unions are inherently *alien* to the workers (that workers do not or cannot organize unions themselves).

It is thus taken for granted by most on both the Right and the Left that 'The Union Question' begins *not* with workers' self-organization, but with a particular organizational *form*, i.e, a bureaucratic interest group servicing one subset of workers or another. They conform to legally-sanctioned representative institutions that are run by professionals who specialize in "union" work (whether they're on the AFL-CIO's payroll or that of a worker centers).

For many years members of the IWW have played into this narrative by characterizing the Wobblies as a more militant and structurally “horizontal” union--merely a “union” as defined above with more or less of one quality or another. However, this explanation hasn’t gotten us anywhere, and it’s not accurate. The IWW is not just a better option over the "other" unions. We have a different vision of what a union can be; indeed, we are a completely different *kind* of organization altogether. In order to disabuse ourselves from today's narrow conceptions of the union form, it’s important to put things in historical perspective. Since the earliest days of capitalism’s development, workers have organized to protect their interests from an increasingly powerful exploiting class. In the US during the 17th and 18th centuries, workers’ organization was often transient - sometimes to address a specific grievance, other times a violent rebellion against the exploitative social order. But by the late 19th century, permanent labor organizations had become prominent. And while "labor statesmen” of capital's loyal opposition had already emerged (the A F of L is the easiest example), the imaginary "win-win" partnership of Labor with Capital had not yet been sealed.

The Labor Relations system we know today was largely a response to the Great Depression and the mass strike wave that shook the US to its core in the mid-1930s. In a nutshell, economist John Maynard Keynes and then US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt led a push to rescue capitalism from the crisis of the time through State intervention. In order to restore productivity and profits, it was necessary to expand the purchasing power of working class Americans through subsidies, public works projects, and, no less, by encouraging the formation of unions. The New Deal, specifically the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA, aka Wagner Act), in this way addressed the crisis of overproduction by facilitating the expansion of demand. Keynes and Roosevelt recognized class struggle as unavoidable, and used the NLRA to contain struggle and rout it into a bureaucratic system we now call *Labor Relations*.

The Keynes-Roosevelt intervention represented the capitalists' best answer to winning the class war at the moment. Without such an intervention, more reactive elements of the capitalist class would have likely annihilated the whole capitalist economy by provoking such deep and wide strikes as those that swept the continent in 1934.

Hindsight allows us to see clearly why the capitalist class adopted the system of Labor Relations. Throughout the 30s into WWII it reinforced capitalist class hegemony, reshaping the content of unionism by institutionalizing a specific union form mediated by the State - and further and further removed from the membership at the point of production.

However, after decades of channeling proletarian rebellion into Labor Relations, capital no longer requires Labor as its junior partner. In the U.S. and other service dense economies the “Team Concept” has replaced “Labor Peace” as a more efficient model for social control. No longer needing to contract working class containment out to unions, many employers have introduced managerial strategies that combine classic Taylorist self-management values with “corporate social responsibility” culture. Workers are trained to view their own productivity and efficiency with a sense of pride and as a means for achieving greater financial incentives. We see this in the retail sector with the emphasis on “Team” or department based profit sharing programs. With Labor on its deathbed, capitalists insourced solutions to class war through increased employee propaganda, seeking to equate the sale of one’s labor power with a purpose and passion to save the world.

This is the world in which we are organizing, and for us, though unionism can take on many forms, it comes to life at the most basic level when two or more workers band together to struggle in their common interest. Here the “concerted”, or collective, aspect of the workers’ activity is foundational. In this scenario, workers themselves act together to address common concerns. No one acts in their stead. Unionism is here not merely passive enrollment into a representative labor institution, but a practice of solidarity and struggle carried out by real workers in real time.

Now, two or more workers engaged in workplace struggle is not on its own necessarily building a *union* per se. Further, it is not sufficient to build a revolutionary organization, nor is there anything necessarily revolutionary about this type of activity. There are many directions workers have taken from this initial point of struggle due to many reasons. So what constitutes a *union*, let alone a “revolutionary” union?

At its most basic, a union is “an organization of workers formed to protect the [...] interests of its members”¹¹ over time. Where an instance of self-activity could dissipate or pass, unionism is the practice of consolidating workers into an organization that acts to protect their interests on an ongoing basis. In recent

decades, this has often meant that union representatives do the “protecting” in the form of negotiating with management on the workers’ behalf, thus “unions developed a life independent of their membership and began to operate over their heads”. Solidarity Federation calls this tendency the *representative function* of unions as we know them now, in contrast to the (once more prevalent) *associational function* of workers relating directly to each other without the mediation of an entrenched bureaucracy¹². This distinction is useful as it demonstrates that unions can have diverging trajectories, leading to them playing very different roles in society. While many ultra-Left positions¹³ take the *representational function* of unions for granted, understandably portraying them as backwards institutions who have a stake in maintaining capitalism, clearly there have also been many workers’ organizations throughout the history of capitalism that have retained their *associational function* and represented a genuine threat to capital. Whether we call it a council, a union, or anything else doesn’t change the fact that it is possible to create and maintain “an organization of workers formed to protect the [...] interests of its members” - and that such a formation can retain its autonomy from the State and its allied institutions, can win improved conditions for workers under capitalism, and, further, can facilitate

the development of a revolutionary politics amongst the workers. The fact that such formations must come up against limitations under this system does not render them irrelevant, ineffective, or “*infantile*”.

Clearly, we believe self-organization is the cornerstone of unionism, and it is the premise upon which we base our argument for Wobblyism. We draw on a rich tradition of working class self-organization in the US, from the Knights of Labor¹⁴ of the late 19th century, the IWW agricultural and maritime workers of the 1910s and 20s¹⁵, the rank-and-file worker rebellion in the 1930s that gave rise to the CIO and continued well into World War II¹⁶, to the Revolutionary Union Movement cells in automotive production in the 1960s-70s¹⁷, among so many other examples. Each had its rise and fall, strengths and weaknesses, but all shared workers’ autonomous self-organization as an enduring key ingredient. This ingredient represents an irrepressible impulse of the class to assert its humanity and fight its class opponents head-on - whether its opponents take on the form of The Company or The Union.

4. Three Dominant IWW Organizing Models: Praise and Critique

Radical Service Unionism (RSU)

General Membership Branches (GMBs) increased alongside the proliferation of “street” activism in the 1990s, and the IWW drew a good number of recruits from within these activist milieus. Several decades of political decomposition of the US working class meant that during this time of growth, no surviving Wobbly organizing traditions were left to draw on to re-build the organization. Many Wobblies in turn looked to the business unions for organizing models that they would adapt to a more egalitarian, less bureaucratic approach. This led to a style of organizing that we call Radical Service Unionism (RSU).

Stripped bare, RSU is a form (service union) and a structure (democratic). Notable examples of this model can be found in most contract shops throughout the union. They are especially apparent in larger branches such as Portland and the Bay Area.

Workers organized in these campaigns are dependent upon GMB representatives and “outside” organizers, possibly with a few leads or IWW militants on the inside.

Formalized employer recognition and collective bargaining agreements, or contracts, tend to be the organizers' principal goals. Direct action and mobilizing an activist base generally play into the strategy used to achieve them, lending the organizing some street-cred. This organizing model is primarily directed at organizing "shops", with no explicit intent or strategy to build class power more broadly. When these shops are organized, union maintenance clauses that are often written into contracts have had the effect of reinforcing a service relationship to the workers in order to continue representation and avoid legal trouble. Affiliation with a revolutionary organization gives this method "radical" credentials, but we observe little to no distinction in practice between this and service unionism - a union model we should avoid replicating.

As much as this model is a result of the dominant aim and method of organization in the IWW at that time, it also reflects the broader level of struggle emanating from the class at that moment in history. It isn't only because of RSU organizers, but also because of inherent limitations of struggles generally at that time, as well as workers' general alienation from political life, and a notable lack of investment in building their own organization.¹⁸

It is worth noting that where this scenario exists, efforts have been made to change this situation, with some success. We do not advocate abandoning these shops because of their present limitations, and we hope that Wobblies will help these shops develop their own rank and file leadership and expand their fighting role in the class. In the meantime, we encourage Wobblies to reflect critically on this approach to organizing, and learn from its practical limitations.

Characteristic Features of Radical Service Unionism

1. Dependency on organizers from outside the workplace
2. Organizing orients around recognition (as something prior to and distinct from, demands) with a deference to “contractualism”
3. Single shop strategy

Solidarity Unionism (SU)

The essential components of Solidarity Unionism (SU) are *workers' self-activity*¹⁹ and *direct action*. SU provides a framework for workers to unite in pursuit of issue-oriented struggles (e.g. wages, schedules, sexual harassment, sick pay, etc) within a workplace or in multiple shops within a campaign. “Direct action gets the

goods through workers' self-activity" might be an appropriate summary of the SU approach.

The concept of Solidarity Unionism challenged the backwardness of mainstream union methods by asserting that workers are better off acting together on the job through direct action rather than relying on a business agent to solve their problems for them (a practice which is in itself very problematic). The workers' own "self-activity" represents a higher, more effective form of organization than the bureaucratic "business unions". This holds true whether or not the workers are members of a union; they supercede the limitations of the union that "represents" them, if one exists, and they *become the union* in effect.

Such a concept naturally finds a welcome home in the IWW. It could be said that "Solidarity Unionism" is a more recent term for a practice that unions like the IWW have practiced for a century or more. But while we should encourage members to "be the union" rather than just join it, there are other key dimensions of IWW organizing that we feel SU hasn't adequately articulated.

Since labor bureaucrats and staffers are absent from the solidarity unionist picture, it would seem that through SU, workers collectively assume leadership of their own

struggles. However, even though this model has recruited several solid and long-term Wobblies from workplace struggles, we have observed an overall pattern of a strong reliance on the initial organizer, with no well-developed system for developing leadership throughout the ranks. Also, the generation of Wobblies who pioneered SU tended to fixate on brand-based and retail-based strategies. In spite of a push from some organizers to expand down their respective supply chains (to their credit), supply chains were left mostly untouched. Inspired by the feats of SU at Starbucks and other prominent chains, fully-fledged organizing campaigns were launched by enthusiastic new members at single retail outlets (e.g. “stores”, “shops”, “locations,” etc) wherever a lead or contact was identified, but would often fizzle out due to a dearth of experience, mentorship, and/or local support.

Lastly, the IWW is a revolutionary organization. We see *workplace struggle* around specific issues as part of a *class struggle* against capitalism. We reject the idea that the two struggles are separate.

While Wobblies “inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, ‘Abolition of the wage system,’” it’s perfectly consistent within the paradigm of

SU for a union²⁰ of workers to exhibit self-activity and take direct action within an organizing framework that is ultimately reformist in its aim, method, and overall trajectory.

If we engage in direct action with our co-workers, say over a safety issue, but don't integrate an educational component that helps our co-workers think about the connection of that safety issue to the unsafe priorities of capitalism, then the struggle around the safety issue will more likely seem isolated to that one workplace, a "bad apple" in an otherwise healthy tree. Additionally, without the "big picture" vision of the system and our struggle that comes with an educational component, it will be more difficult to recruit and *retain* new members who will commit to the struggle for the long haul.

While we embrace the core concepts of SU, we feel that this model - as it is - has reached a wall in the IWW.

Without additional components of leadership development and political co-education along revolutionary Wobbly lines, we will not be able to push the virtues of SU into a higher stage of Wobbly organizing.

Characteristic Features of Solidarity Unionism

1. Workers' self-activity
2. Direct action

Direct Unionism (DU)

Along the way, Wobblies reflect on what they've done, compare notes, and formulate new approaches to do it better next time. Through experience - gains and especially losses - purpose and practice as an organization is clarified. Organizer's energy becomes more focused and better spent. Often, organizers write these things down in the form of pamphlets or articles and share them with fellow workers for feedback. One such key article was the 2010 discussion paper on what the authors called "Direct Unionism." Drawing on the best aspects of Solidarity Unionism, the Direct Unionists offered a practice for implementing militant worker-led unionism in unionized as well as non-union workplaces, in "public" and in underground campaigns. They emphasized "reproducing" the organizer - a "quality over quantity" approach to developing new militant working class organizers who, even if they don't join the IWW,

can take their skillset with them and organize on their own.

Direct Unionism was a *synthesis* of Solidarity Unionism with the organizers' own lessons and theories drawn out of experience. Their document crystalized hard-won lessons from some of the IWW's brightest organizers, and offered itself for reflection and critique. To be fair, DU was less a developed organizing model (though some Wobblies do consider it as such), and can only be fairly treated as an influential discussion paper. We also acknowledge upfront that the discussion paper reflected much compromise. When we refer to 'Direct Unionism' and 'Direct Unionists' in this article, we speak only of opinions expressed in the discussion paper.

Nonetheless, we consider DU an important benchmark in the IWW's growth and we will likely retain much of its insights. These lessons also inform current high-profile underground campaigns, which are keen to invest in long term qualitative growth through organizer-development ("reproducing the organizer").

DU picks up where SU leaves off, taking direct action and workers' self-activity as a starting point, and stressing the importance of the way that workers' *consciousness* is affected in workplace struggles. DU asserts that class consciousness should develop and expand with the

experience of *struggle* (“struggle” understood as a process of confronting a boss together, for example). But little more is added regarding the role of the organizer as an active facilitator within this process.

The Direct Unionists don’t hesitate to assert an organizing method based on very specific revolutionary values. They keenly remind organizers that even the largest mainstream unions are guided by their own set of values, just as Wobblies are. With that in mind, it is easier to dispel misconceptions about principles and values being incongruent with developing a “mass organization” like a trade union. But while Change To Win may be guided by its own set of values, it is true that the IWW has qualitatively different, and in some ways narrower, values. Instead of uniting workers behind the lowest-common-denominator value (say, “fair wages”), the Direct Unionists want to organize the working class to fight for its truest and deepest interests. In so doing, they counter the fallacy that the IWW is a “non-political” organization.²¹ Instead of struggling for a temporary improvement under capitalism, the aim is to end capital’s domination over society. What Wobbly could disagree? While many contemporary IWW’s espouse a desire to enroll as many workers as possible and leave the revolutionary content of its purpose to the side, DU

asserts that this is unlikely to attract members on a large scale anyway, outside of extraordinary periods of working class rebellion. Instead, DU focuses on recruiting and retaining quality members with experience in and a commitment to struggle. What this looks like in practice could vary, but we agree that more red cards is not inherently equal to quality development and long-term growth of the IWW.

Direct Unionism represented some of the most advanced ideas on organizing outside the narrow parameters of business (or service) unionism, including the issue of worker/organizer class consciousness.

According to Direct Unionists, “struggling collectively against a boss is transformative. It changes the way we relate to our coworkers and bosses, it changes the way we think about work, society, class, the world, and ourselves, and it can change our commitments.”

Moreover, as Wobblies:

“In the long-term, politically and socially, our goal should be changing the way workers relate to one another, how they view their boss, and how the working class understands the larger economic system. In a nutshell, we need to be able to leverage the short-term gains we

*make to not only improve conditions, but to make workers understand that we won't be able to achieve long-term changes in society without a fundamental confrontation with capital...The long-term goal of the industrial strategy, then, is to organize in a way that develops such consciousness and gives workers a way to relate to one another that creates that very change within their workplaces and within themselves."*²²

We couldn't agree more that an important goal of Wobbly organizing should be to develop revolutionary class conscious organizers (and therefore long-term, self-reliant Wobblies). We do however believe that direct action alone is insufficient as a method for achieving this end.

"Action precedes consciousness"

*"Direct action and solidarity...build up a collective consciousness. But it's important to recognize what comes first: direct action and solidarity. These must be the building blocks of not only successful organization, but successful education."*²³

On the process of education, Direct Unionism leaves off with the assumption that revolutionary consciousness will generally develop out of the experience of open,

collective conflict with the boss. Indeed, in the short term, Direct Unionists argue that “the goal of actions is to build up leadership and consciousness amongst other workers.”

The emphasis on direct action as a method for qualitative development and growth has also been advocated by groups like Seattle Solidarity Network (aka “SeaSol”), a grassroots collective of workers and tenants who’ve inspired spin-off groups in several other cities in the US. They can be characterized by their use of direct action to address grievances brought by individual workers or tenants, usually demanding stolen deposits for tenants and reinstatement and back wages for fired workers. The idea, according to a leading member of SeaSol, is “to view these small fights as a training ground for class struggle organising, from which we can progress to bigger, more collective, more prolonged projects. They aren't a model for social change as such but they contain a key ingredient required for large scale social change - direct action by the people facing a problem themselves...fighting together against bosses and landlords, planning things collectively, pooling our resources, realising that we have power together.”²⁴ Direct Unionism differs markedly in their approach from that of solidarity networks like SeaSol in that,

importantly, they advocate membership development in committees firmly planted at the point of production. That is, Direct Unionists engage the class war and build organization in their own and others workplaces rather than search for and support individual battles of members of the class. However, like SeaSol, Direct Unionism takes for granted that the source of conflict and the virtue in addressing it collectively are implicit, and will likely be understood on some level by those who experience it. We believe that the class character of the issues and of the fight should be made explicit, in part by action demonstrating this character in the flesh, but also in part through the educational approach of the organizer. Rather than interpreting the phrase "*action precedes consciousness*" strictly as "*one must take place before the other, and the other will naturally follow*", we encourage IWWs and to see action and consciousness as two components of a fluid process where each necessitates and influences the other.

It is hard to blame the authors much for this oversight, since for all the IWW's growth the last few years it's still having to learn through experimentation, through trial and error. But it is important that Wobblies find ways to merge the two practices of organization and education, and take the next step in its growth as an organization.

Additional key features of Direct Unionism include cadre formation or a “network of militants” and an industrial unionism strategy. Ideally the two coincide: IWWs connect with/develop militants within the same industry. This strategy is appealing. It recognizes the need to connect strong organizers who are capable and committed to building committees at the point of production over the long haul. It also argues that we intentionally focus resources within industries where we have an active presence.

However, as we discussed briefly above, DU takes for granted that membership development and retention will proceed from taking action on the shop floor. It’s unclear exactly how we arrive at the initial form of a network of militants if we haven’t provided a method for development. Another practical consideration that is not mentioned in the DU strategy is the importance of choosing target-based workplaces prior to and in continuation of cadre building. A network of militants scattered among unstrategic workplaces, even within the same industry, is not the best way to maximize our limited capacity. Finally, an industrial union strategy, as prescribed in Hagerty’s [Wheel25](#), may not be the most effective approach to building a strong class-wide organization.

Characteristic Features of Direct Unionism

1. Network of militants based in Wobbly workplace committees
2. Collective direct action yields class consciousness
3. Industrial unionism strategy
4. Contracts *are* Contractualism (Reject both as one and the same)

5. Revolutionary Unionism and the Trajectory of the IWW: Staking Out a New Organizing Tradition

“The IWW made the notion of the social factory a concrete reality, and it built on the extraordinary level of communication and coordination possible within the struggles of a mobile workforce. The IWW succeeded in creating an absolutely original type of agitator: not the mole digging for decades within the single factory or proletarian neighbourhood, but the type of agitator who swims within the stream of proletarian struggles, who moves from one end to the other of the enormous [North] American continent and who rides the seismic wave of the struggle, overcoming national boundaries and sailing the oceans before organising conventions to found sister organisations. The Wobblies' concern with transportation workers and longshoremen, their constant determination to strike at capital as an international market, their intuitive understanding of the mobile proletariat - employed today, unemployed tomorrow - as a virus of social insubordination, as the agent of the "social wildcat": all these things make the IWW a class organisation which anticipated present-day forms of struggle...”

-Sergio Bologna, "Class composition and the theory of the party at the origins of the workers' council movement" (1972)

By now we're assuming that you have not already made your mind up about revolutionary unionism as a contradiction in terms, and are open to ideas on how to implement it. Clearly, we are proponents of revolutionary unionism, but we believe that its content and form will be different from "unionism" as it is commonly understood today. Rather than trying to appropriate the form of unionism that we see around us to wield for our own purposes (as RSU did), our approach to unionism starts with an understanding that unionism begins with the most basic collective struggle against capitalism. As we discussed earlier, we regard two co-workers asserting themselves together against an employer as unionism, though in a nascent stage. That is to say, unionism is not defined by its *forms* as determined by mainstream business unions or bourgeois labor law, but by its *content* of collective struggle against capital (whether conscious or not). Such is the essence of Solidarity Unionism, which Direct Unionism took for granted, and which we use as a starting point for our understanding of Revolutionary Unionism. Finally, we are writing from experience organizing waged workers at

various points of production, but Revolutionary Unionism is, fundamentally, an approach to class-wide struggle so we believe it to be an equally essential method for developing revolutionary organization amongst *unwaged* workers, and other proletarian sectors of the 'social factory.'²⁶

Let us make a bold statement by asserting that the IWW, or any revolutionary workers' organization, is not simply one better or worse option out of a menu of unions. Wobblies have used a good deal of talent and energy trying to dress the IWW up as a "better alternative" to the business unions. Posturing as such will not lead to the growth in membership hoped for. The truth is, we cannot fulfill the role of a business union as well as a business union can, nor *should* we, because the IWW is not a business union. The *function* the IWW has historically played in struggle necessarily leads to a *form* distinct from mainstream unions. At the height of the IWW's membership and activity, members were less attracted to it because it "got the goods" (though it often did), but because of the IWW's revolutionary content and methodology. Had that not been the case, liberalism or simple "trade union consciousness" would have won the day early on and we would not have such shining

historical examples of revolutionary activity to learn from.

Making this distinction in this stage of growth is well-timed, as revolutionaries are having to define and develop the kind of organization they want to be in the coming period. Again, we do not assume to have the last word on the subject, but we do hope that we can avoid historical pitfalls by clarifying our revolutionary role in struggle. For example, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) of France established itself firmly on revolutionary principles, but turned eventually into a “business union with red flags”, showing its true colors as a “reactionary” (holding back or trying to reverse revolutionary struggle) force during that country’s uprising in 1968.²⁷

Closer to home, when the Great Depression hit, John L. Lewis and his cadre of bureaucrats observed the declining American Federation of Labor (AF of L), contrasted it with the vibrancy of the IWW, and sought to co-opt elements of Wobbly organizing to their own class-collaborationist ends. The CIO appropriated the Wobblies’ concept of Industrial Unionism, recognizing that its intrinsically revolutionary content was proven false, and organizers were picked from the crop of

militants that were either former Wobblies themselves or were developed through IWW traditions. These organizers played a major role in establishing a foundation for the CIO in automotive production, rubber, steel, and other major industries, in one of the most significant waves of struggle in US history. But once they had established this base, union leadership promptly purged the radicals who helped to build it (if the Federal Government didn't get them first). The path was cleared for the CIO to become the class-collaborationist business union that Lewis and Murray aspired to create. Today, the CIO is known only as the last three letters of the AFL-CIO. Little distinction can be detected in their organizing practices. Incidentally, they are declining in membership - and *power*.

Today, the IWW has attracted new members that don't just want the organization to be a cut-rate business union. Meanwhile, the business union leadership is grasping for straws trying to pull itself out of the margins of the working class and back onto center stage. Just as the nascent CIO sought to utilize the innovations and creativity of the militant worker-organizer, today's progressive wing of mainstream labor realizes it must find fresh blood to prop itself up again. Wobblies have observed these unions adopt direct action tactics (walk-

out's, civil disobedience, even occasional workplace occupations) similar to what the IWW uses. Wobblies have also heard these elements echo calls for fundamental change from below, for example, when attempting to co-opt the Occupy movement²⁸. And many organizers in the IWW have witnessed these same unions win over more than a few of its brightest, most motivated members to their ranks with salaries and other resources the IWW does not have. Thus the labor bureaucracy uses the talent and energy of the rank and file to build and mobilize a base, yet contain class struggle within its own liberal narrative of justice in the workplace. This remains a looming threat to the IWW's prospects for building a genuine revolutionary pole outside of the moribund labor mainstream. IWW's would do well to inoculate themselves against this.

Towards a Wobbly Methodology for Today...and Tomorrow

What we've learned over the last several years is that, in order to build a revolutionary union movement the IWW needs to identify and implement more nuanced Wobbly practices at the micro level with an eye toward its trajectory and growth as a revolutionary force within the

working class. Our internal organizer development programs along with the lessons and concepts laid out in IWW pamphlets like “Weakening the Dam” have provided organizers with excellent reference points by focusing on the individual organizer in the workplace. We hope to supplement and expand on those points by addressing 4 main methodological areas:

- A. Recruitment and Orientation
- B. Member Development and Retention
- C. Analysis and Orientation around Class Composition
- D. Organizational Growth and Trajectory

A. Recruitment and Orientation

We’re all Leaders?

When a few hundred Wobblies aboard the steamer Verona approached the dock in Everett, WA on November 5th, 1916 to support striking shingle workers they were met with hostility by hundreds of local vigilante “citizen deputies.” When asked “who’s your leader?” by local sheriff Donald McRae, a chorus of Wobblies famously replied, “we’re all leaders!” The slogan has been a hit ever since. But what exactly does it mean and what does it imply about the IWW and its members? To answer these questions one must first

disambiguate the term 'leader' in this context. McRae could have done this initially had he originally asked the more precise question he had in mind, namely, "who is in charge?" It is well known that Wobblies harbor healthy aversions to illegitimate authority and hierarchical structure. Thus the response made loud and clear on the docks in Everett, which was a reply to the fact that no one Wobbly was "in charge." However, the other side of the ambiguity is more complicated and begs important questions like what constitutes a good revolutionary leader and how can we recruit, develop and retain them?

Let us take a moment to clear up what we mean by "leadership". Leadership as a personal quality manifests itself in countless ways. In the Organizer Trainings, we discuss what it means to be a social leader in the context of the workplace. This brings up an important point: "leader" is a concept relative to a particular social group or situation. Where in one situation one person could be seen as a leader, in others they are led. Thinking about it this way, it is true indeed that all IWW members are leaders (along with most everyone else). However, the IWW has historically raised the bar for promoting a particular kind of leadership and developing a particular kind of revolutionary leader, namely, a Wobbly.

For us, the phrase “we’re all leaders” simply suggests that all workers are able to develop qualities and skills conducive to leadership in a multiplicity of situations. This does not mean all workers *will* acquire these qualities and skills, nor does it imply that they will acquire the qualities and skills to be a Wobbly. But this does not bear on the IWW’s approach to the present. Its strength as a revolutionary force within the working class is dependent on developing Wobbly leaders. Therefore it makes sense to identify Wobbly qualities and leadership characteristics, in order to highlight their virtues and reproduce them widely amongst the class.

What is a Wobbly?

While we’re on the subject of Wobbly leadership, we would like to briefly outline basic qualities we think Wobblies should strive for. Every member, when they join, agrees to study the principles of the organization and acquaint themselves with its purposes. But a red card does not a Wobbly make. We began this essay with a quote from FW Embree which strikes at the heart of Wobblyism. It’s worth repeating: “...*the end in view is well worth striving for, but in the struggle itself lies the happiness of the fighter.*” Wobblies are revolutionary class warriors, tireless fighters against capital and its

allies. They are responsible, competent, and accountable members to their class - adept at, and committed to, anticipating and negotiating diverse social terrain. They are courageous, not reckless; spartan, not obedient. They lead by listening. They are humble to learn and careful in speech. They understand the intimate and interdependent connection between personal aim and action within collective struggle and revolutionary social change. Therefore, above all, Wobblies are dedicated to reproducing Wobblies greater than themselves.

Salt: Every Worker an Organizer

“Every worker is an organizer” is useful shorthand for some of the principles the IWW holds close to its heart. It’s both a phrase and philosophy that resides in the back of every Wobbly’s mind as they survey the shop floor or run their thumb down a list of co-workers—scanning for potential allies and bookmarking future 1-on-1’s. Stripped bare, it’s a Wobbly maxim that recognizes the necessity for workers to organize for a truly new society.

Consequently, as the IWW seeks to maximize its strength with still limited numbers, we encourage every Red Card to adopt the mindset and approach of a salt. Salting is the proven, time-tested tactic of selling your labor power

strategically, with the specific aim of advancing the union and building class power. Salting is not exclusive of personal needs and desires, nor do we see it as a discrete series of events whereby Wobblies coldly calculate their move from one campaign to the next. ‘Every Wob a salt’ is a battle cry we embrace, but by this we mean a thoughtful, nuanced and long-term approach to orienting oneself to class struggle. In the section on “Growth and Trajectory” below we propose basic criteria to guide Wobblies in thinking about a personal revolutionary trajectory. We intend this guide to supplement Wobbly’s individual predilections regarding where they choose to sell their labor power. We hope this will encourage comrades to be thoughtful about their role as Wobblies and revolutionaries and instill an appreciation for acquiring skills and resources needed for securing a specific job in a particular workplace and learning how to establish oneself as a leader. These are critical skills every Wobbly should have in their revolutionary arsenal.

Not all Salts are Wobs

With this in mind, we are also increasingly looking to recruit new salts from outside the union. And interestingly, we’re finding that workers unaffiliated with the IWW are increasingly looking to join the organization

to fight within existing campaigns. Some of these workers have workplace organizing experience, many don't, and most aren't familiar with the rigors associated with revolutionary union organizing or the virtues conducive to reproducing class warriors. As many Wobblies know (and as we discuss in more detail below) it takes a tremendous amount of time and energy to help organizers salt into a campaign and ensure that they have the skills and information needed to find their stride. In our own campaigns we've stumbled blindly through this process several times in the last few years alone, with little success. There are numerous reasons for failure, largely derived from false starts. We failed to determine commitment, provide sufficient tools and/or resources, and generally gauge overall investment on the part of the interested salt. Looking back, we could have eliminated a lot of wasted time (by both parties) had our committee taken a more proactive "orientation" approach.

It is true that the 'One Big Union' has always gone to great pains to fight for inclusivity as a guiding principle of class conscious organizing. However, inclusivity is often reduced to meaning *non-discrimination* of membership. We want to move beyond this passive approach. We want to be inclusive in the sense that all members of the

working class are able to join the OBU, but we also want to take a positive approach to membership that ensures that new IWWs are well informed and equipped to become capable fighters in the class struggle.

What does it mean to join the One Big Union?

The IWW is an organization of the class. Therefore, as we have tried to impress, the union's membership, if it is to be successful in its historic mission, must be composed of working-class leaders. Wobbly organizers are always on the lookout for workers who demonstrate potential to become capable leaders on the job and within the class. Every worker is important, but for many reasons, not every worker is going to be a caring, responsible and class-conscious leader. We want to identify co-workers who demonstrate these qualities, or the potential to develop them, and who could duplicate and build on the skillset of the initial organizer and recruit yet new organizers. All this is based on organic, human-to-human relationships that we begin to develop in the workplace. We have developed the flexible guideline below for recruiting new organizers from the job, starting from this basic relationship to taking on the first tasks on the

committee. Many aspects of this practice could also be applied to branch building or other similar organizing activity.

Wobbly Organizer Recruitment Process

- Meet workers where they're at. This is very basic: it means listening, learning about people as people, engaging them on their interests and building a relationship of mutual respect and support.
- Trust: establishing trust through relationship-building and mutual aid.
- Initiative/Reliability/Follow-through: Is this worker a self-starter, responsible, accountable?
- Conduct a series of formal and informal "one on ones". Discretion is obviously important, and it's best to reflect on these interactions with a committee if one exists. These encounters could vary from casual socializing, to focused one-on-one meetings where workplace issues are discussed, to asking a worker to join the committee. Each step is an opportunity to assess whether to continue pursuing the worker's involvement in the campaign or not, but is also an important part of an ongoing process of relationship-building throughout the

workplace. As we state elsewhere, “Ultimately we need to know our co-workers, not just know about them.”

- Social mapping as an example of a practical entry to ongoing committee work.
- Promoting Wobbly values, practices, and expectations.
- Connect new member with available resources (literature, websites, people, communication tools).

Establishing yourself as an organizer in a new workplace and becoming a social leader

Upon getting hired at a new job, it’s tempting to jump right into agitating and educating co-workers. This approach is problematic for several reasons. Experience has shown that workers who do not first build relationships and establish themselves as social leaders within the shop are apt to be quickly labeled as an arrogant and disgruntled employee by management and gain a reputation among co-workers as a “complainer” and/or just another naive “crazy radical.”

Depending on the workplace it’s generally a good rule of thumb to allow yourself a few months to get acquainted with the social landscape at your new job. During this

time, organizing consists of getting to know as many names and faces as possible, social mapping, building positive relationships with everybody - including management and co-workers that you may find personally repulsive and lacking in class-consciousness. While organizing under the radar, having enemies only makes things harder, whether those enemies are worthy of ire or not.

Becoming a social leader requires putting yourself out there, going out of your way to introduce yourself to people and making it a point to say hello to folks both inside and out of your immediate work group. The first few weeks give you a unique opportunity to get acquainted with nearly every worker that passes you by. In many workplaces, departments and jobs are segregated in numerous ways. Intentionally pursuing relationships that force you to move beyond your comfort zone requires seeking out co-workers outside your immediate work group. Doing so will introduce you to a wider, more diverse social milieu, and give you a more informed understanding of the composition of your workplace. This puts you at a tremendous advantage to become a social leader and teaches you a lot about what the organizing committee should look like in order to build substantial workers' power in your shop or

campaign. At the same time, keeping all this information locked up in your head is nearly impossible. The taking of daily notes on the interactions you have with co-workers will prove indispensable when you want pass on that information to another Wobbly or simply organize your own thoughts into a clearer social map. Check with fellow organizers as to how they keep their notes in order so that you can devise a system that best fits your own situation.

Building a reputation as a worker who carries their load, helps others, covers shifts, arrives on time and doesn't call out sick frequently is another critical element of becoming a social leader. It's a cliché, but the best workers usually make the best organizers. Working hard and doing a 'good job' may increase the rate at which you're exploited, but it also makes the labor process easier for other workers, and they will take notice. Being known as someone whom everyone likes and respects is invaluable in establishing credibility, which is a vital prerequisite for assuming social leadership in the workplace.

B. Development and Retention

Building Relationships and Community in the Committee and the Class

“At its best, one of the most creative activities is being involved in a struggle with other people, breaking out of our isolation, seeing our relations with others change, discovering new dimension in our lives.”

Silvia Federici “Putting Feminism Back on its Feet” (1984)

At this point we’d like to magnify the discussion by homing in on the level of conversation and organizing that takes place between individuals in struggle.

Wobblies who are new to point of production organizing can fail to see between and beyond the ‘stages of a campaign.’ It is difficult and uncomfortable at first, to integrate the seemingly disparate spheres of one’s life (‘home,’ ‘friends,’ ‘work,’ ‘IWW,’ ‘family,’ etc.). As a result, organizers tend to remain fixated on a numbers game of growing the committee and signing up new members. This approach often focuses singularly on quantitative results and outcomes (e.g. “going public”) that take little to no consideration of the overall vision for the stated goal, and limited attention to methods for achieving success. We want to contrast this practice with

our conception of revolutionary unionism, which we assert requires a greater emphasis on a *process* for developing dynamic individual relationships, sharing leadership skills, creating experiences rooted in struggle, ensuring laughter, lessons, co-education and reflection. In our experience this process has had an invaluable effect on the quality, character, and content of struggle. Qualitative growth does not equal slow growth. In the long-run it will yield exponentially more organizers who have the capacity to move people in revolutionary directions. Thus we believe IWW organizers need to better understand how to develop relationships, particularly those that transcend the personal/political dichotomy. When Wobblies compartmentalize their lives they limit their connection and contribution to their families, comrades, and ultimately, the class struggle. Moving forward, we suggest IWW organizers place greater emphasis on the process of building the kind of relationships necessary to growing a union of revolutionaries.

Decompartmentalization is a term we use to describe a revolutionary approach to relationship building. It's a holistic view of the different parts of our lives and the class struggle. In practice the activity is a reciprocal one: our dynamic working class social relationships inform

how and why we struggle—and struggle informs, nurtures, and transforms our relationships to one another. This implies that revolutionaries “meet people where they’re at,” which requires the continual development of relationships outside radical circles, social cliques, and otherwise comfortable ‘milieus.’ This approach is not an exercise in friendship building. It’s an approach to organizing that recognizes the class struggle as a fundamental battle for our humanity. As such, our organizing should reflect the basic aim of revolutionary struggle--to stimulate, nourish, and develop those humanistic qualities suppressed under capitalist rule. For us, this suggests building more comprehensive relationships with co-workers, comrades, and broader members of the class.

Occasionally we hear comrades say they are frustrated because their job is such a hindrance to their “political work.” If only they had more time off the clock, more could be achieved. There is a wide range of activity that falls under the umbrella of political work so we aren’t being derisive of the term, per se. Nor are we questioning fellow workers who work long hours, multiple jobs, and/or simply have very little “free time.” Our quarrel is with the idea that political work is extracurricular, something lying outside the necessary

daily routine--one among many independent priorities competing for our attention. But denying capital's omnipresence only contributes to the illusion that some spheres of life are still sacred.

As Selma James makes clear,

*"...capital is a social relation not only between classes but between all individuals. All the relationships in society are transformed on the basis of this capitalist way in which human beings are exploited in the course of working to survive and develop. The most obvious, pervasive, and fundamental change is that we relate to each other through things...The class struggle is in essence to end exploitation and to transform the quality of our lives: we don't wish to spend any of our precious time submitting to an alien--an alienating--will."*²⁹

From this perspective, every aspect of life becomes "political". Each seemingly separate sphere of life (work, socializing, hobbies, etc) is shaped by this "social relation". All life, all creative human capacities are channeled into reproducing this relation; to creating and reinforcing capitalist society. The working class doesn't own or control society's "means of production", thus it has little choice but to take part in this process or starve (the bagel dumpsters don't fill themselves). The process

of workers' alienation from the means of making life possible is profoundly political in itself. For us, some of the most important political work a revolutionary can do is where they're forced to *work* in order to *live*.

Working class intellectual Stan Weir coined the term 'singlejack solidarity' to describe the nature and significance of developing a close bond with co-workers and other working class organizers (the term is also the title of a great edited compilation of Weir's essays).³⁰ We believe 'Singlejacking' should be a principle method of Wobbly organizing because it draws out the underlying commonalities workers have in class struggle by penetrating the personal and breaking through the 'compartmentalization' that tends to separate our lives into separate spheres of work, personal life, identity and politics. Babysitting, helping someone move, and going camping might not at first seem like things we would associate with workplace organizing, but they are essential to building a broader and mature sense of solidarity, comradeship, and community in our workplaces and within committees. If Wobblies can agree that building a powerful and sustainable workplace committee depends on organizing that practices and promotes a decompartmentalized approach to relationship building, they are able to release the pressure to rush quantitative growth in their

campaigns. They are able to devote more attention to qualitative development and to ensure that new organizers receive the skills, capacity, and competence to be leaders. This approach requires patience, but Wobblies should be up for this challenge.

There is a reason why much of the IWW's rich history and other thoughtful accounts of class struggle are couched in spiritual language: Revolutionary organizing requires an understanding that working class solidarity must transcend the daily forms of isolation and alienation reproduced under capitalism. In crafting a spirit of revolutionary community with co-workers and within committees revolutionaries are actively “building a new society” by forming new types of relationships “in the shell of the old.”

Ultimately Wobblies need to know their co-workers, not just know about them. Whether a Wobbly is a committee of one, or one member in a larger committee, the method of decompartmentalized organizing is universally applicable. Building one strong relationship is one of the most difficult things to do as an organizer. It is also the most important.

Mentorship, On the Job Organizer Training and Political Co-education

Mentorship is elemental to growing a sustainable organization. A mentor shares experiences and insights which foster growth and development. A good mentor will pass on skills and lessons for others to build on and become mentors themselves. Most Wobblies, if they're active members, have probably played a mentor role in orienting a new member with branch meetings, or as an adviser when a new organizing drive is getting on its feet. However, we feel that the form and level of priority that mentoring takes in recruiting and developing IWW members needs to be better impressed.

Many current members joined the IWW online, waiting for a clue as to what to do next when the new member packet came in the mail. Others joined in person, but were left to orient themselves in a new organization mostly on their own. Still today, we find an overall lack of a practice of building relationships with new members, fielding questions about the organization they're about to join, and providing guidance once they're in so they can be a thriving member. Even the most thorough Organizer Training will have little effect without extensive follow-up and support. While mentorship takes

place on an informal level sometimes, it has yet to be made a priority of the organization in general.

Experienced members must mentor newer members, helping them past unforeseen obstacles and nuances of day-to-day organizing.

How does this look? There are many ways we can step up mentorship, but some examples may be helpful. For instance, in the Food Mart campaign, new committee members have “shadowed” more experienced members through one-on-one’s to build their sense of competence to initiate their own; those with a history of workplace organizing will follow up with newer members - especially if there’s a natural rapport in place - after committee meetings to field questions, explain new concepts, and generally check in. Food Mart committee members have also experimented with establishing “organizing partners,” two worker-organizers who meet together regularly, if briefly, to keep each other motivated and on task, to share experiences and skills, analyze and discuss readings, write articles together, and most importantly, learn how to ask questions. There are a wide-range of possibilities within this framework depending on the context and situation (e.g. It may be beneficial for IWW Industrial Organizing Committee (IOC) members who have not established a workplace

committee to pair up even though they do not share the same workplace. Or perhaps circumstances suggest partnering with someone outside your industry, branch, or location. Having an organizing partner you can relate to and grow with is critical).

Wobblies in Portland have developed a systematic approach to orienting new delegates to their responsibilities, and to the inner workings of the IWW more generally. Also of note is the “resource tree” system Twin Cities Wobs are developing, which matches resources with people who need them, in effect supporting the development of new and more diverse leadership (which should continue to be a priority for the IWW going forward).

Alongside mentorship, another essential but often-lacking component of our organizing has been *education*. Early Wobblies identified three key components of our revolutionary organizational practice known as “the Three Stars of the IWW”: *Education, Organization, and Emancipation*. Throughout the first decades of Wobbly activity, a rich culture of working class self-education prevailed, giving the rank and file a compass toward Emancipation to guide their daily activity on the job. Fellow Workers led classes on economics using real-world terminology and illustrations. “Ordinary workers”

recorded their ideas, often very advanced even for our time, in union publications or in pamphlet form³¹. They recognized that it was important for workers to understand their position in society in order for them to use it to the class's advantage. They knew that workers could not only grasp concepts of struggle, but expand on and improve them, because they too were workers who yearned to resolve the system's contradictions that played out in their everyday lives. Clearly, education plays an indispensable role in Wobbly organizing, now as much as then. The challenge today is to identify obstacles to successful education practices and to overcome them. Specifically, the IWW needs a method of *co-education* where Wobblies share their knowledge and experiences to build a smarter, more vibrant organization on a trajectory toward universal emancipation.

To be clear, our perspective as revolutionary organizers is not as professionals or intellectuals, hoping to insert correct ideas into an ignorant and passive working class from the outside. "The workers" - if we can refer to "them" in the third-person - are neither ignorant nor passive as a whole, and we are living examples of that. Our approach to education is from within the class, and this shapes our education practice. Further, even as

“well-read” revolutionaries, we do not find that we have to bring politics³² into organizing, but that politics is implicit in everything we do. The power relations built into this society touch every aspect of our lives. We do not have to search long to find the connection between an aspect of our lives and the system. Thus the personal becomes political in a profound way. “Politics”, we find, are lying around everywhere.

That said, our role can be seen as two-fold: one is to draw out the contents of this system from our co-workers’ lived experience and facilitate a process of connecting that experience to the big picture of the system and revolution; second is to give them the tools to better agitate and organize on their own. In doing so, we stand to learn as much as we share. In fact, we should approach our education practice expecting to learn something from our co-workers that we didn’t know before. While we will often have organizing and political tools that others have not yet developed, we should not see ourselves as possessing all relevant knowledge. We say that a Wobbly educational component should resemble a two-way street; we call this *co-education*. Our approach to co-education will necessarily vary with the circumstance. We should be flexible and do our best to orient education around our co-workers' interests,

experience, and capacity. While study groups are appropriate for some, others might get more out of a film or discussing how things went on their first picket line. Drawing from a Food Mart example, we've adapted dense texts to a slideshow presentation, adding visuals and extracting key quotes for discussion. This way, the contents of the text can be communicated more easily for more people, and there's more time to discuss how it relates to everyone's lives. Further, by breaking down complicated concepts this way, we're better able to take these concepts into the workplace and enrich our agitation skills.

Obviously, a key ingredient in this process is a desire to participate. Our co-workers have to want to be part of this, and we have to want to initiate and follow through with it. As with everything else, there are no silver bullets to revolutionary co-education. It is challenging, and at times discouraging, but nonetheless necessary - and possible.

C. Class Composition and the Orientation of the IWW

The IWW of the early part of the 20th century is known for its diverse composition. It agitated in earnest for equality, against racial subjugation of blacks, exclusion of recent immigrants, and the marginalization of women. Many compelling examples can be used to demonstrate that these weren't just meaningless sentiments. A large portion of the active membership were recent immigrants who were often not regarded as genuinely "American". Asian immigrants were called on to join when even the most progressive forces of the time (most unions, various US socialist parties, the Second International, etc) kowtowed to then-prevalent anti-Asian public sentiment³³. Black leadership was key in holding together the IWW's powerful maritime organization in Philadelphia, MTWU Local 8. Philip A. Randolph, a key organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, often admired the Wobblies' attention to the conditions of black worker³⁴ and their appeals to join³⁵. And surely women in the organization faced unfair challenges, but were able to take meaningful leadership roles with the ardent support of many male members. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn asserted: "The IWW has

been accused of putting the women in the front; the truth is: the IWW does not keep them at the back – and they go to the front.” Thus the IWW made ongoing earnest efforts to put its money where its mouth was on organizing all workers based on their common interests, “regardless of creed, color, or nationality.”

Today, the question of class composition (Who is the class composed of? What immediate issues concern them? How do they relate to the rest of the class at this time?) is again a burning one for us to consider for our growth. The terrain of struggle is shaped by race, immigrant status, sexuality, gender, and the historical backdrop of decades of both struggle and working class decomposition³⁶ (a process of the class breaking up into separate interest groups and a loss of a relevant working class political culture). The question of how to navigate this complex terrain and build a class-based organization whose composition reflects that of the widest possible segments of the class is one that cannot be answered in one sweeping document. However, we must use this question as a guide in considering how we want to carry on our work in the coming period to make our organization more effective and relevant.

In doing so, we would recommend avoiding falling into a liberal narrative around “diversity”, which we hold to have little meaning. True, having a composition within the IWW representative of our class at large is a good thing, but diversity for diversity’s sake is not a response to struggle or historical conditions, and too easily tends toward tokenizing certain demographics. A compositional approach starts with material (historical) conditions that call forth the possibility and necessity for different layers of the class to support each other in struggle. As the universal emancipation of humanity from the history of class societies is our goal, our scope for compositional analysis and movement-building is broad indeed.

With all this said, it is true that the IWW has, especially in recent years, had a limited composition compared to the wider class. This is a subject which we could easily write another several pages on, but we would rather reflect on this in real time with other Wobblies. For now, there are at least a few key ways we think this limited composition perpetuates itself, and that we would like to consider while orienting ourselves toward a higher phase of organization.

To make a convenient generalization, our organization as it exists today has been largely built up by organizers

coming out of activist milieus with their own distinct cultural norms. (See above: “The activist turn”.) While this fact on its own isn’t necessarily bad, there seems to be a tendency to reproduce the cultural norms of those milieus within the IWW. This is especially evident in areas where branch-building takes priority over - or is done instead of - workplace organizing. Still often enough, where there has been workplace activity, an inertia has set in where radicals of this bent defer to other such radicals in building committees. Whether this looks like the stereotype of the “old lefty” labor history club, or the younger, hipper radical activist, this orientation tends to alienate many others who don’t share that background. True, this tendency is less prominent in some areas where serious workplace organizing has taken place, but it is a phenomenon that still ails us.

We would like to see the broader IWW take steps to orient its activity around workplace struggle in more meaningful ways. Where serious workplace organizing is going on, we have to consciously build organization with composition in mind. Again, compositional considerations will vary from place to place, but clearly the overall tendency, up till now, of retaining members who share a specific cultural reference point through the Left (all too often mostly white) isn’t paying off.

Moreover, qualitative growth and stability is possible only insofar as class composition is thoughtfully addressed by existing workplace committees, by organizers currently “picking a target”, and by wider IWW recruitment strategies.

Like much of the Wobblyism method we're advocating, this process is dialectical. Organizers develop relationships with workers as people. Based on the evolution of those relationships toward or away from struggle, more concerted efforts are taken to connect with key demographics within particular workplaces, industries, regions, international campaigns, etc. It is true that the class--a constantly evolving force--"still remains an unknown continent."³⁷ Revolutionary organizers must continually experiment with creative ways to fruitfully connect with ever-changing and diverse sectors of this rich proletarian landscape. Therefore, the challenge for Wobblies on the ground is to social map the “social factory” from different angles and from different dimensions according to the climate and context of struggle. They must grow adept at analyzing the composition of the workplace to gain insight into shop floor leadership dynamics, to identify social and cultural pull within the context of campaigns, and importantly, master the art of acclimation, while encouraging an

orientation towards class struggle. Only through careful attention and practical activity devoted to building an organization which reflects the diverse composition of our class can Wobblies pursue revolutionary unionism.

D. Growth and Trajectory

We have focused a lot on the “micro” level of day-to-day Wobbly organizing, a method distinct from the business union approach. But just as important is the scope for organizational growth and, eventually, revolution. We would like to relate our thoughts on building for the next stage of IWW organizing.

The IWW could never boast membership sizes that could compare to the millions of workers enrolled in the best-known business unions. Nonetheless, it has historically played a disproportionately powerful role in advancing the interests of the entire class. Many of the gains and comforts the class enjoys today can be largely credited to the methods and traditions of the IWW. This could not have been accomplished without the IWW’s distinct approach to organizing, which emphasized organizing worker-to-worker in many of the world’s key industries. In this way, the dichotomy between leadership and rank-and-file was blurred, if it existed at all; the self-activity of

the workers themselves was the motor that drove the IWW. This approach is vividly exemplified in the dynamic organization Wobblies built in timber, agriculture, and maritime in the 1910's and 20's.³⁸

Many of us are familiar with the Wobbly adage, "Organize the worker, not the job." In other words, share with other workers the tools to build up their own organs of struggle, and leave the problems of running capitalist production to the capitalists. One other sentiment we've heard within the IWW goes something like, "Organize where you're at." Without digressing too much from the point, we think there is merit in acting like a Wobbly whether you work at a small print shop or in a massive steel mill. We should implement our method where we can, when we can. However, the IWW has finite resources and cannot meaningfully support fully-fledged campaigns in just any and all places. The IWW should aim to build sustainable organs of struggle that will have the broadest possible positive impact on the class as a whole. There is an important distinction here between *organizing* and *organizing campaigns*. Both are important, but here we will focus on campaigns. One would be hard pressed to find a Wobbly who feels that members of the IWW shouldn't always be working to organize our class, regardless of where we fall in it. In any given workplace a Wobbly might happen to work,

they have a responsibility to their co-workers and their class to nurture solidarity and act on their revolutionary principles. But Wobblies, like most other workers, aren't static objects born to a single workplace where we must be affixed until the end of time. Many factors affect and change where we end up, not least of which being our own decisions. It would be unrealistic to expect a Wobbly to ease into a workplace that requires training and experience that they do not have, in a line of work that they would never seriously consider. However, if a member is on a trajectory toward the kind of job called for in a strategic workplace, the story changes. There are many valid considerations a person should make before taking on this kind of commitment, but our point is that worker-organizers do not require an academic education to be salts. It could be alleged that it is unfair for workers to make a strategic choice in who they sell their labor-power to. However, workers change jobs *constantly*. We take jobs first because we have to in order to live. We are encouraging working-class revolutionaries to pick workplaces that they are on a trajectory to work in anyway, if they can, with the intent to help organize those workplaces.

The question is therefore raised to us: what considerations must we make as Wobblies individually

and as the IWW collectively when determining "where we're at?" That process begins with a survey of the industrial terrain before us and an assessment of the path to revolution.

It is true that the stages of capitalist production are necessarily integrated. Producing a commodity is a process spanning many diverse and separate workplaces, demanding a structure to facilitate all of this capital getting to the right places at the right times. The component parts of the commodity must arrive to be prepared for sale, and a long chain of ships, planes, trains, and trucks must connect all these distant points together.

Any strike at a vital point of distribution is a crippling blow to the employing class. Production might continue at tremendous rates, and customers could still flood the stores, but without operational means of distribution to get commodities from the point of production to the point of exchange, the circuit of capitalism shorts. Thus we make our case for *supply chain* strategies, a more effective way to use our limited resources to leverage power against employers.

Ideally, our organization's capacity would allow for industry-wide organizing in maritime, auto, or Walmart,

as examples. But we're not there in terms of size, location, and capability at this point. Nonetheless, the organizing upturn over the last decade or so has put the IWW in a position to pursue larger targets than it could before. One well-known Wobbly organizer often recommends that we “pick the low-hanging fruit.” We agree, but many Wobblies now have the tools and experience to start picking higher. We encourage organizers to use the key considerations below before pursuing a serious organizing drive:

-Picking Key Capital Targets: Is the employer a powerful player in the economy, locally or more broadly? Are they vulnerable to Wobbly organization in your region? After considering your branch or committee’s organizing capacity, zero in on reachable targets that will have a significant impact on workers in the industry or in the economy more broadly.

-Identifying Where Momentum Is and Assessing Organizing Capacity: Is there already organizing activity taking place at your target workplace, or a serious interest in initiating a campaign there? Is your branch or committee prepared to lead a long-term campaign there?

*-Supply Chain Agenda and Geographical Strength*³⁹:

Aiming down the supply chain, instead of just across points of exchange, will likely reap more gains, especially for a small organization. Does your target have production, warehousing, or transportation facilities within range of your committee? Neglecting these key points in the chain will only give the employer that much more leverage.

-Compositional Analysis and Education: Does the workplace or industry demographics reflect the demographics of the class locally? Is your committee equipped to navigate diverse workplaces and build on-the-job leadership among different segments of the workplace? Will your campaign resonate with broad segments of the class?

-Membership and Orientation: Does your committee have a system in place for recruiting lasting and able members who understand and embrace IWW aims and methods?

-The Campaign and the Class: How does your campaign affect or advance the growth of the IWW and the interests of the class? Will it resonate widely and help build class power more broadly? If so, how?

-Goal-setting: What short-term goals do you want to achieve through this effort? How will this affect where the IWW is at in 1 year, 2 years, or 5 years out?

Wobblyism: Toward a model for Revolutionary Unionism

1. Organizing aim and method based on a revolutionary trajectory
2. Integration of leadership development (“reproducing the organizer”) and political co-education into everyday workplace struggle
3. Target-based workplace committees
4. Supply chain organizational strategy

6. Conclusion

Summing it up

Zooming out from the subject of organization-building we've discussed here, it is helpful to keep in mind our context in the world-wide class struggle. This can be a lot to conceive of, but it is this global struggle that gives our local efforts direction and meaning. Capitalism is not the first stage of exploitation and inequality the world has known; humanity has been burdened with the struggle to free itself of these shackles for a long time. Class societies gave way one to the next over time. Convincing analysis cites the domination of women as the first manifestation of class⁴⁰; ancient chattel slavery gave way to feudalism, which capitalism triumphed over, which has wrought its own divisions and oppressions to secure its preservation. Capitalism is thus a culmination of a long and tired history of systemic oppression; it also has the distinct disadvantage of daily digging a grave for class societies as a whole. This system has given the very class it depends on for survival the tools for its own destruction. Workers have immense transformative power, but it is not written destiny that they will use it to transform society. Capitalism will run out of steam one

way or another. Are Wobblies prepared to build something qualitatively better in its place?

An essential aspect of fighting an opponent is *understanding* your opponent, their motives and their tactics. Capitalism, our opponent, is the rule of exchange-value (or simply, “value”) over society. It is the systematic squandering of the earth’s resources (people among them) for the purpose of exchanging commodities for yet more commodities. This represents the basis of social relations in capitalist society.

The *business unions* have found a niche in this system, negotiating the effects value has on the working class. They address surface manifestations of capitalist antagonism, while preserving its essential exploitative function (and hence, their own preservation). *Activism* critiques the hierarchical *form* of capitalism, and finds its own niche in the system as the vocal critic of its “errors” and “excesses”. Wobblies have no horse in that race, and should understand and struggle directly against the rule of value itself. We do not entertain illusions about a more “fair” or “horizontal” capitalism. We cannot build an organization that attenuates, ignores, or misunderstands the role of value in our struggle. Indeed, this is what inspired the IWW into existence, and which the Preamble declares in no uncertain terms. This, for us, is the starting point when we assess the role of our

organization, our opponent's tactics and weaknesses, and what we need to do to win in struggle.

Wobbly Grover Perry once stated, "Labor produces all wealth. Labor is therefore entitled to all wealth. We are going to do away with capitalism by taking possession of the land and the machinery of production. We don't intend to buy them, either."

Going forward

If nothing else, this piece is an attempt to reflect upon our organization and its history. We sense that this article is merely articulating what's already developing on the ground, and we hope to push this positive development as far as we can. A variety of changing historical dynamics have shaped the organization we know today and defined its political content, with all its flaws. But these changes have also given the IWW an opportunity to embark on a trajectory that is truly revolutionary. This is only possible, however, with rigorous self-evaluation. We must recognize that adherence to particular forms of unionism is inherently problematic, at best limiting our organization to militant reformism, and at worst allowing it to degrade into a cut-rate business union. We must attempt to transcend the relegation of class struggle to an activist hobby and

commit to organizing in a way that recognizes its fundamental role in the formation of society (and, consequently, our individual lives). And we must develop a strategic analysis of our current and potential role in struggle to insure that the IWW can once again be central in moving our class towards revolution. And finally, our approach to these tasks must reflect our holistic view of the system as well as what gives the struggle against it its deepest meaning: the struggle for our humanity.

In the absence of such evaluation, it is likely that continuing on the exact same course we have been on for the past 20 years will lead to marginalization and defeat. We need a serious re-evaluation of our trajectory, and to advance to a higher phase of organization. This is our moment to do so. Without the IWW our class will probably not see victory for a long time to come. We can again be a powerful force for change, and surpass our history's more glorious heights. It's up to us. This is our contribution to that process. We look forward to working with you all in good faith to live up to our historic mission.

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- **1.** This article was a remarkably collective process. Though initiated by members of the Food Mart organizing committee in the Bay Area, many IWWs provided valuable insight and criticism; some directly contributed to portions of the piece. Creating a vibrant intellectual working class culture is integral to the IWW's success as a revolutionary union. We hope this piece will enhance debate and discussion and encourage other fellow workers to share their reflections on struggle. There is so much more our class has to say.

by the Wobblyism Working Group:

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"...revolution is not a question of the form of organisation [...] the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on the precise ends defined by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and

sacrifices..."<http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1921/party-class.htm>

- 2.<http://libcom.org/history/thw-iww-one-hundred-return-haunted-hall>
- 3.Kornbluh, Joyce L. Ed. 2011. *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*. p. 255. PM Press: Oakland.
- 4.In this paper we use the terms “organizers” and “organizing” to refer to actual workers engaged in self-organization or self-activity. Our relationship to our co-workers, comrades, families and communities are driven by the necessity for absolute class solidarity, not charity or moral obligation.
- 5.This term was coined (as best we know) by Staughton Lynd in his pamphlet of the same name. See *Solidarity Unionism*, S. Lynd, C. H. Kerr Publishing Company 1992. Also see *Solidarity Unionism at Starbucks*, S. Lynd and D. Gross, PM Press 2011.
- 6.See for example Jimmy John’s Workers Union - a Wobbly union formation at a North American fast food chain.

- **7.** Here we focus on specific historical currents within the IWW, which often point to contradictory elements in the union as a whole, and not features of specific people and campaigns. Our timeline is a representation of events and processes from a birds eye view. We admit that more detail would yield a chronologically more complex story with fits and starts. Particular trends overlap, die out, and sometimes re-emerge. Such is the case with our organization's history.
- **8.** The dramatic textile manufacturing strike in Lawrence, MA, 1912. For more on this crucial historical moment, see *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*, Bruce Watson, Penguin Books 2006.
- **9.** This isn't to say that the Wobblies from "back in the day" had it all worked out theoretically and practically. Far from it. But the unique revolutionary tradition of the early Wobblies made them some of the most advanced thinkers - and doers - of the time. The "residue" left from those early generations nourishes our generation of revolutionary workers and Wobblies.

- **10.** See V. I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder* (“Should Revolutionaries Work in Reactionary Trade Unions?”) 1921.
- **11.** Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2013.
- **12.** Solidarity Federation is an anarcho-syndicalist organization in the UK. Their recent position paper *Fighting For Ourselves* features this critique of unions and today’s mainstream workers’ movement: <http://libcom.org/library/1-mainstream-workers-movement>.
- **13.** See *Workers’ Councils* by Anton Pannekoek, Ch. 2 Pt. 1: Trade Unionism; 1947: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1947/workers-councils.htm#h13>. See also, *Unions and Political Struggle* by French libertarian communist group Mouvement Communiste; 2003: <http://libcom.org/library/unions-political-struggle-mouvement-communiste>, and *Soviets In Italy* by A. Gramsci, 1920: <http://libcom.org/library/soviets-italy>.
- **14.** Originally a labor fraternal organization, the Knights took on many “union” traits as it grew in the economic

and political turmoil of the 1870s-80s. The Knights were in many ways a precursor to the IWW. Overview of the Knights: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knights_of_Labor

- **15.**Both industries saw thriving and dynamic worker-led organizations that embraced direct action and political development. For more on IWW activity among agricultural workers, see *Rebel Voices*, ed. J. L. Kornbluh, PM Press 2011. For maritime activity, *Wobblies On the Waterfront*, P. Cole, University of Illinois Press 2007.
- **16.**For more on working class militancy and self-organization during World War II in the US, see *Wartime Strikes* by M. Glaberman, Bewick Editions 1980. See also *Singlejack Solidarity* by Stan Weir, Univ Of Minnesota Press 2004.
- **17.**Referring here to the all-black Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs) that grew out of Detroit's working class college campuses and automotive factories in the late 1960s. The RUMs, later assembled under the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), were autonomous shopfloor organizations formed by politicized black workers as a response to the entrenched racism of both their employers and their

union (United Auto Workers), as well as the general corruption of the latter. RUM cells carried out strikes and other job actions to address their grievances, and sought to mobilize black workers generally behind a revolutionary program. For more, see *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, D. Georgakas and M. Surkin, St. Martin's Press 1975.

- **18.** To clarify, by this we mean a more formal organization beyond the “Informal Work Group” - a phenomenon identified by worker-organizer Stan Weir. Informal Work Groups are organic, informal, often unseen solidarity groups that workers form through the course of working with each other. They are built on trust, the need for comradery, and self-defense from management, and are the essential building block for any coordinated self-activity.
- **19.** Very simply, collective activity that workers engage in without the mediation of a [service] union, the employer, or the state. For George Rawick, in his cogent essay *Working Class Self-Activity*, the strengths of wildcat strikes in unionized workplaces sum up the virtues of self-activity: “first, through this device workers struggle simultaneously against the bosses, the state, and the union; second, they achieve a much

more direct form of class activity, by refusing to delegate aspects of their activity to an agency external to themselves.”

- **20.** Solidarity Unionism is a model often equated (sometimes pejoratively) with ‘Minority Unionism’ but the terms are not synonymous. One possible source of conflation is that SU advocates often highlight the National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) definition of “concerted activity,” which state that “two or more employees discussing work-related issues beyond pay, such as safety concerns, with each other” enjoy legal organizing protections.
- **21.** This reflects a debate that has gone on long in the IWW, but some context is important here. Early on in the organization, “political” often meant something very specific (either attributed to bourgeois, electoral politics, or to a “political state”). The critique of the latter was often a response to an emerging current of Leninists and Stalinists soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917. A key example text on this is *Industrial Communism - the IWW* by Harold Lord Varney, which was most likely written in the 1920s or 30s. This understanding of “politics” was apparently understood by Wobblies, especially in the 1980s and

90s, as an outright rejection of all political ideas within the IWW. Instead, the IWW would limit its scope to “economism”, or activity only around bread and butter issues at the traditional workplace. Members could act on their political worldview outside of this context, whatever it may be. This distortion of IWW ideas ignored the political content of struggle at all levels (at the workplace and elsewhere), disregarded a tradition of political education within the IWW, and nonetheless did not stop the fact that almost all members throughout the period of its revitalization were recruited from within the Left. This contradiction is further spelled out by Nate Hawthorne in his essay *Mottos and Watchwords*.

- [22](#). Direct Unionism Section 5: “What is the industrial strategy?”
- [23](#). Ibid. Section 2. “So what is to be done?”
- [24](#). Interview with the Seattle Solidarity Network (SeaSol), 2010. <http://libcom.org/library/seasol-interview>
- [25](#). Father Hagerty, an early and influential IWW member, developed the Industrial Union (“IU”) “wheel”

for the IWW that endures still today. The only changes have been the addition of new IU's for different subsets of workers (e.g. IU 690 for sex workers). The industrial strategy from the time of Hagerty was an advanced response to the conditions of the time, when craft unionism as a form of workers' defense and struggle had mostly become obsolete - even reactionary. It was generally assumed that organizing along industrial lines brought with it a natural class consciousness among the workers. While the concept of industrial unionism created an effective opening to expand on concepts of class solidarity, this approach today can be awkward, and has not had the effect of building industrial unions as we have envisioned them up to now. We do not advocate throwing the IU baby out with the bathwater, but this is another area of critical self-evaluation that needs attention. In short, we should retain the tradition of strategic class-wide organizing that industrial unionism aimed for, while imagining a more effective approach for today. More on Hagerty's Wheel

here:<http://www.iww.org/en/about/official/wheel>.

- **26.** For insightful analysis and discussion on unwaged work and struggle see Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James, among others.

- **27.** During factory occupations initiated by the workers, the Communist Party-affiliated labor union CGT turned away enthusiastic agitators who came to initiate dialogue with the striking workers for whom it claimed to speak. Union officials feared that they could lose control over "their" strike if the workers insisted on changing the demands from the usual ones concerned with wages to ones which the union could not easily co-opt. Therefore, they kept the factory gates locked and insisted on mediating all contacts with the workers who were occupying the factory. More here: <http://libcom.org/book/export/html/1849>.
- **28.** This was observed frequently. On November 2nd 2011, the day of the general strike called for by Occupy Oakland, officers from several business unions rallied the crowd from the podium. The Teamsters drove an enormous truckbed advertisement to the head of the march to the port that afternoon. Reformist trade union slogans abounded throughout the height of Occupy (late summer 2011 to May Day 2012 in Oakland).
- **29.** James, Selma. (1983) "Marx and Feminism." In James, Selma. 2012. Sex, Race, and Class--The

Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952-2011. pp. 149-150. Oakland: PM Press.

- **30.**PDF available for download here: <http://libcom.org/library/singlejack-solidarity-stan-weir>
- **31.**An example of this during the years of the Agricultural Workers' Organization is the study document called *An Economic Interpretation of the Job*, crafted by Wobblies, which we use still today. *The One Big Union Monthly*, an IWW periodical, featured in-depth articles from the membership dealing with a variety of complex political questions. The book *Rebel Voices*, referenced elsewhere, also documents this culture of self-education.
- **32.**We should be clear what we mean here by “politics”: “the total complex of relations between people living in society” (thanks due to Merriam-Webster online dictionary). Understanding politics this way, every dyed-in-the-wool Wobbly deals with politics as a primary concern.
- **33.**See *The Rhetoric of Inclusion: The I.W.W. and Asian Workers*, an essay by Jennifer Jung Hee Choi, 1999.

- **34.** There were different approaches to anti-racism within the IWW of this period, but developments in the class struggle after World War I seemed to make them more mature. A key example of this is the IWW pamphlet *Justice for the Negro: How He Can Get It* of 1919, which can be found online here: <http://libcom.org/files/justice.pdf>.
- **35.** See *The Messenger*, July 1919, pg 8. See also, Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront*, University of Illinois Press 2007.
- **36.** "'Decomposition" is the process by which the working class is divided, atomized (fighting among itself) and exploited more intensively.' *Midnight Notes*, early 1990s.
- **37.** Mario Tronti in Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomous Marxism*. <http://libcom.org/library/class-composition>
- **38.** Historians almost unanimously conclude that the IWW's radicalism in this period caused it to fall short of the long term stability of membership and workplace representation that other unions attained. While the IWW did not establish the same kind of workplace

organs that the CIO or others did, its aims and methods were entirely different. As a fighting organ emanating from the class, its culture and methods were not codified in bargaining agreements (even where they existed) but instead thrived as a living tradition of struggle that workers used to flex their class power wherever they were employed. For more on maritime, see Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront*, University of Illinois Press 2007. For a glimpse of this tradition among agricultural workers, see Len De Caux, *Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to CIO*, Beacon Press 1970. Much more can also be gleaned from *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*, J. Kornblugh, PM Press 2011.

- **39.** A great online resource - empire-logistics.org - has supply chain analysis tools that can be helpful for Wobblies to determine longterm organizing strategies. Members of Insane Dialectical Posse, some of whom are Wobblies, have many materials on this as well. They can be contacted through their website: flyingpicket.org.
- **40.** Two key figures we could point to for more research on this (out of many many more) are Silvia Federici and FW Gayge Operaista. This statement also reflects our perspective fairly

well:http://www.angelfire.com/pr/red/feminism/womens_oppression.htm.