

Film Review

The Wobblies (1979): What the IWW means for the working class today

Tom Mackaman
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Directed by Deborah Shaffer and Stewart Bird. Narration by Roger Baldwin.

“This is the Continental Congress of the working class. We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism... What we want to establish at this time is a labor organization that will open wide its doors to every man that earns his livelihood either by his brain or his muscle.” William ‘Big Bill’ Haywood, Opening Remarks at the Founding Convention of the IWW, 1905.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in 1905 in Chicago with the aim of organizing all workers, no matter their skill, occupation, national origin, race, or sex, into “One Big Union.” Capitalism would be sunk when workers finally took into their own hands “the economic power, the means of life... the control of the machinery of production and distribution, without regard to capitalist masters,” as the union’s president, “Big Bill” Haywood, put it.

The IWW’s message of labor internationalism, class struggle, and uncompromising solidarity resonated in the most oppressed layers of the working class—those whom the American Federation of Labor (AFL) viewed to be the unorganizable “trash at labor’s door,” as one bureaucrat described industrial workers. With a few notable exceptions, the unions that comprised the AFL refused to have anything to do with these so-called unskilled workers— or black, immigrant and women workers.

The IWW identified and condemned both the AFL’s bigotry and its obsolete organization, heavily rooted in the declining craft trades. It focused on the great, unorganized mass of the working class, leading in the process some of the period’s most famous labor struggles—those of immigrant mill workers, many of them teenage girls, in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Paterson, New Jersey; of iron miners on Minnesota’s Mesabi Range and copper miners in Arizona and Montana; of harvest hands in the Dakotas and lumberjacks in the Pacific Northwest; and of longshoremen, black and white, in Philadelphia.

The IWW’s influence went far beyond its never-large membership rolls. It was enemy number one for America’s businessmen and politicians, and the bête noire of the AFL officialdom—bureaucrats whom the IWW scathingly derided as “the labor lieutenants of capital.” Its worker cadre drew the most selfless, dedicated, and physically courageous men and women—among them future leaders of American Marxism and Trotskyism, including James P. Cannon, Arne Swabeck, Vincent R. Dunne and Carl Skoglund. A very partial list of the noted figures of

American socialism who passed through its ranks, or were associated with it, would include the names of Haywood, Cannon, Vincent St. John, Eugene Debs, Mary “Mother” Jones, Lucy Parsons, Daniel De Leon, Carlo Tresca, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, John Reed, William Z. Foster, Ben Fletcher, Frank Little, and Joe Hill.

Today, with the American working class entering into its first major strike wave in decades, the re-release of the documentary *The Wobblies*, directed by Deborah Shaffer and Stewart Bird, is most timely. The film had its first run in 1979 and 1980, at what turned out to be the tail end of the last major American strike wave, which had raged throughout the 1970s— and which had sharply posed the need to break with the conservative trade union leadership that dominated the AFL-CIO.

The film seems to have then been largely forgotten. One suspects that the militant mood of the 1970s helped to inspire it, and that then, with the betrayal and defeat of strike after strike in the 1980s, *The Wobblies* faded into obscurity. But in 2021 it was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in recognition of its artistic and historical significance, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) recently completed a restoration. *The Wobblies’* marketing rights are owned by the independent film distributor Kino Lorber, which brought it out for a limited theatrical run this spring. It is hoped that the film will be released for streaming and made broadly available—Kino Lorber’s high paywall would certainly not have pleased the Wobblies!

The film’s most remarkable, and moving, aspect is that its dialogue is carried forward almost entirely by former rank-and-file members of the IWW. These workers were part of a generation, born in the 1890s and early 1900s, that came of age in an intense period of class struggle. Though they speak of events that are now, for us, over one century in the past, what they have to say seems so very contemporary, at a time when there is such a pressing need for the old class struggle traditions to be revived, traditions summed up in the Wobblies’ memorable slogans, “*An injury to one is an injury to all!*” and “*Labor knows no borders!*”

Those interviewed include silk mill workers Sophia Cohen, Irma Lombardi and Dominick Mignone; migratory workers Nels Peterson, Sam Krieger, Nicholas Steelink, Joe Murphy and Jack Miller; textile worker Angelo Rocco; lumberjacks Tom Scribner, Vaino Konga and Irv Hanson; miner’s wife Katie Pintek; and James Fair, an African American longshoreman. All are long-since deceased.

One is struck by their eloquence and conviction. Given their advanced age at the time of their interviews, it is remarkable how clearly the workers recall their struggles in the IWW— and how they all hold so firm to their class anger. Among the episodes they remember are the Lawrence strike of 1912, in which, famously, the IWW managed to fuse together twenty-some different nationalities; the Paterson strike of 1914; the Everett, Washington massacre of IWW members in 1916; and the Bisbee,

Arizona, deportation of 1,300 striking copper miners to the middle of the New Mexico desert in 1917.

The main narration is sparsely and unobtrusively provided by Roger Baldwin (1884-1981), founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, who was in his mid-90s at the time of filming, and who himself was a former Wobbly. Fred Thompson (1900-1987), the longtime editor of *The Industrial Worker* and a former migratory worker in Canada and the US, adds a bit of commentary. The noted folk singer Utah Phillips helps bring to life the Wobblies' famous "Little Red Songbook." A few actors, including the late Rip Torn, provide voiceovers.

The film also treats the repression of the IWW at the time of World War I. Unlike the AFL, the IWW refused to adopt any kind of "no strike pledge" for President Woodrow Wilson's bogus "war for democracy." In fact, the years 1917-1919 may be the high-water mark of IWW influence. The period's labor struggles, historian David Montgomery once noted, all seemed to have "breathed the spirit of One Big Union." Because of this, the IWW was subject to what may be the most ruthless state repression of a workers' organization in American history. Virtually the entire IWW leadership was rammed through show trials and imprisoned under the Espionage Act—the same anti-democratic legislation that now targets Julian Assange. IWW literature was banned or subject to censorship in the mails. Across the US, local police smashed IWW offices and printing presses.

The Wobblies brings to audiences stunning historical film, audio, and even animation—the last in the form of vicious anti-IWW propaganda cartoons. Indeed, the entire film is an assemblage of primary material—including the interviews, which provide direct testimony to the period. Unlike most historical documentaries, and somewhat refreshingly, there are no historians brought on to interpret the evidence for the audience. In this sense, the directors absent themselves from the film. They let the sources do the talking.

But of course, the directors are not really absent. They have made a selection about what to include and what to leave out. That which is most significantly missing is any attempt to answer the question: *Why was it that the IWW fell into obscurity after the First World War?* The directors were aware of this lacuna. In a 1980 interview, Byrd acknowledged that those interviewed had "a lot of difficulty talking about the decline of the IWW from making a revolution." To this fellow director Shaffer (*Witness to War*, 1984) added, "And our major purpose was not to find out why the IWW failed but to make its accomplishments known to a wider audience."

The most significant reason for the decline of the IWW was the Russian Revolution of 1917, which opened a new path forward for the class struggle in the US and all over the world. Most of the militant workers that gravitated to the IWW, even if not members, shifted their allegiance to those who said that they were the American proponents of Lenin and Trotsky. This was also true of many of the IWW leaders, including Haywood, who skipped bail at his trial, fled to Soviet Russia, and is buried in the Kremlin Wall.

Because of the important gap in its coverage, in the view of this reviewer *The Wobblies* should be taken together with Cannon's perceptive writings on the IWW, which are found in the volume *The First Ten Years of American Communism*. The film deserves the widest possible audience, especially among workers and youth. But the IWW experience should be worked through carefully. There are profoundly important lessons for today's workers in its rise and in its fall.

In 1905, as now, only a small share of the American workforce was nominally organized into the official trade unions, well under 10 percent. Then, as now, the official unions had shown themselves to be impotent in the face of a corporate drive against the working class, which had begun with the eruption of American imperialism after the Spanish American War of 1898. Indeed, if anything, today's so-called unions are more

nakedly the tools of the state and the corporations than the "business unions" that staggered along under the conservative leadership of Samuel Gompers. At least in Gompers' day the unions negotiated on behalf of workers, as opposed to today's unions, which are in the business of imposing pay cuts on behalf of the bosses in the name of "competitiveness," "balanced budgets" and other such corporatist claptrap.

To listen to today's pseudo-left commentators—many of whom just so happen to be directly or indirectly in the pay of the official unions!—one would think that no struggle against existing unions has ever taken place. They like to speak of the unions as "the basic defense units of the working class," as if this is some sort of permanent, immutable state of being. *The Wobblies* puts the lie to such claims.

The IWW did not set out to reform the AFL. It aimed to destroy it. Haywood and the rest knew that any development for the working class would have to take place outside of what the AFL liked to call its "jurisdiction," and, that within the AFL "jurisdiction," there would have to be an insurrection against it. In this sense, the IWW anticipated what would actually happen with the eruption of the great industrial struggles of the 1930s, and the formation of the CIO. The rotten old AFL unions had to be driven out of industries like auto and rubber, and, in some cases, literally hauled out of the plants. Workers need to know this history.

But there is a still more important lesson from the IWW experience. Militancy and solidarity, no matter how strong, are not enough. Today's workers require revolutionary theory and politics to prosecute their struggles. They require an understanding of the nature of the capitalist state and the roots of the various political tendencies in the social classes. The absence of such understanding proved to be the IWW's fatal weakness.

The comparison with Russian history is most illuminating. There was—and there remains—a startlingly fateful connection between the class struggles of America and Russia. As Cannon notes, when the IWW was founded in Chicago in 1905, a half a world away, in St. Petersburg, the Russian Revolution of 1905 was underway, which would lift Trotsky up as its foremost leader. The Wobblies in Chicago celebrated the events in Russia. Haywood said he looked forward to the day when the American workers "will rise in revolt against the capitalist system as the working class in Russia are doing today." But the Wobblies were not in a position to understand Trotsky's great theoretical development that came out of that revolution, the theory of the permanent revolution, nor Lenin's theoretical anticipation of it in his relentless struggle against opportunism, announced in his seminal *What is to be Done?* of 1902 and the split with the reformist Menshevik faction of the Russian social democracy in 1903.

In a certain sense, as Cannon notes, the IWW was the American corollary to the Russian developments. It is true that, in addition to recognizing the bankruptcy of the AFL, the IWW leaders condemned the opportunist parliamentary reformism of America's Socialist Party, dominated by the "sewer socialist" Victor Berger of Milwaukee and his ally Morris Hillquit of New York. History's paradox is that the class struggle's great theoretical developments were made in the most backward country, Russia, and, in the most advanced, the US, the political understanding was the most primitive from the point of view of Marxist theory.

The IWW leaders were practical men, schooled in the bloody fights of the hard rock miners of the West. They thought to meet force with force, and to simply cast off the "lily-livered reformists." Rather than agitating for the development of a genuinely revolutionary politics, the IWW rejected political struggle altogether, in favor of what they called "direct action." This could get the Wobblies only so far.

As Cannon explained, "The turning point came with the entrance of the United States into the First World War in the spring of 1917, and the Russian Revolution in the same year. Then 'politics,' which the IWW

had disavowed and cast out, came back and broke down the door.” He went on,

These two events—again coinciding in Russia and America, as in 1905—demonstrated that “political action” was not merely a matter of the ballot box, subordinate to the direct conflict of the unions and employers on the economic field, but the very essence of the class struggle. In opposing actions of two different classes the “political state,” which the IWW had thought to ignore, was revealed as the centralized power of the ruling class; and the holding of the state power showed in each case which class was really ruling.

From one side, this was shown when the Federal Government of the United States intervened directly to break up the concentration points of the IWW by wholesale arrests of its activists. The “political action” of the capitalist state broke the back of the IWW as a union. The IWW was compelled to transform its principal activities into those of a defense organization, striving by legal methods and propaganda, to protect the political and civil rights of its members against the depredations of the capitalist state power.

From the other side, the same determining role of political action was demonstrated positively by the Russian Revolution. The Russian workers took the state power into their own hands and used that power to expropriate the capitalists and suppress all attempts at counter-revolution. That, in fact, was the first stage of the Revolution, the pre-condition for all that was to follow. Moreover, the organizing and directing center of the victorious Revolution had turned out to be, not an all-inclusive union, but a party of selected revolutionists united by a program and bound by discipline.

None of these vital lessons invalidates studying and honoring the history and heroism of the IWW, which represents an irreplaceable stage in the development of the American and international working class.



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