

Book review

Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers

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Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers, by Ahmed White. University of California Press, 2022.

Ahmed White's *Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers* is a comprehensive account of the campaign waged by the American state to destroy the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or "Wobblies") in the decade surrounding the First World War.

The IWW was founded in 1905 in Chicago at a gathering its first president, William "Big Bill" Haywood, of the Western Federation of Miners, named "the Continental Congress of the Working Class." It called for the building of "One Big Union" that would encompass all workers in all industries, regardless of distinctions of skill, nationality, race, or sex. The working masses united, a great general strike would then do away with capitalist private property, liberate "the wage slaves," and usher in the commonwealth of labor. The Wobblies declared open war not only on capitalism, but on the conservative "labor lieutenants of capital" in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who had managed to organize less than 10 percent of the workforce by 1905 and whose member unions, as a rule, rejected industrial and unskilled workers, and often maintained racist and anti-immigrant exclusion clauses.

The IWW's revolutionary unionism won support from famous left-wing figures of the labor movement, among them Eugene Debs, Daniel De Leon, Lucy Parsons, and Mary "Mother" Jones. In the working class, it attracted miners, lumberjacks, longshoremen, and harvest hands across the American West, from California to Kansas and from the high plains and the Pacific Northwest down through the Rocky Mountains and all the way to the Mexican border. It was in this vast region that the image of the freewheeling, hobo Wobbly radical emerged, along with its movement culture surrounding the martyred balladeer Joe Hill, *The Little Red Song Book* and black cat symbology.

Further east, in the powerful citadels of American capitalism, the IWW led dramatic strikes of the supposedly unorganizable "new immigrants" from eastern and southern Europe, including among the steelworkers in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania; rubber workers in Akron, Ohio; textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts; iron miners on the Mesabi Range of Minnesota; and silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey. The IWW even had a degree of international influence, nurturing the development of the parallel One Big Union organization in Canada, and, carried by sailors across the Pacific, to the formation of another IWW in Australia.

The IWW's importance went far beyond its nominal size, which, with membership rolls in constant flux, was never more than a fraction of that of the AFL. Its uncompromising view of the class struggle helped ready a share of its cadre for the teachings of Lenin and Trotsky. In this regard, it is notable that some of the leading figures of American Trotskyism passed through its ranks, including James P. Cannon, Vincent Dunne, Arne

Swabeck and Carl Skoglund. And the IWW did much to popularize the idea of industrial unionism, by which workers in a given industry were organized into a single union, regardless of trade, helping to prepare the way for the great upsurge of industrial workers in the 1930s.

The Wobblies also had an impact on American literature, an interesting thread of White's narrative. The IWW was much inspired by the author Jack London, and London was, in turn, supportive of the IWW up until his death in 1916. Indeed, London probably exercised more influence on the IWW than did French anarcho-syndicalism, as is often supposed (the word *sabotage* comes from French syndicalism, its origin evidently the kicking of wooden *sabot* shoes into factory machinery). The Wobblies were all well-read in London's work, especially his *The Iron Heel* (1908), from which White takes his title, and which foretold of a ruthless dictatorship of capitalism, a dystopia predictive of fascism 15 years prior to its actual birth in Italy. The novel was cited again and again by the IWW as its cadre were smashed up by the American state. White notes that the IWW also influenced *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair (1926), *1919* by John Dos Passos (1932), and *From Here to Eternity* (1951) by James Jones.

But perhaps the greatest testament to the IWW's influence was provided by the extraordinary lengths the American ruling class went to destroy it. This, White's main subject, makes for harrowing reading.

The state's war against the IWW was waged through the enactment, by 22 states and territories, of criminal syndicalism laws. Under these, some 2,000 Wobblies were jailed, according to White's estimate. Scores more were persecuted under the federal Espionage Act of 1917, including at major show trials in Chicago, Kansas City and Sacramento that were used to arrest the entire IWW leadership and to destroy its offices and printing presses. On top of this, untold thousands of Wobblies were jailed through the cynical use of vagrancy laws, which trace back to the dispossession of the peasantry in early capitalist England and which, strengthened after the American Civil War, upheld the belief that "workers' freedom consisted of an obligation to care for themselves and a duty to accept employment at prevailing conditions and wages." (52)

Wobblies languished in federal and state prisons throughout the 1920s. Some never made it out alive. As White shows, jailed Wobblies were singled out for particularly brutal treatment, including extreme solitary confinement, refusal of medical treatment and other forms of torture.

On top of this, government authorities and business interests effectively deputized right-wing organizations, heavily comprised of middle-class layers, including the American Protective League, the American Legion, the Ku Klux Klan and numerous smaller "100% American" groups that resembled the fascist gangs simultaneously emerging in Europe. With lawmen turning a blind eye, and more often acting in support, White explains, "Wobblies were beaten, run through gauntlets, tarred and feathered, chased out of town or across state lines, or simply murdered by

businessmen and professionals, self-described patriots, local toughs, college students, soldiers, and police.” (3).

Among the most notorious of such incidents were the deportation in train cattle cars of hundreds of striking copper miners from Bisbee, Arizona, to the New Mexico desert in 1917, and the lynching less than one month later of Wobbly leader Frank Little in Butte, Montana, at the behest of the Anaconda Copper Company. But, as White’s book shows, the list of violent acts against the IWW is much longer than those notorious incidents. White cites one episode in 1923 in which

a mob of about 150 police, Klansmen, AFL unionists and other “citizens” ... raided the IWW hall in San Pedro [which was] packed with 300 people there for an entertainment fundraiser to benefit families of men who had been killed on the railroad. ... [A]rmed with firearms, clubs, and axes, the raiders smashed into the place, burned up furniture and documents, and assaulted the union people. They severely scalded seven children, ages four to thirteen, by dipping them into an urn filled with hot coffee and burned another child with hot grease. The raiders also beat these children, along with women and other children. (188)

It was not just the IWW that was persecuted. Left-wing socialists were also targeted, including Debs, who was jailed by the liberal Democratic president Woodrow Wilson for his “Canton Speech” opposing US entry into WWI. The wartime persecution of the IWW then transitioned seamlessly into the postwar Red Scare and the Palmer Raids. But, as White makes clear, it was the IWW that was Public Enemy Number One at the beginning of the period.

A significant strength of this book is White’s analysis of the legal and constitutional issues behind the criminal syndicalism laws and the Espionage Act. The former made criminally liable any member of an organization that advocated sabotage, a vague concept that was often interpreted by courts to include labor strikes. At trials held under the syndicalism laws, it was enough for prosecutors merely to present IWW literature to establish the “guilt” of defendants. Guilty verdicts were punishable by 1-14 years in state prisons.

The Espionage Act, to a certain extent, amounted to a federal implementation of the state syndicalism laws, but substituting “interfering with the war effort” for the concept of industrial sabotage. As White explains, the act criminalized

Interference with military and defense operations ... authorized postmasters to bar objectionable materials from the mail [and] empowered the government to criminalize nearly any kind of political activism or dissent, provided that such action was deemed inimical to the war effort. (81)

In courts, the state syndicalism laws and the Espionage Act resulted in conspiracy cases. These, White explains, made it

a crime for defendants to agree among themselves to pursue a criminal purpose. Beyond demonstrating such agreement, which can be tacit in nature and proved by circumstantial evidence, prosecutors are not required to prove that any particular defendants actually did anything. For while conviction also required that an “overt act” have been committed in furtherance of the conspiracy’s purpose, that act need only have been committed by

one of the defendants and, furthermore, need not itself constitute a crime or even something essential to the completion of the conspiracy. Indeed, the overt acts identified in the indictment consisted of correspondence or written documents. ... [Prosecutors] were in a position to convict the defendants almost entirely by convincing the jury they shared an intention to interfere with the war effort, and they could accomplish this, like their counterparts in the state criminal syndicalism cases, by putting the IWW itself on trial. (118–119)

It did not matter to prosecutors, judges or juries that most IWW members had joined the organization *before* the criminal syndicalism and Espionage Act laws were in place. Furthermore, in establishing criminal intent, prosecutors heavily relied on paid testimony, including the repeated use of two professional informants, IWW turncoats Elbert Coutts and John Dymond, derisively styled “the Gold Dust Twins” by the Wobblies.

The criminalization of the IWW reached extreme levels. Members could be arrested simply for carrying the IWW card, which authorities took to be evidence of criminal intent. In some court cases, as White shows, witnesses for the defense could be arrested for criminal syndicalism immediately *after stepping down from the witness stand*. Defense attorneys for the IWW could themselves be arrested. So could anyone who dared to come forward in public defense. In 1923, Upton Sinclair was jailed for attempting to read the Bill of Rights at a public gathering in San Pedro in defense of striking IWW longshoreman. He made it “midway through ... the First Amendment” when he was booked. (183).

The attack on democratic rights in World War I, in essence an attack on the rights of the working class, was corollary to the eruption of American imperialism in 1917, an event that was quickly followed by the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution. Ever since, imperialist war abroad and the evisceration of democracy at home have been two sides of the same coin. It is notable in this regard that the Smith Act, passed in 1940 as the US prepared to enter World War II, was “premised on, and understood as a federal version of the state criminal syndicalism laws.” (228) The Smith Act was used to prosecute the leadership of the Trotskyist movement—with the support of the Stalinist Communist Party, which soon enough itself ran afoul of the law. As for the infamous Espionage Act, it now provides the basis for the Biden administration’s persecution of Julian Assange, whose brutal imprisonment in Britain’s Belmarsh Prison so resembles the treatment meted out to the class war prisoners of a century ago.

Biden’s vindictive effort to destroy Assange stands in this ignoble tradition of 20th century American liberalism. White includes a sharp, two-page summary of the class nature of the fabled Progressive movement. In words that would serve well as a summary of the contemporary pseudo-left’s attitude toward the working class, White writes that “most Progressives were eager to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate unions ... between those that were tolerably moderate and responsible in their methods and aims and those that were intolerably militant or radical.” The former, which accepted capitalism, could be supported. The latter, such as the IWW, were “to be held in check.” (24-25) White sharply analyzes the gutting of political freedom by the liberal Supreme Court justices Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis through the “clear and present danger” doctrine, by which speech can be criminalized if it (supposedly) poses a real and imminent threat. For judges all the way up to Holmes and Brandeis, the doctrine provided the rationale for jailing opponents of American entry into World War I.

Ahmed White has emerged as one of the more interesting labor historians working today— though by training and profession he is not a historian, but a lawyer and a faculty member of the University of Colorado School of Law. He is the author of a valuable study of the Little

Steel Strike of 1937, during which Franklin Roosevelt and New Deal Democrats turned a blind eye to the bloody suppression of the struggle to complete the organization of the steel industry. White's writing is characterized by its honesty and directness, and, notably, by the absence of trendy postmodernist gibberish and the racial and gender "categories" that confuse the heads, and clutter the volumes, of so many historians at present.

A clear-eyed view of the repressive power of the American state is certainly in order. However, White draws pessimistic conclusions from his analysis. He warns readers that his study will "disappoint those leftists and unionists who have found in the Wobblies' experience a hopeful augury." Instead, to White, the destruction of the IWW was the beginning of a long, dark night that aligns "with the dismal fate of the labor movement and the radical left since the IWW's decline." (10). White's writing evinces genuine sympathy for its worker subjects, and is occasionally even moving—it is indeed stunning how courageous and principled so many Wobblies were in the face of ruthless, violent repression—but one senses that White views the IWW as the largely helpless victims of a much greater force, the American state. Yet, even in the period of the IWW's destruction, the working class made enormous strides. The years 1916 to 1922 marked off the greatest strike wave in US history, which, though the struggles were usually defeated, forced concessions from capitalists and the growth of class consciousness among workers. But the greatest victory of all took place in the Russian Empire in 1917, with the working class revolution that first swept aside the tsar and then the Russian bourgeoisie—an event that, in presenting an actual revolutionary alternative to capitalism, played at least as crucial a role as state repression in the demise of the IWW.

As White's focus is state repression of the IWW, he can be forgiven his shorter consideration of other aspects of the organization's decline, themes he takes up only late in the book. For a fuller understanding of this, the most crucial writing remains Cannon's essay on the IWW in *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, a source that White only partially engages.

Cannon, himself a former Wobbly, did not deny that state repression contributed to the destruction of the IWW. He also pointed to the political immaturity of the leaders of the young American communist movement, who failed to win over much of the IWW cadre in spite of prodding from leaders of the Russian Revolution, including Trotsky, who recognized in such worker militants genuine revolutionists who had to be won to the banner of the new Communist International.

But there was another side to the story, bound up with problems of the development of political consciousness in the American working class. The homeland of the assembly line, scientific management, and the world's most massive industries, the US had emerged as the most advanced capitalist country by 1905, the year of the founding of the IWW. Yet, in paradoxical fashion, in America the theoretical understanding of the class struggle lagged far behind backward Russia. There, in the same year, 1905, the first Russian Revolution took place, an event bookended on one side by Lenin's development of the theory of the revolutionary party, and on the other by Trotsky's elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution.

The class struggle in the American West, the cradle of the IWW, produced practical, not theoretical, revolutionists. The methods that the IWW used—including, to a degree, sabotage—developed out of a context where the state and its power appeared remote. To the IWW, the showdown was directly between worker and capitalist. And while the IWW cadre sniffed out the fake "sewer socialism" of figures like Milwaukee's Victor Berger and New York's Morris Hillquit, the resulting tendency was to reject politics entirely in favor of "direct action." This program, such as it was, melted down in the crucible of war and revolution.

Here, it is worth quoting Cannon at length:

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. 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...

The time had come for the IWW to remember Haywood's prophetic injunction at the Founding Convention in 1905: that the American workers should look to Russia and follow the Russian example.

These lessons are important for American workers today, who, for the first time in generations, are just beginning to feel their own immense industrial power. In the stormy seas of the crisis of capitalism they will turn to history and rediscover their own militant traditions, including the heroic experience of the IWW—traditions stolen from them by decades of betrayals at the hands of the badly misnamed "American labor movement."

But, as the experience of the IWW also shows, militancy and solidarity, no matter how strong, must be joined to a scientific program that sizes up all the political tendencies controlled by the capitalists, as well as those in the orbit of the upper middle class. Workers must be wise to the dangers posed by the state, a lesson so ably demonstrated in Ahmed White's book. The government is not an abstract or neutral entity, but the mechanism by which one class dominates another, a fact demonstrated in the year 1917 by the crushing of the IWW in the negative, and by the Bolshevik seizure of power in the positive. American workers, as Cannon put it, must turn to 1917 again, "look to Russia, and follow the Russian example."



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