

“They had an outsized influence because they had an outsized ambition”

Interview with author Ahmed White on the historical significance of the Industrial Workers of the World

Tom Mackaman
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Ahmed White is professor of law at the University of Colorado. He is the author of a recent book on the repression of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Under the Iron Heel The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers.

The 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.

Tom Mackaman: I want to start with the typical interview first question: How is it that you came to the subject of the IWW? And relatedly, how is it that a law professor becomes a labor historian? I’m thinking here, as well, of your previous book, another fine effort, *The Last Great Strike*.

Ahmed White: I started on this project 20 or so years ago—at least that’s when I did my first bit of work on it. At the time I didn’t know very much about doing historical research or even very much about the IWW, but I got interested in the plight of migratory harvest workers, featured in the book, and kind of worked my way towards doing some archival research on them. I then published a couple law review articles on the subject, put it aside for a great number of years, and only came back to the topic when, in the wake of publishing *The Last Great Strike*, I tried to figure out something else I wanted to do.

I ended up initially trying to write a book about criminal syndicalism, but in short order I figured out that neither I nor the typical reader was as much interested in a history of laws as they might be interested in a history of people. It evolved into a broader project about sedition-type laws and persecution under them in the postwar period. And then from that, into the project on the IWW.

How did I end up doing labor history? I think the book on the IWW reflects some of the underlying reasons. I started out as a law professor with a sort of leftist orientation, but still in some small but notable way, kind of imprisoned by conventional liberal assumptions about law and about the legal system, and about all of society. Those assumptions rested uncomfortably with me all of my career. And it didn’t take very long, actually, before I began to migrate away from that. And that involved, first, putting aside, for the most part, the work I had been doing on criminal laws, criminal justice policies, and turning more to labor.

TM: Yet I found the discussion of the criminal syndicalism laws in your

book fascinating. And I want to come back to that in a bit. But first let me ask you more about the subject. I recall hearing a historian once state that there is, if anything, too much attention given to the IWW, because it never had more than a fraction of the membership of the AFL. And as a matter of fact, I’ve heard similar arguments made about the CIO in the 1930s in relation to the AFL—that it should be viewed as less important because it remained smaller. I think this reflects a very mechanical way of thinking about history. But putting that aside, I guess I’m inviting you to make a case for the importance of a study on the IWW, such as the one you’ve done.

AW: That’s a really interesting and important question because you not only have those impulses that kind of diminish the significance of the IWW. You also have people for whom the IWW is important primarily because it played an important role in the progression of American civil liberties. I think to figure out where one stands on the subject, one has to navigate both of those concerns. I think the importance of the IWW lies with the way its influence extended beyond mere dues paying membership. So, there’s a point that I make in the book, and that others have made, about the large number of people who passed through the IWW. And though the membership was a fraction of the people who were in the AFL, nonetheless, it’s not an insignificant number.

On top of that, at the conclusion of the book, I invoke the novelist James Jones’s ruminations, which I think are extremely interesting, about the IWW. He has one of his characters describe the IWW as having a vision we don’t possess. Well, I think that’s another factor that goes to the significance of the IWW, that they had an outsized influence because they had an outsized ambition compared to the AFL and just about every other institution in American life. And I think that that very understandably, and quite rightly, made them much more important than their mere membership numbers.

And that was, of course, reflected in what happened to them. A measure of the union’s relative importance is just how much it endured in the way of oppression.

TM: That’s an important point. I think it suggests something that resonates powerfully today: The explosiveness, just of the idea, of a labor movement that declares as a principle that it’s going to organize the whole working class, that it’s going to have an uncompromising attitude toward capitalism. And as you show, it’s that program that so terrified the American ruling class, first in the West, and then at the state government level, and then finally at the level of the federal government.

So, let's turn to the laws. One of the most fascinating aspects of your book is its analysis of these criminal syndicalism laws and the related Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 in 1918. Can you try to summarize these laws—say something about their significance?

AW: The laws were often different in their text. But they were very similar in their ultimate practical effect, which was to make membership in the IWW a felony. They all did this a little bit differently. The Espionage Act, which, as you know, was amended by the Sedition Act, made it a crime to oppose the war. It was enforced against the IWW by means of conspiracy doctrine, which abetted this project of criminalizing IWW membership. The nature of conspiracy law is such that you don't have to prove that the person charged with conspiracy really did anything, only that he or she agreed with someone else to accomplish this criminal purpose—in this case, to undermine the war effort.

When it came down to it, in these trials of IWW members, this meant nothing more really than proving these people were members of the union. And putting on a bunch of evidence to suggest the union was a seditious organization. That was enough. And it didn't matter that the evidence was, as I and other people have noted, already dubious to start with. Nothing in particular had to be proven about any of these individuals to bring about this result.

The criminal syndicalism laws were even more artfully designed to accomplish that purpose. They made it a crime principally to advocate for what was called industrial or political change by means of violent sabotage, and other criminal acts. But they also made it very explicitly a crime to be a member of an organization that was committed to that kind of change. And so, on their very face, they made it possible to prosecute people simply because they were in the IWW. That's how they worked.

And they worked very well, not least because these Wobblies were not inclined to deny membership. It was pretty uncommon for them, when brought to trial or arrested, to say, "I'm not a member of the union." They were quite courageous. They made a cult of courage, and their martyrdom. And so, once they admitted membership or refused to deny it, it was a very simple thing to convict them. This was done often by means of professional witnesses, or testimony from IWW snitches, who were put on the witness stand to make extravagant accusations. Occasionally a local police officer or someone like that would testify. But mainly it was just the fact that these people would not deny membership that was good enough to convict.

TM: And the Espionage Act is something that the federal government dusts off from time to time. Presently with Julian Assange.

AW: That's right. It's been amended over the years, but it's still used. With Assange, it just proves the political purposes for which it can be used, beyond supposedly stamping out spying. I think what the Assange case shows is the continuity in the federal government's role, its willingness to use its prosecutorial authority to repress voices and movements that it opposes.

What's interesting about what happened to the IWW was that it was central to the construction of this facility within the federal government, which was very poorly developed until the First World War. Before the persecution of the IWW, and the first Red Scare, there was actually very little facility on the part of the federal government to do what it does very easily today. And I think a lot of that is to be owed, or is to be in some perverse way, credited to what happened to the IWW.

TM: Along the same lines of past and present, one of the things that struck me about your book is its really sharp analysis of liberalism, a thread you weave throughout. And you have a couple very incisive pages, early on, where you describe the transformation from a 19th century classical liberalism to this Progressive Era statism. Could you summarize the role of liberalism in the persecution of the IWW? And following from that, what do you make of the state of American liberalism at present?

AW: What was striking to me in researching and writing this book was

the contradictory role of liberals or progressives. Some of them supported the union. But many of them aligned in the effort to destroy it. And I think what these people brought to bear, which is so interesting, is a kind of characteristic belief that a society needs to be managed. I mean, these were all capitalists fundamentally, and they believed that capitalism created problems, contradictions, difficulties that needed to be addressed. What distinguished them was the serious and organized and legally oriented way they thought that should be done. That was true of their approach to things like child labor or food safety and all sorts of things. It was also true of their approach to radicalism.

And so, once these progressives and liberals decided that the IWW was an intolerable threat that was antithetical to their ambitions, their beliefs, then they spearheaded the attempt to destroy it by exactly those organized and legally oriented means. That's what they brought to bear. They were not above participating in acts of extralegal violence or vigilantism, but their main purpose was to do this in an organized and lawful way. And they did. And that was reflected in their role, the often leading role, they played in the enactment and enforcement of the Espionage Act, the enactment and enforcement of the criminal syndicalism of laws.

Now, I think we still see that today there is in liberalism a fist in the velvet glove, that's often very quickly deployed. We can see that in the treatment of people like Assange. It's not a universal thing. There are today, as there were 100 years ago, liberals who are concerned about civil liberties and about democratic rights. But there are plenty who are quick to deploy the state in very, very aggressive and coercive ways to accomplish their purposes. I think that's one of the legacies of what happened to the IWW, the broader legacies of progressivism, and frankly, one of the legacies of the New Deal.

TM: Speaking of the New Deal and following forward in history the other legal strand—these criminal syndicalism laws—you make the interesting point that the Smith Act was basically a federal version of the state syndicalism laws. What about the present? Are these laws still on the books? Or did *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, which you discuss in your conclusion, undo them?

AW: *Brandenburg v. Ohio* was decided in 1969. It is, to my mind, a rare case deserving the inscription "landmark decision." Before *Brandenburg*, these criminal syndicalism laws had been enforced—not just the criminal syndicalism laws, but also the Espionage Act and the Smith Act—had been enforced for decades. What *Brandenburg* did in a case involving criminal syndicalism—although the case itself involved some hapless and really pathetic Ku Klux Klan member in Ohio—was find these laws could not be constitutionally enforced when they criminalized mere advocacy or membership in a group, or actions that were too far removed from the dangers that they incited, or that the authorities said they were about to incite. And so, what appeared to be on some level a kind of technical or even marginal distinction actually had an enormous effect.

And that is why today you find people across the political spectrum who are displeased with *Brandenburg* and would like nothing better than for the Supreme Court to abandon their precedent and open the door to the more aggressive prosecution of all kinds of people for what they say, or what group they belong to. And not just people like these folks who barged their way into the Capitol a couple of years ago, the insurrection, but also people on the left who stand to be prosecuted in the way they were for the 50 years between the enactment of the Espionage Act and the *Brandenburg* decision.

TM: Indeed. And one of the reasons I ask is because I think there are signs of stirring in the American working class again. There is, I would say, a growing sense of militancy, sort of a sense among workers that things can't go on as they have been. Speaking of that, I'm curious to know if you've followed Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president, and also the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, and its fight against the Biden administration's injunction against workers' right to

strike?

AW: I do. And the WWS is one of my major sources of information about these struggles. You're right, we live in an interesting and uncertain time. There is a disquiet on the part of the working class. And we saw that, certainly, with the preempted rail strike. And what it generated in its way was this tension and cleavage between people on the left and people in organized labor and the Democratic Party establishment.

They avoided the strike. But it raises the question, which is I think where you might have been going with this, of what will happen if this evolves into a major working class upsurge of the sort that we've seen many times in this country's history? And would it involve some of the things that happened to the IWW? I think it's well within the realm of possibility to imagine the widespread use of sedition type laws against people on the left and labor people if there were such an uprising. But presently the ability to prosecute is constrained by *Brandenburg*. And that may not be true in five years' time, or three years' time.

I think that raises a point about the book in another way. One of its themes, and something I think is an inescapable aspect of the history of the IWW and its repression, is the way that law and legal principles yield so quickly to political realities and class politics. And that should, in itself, provide the cautionary point in thinking about where labor and where the left is today, and where it might be in the years to come.

TM: Another element of the history that comes across, and that is not commonly known, is the sort of vigilantism that took place in this period. I think you're correct in identifying in the book that the lawmen were very frequently complicit in these acts, often involving middle-class layers. And we have these successive waves of vigilante organizations, the American Protective League, the American Legion, and then the Ku Klux Klan and all sorts of other names that nobody would recognize. What's the relationship between this and the overall repression of the Wobblies?

AW: I think one thing that can be said about the vigilantism that the union faced is that it was very frequently a means of augmenting the more lawful forms of repression that the union faced. In other words, the people who did this viewed it as an almost entirely legitimate way of dealing with the threat that they imagined the IWW posed to them.

And that was evident in what they did, the way they justified it once it was done, and in the way they often turned the victims of this behavior into the perpetrators. They made IWW members responsible for their own persecution. This was acutely evident in the wake of the lynching of Frank Little in Montana in the summer of 1917, with several different people basically saying, "Well, if there had been adequate legal repression here in Butte of the IWW, Frank Little would still be alive today. It wouldn't have been necessary to lynch him."

TM: It is the Iron Heel, as Jack London foresaw.

AW: Like a lot of people on the left, I read Jack London when I was a kid. And I found this project as an opportunity to go back to Jack London. What was just so wonderful about Jack London, and so resonant to me, is that in his political writings the one great virtue is it's just all clear. London is up from the bottom. He is not a sentimentalist. And he was willing to see the world for what it was. And it's frightening but it's also refreshing.

TM: I think these are important lessons and well worth pondering. Do you think that there are other critical lessons to draw from the experience of the IWW?

AW: A point I try to make in the book is about the tremendous and often forgotten human cost of repression. I think there has been a tendency, not a malicious one, but a tendency nonetheless, even for the best of chroniclers of anti-leftist repression, to give short shrift to what that really means to people who were subjected to it.

And one of the things that struck me since I began studying the IWW years ago, in all the work I've done on repression, is how devastating this can be to a lot of these people. People who were made of iron. But that

doesn't mean they didn't suffer. They suffered enormously. And I think that's something to remember not just for some sentimental reasons, but for very bright, practical political people to understand what awaits them if indeed we have a massive upsurge in radicalism or activism. People will suffer, as they have in the past. And they will suffer enormously. I think that's something worth remembering. Not to deter people, but for quite the opposite reason—to prepare people for what's to come. That's something that I think is important about the story.

There's also a story here, and I don't weigh in on it so much as just raise it in the book, and that has to do with the relative merits of the IWW program, its agenda, its ideology. Its syndicalism comported well with its skepticism about the power of the state, something that was confirmed tragically with what happened to the organization.

TM: In this vein, you mention James P. Cannon's essay on the IWW. As you know, he had been a Wobbly. But I would describe him as a revolutionary optimist in his view of the IWW. I would say that, while recognizing the tragedy of the experience, he took positive lessons out of it—as a sort of a process in the development of consciousness within the American working class.

AW: I agree. It's yet another part of this story that I think is significant. And there is a lesson in the IWW's success, even if membership numbers were never enormous. They offer, I think, to anyone reviewing their history, some indelible lessons about how to go about organizing people, about the importance of organizing people from the ground up.

The repression against the IWW only really escalated when the union started to make some significant headway. And it made significant headway when it adopted the so-called job delegate system of organizing, which I think in many ways is a quite useful example of thinking about how to organize. It was, in its conception, an anti-bureaucratic and only somewhat professionalized idea of organizing. And most importantly, it put organizers shoulder to shoulder with the people they were organizing, at a time when already there were tendencies in American labor towards greater and greater professionalization and bureaucratization. Similarly, the way workers comprised the leadership of the organization to a much greater extent than many other labor organizations or leftist movements. There's a lesson to be learned from the IWW.

TM: Your primary focus is on the West, but it has struck me that there was a real attraction to the IWW program in the immigrant working class of the industrial East, broadly defined. We saw it in the Lawrence textile strike of 1912 and the Paterson silk strike of 1913, but it cropped up again and again. And, here again, Cannon writes so well on this, this problem the IWW faced was that they could come in, they could provide leadership, but it wasn't really a union. And so, it would dissipate. But in all of these immigrant groups, it seems that there were very commonly IWW-oriented newspapers in the foreign language. It's a very significant and fascinating chapter of American history.

It's one of several ways that I think your book really provokes curiosity. To cite one example that you mention, this Bulgarian immigrant, George Andreytchine. First, he's in Bulgaria and he's in prison camps in the Balkans. And then he comes to America, joins the IWW, and he's jailed here. Then he winds up in the Soviet Union. And ultimately, after this long and fascinating career, he's accused of being a Trotskyist and executed in the Soviet Union. Somebody who's certainly worthy of a biography. He's just one example, but your book is full of such fascinating figures.

This question, I think, flows from a discussion of what the IWW did among such workers. One of its strengths was its really uncompromising attitude toward the existing union, the AFL. The Wobblies recognized they were going to have to either go around it, organizing workers the AFL disregarded or banned, or else run right through it, in industries where there were these shell AFL unions.

I guess the question following from that historical observation is, and

again to bring us to the present: What similarities do you see between the situation confronting the IWW and what was a very polyglot American working class 110 years ago, and the situation at present?

AW: Politically, obviously the field is very different. But once again we have—what’s the word used now?—a multicultural labor force, a working class that is composed of a percentage of immigrant workers similar to what it was 100 years ago. And in that context, I think, a growing sense of crisis, a sense that things can’t go on like this. And that does raise some questions about the viability of the kind of organizing the IWW engaged in 100 years ago, and the viability, or maybe the lack of viability, of the current trade union establishment. I have some very negative words at the end of the book along those lines and I stick by those.

There is clearly a lot of unrest among American workers today. But I am far from convinced that the existing union structure is, even by its own standards, ready to take any real advantage of it. Because I think its methods and its means, maybe not unlike 100 years ago, are equally unsuited to what the situation is. And equally likely to be squandered, maybe even in a worse way than all the official unions’ programs founded in the 1920s and the early 1930s.

TM: It’s easy to look back and identify the problems of the old AFL. It’s enough to note its hostility to industrial workers, which obviously overlapped with its hostility to immigrants and blacks and women. And it was “business unionism,” as the Wobblies liked to say, or “the labor lieutenants of capital” running these organizations.

But on the other hand, the AFL unions were in the business of, as I think Gompers put it, “more”—negotiating wage increases for the often skilled workers that they represented. Of course, one of the similarities that we have today is that there is a similar share of the private-sector workforce that’s organized. But, as opposed to then, now it’s really been a half-century of the unions negotiating wage cuts. I mean, this dates back to the 1980s.

AW: I agree with that, and I would add again that the unions are lacking this vision that the IWW had, and that was very effective to cultivate and propagate among American working folks—to fight for something fundamentally better. Whether we agree that its methods were well-suited to achieve that or not, I think that’s something that is sorely lacking in the labor movement. And for which there is, I think, a tremendous appetite among American workers. The status quo is, to a lot of people, workers and others, an insufferable one.

TM: As I note in the review, one of the things that’s refreshing about your writing is the absence of academic jargon, postmodernism and so on. It’s free of the projection of present concepts of identity onto the past. So, you’re swimming against the current. I think it’s very serious history writing that you’re doing. But it’s not a very friendly climate at present for such writing.

AW: I made a conscious decision to tell the story as it deserved to be told. And that is a story in which the principles and dynamics here are fundamentally about class, and not about race and not about gender. Now, I don’t deny that these are things that define society, or certainly define American society. But they were not central to this story. If they were, I would have incorporated them to a greater degree than I have. I think some people have done some wonderful work, for instance, about the occasions in which the story of the IWW intersected with questions of race, such as Peter Cole’s book on blacks in the IWW. And some interesting work, some quite good work, has been done about women in the IWW, studies by Laura Vapnek, Heather Mayer and Jane Little Botkin, for instance. But as I note in the book, when you write a book about repression and the IWW, it’s primarily a book about what happened to men, and primarily a book about, frankly, what happened to white men. And that’s the way I tell it.

Maybe I approach things the way I do in part because of my own background. I’m black and was born and raised in the rural south in the

1970s and 1980s. My father was a civil rights lawyer who grew up on a cotton and potato farm, and was himself a farmer, as well as a political activist. He was a real civil rights lawyer, not the kind that makes boatloads of money, but the kind that suffers politically and struggles professionally and financially because of the kind of work he’s doing. He also did some work for labor as well. Growing up, I saw white supremacy in its dying days—something quite overwhelming, not the vestiges of it, however problematic they may be. And I learned to take things like racism and sexism seriously enough to insist that people see them for what they are and not for what fits their political or scholarly agenda, or the fashion of the day.

You were very generous in describing how straightforward, and, maybe, accessible, the book is. That was certainly an intention of mine as well. This is a story that deserves to be read by people who aren’t academics and aren’t preoccupied with the kinds of postmodern tropes and concepts and notions that you mentioned, people for whom those things have very little meaning anyway. And so, I consciously wrote the book in that way.

TM: Did you follow our critique of the 1619 project?

AW: Yes. I certainly did. It was quite effective and deservedly well-followed. I much appreciated the work you all did on that for a lot of reasons, but in part because of what I just mentioned about my own past and my own kind of consciousness of race in America, in the American South. This is going kind of far afield, but nothing irks me more than the reduction of the American Revolution and the Second American Revolution, as you rightly described the Civil War, to some kind of cynical conspiracies. It’s unfortunate to see these great revolutions diminished.

TM: We’re nearing an end. And so, I should now ask you the classic last interview question: What are you working on? What’s coming next?

AW: I am working on a project that was once part of what became the IWW book, and that is a book about sedition, repression and communist unionism in the 1920s and 1930s, that speaks to some of the same things as the IWW book, including the role of the state and the position of progressives and liberals when it comes to labor activism and labor radicalism. And, in that period, what proved to be the last gasp of independent labor radicalism in the United States on a large scale.

TM: We’ll look forward to that. Thank you again for speaking with us.



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