the IWW

REVOLUTIONARY UNION OR HISTORICAL ANACHRONISM

We are publishing this reply to the pro-I.W.W. article that ran in our April issue because we feel that "Emancipation" is a forum for anarchist ideas. We appreciate all submissions (typed double-spaced please) and, depending on the availability of space and the amount of discussion on a particular topic, try to open our pages to all our readers who have something to say.

Jeff Stein's article in the April 15th issue of 'Emancipation' brings us back to an old question, that of anarchist participation in the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). It's an important question. Most revolutionary anarchists and libertarian communists believe that the basis of any social revolution will be a revolt in the workplace, in other words, the overthrow of the state and the expropriation of capitalism at the point of production and distribution, the replacement of capitalism with free communism. The question of whether anarchists should participate in the activities of the I.W.W. was one of the disagreements that led to the disbanding of the Anarchist-Communist Federation a few years back. Although I was never a member of the A.C.F., I did join the I.W.W. in 1981. To my knowledge I am still considered a member, although I haven't paid dues in over a year and a half they still send me copies of the bulletin of the I.W.W. General Executive Board. In the following article I will try to explain why I think the I.W.W. is not the place for class-conscious anarchists.

Why Anarchists should abandon the I.W.W.

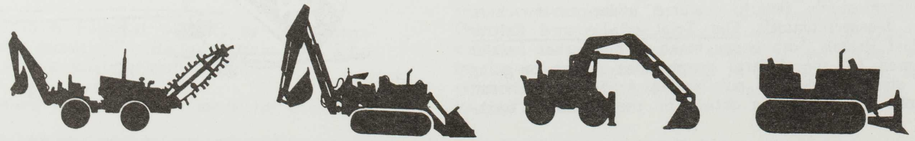
In spite of claims to the contrary, the present-day I.W.W. is not a revolutionary labor union. It is an organization of people who either wish to build a revolutionary union or mistakenly believe that the present-day I.W.W. is the revolutionary union of the North American continent. In reality the present day I.W.W. is barely a union and it is certainly not revolutionary.

In talking about the I.W.W., a distinction has to be made between the historical I.W.W. and the contemporary I.W.W. The historical I.W.W. was, in my opinion, the most uncompromising, perhaps the only truly revolutionary proletarian organization in the United States in the 20th century. But that movement was a product of a particular stage of the development of capitalism and was desroyed by a combination of violent government repression and by the rise of the more conservative Congress of Industrial Organizations, the C.I.O. With the rise of the C.I.O. came the displacement of revolutionary syndicalism and the beginning of the era of unions as labor brokerages, such as the United Auto Workers, whose function was not one of workers organizing themselves with the eventual aim of expropriation, but delivery of the workers as a commodity into the capitalist economy. The I.W.W. was still involved in workplace struggles in the 1930's and even into the 1940's. But it declined irrevocably, and the real end of the I.W.W.'s potential to be the framework of a workers' revolution in North America had passed. It's true, the I.W.W. that exists today is formally the same organization. But its existence is largely on stacks of paper, limited to an office in Chicago, and to the two or three places where the contemporary I.W.W. functions as a poorer brother of the labor brokerage trade unions. In the places where the I.W.W. represents workers it simply negotiates the terms and conditions of wage-labor without having any possibility of overthrowing those conditions.

We live in a very fucked-up society. Any revolutionary libertarian opposition to this society is an underground phenomenon at best. And under these conditions it is hard for people to get information; it is difficult to know what to do. How does someone go about finding a way out of this mess? Like many of the people who join the contemporary I.W.W., I had long been a great admirer of the history of anarcho-syndicalism, and when I heard that the I.W.W. still existed I was very enthusiastic and interested.

Passing through Chicago in the summer of 1981, I made a point one day of taking the train out to the office on Shefield Ave. near Wrigley Stadium. I met the woman working in the office and paid the membership fee and dues to join. In return I was given a little red membership book, complete with a little red stamp for every month's dues I'd paid, a copy of the I.W.W.'s preamble and constitution, and a little red songbook. Both the constitution and the songbook are replete with 19th century phraseology, the relics of a past era of proletarian revolt. I was also given a subscription to the newspaper, The Industrial Worker, and later I was mailed copies of the bulletin of the General Executive Board. In my membership booklet I was given a personal number (how libertarian!) and since in my last job I worked as a cashier I was made a member of the retail clerks section of the industrial union. For all I know I may well have been the only member of this retail clerks section. Now, I was a lot more sympathetic than most to the idea of a resurrected I.W.W., but the antique quality of all this was still surprising. Even down to its name, the I.W.W. is the relic of a historically specific kind of class struggle. When there is no generalized revolt in the streets it is a lot easier to take refuge in ancestor worship, to abandon a critique of past failures in exchange for the more immediately satisfying pursuit of nostalgia, revelling in the long-gone glories of Kronstadt and the Makhnovschina, the Paris Commune, Spain in 1936, or the I.W.W. It's a temptation, especially when it seems that there isn't a revolutionary situation today. But people can't allow that to become the basis of their politics, or they condemn themselves to meaningless sterility.

Let's examine the I.W.W. paper, the Industrial Worker. Now, the newspapers of the left in the U.S. offer a wonderful variety of bad graphics and confused/ reformist politics, and are usually badly written to boot. The Industrial Worker is better than most, but not by very much. Its pages are filled with reports on the current dismal state of organized labor in the U.S. and an occasional wish that, "gosh-golly, if-only-the-unions-of-the--world-would-all-get-together..." etc. The purpose of a revolutionary workers' newspaper shouldn't be just to talk about the crummy state of labor unions today, it should also suggest something, various ways of fighting back. I don't see this happening in the pages of the Industrial Worker. I see virtually no difference between the I.W.W. paper and the People's World of Gus Hall's C.P. It has no libertarian content whatsoever. And the timidity of the articles in the I.W. is not just a matter of bad writing. I think it's a direct result of the very non-libertarian politics of the majority of the I.W.W.'s membership.



The majority of the people who join the I.W.W. do not join because they can protect themselves against their bosses by being in the I.W.W. They join for the same reasons that I had, ideological reasons. Suggestions that the contemporary I.W.W. is some kind of small but growing and powerful organization in the workplaces of America could not be further from the truth. Outside of the university bookstore in Ann Arbor and a few printers' co-ops, the I.W.W. has virtually no presence in the workplace, and for an organization of 500 dues-paying members that is a very sorry record indeed.

The G.E.B. Bulletin

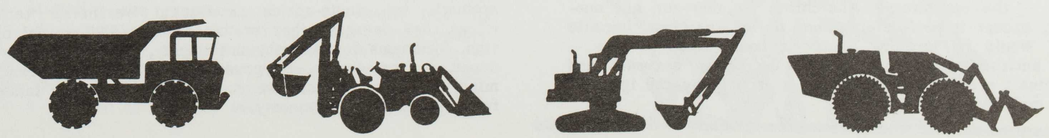
The real contact that a member of the I.W.W. has with the organization is the bulletin of the General Executive Board. This bulletin contains very little and usually no information on any real struggles in the workplace that I.W.W. members are engaged in. Rather, it is filled with the shadowy and difficult-to-understand details of this centralized micro-bureaucracy: the G.E.B. The bulletin at first glance appears to be written in a kind of secret code; of course they make no effort to explain the code to new members. References are made to "The Constitution" in a reverential air (just like so many high priests of the illuminati quoting scripture). No wonder they aren't opposed to religion! How many workplace struggles, or other kinds of struggle, have the members of the I.W.W. been involved in in the past two years? Don't look to the bulletin; it won't tell you! All the G.E.B. bulletin talks about is how much money they have in the bank, the expenses of the paper, and the concert schedule of a folk singer named Utah Phillips.

Political Confusion

Look at the conflicting politics of the people in the I.W.W., a regular "Mulligan stew" of the left. The contemporary I.W.W. is by no means an anarchist organization. Over half the members of the I.W.W. are social democrats, mostly members of the reformist and practically moribund Socialist Party U.S.A. Others are Marxist-Leninists, or followers of other authoritarian tendencies. I think that the political differences between revolutionary anarchists on the one hand and social democrats/Leninists on the other are too great for the anarchists to be associated with reformists and authoritarians. Shouldn't anarchists build their own, explicitly libertarian communist workplace organizations? The interests of libertarian workplace intervention are not served by forming coalitions with authoritarians in a dead organization, but by the practice and defence of libertarian principles in struggle and trying to reach out to other left libertarians while engaging in workplace struggles. Perhaps such a network is forming around the series of annual anarcho-syndicalist conferences that has come out of the collapse of the Anarchist-Communist Federation, and the groups listed in the newspaper Strike!.

How anarchist are the anarchists in the I.W.W.? Rather, I should ask, what is their conception of class-struggle anarchism? One ostensible anarcho-wobbly told me, "I'm a syndicalist, not a communist." If I understood him correctly, he is not actually an anarchist. The whole idea behind anarchist-syndicalism is not just to have trade or industrial unions, but to organize and fight for the overthrow of capitalist relations of property, production, and distribution, and to replace capitalism with free communism. Many of the people who consider themselves anarchists in the I.W.W. have no meaningful understanding of how complex capitalism is, of capitalism as wage-labor, surplus value, commodity production. Some anarcho-wobblies consider food co-ops to be "syndicalist". Again there's a confusion of terms. Food co-ops are not revolutionary, they are not a break with the market economy. Collectively run businesses are not a break with capitalism, they are only a self-managed form of capitalism. The anarchists I know in the I.W.W. think that a little system of anarchists can somehow exist within the capitalist economy and somehow "it isn't capitalism any more" because everybody helps to make the decisions. The "anarchist" who told me he wasn't a communist also told me that he didn't see the function of the I.W.W. being to organize workers, that this ostensible union should organize people into food co-ops, collectively run businesses, and the like.

Please tell me, what is revolutionary or libertarian about any of that?

To say that anarchists should defend anarchism within the I.W.W. is like saying that anarchists should defend anarchists should defend anarchism in meetings of Civil War paraphernalia buffs. The I.W.W. is a relic. It isn't meaningful any more. Talk of rebuilding the I.W.W. is like the Trotskyists who speak of rebuilding the still-born Fourth International. How are we to talk seriously of transforming all of human society if we value the past struggles more than the present ones, if people prize nostalgia over a far-reaching critique of what capitalism is today and how to overthrow it? The anarchists in the I.W.W. should read Marx, read about all kinds of revolutionary currents like the left communists, the "council communists", Pannekoek, and the people who came after them. One booklet that I found useful is "Eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement" by Jean Barrot and Francois Martin, published by Black & Red, Detroit, 1974. "Solidarity" in Britain and "Root and Branch" in the U.S. have put out some interesting things. Read about the Situationists; a good source for them is the "Situationist International Anthology", edited by Ken Knabb. I'm not saying to swallow everything that these folks have to say, but check them out. And forget about the contemporary I.W.W. Leave the contemporary I.W.W. to the "pure and simple trade unionists", the social democrats, and the Leninists. If we don't abandon all nostalgia politics, then we will be just like so many Leninist sects, a movement that is just a mouthpiece for cadavers.

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OF THE CONTEMPORARY I.W.W.