

**'We Are All Leaders': Anarchism and the
Narrative of the Industrial Workers of the
World**

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Contents

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| Historical Background and Theoretical Approach | 4 |
| Methodological Approach | 6 |
| The IWW, Anarchism, and Changing Structural Opportunities | 7 |
| The IWW as Anarchism in Practice | 9 |
| Anarchism as a Mediator for the IWW | 10 |
| Tensions between Anarchism and the IWW | 12 |
| Conclusions | 13 |

In 1916 in Everett, Washington, a passenger ferry loaded with Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) free speech activists attempted to dock. On the dock, the local sheriff, along with armed deputies and armed guards hired by local businesses, attempted to block the ship from docking. According to lore, when the sheriff asked, “Who are your leaders?” the response from the ferry was a shout from everyone aboard, declaring, “We are all leaders here.” As folk musician Utah Phillips explains, “that scared the tar out of the ol’ law you know”¹ and as a result, a gunfight ensued. The gunfight left at least five IWW members dead and became known as the “Everett Massacre.” In the documentary film *The Wobblies* (Bird and Shaffer 1979), which tells the story of the early years of the IWW, two IWW members recount their experience in the “Everett Massacre.” Years later, Utah Phillips recounted this story on a collaboration album with popular musician Ani DiFranco, spreading the story and message to a new generation.

From about 1910 – 1920, cities and towns across the U.S. were outlawing public speaking in an attempt to control IWW “soapboxing” in which IWW members would speak publicly against industry and capitalism, and for the need for workers to organize as a class. The Everett Massacre was one of many free speech fights that the IWW initiated. What made this one so infamous is that it was so brutally repressed. During the Everett free speech fight, the IWW had made a call for members to converge on Everett in order to challenge the new laws against public speaking. The free speech struggle in which the IWW engaged entailed making calls for Wobblies (as IWW members are sometimes known) to flood into towns that had passed public speaking ordinances and get arrested en masse by illegally speaking in the streets. This would then overwhelm the jails and courts, and the towns would be forced to repeal the public speaking ordinances. This style of “direct action” came to characterize the union’s tactics. The stories of these free speech fights became part of the enduring narrative of the IWW and its members (Bird and Shaffer 1979; Rosemont 2003; Thompson and Bekken 2006).

In September of 2007, over ninety years later, in North Providence, Rhode Island, a labor rights march turned into an altercation with police. Several marchers were pepper sprayed and one marcher’s leg was broken when she was tackled by police. The march was organized by the Providence IWW. The group had planned to march to a local restaurant and picket it in order to pressure the restaurant to stop purchasing from a food supplier in New York City, which had been the target of an IWW campaign for abusive employment practices.² After the violent confrontation with police, the union announced that they were making a call to Wobblies in the northeastern U.S. to come to North Providence to protest the actions of the North Providence Police Department. Several days later, the IWW website carried the headline “IWW continues organizing and free speech fight in Providence” (www.iww.org; Industrial Workers of the World Website 2007). This headline illustrates attempts by the contemporary IWW to make connections to the past struggles of the union. By announcing the protest as a free speech fight, the union was inserting this new fight into a longer narrative of struggle both with industry and the state that had become well known throughout the union.

The incident in Rhode Island comes on the heels of a renewed growth in the IWW. After many years of decline and near death, the IWW has seen a recent resurgence of organizing and publicity with membership nearly doubling from 2001 through 2006 (Gerson 2006; Moesel

¹ Utah Phillips and Ani DiFranco, 1999 *Fellow Workers* [Audio CD]. Righteous Babe records: Buffalo, NY.

² For more information about the Providence incident, see *Industrial Worker, September 2007*, and *The Providence Journal* online, www.projo.com (Salit 2007).

2006). In addition, the union has also had several high-profile campaigns, including the Starbucks Workers Union (SWU) campaign, which has received national press coverage.³

Although there has been much written about the IWW, most of it has focused on the history of the IWW as an organization or on leaders within the organization.⁴ Rather than focus on the organization's infrastructure, this article explores the union's culture and ideology as expressed through narrative, much of which is rooted in anarchistic ideals and philosophy. Narrative accounts of IWW activism, as well as narrative expressed through music, film, and poetry have helped sustain the IWW as a labor union by constructing and reproducing the organizational identity. The culture carried through song and art has also served as a mediator for the ideology of the IWW, and although the IWW has never been explicitly anarchist, the extensive presence of anarchistic ideals in the narrative indicates a relationship beyond even the level of affinity. Specifically, the questions being dealt with are: How has the theme of anarchism been negotiated within the IWW and how does it appear in the narrative? In addition, how has anarchism *functioned* within the organizational narrative? In addition to the contributions this article makes regarding the IWW's continued survival as an organization through narrative, this examination also contributes to an understanding of anarchism as a narrative component, and provides an illustration of the ways that anarchism, and the idea of anarchism, functions within a labor union that has not explicitly defined itself as anarchist.

Historical Background and Theoretical Approach

Since its inception, the IWW has been controversial and the organizational structure has been contested. The IWW has its roots in the early twentieth century U.S., a time of extreme wealth disparity and labor strife. The IWW was formed in 1905 by a small group of dissident labor unionists. The philosophy of the union was that all workers in every industry should organize themselves as a class into "One Big Union" in order to take control of the means of production and work toward the workers' commonwealth. They believe that trade unionism creates artificial divisions among workers. These divisions, they argue, are advantageous to the capitalists rather than the workers because they pit worker against worker and also create union turf battles. The IWW, then, was envisioned as a union where every worker in every industry could be organized to fight the forces of capital. They also believe that the organizational structure of the union should reflect the new world that they envisioned, which was a world free of bosses and "wage slavery," to be built in the shell of the old system (Rosemont 2003; Salerno 1989; Thompson and Bekken 2006). In this sense, the IWW is an early exemplar of what Winifred Breines (1982) describes as prefigurative politics, which became an important aspect of New Left and anarchist politics of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.

Through radical rhetoric and direct action tactics, the IWW grew into an infamous presence throughout much of the early twentieth century, with their influence extending far beyond the labor movement. However, by the end of World War II, the IWW's numbers had dwindled, and the organization had been decimated by government repression and vigilante violence (Bird and

³ See, for example, Daniel Gross, "Latte Laborers Take On a Latte-Liberal Business," *New York Times* (March 30, 2007), www.nytimes.com.

⁴ See, for example, Fred W. Thompson and Jon Bekken, *The Industrial Workers of the World: Its First 100 Years* (Cincinnati, OH: Industrial Workers of the World, 2006) and Salvatore Salerno, *Red November/Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Shaffer 1979; Rosemont 2003; Salerno 1989; Thompson and Bekken 2006). Yet, despite relatively little success in terms of building a worldwide workers' movement and the One Big Union for which they strive, the IWW has never fallen into the category of a failed organization but rather, has maintained legitimacy through its cooperation and solidarity with other movements (Rosemont 2003; Rosemont and Radcliffe 2005). In addition to the actual interaction the IWW has had with various leftist movements, the union has retained a position in the imagination of movements for change through a recurring cultural narrative that reflects the group's ideals, and has influenced the modern organization and membership of the IWW. Thus, even when it was in such dire shape organizationally, the IWW managed to sustain a minimal existence and never fully disappeared. The IWW has maintained a continual relationship to and presence in various leftist social movements in U.S. and European politics and was especially influential on the student movements of the 1960s and early 1970s (Buhle and Schulman 2005; Rosemont 2003; Rosemont and Radcliffe 2005; Thompson and Bekken 2006).

Salerno (1989) discusses the sometimes contentious history not only within the organization but also within the historiography. He argues the IWW project was always much broader than that of the typical trade unions, as they sought not only workplace organization but a whole transformation of society. Furthermore, he argues that while membership numbers remained relatively small, there were many people who let their formal membership lapse but continued to fight for the IWW cause of revolutionary unionism. Thus, he argues, it is more appropriate to treat the IWW as a social movement rather than a labor union, and this seems to be even truer today than in the past. More importantly, Salerno emphasizes the important role of anarchism in the founding and early years of the IWW. He points out that although they never explicitly called themselves anarchist, there were many anarchists who participated in the founding of the union. Further, he emphasizes that the IWW was the closest thing to European anarcho-syndicalism that existed in the U.S. at the time, although the union never described itself as such.⁵

In examining the narrative relationship between anarchism and the IWW, I am building on Francesca Polletta's examination of narrative and social movements. *In It Was Like A Fever*, Polletta states "narratives are forms of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and elements of collective action frames" (Polletta 2006, 11). Polletta further argues that "stories make explicit the cultural schemas that underpin institutional practice" (13). Similarly, Charlotte Linde (2001) argues that organizations use "narrative to create and reproduce [their] identity by the creation and maintenance of an institutional memory" (1). Thus, examining the stories that IWW members tell and the stories told through song, art, and poetry helps explain how identity is created within the organization and helps explain the ideology of the organization. Linde (2000) further points out the influence of narrative in creating a sense of one's position within an organization. She points out that narrative is used to create an identity wrapped up in the organization through the use of stories and storytelling. She argues that speakers come to associate familiar organizational stories with their own experiences. Therefore, stories are a powerful way to create history and identity. Within the IWW, history is exceedingly important to members, as is political identity.

⁵ More recent works on the IWW by Franklin Rosemont (2003) and Rosemont and Radcliffe (2005) have placed their emphasis on the culture surrounding the IWW. Rosemont (2003) examines the life and influence of famous "Wobbly," as IWW members are called, Joe Hill. He argues that the life and work of Joe Hill and the IWW have spread their influence far beyond IWW union halls through widespread cultural transmission that has then spawned many revolutionary and working-class movements. Further, Rosemont and Radcliffe (2005) examine the influence of the IWW on various radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including anarchism.

Because the IWW is such a decentralized organization, the process of collective memory formation is important because the doctrine is less rigid than most organizations. Stories or narrative accounts through song and art are one of the few ways to create a shared sense of identity. So, by examining these stories, we can also better understand the logic by which organizations operate. Due to the level of repression the IWW was facing, narrative was one of the main vehicles for disseminating organizational ideology, tactics, and values.

Narrative accounts of the IWW can help explain how organizational characteristics change over time as well. For example, Polletta (2006) examines how the term “participatory democracy” became metonymically associated with a certain set of negative characteristics. She explains that people within the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began using the term “participatory democracy” in association with what were increasingly seen as failed or negative aspects of the organization. Similarly, the meaning of terms such as “direct action” or “sabotage” and images such as the black “sabo cat” and the wooden shoe, all of which are recurrent themes throughout the union, have potentially metonymical associations. Examining the changing meaning of words and phrases, then, helps broaden our understanding of how organizations survive and change over time.

The resurgent IWW is not just the story of a resurgent social movement; it is also about a changing organization. Sheldon L. Messinger’s (1955) examination of the Townsend organization is especially relevant in understanding the transformation of the IWW over time. Messinger (1955) explains that as economic conditions changed and competition from similar social movements challenged their hegemony, the organization slowly began to transform from a social movement into a social club and, ultimately, to a brand. He explains that many people who participate in the Townsend organization do not even want to discuss the ideology of the club, and would prefer to participate only in the social functions. Although the IWW has not transformed to the same degree, the resurgent IWW does show that the organization has changed. This is most likely due to changing political/economic conditions as well as competition from other unions. The IWW is no longer one of the only unions organizing immigrants and unskilled laborers, so its priorities have necessarily had to shift. I will argue that anarchism and “anarchistic” themes are prevalent in the narrative of the IWW and that this narrative expressed through music, film, poetry, and art has helped sustain the IWW as a movement and shaped the resurgence of the organization. Further, I will argue that anarchism has served as a mediator for the IWW and vice versa.

Within the IWW and its narrative, anarchism has been negotiated and has functioned in several ways. First, both the IWW and anarchism have benefited from changing structural opportunities. Second, the IWW is seen as a practical means for carrying out anarchist ideals. Third, anarchism has been a mediator for the IWW. Finally, there is tension between the IWW and anarchism. These themes were drawn from extensive research of IWW artifacts and ethnographic research with an IWW branch.

Methodological Approach

Research consisted of content analysis of IWW artifacts, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. This mixed methods approach allowed me to investigate not only the history of the movement through the artifact content analysis, but also the dynamic features of the cur-

rent movement through the participant observation, and the interviews, which allowed me to connect the two from the perspective of movement participants.

Because many of the official IWW documents have been destroyed by the government, any historical analysis based solely on records is difficult. Thankfully, IWW poets, artists, songwriters, and storytellers have left a rich record of cultural artifacts including songs, poems, and cartoons. There is also a rich history of IWW graphics, songs, and posters that helped maintain the organization. These cultural artifacts are extensively documented by IWW historians. In addition to cultural artifacts found in the histories written about the IWW, there are many songs about the IWW and its various members as well as songs written by Wobblies that have become popular beyond its membership. My content analysis includes these cultural artifacts. The sample is taken from the various histories of the IWW, flyers, and posters from personal collections as well as pieces from various labor websites. It also includes analysis of artifacts collected through participant observation, which includes papers and flyers.

A second and major source of data are interviews with IWW members from a local General Membership Branch of a major northeastern city in the U.S. Interviews with IWW members are in-depth, semi-structured interviews that focus on how they became interested in the organization, the activities that they participate in, whether or not they feel a strong cultural association to the organization, and whether they feel that culture and narrative were important to them in relation to the IWW. All members were active in the organization and included several local branch delegates. There were three females in the sample and two males. All of the interviewees self-reported in the lowest income bracket (less than \$25,000), except for one who did not report income. Many from the sample held jobs that were nonstable, such as street performer.

In the interviews I also asked for participants' interpretation of IWW graphics and cartoons. As Gamson and Lasch (1983) explain "A cartoon can draw on several different framing devices simultaneously — it presents a dynamic metaphor, particular visual imagery, and its caption can employ a catchphrase" (402). Cartoons and graphics, then, do a particularly good job at capturing multiple elements of narratives and bringing them together into one "interpretive package" (Gamson and Lasch 1983). The interpretive session allowed the interviewees to engage narrative tropes themselves. This allowed the voices of the respondents to emerge and highlighted salient themes in the IWW narrative.

Finally, participant observation was used. This allowed me to observe any unspoken or unacknowledged elements such as ingrained rituals that participants have become so used to that they may have become unremarkable. Participant observation has been ongoing with the local branch for more than two years. As part of that I have participated in pickets, marches, meetings, and other mundane union businesses. It should be noted here that my access was due in large part to my membership in the IWW.

The IWW, Anarchism, and Changing Structural Opportunities

Many scholars have noted the importance of changing political and economic situations to create openings or opportunities for social movements to mobilize.⁶ The resurgent IWW has

⁶ See, for example, Gamson and Meyer, "Framing Political Opportunity" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

benefited from and taken advantage of many changing structural opportunities. A clear example of this has been in the SWU campaign. The campaign is a project of Industrial Union 660, the retail workers union. This campaign, initiated in 2004 in New York City, has spread to cities throughout North America.

The changing ways in which companies do business has opened up opportunities for new pressure tactics. In this case, Starbucks' image consciousness opened an opportunity for the IWW and their tactics. The SWU, drawing on their long history of direct action tactics, has targeted the Starbucks brand image in an attempt to leverage power and influence. Despite the fact that Starbucks does not officially recognize the union because it has not been certified by the National Labor Relations Board, the union has claimed many victories, such as wage increases and reinstatements for fired employees.

Because the SWU has not organized every Starbucks store, Starbucks lawyers challenged the size of the bargaining unit (Kamenetz 2005). The company claimed that the store as a unit could not vote on union representation because it did not represent a majority of Starbucks employees. Many in the union saw this as an attempt to weaken the union by waiting the drive out by tying it up in the courts where it was out of the hands of the workers. It also created an overwhelming task if the courts sided with Starbucks because it would be essentially impossible for such a small union to organize an international chain. As a result, the organizers of the drive quickly changed tactics.

Drawing on the historic narrative of the union as one rooted in direct action and solidarity, the union, rather than seeking a contract, which would be difficult given the circumstances, operates more as a decentralized social movement. With this model, pressure is applied through pickets, media strategies, and community support. All members of the IWW are encouraged to take actions locally either to organize local stores or pressure local stores. With this strategy, a contract with the company is not the main goal, rather it is for workers to be organized enough to take collective action whenever and wherever they feel they are being wronged.

With this model, workers do not have to wait for union lawyers and company lawyers to fight it out in court. Instead, they can take action themselves to address any issues they are having with their employer. This form of unionism also gives workers direct control over their union because they are organizing their own workplaces and are choosing their own tactics rather than relying on union bosses. As one organizer puts it, they do not want to duplicate capitalism's structure within the union.

This example points to the changing opportunities that the union has benefited from. The IWW has gained an opportunity to organize in the retail sector because the big traditional unions have not been organizing there. Messinger (1955) has illustrated how competition from other social movement organizations was one factor that led to the radical transformation of the Townsend movement over time. Similarly, the IWW has been affected by competition from other organizations as other unions now organize low-skill workers and use the industrial unionism model.

The IWW has also benefited from the changing political landscape following the fall of the Soviet Union and the decline of strong leftist parties. One long-time member put this well, saying, "The fall of the Soviets really undercut the standing of all the different communist groups — they really have hardly any appeal to the working class at large, to the public at large and we and the anarchists benefit from the situation." Another member makes more explicit the connection between the IWW, anarchism, and changing political opportunities:

I think that the collapse of the Soviet Union, before that the kind of corruption of the Russian revolution has led a lot of people to look at more decentralized forms of organization. And though I'm not really sure I'd consider myself an anarchist, you know it seems like such an optimistic thing to call oneself, you know [chuckling], but I do like the fact that the IWW is focusing on trying to build power in the workplace, power resulting from power in the workplace and not necessarily going the political route, trying to get people elected to office.

As this member makes clear then, there is a strong sense that anarchism and the union have a strong affinity. Not only that, but their fortunes seem intertwined.

The same member, when asked about the resurgent interest in the IWW explains,

I think a lot of it has to do with like the increased interest in anarchism... especially resulting from the whole world trade, World Trade Organization in Seattle thing. And I think a lot of, sort of, environmentalists, and other people on the left are coming to see the labor movement as a natural ally and the IWW is a natural ally within the labor movement.

As is illustrated by the interest in “decentralized forms of organization,” there is an affinity toward anarchistic forms of social organization. This affinity is further indicated in the hesitancy of the SWU to engage in union votes and contract negotiations and the SWU’s desire to not “recreate capitalism’s structure within the union.” In both instances, the anarchistic approach is seen as more practical in the current economic environment where multinational corporations can act outside of the laws of any one country. Thus, decentralized forms of organizing, not relying on centralized unions, political parties, or governments, is seen as positive and is emphasized in the IWW narrative.

The changing structural opportunities that come with the spread of globalization and the downfall of the Soviet Union and strong Left-wing parties have been seen as positive for the IWW and anarchism in general. Many members saw the fortunes of the anarchist movement and the IWW as either casually or explicitly linked. Further, the SWU emphasized its more anarchistic decentralized organizing is a result of the fact that Starbucks is a multinational behemoth that would make traditional union drives prohibitive. The reason for this linked fortunes and similar tactics is more closely examined below.

The IWW as Anarchism in Practice

Although the local branch I studied does have members from a variety of different radical traditions, by far, the ideology most represented is anarchism. Anarchist ideals are valorized in much of the newer literature and by members of the IWW. For example, IWW contingents in marches and rallies will often be seen carrying the syndicalist red and black flag, which has a close relationship with Spanish anarchism and the black anarchist flag. Further, many IWW members display anarchy symbols on their bags, jackets, etc. Many members also saw the IWW and the way it functioned as anarchistic, noting direct action as one of the ways in which the IWW exemplified anarchist ideals. Many also saw the decentralized style of organizing and authority as anarchist,

and many commented that the IWW was one way for anarchism to be put into practice. Furthermore, IWW themes and images have become almost synonymous with anarchism. For example, the IWW black “sabo cat” as well as the term “direct action” have become nearly synonymous with both. One popular button as well as a popular sticker both had the “sabo cat” and the phrase “direct action.” An example of this connection is also seen in the 1960’s IWW publication, *The Rebel Worker*. A letter to the editor explains: “I am an anarchist 1st, last and always; but I see the syndicalism of the IWW as one of the most practical ways of implementing anarchism. Direct action is the only action...” (Rosemont and Radcliffe 2005, 113). *The Rebel Worker* also ran tracts on anarchism in its pages, further solidifying the relationship (Rosemont and Radcliffe 2005).

One interviewee, when describing some of the appeal of the IWW, even implied that the organization was inherently anarchist by associating it with the Spanish anarchists, saying:

it’s a... very much kind of a homegrown American phenomenon as opposed to the, you know like the Communist Party, which I think came to be associated an awful lot with the Soviet Union and other Left groups that, you know maybe they followed China or Cuba or whatever for their leadership... I mean, I guess we follow the Spanish anarchists – but they were mostly killed so it’s not really a problem.

The IWW then, either because of its advocacy of direct action, or its association with syndicalism or both, has come for many to mean that the IWW is a way to practice anarchism. This relationship is beneficial for both anarchy and the IWW.

Anarchism as a Mediator for the IWW

Because the IWW has never distanced itself from anarchist groups, the IWW has also benefited from growth of anarchism. This growth too has been mutually beneficial for both the IWW and anarchism in general. The most recent resurgence has included many who joined the IWW after becoming interested in radical politics. Many of the IWW members I spoke with indicated that they came to be members of the IWW and ideological adherents not through the some organizing drive or propaganda campaign (i.e., through direct contact with the union) but through intermediate sources such as radical and IWW histories, folk culture, and other radical organizations. One member explained that his path toward the IWW began with his joining a radical student organization, and he later found out about the IWW through a history book written about the union. Another IWW member explains that he was a big fan of anarchist folk musician Utah Phillips, which is where he first became familiar with IWW. Later as he was traveling the country, he met the Chicago Branch secretary during a period of intense organizing in the area. He explains that this was impressive at the time and decided to join the organization later.

Still another explains her introduction into the organization through a local anarchist group.

“...well when I was first getting involved into anarchy... I think it was my first [local anarchist] meeting ever and they were like ‘and also, like, next Sunday is the IWW meeting’ and I was like ‘I don’t know.’ I think it was the first I had heard of it, and was like ‘can I go?’ and they were like ‘yeah.’”

Another explains that many of the local IWW actions are written about in the local anarchist newspaper emphasizing the strong relationship between local anarchist groups and the IWW.

One Wobbly that I spoke to also points out that her first exposure to the IWW was by reading about radicals and anarchists such as Emma Goldman and Helen Keller. She then explained that after joining her school's antiauthoritarian group and discovering that one of the members was also a wobbly, she was excited to join the local IWW after having read so much about them.

But anarchist groups do not just serve as recruiting pools for the IWW; the IWW also provides practical ideology and stories of struggle and direct action for anarchists to take up and carry on. One example comes from when I asked a participant to recount her favorite IWW story. She says:

I think my favorite [story] that I like telling, especially during “know your rights” trainings, cause I’m part of the Anarchist Black Cross, is like, back when they were doing their free speech campaigns during World War I and when they just kept arresting more and more Wobblies and like, soon this entire wing of the jail was like Wobblies on both sides and they were just having a good old time, because what else the fuck can you do when you’re in jail — just have a good goddamn time, and they were like clapping and everyone started stomping, and then everyone started jumping up and down in unison, which as you may or may not know, is like... like synchronized movement can break down structures and like the entire floor of the prison just, like, broke and they all like, escaped. I love telling that story.

This recounting of one of the free speech fights of the past exemplifies what IWW union action looks like. It called up the collective sense of persecution, the importance of direct action, and a sense of collective agency in which the actions of the members are able to bring about change.

Within this story about the infamous free speech campaign, not only does she recount a famous story of triumph from the past, but she also inserts herself and anarchism into a story about the story. She mentions that she likes to tell this story at Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) “Know Your Rights” trainings. This is especially relevant because the ABC is a prisoner support group. Thus, she mentions she likes to tell the story at these trainings, which makes the story immediately relevant to her situation as an IWW member and an anarchist, while also making herself an active agent in the telling. The story then becomes a way in which she is placing herself and anarchy within the long narrative tradition. This story emphasizes the importance of direct action and solidarity — two themes that are valorized in the history of the union and anarchism. Thus, the story places this rather small action into a mutually reinforcing narrative of anarchism and the IWW as sharing the same historical trajectory.

These examples illustrate how the introduction to the organization itself is often mediated through some other organization or through exposure to a cultural narrative. The IWW, then, is unlike many unions especially, and social movement organizations more broadly, in that many of the new member's initial exposure to the organization occurs through mediators, such as history books and other organizations. This illustrates how the appeal of the IWW has been widespread, far beyond the organization's formal borders. This appeal is especially apparent in anarchist organizations which supply the IWW with many members, while at the same time the IWW shares narratives of struggle and forms of organization that are appealing to anarchists.

Tensions between Anarchism and the IWW

Relations between anarchism and the IWW are not always positive though. There are several ways in which the two have not followed the same historical trajectory and may have opposing interests.

Of course the clearest way is in that it is beneficial for governments and businesses to use “red-baiting” to scare potential members away from the union. At many periods throughout the history of the U.S., the government has focused severe repression against socialists and especially anarchists. Many anarchists were deported if they were not citizens, and, famously, immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti were put on trial not just for an accused murder, but also because of their political beliefs. For this reason, it was beneficial for many unions to disassociate themselves from anarchism and socialism.

For the IWW, this dissociation was more difficult as many prominent anarchists were present at the founding (Salerno 1989). Similarly, as discussed above, many of their actions were associated with anarchy. One member explains this when asked about sabotage being advocated in an IWW cartoon, saying:

At that time sabotage was being publicly advocated by the IWW and, and I still think direct action is, is an excellent tactic, but now the word sabotage has taken on lurid connotations since then. And it's, I think, generally not that wise to use it in public. People, you know, they think that it means destruction and sneakiness...

Interestingly, while direct action and sabotage are often conflated within the organization, there does seem to be a tendency to use the term direct action rather than sabotage, as expressed in the quote above. This uneasiness with the term sabotage and its replacement with the less violent sounding direct action is one expression of the uneasiness with anarchism and the tactics associated with it.

On a more practical level, the two have diverged in other ways. Although many contemporary anarchists value and emphasize that the IWW was a very open union, which organized women, minorities, and immigrants when other unions were not, many take issue with some of the organizational structures and representations of the organization. For example, the depiction of IWW members in cartoons depicting them as mostly white men is contentious. As one interviewee who is also an anarchist puts it while commenting on an old IWW poster:

So ok, all of the workers, who seem to be all white dudes are fleeing the murky lake of craft unionism and going toward the IWW, which will save us all... yeah, I love these posters, but they are very historical and you can't really make people like... if you put up this poster today, in all seriousness people would be like what the fuck are you doing?

As this quote illustrated, some of the historic representations of the union are antithetical to the current anarchist movement. Aside from representations of the union, the functioning of the union is also seen as somewhat undesirable to some in the anarchist movement who value direct democracy and nonbureaucratic decision making. This same Wobbly later goes on to explain:

I'm not always very eager to go to the meetings... I guess this is more of an anarchist whiney thing, but it is, like very bureaucratic and there is a lot of, like centralization,

which I'm not necessarily in favor of and, I don't know there are things about the inner workings of that I'm not really a fan of.

So, although many anarchists do participate in the IWW and the organization clearly benefits from its association with anarchism, there is clearly a tension between anarchism and the IWW. This is seen in the way the IWW downplays some of its more militant or radical elements and in the way that it is represented in the historical narrative. Further, there is a tension between anarchists and the IWW because it is seen as not operating as a purely anarchist organization.

Conclusions

Anarchism as a movement and the IWW as an organization have certainly had a long and interwoven history. From the founding convention to the contemporary post-Cold War era, they have shared a historical narrative, influenced one another ideologically, and have had overlapping memberships.

Anarchism and the IWW have both benefited from changing political and economic structures. Within the IWW, anarchistic themes such as direct action and decentralization are emphasized in contemporary struggles such as the struggle to unionize Starbucks. Further, when speaking of the resurgence of the IWW, many members equate it with the corresponding resurgence of anarchism. In this way, members acknowledge the inherent anarchistic elements of the IWW without having to say that the IWW is anarchist.

Further, within the historical narrative of the IWW is a strong current of anarchistic practices and symbols. Many anarchists, in fact, have seen the IWW as anarchism in practice. Although the IWW has never called itself an anarchosyndicalist organization, it has, in the minds of many, become just that. IWW members can be seen carrying the black and red syndicalist flag, advocating for decentralization, and/or direct action. Because of this strong association of anarchist symbols and tactics, one of the main recruiting pools for the IWW is anarchist organizations. Similarly, The IWW provides many tactical and practical outlets for anarchists.

Finally, the IWW and anarchism are not one and the same. This is clearly seen in the tensions that are present. Not only has the IWW at times wanted to disassociate itself from anarchists, but many anarchists are also uneasy with the patriarchal representations of the union. Similarly, the structure of the union with local bureaucratic structures and elected representatives is seen as not in line with anarchist ideals.

Anarchism, then, is negotiated within the narrative of the IWW. Although at times the IWW has embraced anarchism, it is clear that more often, terms such as “direct action” and symbols such as the black cat are used to negotiate the theme of anarchism. Similarly, when members talk about anarchism and the IWW, it is often indirectly. The stories they tell and the way it is expressed in the historical narrative often places them in relation to one another but clearly does not associate the two. But anarchism also functions in a way to disassociate the IWW with other left traditions that are seen as being flawed. Because of the way anarchism is treated in the narrative, many anarchists are drawn to the organization. This has been especially true as themes and symbols of the IWW have become widespread in the anarchist movement, and anarchist symbols have become common in the IWW. Because of this shared repertoire of symbols and language, the IWW membership has become heavily anarchist, probably more so than at any

other time in the history of the organization. Yet, despite the high anarchist membership, the IWW has still remained technically nonanarchist with members from many political stripes.

Jonathan Christiansen is an independent scholar whose research focuses on social movements, cultural resistance, and political discourse. As a student, labor, and community activist, he has continually advocated for collaboration between academics and community-based organizations.

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