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# Redefining Green Anarchism

## That Dreaded ”I” Word

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The IWW (and green syndicalists) want to replace capitalism with ”One Big (earth destroying) Factory”, or so the story goes among some self-described radicals who would so quickly dismiss us.

To say the IWW has an I-dentity crises would be the mother of all understatements. For half a century, we Wobblies have struggled to disabuse people of the widely believed–though completely erroneous–notion that the ”I” in ”IWW” stands for ”International”. No, we’re not the ”International Workers of the World,” we’re the *Industrial* Workers of the World.

It would be a major digression to explain how the ”International” mislabeling came about. We’re not really certain even we know, and that is not actually the heart of the matter I wish to address. Thanks to recent scholarship and a spate of really good books about the One Big Union, perhaps resulting from the IWW’s centenary in 2005, people are finally getting the actual ”I-dentity” of our first initial right (finally). Of course, this carries with it a new set of I-dentity problems.

For many people, The word ”industrial” conjures up images of a factory, with scenes from Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle or

other exposés of satanic mills vividly dominating those visions. Along with that notion, the horrors of Fordist factory regimentation of the worst sort enter their minds, and not without good reason.

As someone who actually worked in a factory (a steel processing warehouse in Fremont, California to be precise) albeit briefly (five months during the late spring and summer of 1997), I can attest to the veracity of what it's like to work in one of them. It's anything but paradise–though of course–I was working under capitalist economic conditions and the business union that allegedly "represented" me was a more than willing collaborator to them.

The machines were loud and dusty–not to mention greasy (lubricated with whale fat, no less!), the facility fraught with dangers, and the work rules stiffly regimented. Although there was a good deal of safety training (in fact we had weekly, hour-long meetings), it was still very much a death trap. No doubt the union, in this case, ILWU Local 6, had much to do with the token safety measures, but in spite of the union, the place was a deeply alienating work environment.

The minds of my fellow workers had been deeply and thoroughly colonized. Most of them were quite reactionary, and–being a male dominated work environment, deeply sexist and homophobic. They saw the union as an outside agency, and (rightfully) criticized it for its class collaborationism (if the myriad examples of graffiti decrying "Local Sux" evident throughout the grounds was any indication). However, such sentiments were no doubt welcomed or even tacitly encouraged by the bosses, and a year or two after I was "laid off" under somewhat questionable grounds, the union was busted when the facility relocated to Stockton, California.

One needn't work in a factory to understand it, though. During the post war boom, enough working class people did work in factories, and their stories have been passed on through family lore. If that isn't enough, there are plenty of

accounts of what factory life is like. Consider, for example, Judi Bari's expose of working conditions in the Louisiana-Pacific sawmills of Mendocino County based on the first hand accounts of at least two mill workers.

When some hear that the "I" stands for "industrial", they immediately flash on such nightmare visions and assume that we Wobblies envision that the new society that we hope to build within the shell of the old will look like that! (horrors!!!)

This is a grand misconception, of course, and it in part stems from the misuse of language. "Industrial" derives from "Industry". One of the basic tenets of the IWW is that all workers employed by the same boss, such as an auto maker, hotel, or shipping company belong to one union, rather than a group of disunited craft unions. The IWW proposed organizing wall-to-wall unions, i.e. by industry–hence the name "industrial".

That satisfies some skeptics, but of course, some work is still done in factories. Much of that has been outsourced. Many people–at least in the United States in the past two generations–have never worked in a factory, and there's a good reason for that. The capitalist system depends upon the maximization of profits by the employing, capitalist class. At least two factors have driven that process: (1) the drive to "offshore" labor to locations with cheaper labor; and (2) the connected drive to move facilities to places with lax regulations, including environmental regulations.

Of course, the third initial–the second "W" stands for "World", and the IWW seeks to organize those workers as well, whose factory conditions are horrid. We call them sweatshops for good reason.

There is still some trepidation among radicals that factories, even organized factories are a living hell, no matter what!

It's easy to see how one might jump to such conclusions. Most interpretations of classical Marxism suggest the workers of the world seizing control of the factories and taking them

over, and in doing so, operating them for the good of all, not just the wealthy capitalist class.

The IWW is not exclusively Marxist–in fact it's inclusive of *both* the best ideas of Marxism and class struggle anarchism, and much else good besides)–but that concept seems logical enough. After all, the IWW Preamble declares that the workers of the world must organize as a class, take control of the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system. Marx and Engels themselves argued that a revolutionary working class would achieve its full potential by fully developing society's "productive capabilities."

It also doesn't help matters that many of the nation states whose economies are supposedly based on the ideas of Marx (the former USSR and China in particular) have indeed looked like industrial gulags and have thoroughly damaged the environment as well.

On closer examination, however, the level of oppression and environmental degradation is actually worse in capitalist nation states (though the latter are far more effective at covering up the problem through outsourcing and propaganda).

Furthermore, at least one nation state whose economic systems is supposedly based on "Marxist" economics, North Korea, is mostly agrarian societies.

The real discussion and debate should focus on what degree any of the aforementioned (supposedly non-capitalist) nations are actually close to achieving the ideals set forth by Marx (not close at all) or if Marxism results in actual post capitalist "workers paradises" or some sort of technocratic dystopia. On that last question, the debate still rages. Most Marxists would say it's the former, and most anarchists would suggest that it's the latter.

Syndicalism also promotes the idea of the working class seizing the means of production, and to some extent, many syndicalists accept Marx's and Engel's deconstruction of capitalist economics. However, they propose a substantially different



five times as productive as they were when the eight-hour day became standard (thanks in no small part to unions like the IWW agitating and organizing for shorter hours of work with no loss in pay). Why not have a six-hour day? One major company, Keloggs, had even institutionalized that, until World War II, when shortages of workers and increased demand made the six hour day impractical. Since then, however, productivity has vastly improved. Even a four-hour day is possible.

As for the factory environment itself, it needn't be a depersonalized mechanistic hell, as parodied by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Instead work could actually be fun and nurturing. Toxic chemicals can be replaced by safe alternatives, or even eliminated in many cases. Noise levels can be reduced. Ventilation and daylighting can make even the most stifling environments substantially more bearable.

As Jess Grant (and Colin Ward) point out, the productive function of the factory itself can be changed. Instead of producing merchandise for profit, it can instead be produced for need. Instead of creating useless technology, such as weapons of mass destruction and other military hardware, the same machinery can theoretically, in many cases, instead be retooled to produce more benevolent goods, such as bicycles, solar panels, or street cars–for instance.

And since the driving force would be need and creativity rather than the maximization of profit and the competitive drive, the instances of injury, noise, and pollution will all but disappear.

So just because the IWW is an *industrial* union, and Green Syndicalists are not in favor of abolishing industry, that doesn't make us a bunch of earth destroying, gulag building, technocratic dictators. It's merely a case of mistaken i-dentity that leads people to think otherwise.

It's what happens *after* that which is the bone of contention. We argue that at least *some* industry is necessary for people to live and prosper.

Much of that *could* very well be small scale cottage industry, organized in a variety of scales of urban villages, small towns, or even a few big cities as suggested by Christopher Alexander, et. al. In A Pattern Language. Also, one-time IWW organizer and Redwood Simmer participant, Jess Grant, offered his suggestions on how we might transform invasive and disruptive industries once the workers seize control of them into benign replacements, wherever and whenever possible. Even so, there may be *some* larger scale industrial operations, because the economies of scale demand it, but as already stated, these needn't be satanic mills.

The idea of taking over the factories is not merely revolutionary, however, it's transformative. It's not just a matter of changing the bosses or the style of management; it's a matter of changing the factory itself, indeed the whole factory system.

Work in a factory (or foundry) needn't be a prison like dystopia. The working conditions can be significantly improved. Without capitalism and its profit uber alles ethic, there needn't be production quotas.

Instead of placing profit above workers' needs, workers' needs, including creative input, a safe and comfortable work environment, personalization of workspace and more would take precedence.

Work in a factory needn't be tedious or monotonous either. The various tasks involved in production can easily be shared and rotated, as suggested by Michael Albert in Parecon. Where repetitive tasks are unavoidable, workers can pair up and take turns performing them (the ILWU–among others–demanded the concept of "ten-minutes on; ten minutes off" to keep workers fresh and alert. Naturally the bosses resisted such things.

The length of the workday needn't be eight hours either. Thanks to technological improvements, workers are at least



model of revolutionary organization (one big union) than that of most Marxists (a workers' party).

Still, syndicalists are subjected to much malignment by radical environmentalists and non syndicalist anarchists, because both of the latter see the syndicalist goal of seizing the means of production as chaining the working class to "One Big Factory".

They're quick to invoke that famous lyric by the Who's Pete Townsend, "Meet the new boss / same as the old boss" (Won't Get Fooled Again), a common occurrence in political revolutions, to suggest what will happen in a syndicalist revolution.

To Marx and Engels–and for that matter, to Bakunin as well–factories represented both a torture chamber of capitalist oppression, but potentially also the salvation of the working class. If seized by the workers of the world, the factories and machines could be used to meet all the wants and needs of the workers thus making life better for all, including developing the world's productive capacity to the point where the standard of living of all was raised substantially.

In some cases, such as in the early days of the Russian Revolution in 1917 or the Spanish Revolution of 1936, when the workers succeeded in taking over the machinery of production, that's precisely what happened–that is until the counter revolutionary forces gained ascendency.

Almost a century of experience has shown that the reasons for the ultimate failure of these revolutions are many and complex, and much disagreement still surrounds any discussions of them. Capitalist propaganda has succeeded in convincing many, including many on what passes for the "left" in the United States (and in my mind that includes anarchism and radical environmentalism, whether the adherents of both choose to see it that way or not), that the failure of these revolutions is due to inherent flaws in the revolutionary ideal, rather than the sabotaging of those revolutions by opportunists.

Therefore, to many, the idea of "revolution" evokes notions of the naive masses, spurred on by opportunists, who use the former for their own selfish ends. The latter then subject the former to even worse enslavement and even heavier chains once the revolution is complete (Of course, such a pessimistic view of "revolution" is precisely the classical conservative critique of revolution). That there are other, positive, forces at work is often overlooked.

The very tangled web of events that unfolded during the Spanish Revolution of 1936–all of which have been debated from every angle imaginable–have only added to the confusion, because some critics of the syndicalist CNT insist that the leadership of *that* industrial union collaborated with the leftist coalition government that capitulated to counterrevolutionary Stalinist forces, thus paving the way for the coup led by the fascist Francisco Franco. While there may be some (or a good deal of) truth to that criticism, the question is rarely asked, "was the collaboration (if it really happened as charged) a result of *inherent* flaws in syndicalism itself? Or was it a case of the leadership *violating syndicalist principles altogether?* In my estimation, if the charges of collaborationism by the CNT leadership are indeed true, and I'm not at all convinced that they are, the latter is true *by definition*. It is an *inherent violation of syndicalist principles* to directly collaborate with any non-syndicalist political organizations.

Even though some critics of syndicalism agree with my analysis of the Spanish Revolution, they still find the classical Marxist and syndicalist programs, certainly products of the 19th Century, severely dated to their 21st Century minds, especially one so steeped in a greater ecological conscience not known in Marx's and Bakunin's time.

Quoting anarchist Murray Bookchin from his 1980 text, "Towards an Ecological Society":



> "The factory worker lives merely on the memory of such traits. The din of the factory drowns out every thought, not to speak of any song; the division of labour denies the worker any relationship to the community; the rationalisation of labour dulls his or her senses and exhausts his or her body. There is no room whatever for any of the artisan's modes of expression — from artistry to spirituality — other than an interaction with objects that reduce the worker to a mere object… Marxism and syndicalism alike, by virtue of their commitment to the factory as a revolutionary social arena, must recast self-management to mean the industrial management of the self… Both ideologies share the notion that the factory is the 'school' of revolution and in the case of syndicalism, of social reconstruction, rather than its undoing. Most share a common commitment to the factory's structural role as a source of social mobilisation… The factory not only serves to mobilise and train the proletariat but to dehumanise it. Freedom is to be found not within the factory but outside it."

Included in this critique of "syndicalism" was an implicit dismissal of the IWW (in the 1980s when Bookchin wrote these words) as anything but an historical relic, an implication that Bookchin admitted in rebutting green-syndicalist writer Graham Purchase's critique of "Towards an Ecological Society" (Bookchin's rebuttal was rife with his usual defensive vitriol towards his critics).

Neither we IWWs, nor green syndicalists, for that matter, are arguing for "One Big Factory" in any case. What we are saying is that we recognize that in order to abolish the worst aspects of "industrialism", (capitalism), at least *part* of the strategy *must* involve seizing the machinery of production.