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Annotated Preamble to the IWW Constitution

Tim Acott

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The Preamble of the Constitution of the IWW was adopted in 1905 at the founding convention of that organization, and has been changed but slightly in the ensuing years. It is the most elegant, concise and brilliant document I know. It is the basic text of the IWW to this day. If you are a member of the working class (meaning that you do not have the power to hire and fire) and agree with the principles laid out in the Preamble, please join us. You belong in the IWW. Contact a delegate or a branch of the IWW, or contact the General Headquarters, and join the union. Start paying your dues and help the work along. Make it a part of your life. Together we can build a better life. Together we can make this world a better place, better than we ever imagined.

I'm a wobbly (that is, a member of the IWW) and I approach the annotation of this mighty document with no small trepidation. It's a job that, perhaps, needs to be done. The language is a bit old fashioned, though I wouldn't change a word. Nearly a century of struggle and the interruption of working class traditions and oral history have made it a bit less accessible to a

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modern reader than I think it needs and deserves to be. I embark upon this project with the deepest respect for the fellow workers who wrote and adopted the Preamble, and the thousands of wobblies that have lived by it, fighting the good fight and giving us so very much, from that day to this.

Being a wobbly is about just going right ahead and getting after it. If a job needs doing, we don't wait around for some expert to do it for us or to tell us how to do it. We working people can do anything to which we set our minds. In that spirit I shall now attempt to clarify and explain the finest piece of writing I've ever read. Wish me luck! The bold type is the Preamble itself.

THE WORKING CLASS AND THE EMPLOYING CLASS HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON

Well, here we go already. I know this puts some people off. Notice please that it says, "the working class and the employing class." What it doesn't say and doesn't mean to say, is that no member of the working class has anything in common with any member of the employing class. That would be pretty stupid. We, as individual human beings have a lot in common. We all eat food, drink water, and breath air. We all live and after a bit, we all die. We can even interbreed and have fertile children. We have more in common than horses and donkeys do. We have been known to slip, though rarely, from one class to the other. This motion is usually downwards, mind you, as the working class is growing and the employing class is shrinking. Members of the two classes do have some things in common, as individuals.

What we, the workers, need and want is in absolute and diametric opposition to what the employers want and think they need. We want more pay for our time, shorter hours, less boring and repetitive work, less dangerous and unhealthy work, and most importantly, control of how we spend the hours and days and years of our short lives. More control over what goods we produce and what service we provide, and

how these things are done. More control over the effects of this production on our health, on the health and safety of our neighborhoods and our homes, on this beautiful planet earth. We want a safe and healthy place for the children to grow up (all the children, theirs as well as ours), and the possibility of a good, fulfilling life for them to lead. We, in short, want everything the employers need us not to have.

Our needs and wishes are simply bad for their business. The employers, as a class, need us to work longer, harder, faster, cheaper, with less safety rules, less pollution controls and less say in the decision making process. What they really need is a vast army of slaves that don't have to be fed and taken care of. Super duper robots with all of our skills and knowledge, that can do all the work in the world, like we do, but require less maintenance and hassle. These units of labor need to be interchangeable and disposable. What we want and need is to be truly free and in control of our own lives, the resources, the machines, the decision making process, in short, the whole ball of wax.

THERE CAN BE NO PEACE SO LONG AS HUNGER AND WANT ARE FOUND AMONG MILLIONS OF WORKING PEOPLE AND THE FEW, WHO MAKE UP THE EMPLOYING CLASS, HAVE ALL THE GOOD THINGS IN LIFE

Like I said, it's nothing personal, but the two classes are just natural enemies. We're stuck in the middle of a war, the class war. That's not a figure of speech. It's a very real and ugly war with a body count that makes WWII look like a minor fender bender on a sunny Saturday afternoon. It's war, and we fight it every day, but our weapons aren't guns and bombs. Our weapons are education, organization, and the many and various methods of withholding our labor. We fight with our arms folded. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the

wage system. It's not a war of our choosing. We were born to it, but we've damn sure got to fight it and get it over with. There's just no real choice. We can't walk away. There's nowhere to go. Year after year they take away more of our lives, create more misery, kill and maim more of our fellow workers, destroy more of this beautiful planet. They'll never stop unless they are made to stop. They're insane.

Once again, I'm speaking of classes. The employing class is mad. They take more and more and more. They destroy more and more and more. They do not consider the cost in life, in misery, in degradation, in pollution. They do not consider the future. They only consider profit. They do not consider the children, not even their own. They only consider how to amass more capital. They, as a class, are mad dogs. I don't say we must shoot them, but they must be stopped, and only the self-organized working class can wield a big enough hammer to do the job. That hammer is our organized and tactical withholding of labor, the many forms of direct action. We'll get to that soon.

WE FIND THAT THE CENTERING OF MANAGEMENT OF INDUSTRIES INTO FEWER AND FEWER HANDS MAKES THE TRADE UNIONS UNABLE TO COPE WITH THE EVER GROWING POWER OF THE EMPLOYING CLASS

When they say "the trade unions" here they're mostly talking about the official or business union federations and congresses, such as the AFL-CIO, CLC, TUC, etc. Let's be real clear about where we stand regarding the official union groupings. These union federations include a whole lot of fine union sisters and brothers, past and present; who have fought the good fight for us all many and many a time. We salute those fighting workers, those heroes of the class struggle. No wobbly has got a beef with a unionist that stands up for the working class. The IWW has had, however, a couple major beefs (beeves?) with official unions all along. These are differences of approach, of

And there it is. The short term is in harmony with the long term. What is needed to fight the class war is the same thing that's needed to build the new society. We don't know exactly what shape it will eventually take. How could we? We do know that it needs to be truly democratic, to be controlled by the huge majority of the human race, those who do the work. We know that it can be the end to war and famine and slavery and ecological destruction, because these things are against our interests. When we, the workers, run the economy, we will be running the whole show, in our common interest, for ourselves, the vast majority, in peace and harmony. Now, that is something worth working for, worth living for, worth fighting for; and it is, to my mind, quite possible. Won't you join us?

belief, on the most basic level. These unions were founded to represent the interests of a very small portion of the working class, the top of the heap, the white, male, native born, English speaking, skilled craftsmen, etc. It never meant to address the needs of the working class in general, but instead the aristocracy of labor. It was and still partially is, organized along craft lines. In other words, according to the type of work one does. Thus, the railroad, or the post office, was and is, divided into many different craft unions. These unions generally do not cooperate with each other in their common struggles with their common enemy, their common bosses.

The result of this bizarre organizing concept was and is union scabbing. One worker goes to work across the other worker's picket line, with the blessing of their union. Weird, huh? How's that going to force the boss to pony up with some better wages or safety conditions? In the past, the AFL, etc. went out of their way to scab on the IWW many many times and even joined forces with the bosses and government to scab against and punish IWW members. Every day, good union members are forced to dishonor the picket lines and struggles of their own. Curiously, the official union leaders accept capitalism and even believe that capitalism can work and that the working stiff, at least some of us, can get a fair deal, with some adjustment here and there. Wobblies have always known better. Capitalism can't be reformed, can't be made to serve our interests. It's got to be replaced with a system of economic democracy, controlled directly by the workers, before the workers will ever really get a fair shake. Different ideas, different practice. In the long run, while we are in solidarity with working people everywhere, and with the rank and file members of any union, we're bound to bump heads occasionally with union officials or anyone who thinks the boss is our pal. To wrap up, the IWW was founded by experienced, lifer unionists who were fed up with the existing labor unions and felt, based on their experience, that

they needed to create a different sort of vehicle to serve the interests of the working class.

THESE CONDITIONS CAN BE CHANGED AND THE INTEREST OF THE WORKING CLASS UPHELD ONLY BY AN ORGANIZATION FORMED IN SUCH A WAY THAT ALL ITS MEMBERS IN ANY ONE INDUSTRY, OR IN ALL INDUSTRIES IF NECESSARY, CEASE WORK WHENEVER A STRIKE OR LOCKOUT IS ON IN ANY DEPARTMENT THEREOF, THUS MAKING AN INJURY TO ONE AN INJURY TO ALL

So that's just what they did. They built a better form of union. It's democratic. It's built to be controlled by the membership and to guard against corruption and union bureaucracy. It's independent of any political party. It's an industrial union, meaning that every worker in one enterprise, from the cook to the bookkeeper to the janitor to the driver to whomever, is in the same union. The fact is that their collective interests are identical, and this simple home truth is reflected and reinforced structurally in the way the union is set up. The IWW is built to fight for the workers and for no one else. It's not made to support the government, nor the politicians, nor the career bureaucrats, nor the gangsters, nor any church, nor any national grouping or race or gender, nor, least of all, the bosses and employers and owners themselves. It's our fighting machine, designed to be controlled by us, the workers, alone. It's built for solidarity and democracy. It's built for struggle, for self defense, for mutual aid, for emancipation.

INSTEAD OF THE CONSERVATIVE MOTTO, "A FAIR DAY'S WAGE FOR A FAIR DAY'S WORK," WE MUST INSCRIBE ON OUR BANNER THE REVOLUTIONARY WATCHWORD, "ABOLITION OF THE WAGE SYSTEM"

No use beating around the bush, fellow workers. We're here to fight for better wages and hours here and now, and we're here to change the very system that controls the economy. Political democracy without economic democracy is a lie, a sham,

and a cruel joke. We're here to fight for better conditions now and for a better life in the future. No contradiction, it's the same fight.

IT IS THE HISTORICAL MISSION OF THE WORKING CLASS TO DO AWAY WITH CAPITALISM

This sounds like some ancient prophecy, but really it's just common sense. There's nobody else to do the job. We've got to do it. Politics will always obey economics, never the other way around. Military power is just a reflection of economic power. The real power lies already in the hands of the workers. That's the big secret. Tell your friends. Tell everybody. We make everything that gets made. We provide every service. We do it all, and we can stop it all, just by folding our arms. The IWW is not about armed struggle. Armed struggle is simply not a big enough hammer to do the job. We hold the only power on earth great enough to defeat capitalism, and all we have to do is to get ourselves organized, and organized right. Then we can stop the madness and violence of the employing class, once and for all.

THE ARMY OF PRODUCTION MUST BE ORGANIZED, NOT FOR THE EVERY-DAY STRUGGLE WITH CAPITALISTS, BUT ALSO TO CARRY ON PRODUCTION WHEN CAPITALISM SHALL HAVE BEEN OVERTHROWN

We have to organize ourselves to fight the good fight here and now, and as soon as possible, to fight the last battle against capitalism; and we have to hold the whole thing together while that battle rages and after it is won. We're going to replace the structure and organization of capitalism with the superior structure and order of real democracy, economic democracy, workers' democracy. With that structure in place we will carry on, as the new democracy grows and transforms our lives.

BY ORGANIZING INDUSTRIALLY WE ARE FORMING THE STRUCTURE OF THE NEW SOCIETY WITHIN THE SHELL OF THE OLD