Anarcho-Syndicalist Review
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A little over forty years ago, Sam Dolgoff wrote a discussion paper for the 1974 Chicago Conference of the Industrial Workers of the World, entitled "Notes for a Discussion on the Regeneration of the IWW." The IWW at the time was undergoing a real regeneration. After shrinking to a small organization of a couple hundred members in their 60s and 70s, the IWW had been rediscovered by a new generation of revolutionary activists looking for a libertarian left alternative to the various Marxist-Leninist groups. The IWW was drawing in new members but had ceased to be a force in the labor movement and these new members were looking for ways to make it relevant. Older members, however, were divided on what to tell the younger members.

The IWW had undergone changes in its 70-year history, as had the labor movement in general. The IWW had tried to use the same labor laws as its AFL-CIO rivals to win union recognition in its organizing efforts, and to attract members promising the same benefits as the "business unions." This had led to a successful presence in several metal-working shops in Cleveland,

Ohio. However these union shops were lost about twenty years later due to a split in the union over the Taft-Hartley law, when the IWW was threatened with losing its legal protections unless it complied with the anti-union law. Rather than lose legal union recognition, the Cleveland IWW chose to merge with an independent metal workers' union but eventually ended up in the AFL-CIO. The IWW had stood its ground, but in the minds of some members it had not been worth the cost and they thought the time had come to try the Cleveland approach again. Sam thought differently.

Sam pointed out that the IWW could not compete with the AFL-CIO on its terms: professional organizers backed up by lawyers offering union pension plans, medical plans, and a host of services. Business unions were for conservative-minded workers.

The Cleveland IWW had originally appealed to a different type of worker in the 1930s than the conservative workers of the 1950s who split from the IWW rather than fight for their union rights against Taft-Hartley. Those who joined the IWW in the 1930s were part of a rebellious upsurge of workers that had carried out sit-down strikes in the auto industry and other industries. The IWW preceded the UAW in the auto industry, the UPW in the meatpacking industry and a number of other industries, but the lure of the CIO with its greater resources and promise of government support was too great. The Cleveland IWW had failed to educate their newer members about the union's principles and had lost the direct action skills needed to resist Taft-Hartley.

By the 1960s and 1970s a new generation of workers had come forth who were rebelling against the union bureaucracy and began a massive wildcat strike movement that defied AFL-CIO leaders. Sam argued that the IWW's best hope for rebuilding was to appeal these new militant workers and get them to create new organizations based on direct action. Frank Cedervall, one of the leaders of the Cleveland IWW, who had retired

from his paid union position with the AFL-CIO and had now "returned to the fold," denounced Dolgoff at the conference. Unfortunately Sam was not there to defend himself or his position paper. The outcome of the conference was in Cedervall's favor and the IWW decided to form the "Industrial Organizing Committee" (IOC) of self-appointed organizers who would collect funds and develop resources to once again organize along the Cleveland model.

Most of the IOC's organizing efforts in the 1970s and 1980s ended in failure for exactly the reason Dolgoff had predicted: the use of conservative organizing tactics to appeal to conservative workers. The IWW did not have the resources to compete with the business unions at their own game, nor to fight the legal battles this entailed with union-busting law firms brought in by the employers. Nor did it help when the IOC organizers played down the union's revolutionary program. Eventually the IOC fell apart after it made an attempt to transfer the Nelson bequest (a piece of real estate owned by a former member of the IWW that was left to the union after he died) from the union treasury to the IOC, which would have given it the bulk of the union's assets and made it unaccountable to the members. The IOC was dissolved.

Whether Sam's proposal for the IWW to return to the guerilla labor tactics of the early IWW would have made a difference in 1974 is unknown. Guerilla struggles of any kind (and by this we are not suggesting violence but wildcat strikes, sit-downs, mass picketing and quickie job actions) are hazardous and require a special breed willing to take risks that more conventional union approaches do not. However, when considering what happened to the conventional labor movement since, rebuilding the revolutionary IWW may have been more realistic than sticking to the failing strategy of the various left-wing groups "boring within" and trying to save the AFL-CIO from its own class collaborationist policies. Building a revolutionary movement when worker rebellion is

at its peak makes more sense than waiting for events to force the business unions to the left.

The left-wing of the labor movement lost a great opportunity. The question remains whether Sam Dolgoff's "Notes for a Discussion…" is relevant today.

Labor militancy is down considerably since the 1970s wildcat strike wave. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were only 12 major strikes involving over 1,000 workers in 2015. In 1969 there were 412 major strikes, in 1970 381, 298 in 1971, 250 in 1972, 317 in 1978, and 424 in 1974 when Dolgoff wrote his "Notes." Things began to change around 1982, when the number of major strikes began to drop below 100. This was during the Reagan recession when Reagan's austerity economic policies began to have effect. The other reason for the drop in strike activity was global outsourcing, as capitalists began shifting manufacturing to low wage countries. Global sweat shopping continued in the 1990s under the Clinton administration with the passage of NAFTA. By 1999 the number of major strikes had dropped to only 17. Workers can't strike if there is high unemployment and what jobs exist are temporary, part-time and precarious.

On the other hand these were exactly the industrial conditions in which the IWW was successful at organizing. It was not the skilled jobs which the AFL craft unions organized, but jobs like the lumberjacks, miners, harvest workers or dock workers, where jobs were temporary, or seasonal, and difficult to organize. These jobs lent themselves to quick job actions and guerilla tactics, not the long, drawn-out organizing campaigns of the business unions.

We see these same conditions in the service sector or "servant economy." SEIU and UFCW and other service sector business unions are trying to make inroads here, but they still think conventional warfare will work. They have launched the "Fight for $15" movement, but instead of shutting the service economy sweatshops down with mass picketing they rely on passing laws that won't take effect for years, by which time the bosses will have raised prices in anticipation and workers may need $25 an hour to have a living wage.

It boggles the mind that having seen how quickly the Occupy Wall Street and the Black Lives Matter protests caught fire that business unions insist on such timid tactics and keep hanging on the coattails of Democrat Party politicians. Workers are hungry for alternatives. It is time we anarcho-syndicalists give them what they need.