

The IWW - The ABC's of Revolutionary Unionism

Morgan Miller

Since 1970 there has been a great change has come over the world. A shift in "wealth" unknown previously has impoverished millions and made a handful rich beyond all previous dreams. We can see:

Today, the world's 340 Billionaires control more wealth than the 2 BILLION poorest people do. Everyday we witness starvation, environmental degradation and the destruction of human culture for what? To make a couple of thousand people rich and powerful.

We have seen the collapse of the so-called Communist system and the start of a free market system not significantly different.

We see the shift of industrialism to the former socialist countries and the "developing" world and with it the rise of sweatshop conditions and wholesale theft of resources.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) is a revolutionary union in continuous existence since 1905. The IWW was founded by North American rank and file workers who wanted a truly radical, democratic union.

Amongst trade unionists the Wobblies are famous, and Bosses fear us. Through our democratic structure, flexible tactics, solidarity and a vision for the future, the IWW's influence has been and continues to be felt throughout the world.

And the IWW is needed even more today than in the past. We hope this introduction to our union will inspire you to join with us to create One Big Union of all workers and eliminate the scourge of Capitalism and class society once and for all.

Principles

The "Preamble"

The Preamble to the Constitution of the IWW is our basic statement of principles:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. 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.

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, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.

We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever-growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

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.

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."

It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.

To Emancipate the Working Class

The IWW believes that by acting in solidarity, in union, we are building a new world in the shell of the old. Through solidarity we will create a free world with the good things of life available for all. Yes, the IWW is radical. It is as radical as a scientist in her laboratory, as radical as a surgeon planning the removal of a diseased growth, as radical as a teacher must be to tell the truth. It is well to note that from radicalism has flowed all that makes life better today than yesterday. As in the past, radicalism is the only force capable of leading the world out of its night of hunger, hatred and fear. We believe in the abolishment of capitalism, because capitalism has created an unhappy world that poisons our dreams, our families and the world itself, all so the rich can become richer.

The IWW is Non-Political

The IWW, as an organization, is non-political and it does not interfere with political beliefs or activities of its members. It requires only that political views do not create division within the union. This rule enables workers of various political beliefs to join together without friction to advance their economic interests. The IWW concentrates on direct economic action (the strike, boycotts, job actions) because history shows that whoever holds economic power also holds political power. The IWW believes that whatever is "given" to workers by politicians can as quickly be taken away, with interest piled on the "debt". Only that which labor wins by its own economic strength can be retained. The IWW has learned that workers can only fight and overthrow the bosses when we can all unify as a class. Instead of dividing our energies fighting each other over which party or political line will take precedence, we put our strength into fighting the bosses where it counts, in the workplace.

The IWW is Non-Religious

It has no religious bias and it does not interfere with the religious belief of any member. Such beliefs are part of the freedom of humanity and the IWW strives to extend freedom, never to lessen it.

How the IWW Organizes

One Big Union: The IWW believes that workers need to organize into One Big Union (OBU) to be able to defend our common interests and control the economy.

Industrial Unionism: The IWW has always believed that organizing on craft or trade basis generates divisions and rivalries between workers and unions. Thus we organize in 27 broad Industrial Unions attempting to unify workers in a particular industry.

- Locally: Members of the IWW can form several types of locals. A Job Branch at one place of employment. An Industrial Union Branch for members of the same Industrial Union A General Membership Branch for individual members of various IU's Industrial District Councils to coordinate multiple branch activity
- Regionally: Members of the IWW in any given region can form a Regional Organizing Committee (ROC). A ROC can be used to coordinate IWW activities in the region.
- Worldwide: The IWW is the same organization in Sydney or Sierra Leone, Moscow or Vancouver. We have the same policies and statutes in any country. In the present world of "free trade" and multi-national corporations, this is the only sensible way to organize.

A cornerstone of the IWW is the belief that the rank and file must control the union and its officers, instead of being controlled by them. No union can be rank and file that limits the freedom of its members or muzzles minorities by a host of unnecessary regulations. Therefore the IWW makes no more rules than there is genuine need for. All-important questions, including the election of officials, are decided by referendum vote of the membership. Officials who fail to carry out the desire of the majority are subject to immediate recall.

International Elected positions in the IWW include members of the 7-member General Executive Board (GEB), the General Secretary-Treasurer (GST). The GEB is the body that oversees the IWW's activities between conventions and oversees the day-to-day operations, finances and publications of the IWW. The GST keeps the books, papers and effects of the office, and is responsible for official documents and correspondence. Wages of officials and employees of the union are set to the average pay received by the members in industry. This, and limitations on terms, reduces the possibility of a class of union bureaucrats from taking power from the rank and file.

Most of the work in the IWW is done without charge because the organization is composed of workers who believe in their movement and gladly give their utmost to promote its growth. While the structure and constitution of the IWW jealously protect democracy, no law devised can secure or retain democracy once the will for it is lost. The root of freedom is not law, which people can change, but people themselves.

Methods and Tactics

Flexible Tactics

The IWW is famous for creating many new and innovative forms of striking against the boss. We believe that the key to winning for the working class is flexibility, creativity and an understanding of our own power as workers. At the heart of our beliefs is the notion that working people<the majority of humanity>have every right to control our lives and society. An IWW job action can be anything between a spontaneous walk out and a legally recognized union. While the IWW doesn't place any trust in governmental labor brokering, but we aren't fools either. We recognize we can sometimes use labor laws to protect workers from attacks by bosses. But in the long run, the IWW believes that workers should make their own decisions about what to do and how to do it in their efforts to democratize their workplace.

Rather than relying on others to fight our fights for us, we believe we can and should only rely on each other. This is also known as Direct Action, and it can take many forms. It can be simple or complicated, spontaneous or planned far in advance. The point is that we will decide our own destiny, and the way we'll get there is deciding together how to get there.

Solidarity

The needs and best interests of the working class are in opposition to the needs and best interests of the employing class. As individuals, workers might have things in common with individual bosses. In fact, what we want to do not want to seek revenge towards the capitalists, but only to put them to honest work! We, the workers, have the power to gain the things we need by working together toward our common good. This is solidarity. Our solidarity crosses all lines of race, ethnicity, gender, nation, religion, age, sexual orientation, language, education, and trade. These divisions weaken us in our common struggle for a better world. The only way to win as a class is to recognize individual differences, get over them and join together against the bosses.

An injury to one is an injury to all!

We are all Leaders!

The IWW rejects "leaders" as such, for if individuals lead they can also mislead. Labor has continually been betrayed by leaders whom it trusted and followed. It will cease to be betrayed only when it accepts the leadership of ideas and not the leadership of men. As Eugene Debs, a founder of the IWW, said, "Any people who can be led into a revolution can be led out again." Yet there are people who are quick and capable in presenting ideas and in mapping tactics to fit conditions. The best of them do not wish to lead and they will not blindly follow. The IWW develops such people partly because it is a rank and file organization, partly from the shared experience of its members, partly because working people have no lack of intelligence and initiative.

Non-Violence

Employers have always been the first to resort to force and violence and the IWW teaches only what the law affirms, that workers have the right to defend themselves against attack. During the late 1980s the world watched as the police states of Eastern Europe collapse. Those states collapsed when people of all classes refused to participate in them. The same thing will occur when we workers refuse to participate in Capitalism. That is why violence is not necessary when, united as a class, all that workers need to do is fold their arms in a General Strike to gain the world.

Membership

Membership in the IWW is based on three simple things:

- 1) Are you a worker who doesn't have the power to hire and fire?
- 2) Do you agree with the Preamble of the IWW?
- 3) Do you agree to educate yourself to the principles and aims of the IWW?

If you answer yes to all three of these questions, you can be a member of the IWW.