

The Wobblies

Review

Jeff Ditz

a review of

The Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World, Edited by Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, Verso, New York, 256pp., \$25

In the book, *Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, acclaimed New Left historian Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman of *World War 3 Illustrated* have put together a unique, lively, accessible and entertaining history of the most important union in American history. They use the style of a graphic novel and the contributions of many artists to show this complex history from the point of view of the participants.

The history presented feels immediate and personal. Among the best are the story of the founding convention in 1905 and a shipyard wildcat strike in 2001. If you're looking for a 'definitive history' go elsewhere. But this book captures the artistic joy and rebellious spirit well, is a rousing introduction to a turbulent history, and by using the graphic novel approach echoes the pre-pop pop of Joe Hill subverting Salvation Army songs.

The influence of the IWW extends now, as in the past, far beyond its membership. Construction trade workers, due to tradition and power in the workplace, are more inclined than other US workers to shut down a job when it's unsafe or unfair. "We should wobble this job," say construction workers in Detroit and elsewhere when they discuss answering a bad boss or bad conditions with a work slow down or shut down. Many electricians and carpenters may not know where the word "wobbling" comes from but their use of the word reveals its roots in the IWW tradition of direct action.

Construction workers aren't the only ones who use substitutes for "sabotage." The "S" word was informally banned from the pages of IWW publications from the 1920s until 1989 when it burst back forth on the cover of the union's paper, *Industrial Worker*, with an old Ralph Chaplin drawing

I went to Chicago in 1989 to serve as General Secretary-Treasurer of the organization. While our elders from the 'Sixties spoke nostalgically of SDS breaking up in Chicago and its working class members walking over to the IWW headquarters on Lincoln Ave. to join, of young hitchhikers from both coasts stopping in Chicago to trade news and the best drugs, and of Lionel Bottari, the first baby boomer to be General Secretary being driven from office for smoking pot, those of us in our twenties and thirties were trying to yank the union out of its nostalgia for its glory days.

We knew the ideas made sense. We understood their roots in almost a century of struggle for liberation. We'd worked in enough non-union and business union workplaces to choose a revolutionary one. But nostalgia? No, thanks. The question was how to make the organization, or at least its methods and analysis, relevant to today.

We re-introduced music to the annual convention, raised the issue of radical ecology, confronted homophobia and sexism, looked for humor in struggle, and found ways to organize small shops.

There's always been Wobbly humor. Bottari tells the story of organizing the Three Penny Cinema downstairs from the Chicago Lincoln Street office. The Three Penny was owned by a strident Stalinist, but one who didn't want unionized workers. So, we set up a big picket line that shut down the street and Bottari, in clown costume (as

all General Secretaries should be) was there fanning the flames. A cop asked who's in charge of this illegal picket. "Obviously that guy with the bull horn," says Lionel, pointing to theater owning Stalinist who got hustled off.

In the '90s Mike Konopacki's *Wage Slave World News*, a labor oriented send-up of the supermarket tabloid *Weekly World News*, appeared as a four page insert in the *Industrial Worker*.

With outrageous headlines and oversized pictures, the stodgy image of the IW was shattered. The AFL-CIO's quest for the "American Dream" was offered as the reason they'd been sleeping for the past few decades. "Bossicide" was explained as a logical reaction to work and the fastest growing crime in the country.

No boss, no union pork-chopper, no conservative Wobbly was safe from satire. And of course the *Slave* was first to print the news of Billy Bragg swallowing Joe Hill's ashes.

But while many loved the *Slave*, others hated it, and eventually a union wide referendum was held to see if the editors were allowed to be funny in print. Humor won.

Early in 1989, my co-worker, Ingrid Kock, had me return a call to an energetic woman in Northern California whose membership the previous administration had not accepted. Ingrid feared the rejection was due to her radical environmentalism, but she said we should sign her up. Ingrid was right and soon the late Judi Bari formed a new IWW branch in the Redwoods. Bari began organizing when a mill workers union sold out its members and brought together, tentatively at first, but concretely, timber workers and Earth First!ers.

Judi began political life as a Maoist but learned about direct action and the Wobblies through her involvement in the 1970 postal system wildcat strikes. The EF!-IWW collaboration spread from California to the Midwest and New England and caused schisms in both organizations which effected the character of both.

Several pages in *Wobblies!* address that history. I wish Judi's analysis of the importance of labor/environmental work had been included: "We're not dangerous to the powers that be because we organize to save the forests. We're not dangerous because we organize workers. What makes our work dangerous is organizing both together," she said.

The 1990 Oakland, California bombing of Bari and Darryl Cherney galvanized most of our union to defend them from the accusation they had bombed themselves. Some members opposed such solidarity—the chair of the executive board going so far as to block the board from issuing a statement of their innocence with the claim that the union's reputation demanded waiting for the authorities to say they were innocent.

Wiser members prevailed. The IWW defended the victims and granted a loan to begin the lawsuit against the police agencies that wrongly charged Bari and Cherney, which they eventually won. The board chair, who had a history of appearing and being disruptive at times of organizational energy, eventually was expelled for sabotaging the union's computer. Other conservative wobblies left on their own and the union re-energized and grew through the '90s becoming younger and more action-oriented.

The IWW holy-of-holies, the preamble to the constitution, had been changed only once (1908) since it was written in 1905. That nostalgia got tampered with, too. The '08 change booted Daniel DeLeon and the electoralist wing, giving rise to what some call the true, more anarcho-syndicalist, IWW. The 1992 change, sparked at the San Francisco convention in 1991 by Judi Bari and Mark Kaufmann going upstairs and coming back with language changes, brought ecological concerns forward. The '08 preamble said:

"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."

The new language changed the last part of that to read: "...organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth."

The last piece of nostalgia we broke was the tie to Chicago. From its founding in 1905 to 1990, the office and conventions had been in the Windy City. The convention now floats and the office has moved three times since then—San Francisco, Ypsilanti, Michigan and now Philadelphia—allowing new energy and new people to carry it forward. It moved to the internet, too—www.iww.org—the first union website ever.

Seth Tobocman's piece in *Wobblies!*, "Strike: Lawrence 1912," sums up one of the best Big Bill Haywood stories in four panels. He depicts Haywood's legendary ability to speak to a crowd of immigrant workers in several languages among them with language and gestures so concise that all could understand.

In 1915, Big Bill went to Chicago to stop drinking and be closer to his Toledo, Ohio girlfriend. (He didn't stop drinking, dying drunk in Moscow with a Russian wife he couldn't speak to.) In 1989, I sent a "Dear Fellow General

Secretary” letter to Mikhail Gorbachev asking for his party—CPSU—to make good on their decades old promise to reimburse the IWW for Haywood’s bail money he skipped out on following his 1918 conviction. Gorby didn’t respond even though I offered to take the refund in rubles.

Does it matter if the IWW goes on as an institution? I don’t know. I do know it matters that the ideas and actions of the IWW go on. And they will. The authoritarian left is dead while the anti-authoritarian left grows.

Wobbly or wobbly. IWW dues payer or IWW in their heart this most important of US unions is not just nostalgia, but may be a piece of what it will take to end the American empire and make the world safe for life.

“Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results. The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.”

— Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*

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