

Wobbly Without Work?

Reflections on the IWW anniversary

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If there's any idea promoted by the Wobblies that needs revision, it's their concept of "One Big Union." Even if one big union were doable, it may not be desirable. If I had to bet on it, I'd predict it will be One Big Corporation that will demonstrate to us the dystopian nature of "uniting" seven billion people. (Look for a global company like WorldMart in the future.) While the international capitalist system should stimulate global solidarity among non-elites, our struggles and solutions are necessarily local, regional, and decentralized.

The current examples of Wobbly struggles can be understood as successfully small because they demonstrate the manner in which organization actually accomplishes its goals—horizontally among peers.

Only by fighting battles we can win and endorsing a vision we can manage as equals will we salvage the militant kernel that the Wobblies announced in 1905. Glib pronouncements about globalization from below actually betray the economic and ecological imperatives of the planetary predicament.

Size does matter, and small is what societies are when they function in an egalitarian fashion. The Wobbly spirit of revolution isn't really about owning the means of production and controlling them through a bureaucracy of councils and syndicates—but rather, as the IWW Preamble suggests, "abolishing the wage system" and "living in harmony with the earth."

Are Wobblies workerist? That is, do they glorify toil and sacrifice? This critical concern deserves some deconstruction if we are to extend the Wobbly ideal into the next 100 years. Here, Wobbly tradition is instructive. Since so many Wobs were unemployed, they did not glorify the daily drudge, and this zerowork tendency was best expressed in many Wobbly songs. Similarly, since so many Wobs were young migrants and outcasts, they never glorified middle-class institutions like schools and elections.

The Preamble also promotes an unwavering radicalism on the question of reform versus revolution, announcing its imperative to abolish the wage system. Those who would lump this tradition into the garden-variety tendency of workerism are wrong. In fact, the Wobbly spirit encourages an antagonism to the idea of work itself, in contrast to the New Age revision of workerism often labeled "right livelihood," or even anarchist notions of worker-owned collectives.

Efforts to "reclaim" or "redefine" work often lack critical examination and social awareness and instead proffer trite rationalizations to encourage more work. These ideas comprise a sort of Protestant Work Ethic Lite, promoting principled labor as a path to spiritual redemption for the alienated middle class consumer.

We all can gain gratification and even pleasure from meaningful activity that others may call work, but as long as these pursuits are contaminated by wages and mediated by bosses, they cannot be redeemed.

The spiritual path of "right livelihood" is not about learning to meditate and chant while you punch the clock as some writers on the topic seem to imply; the path to enlightenment is laden with opportunities for revolutionary direct action or it is nothing more than the same highway to hell this petrified civilization has been on for a long time.

At its evocative end, the Preamble is really about building the new world now. But if we are creating our new reality amid the ruins of this rotten system, the old world still multiplies its own tyranny, preventing the liberation of the imagination. And to some, the new world is the narrow world-view of self-appointed revolutionary leaders.

Others invoke a new world that looks like some ridiculously detailed syndicalist blueprint or an Edward Bellamy-esque white-bread utopia. But it also could look like dynamic and diverse Bolos blooming on the banks of a whisky river, in the valley beneath the cliffs of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. It can be what we make it, infused with the magical and marvelous.

Now, 16 years after the formal fall of state-communism as an imperial system, the possibility of lots of little autonomist socialisms seems real again. If anything, it has become easier today to identify capitalism's industrial economy itself as the enemy—with the state as the steering committee and warmakers as the police force.

The generalist poetry of the Preamble prevents us from using it like scripture and bullying others with a correct interpretation. It's a zealous dose of working class hope in some often hopeless times. And, its core vision, no matter how unrealized, is cause for visionary reflection and further Wobbly dreams.

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