

THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZATION

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On April 15th, 1915 members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) gathered in Kansas City, MO at a conference called by Local 61. The goal of the conference was to form a new industrial organization amongst the harvest workers of the Midwest. By the end of the conference, the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO) was formed to initiate a broad industrial campaign to organize the entire wheat harvest, from northern Texas to southern Manitoba, into one big union. The immediate demands of the AWO were as follows: “(a) freedom from illegal restraint; (b) proper board and lodgings; (c) a 10-hour day; (d) a standard wage of \$4.00 [a day] for the harvest season; and (e) tentatively, free transportation in answering any call from a considerable distance.”(Veblen 798). The AWO used new tactics such as the “job delegate” and the “on the job strike” to organize the wheat harvest. These new tactics along with the structural changes within the union allowed the AWO to organize thousands of workers expanding into the lumber, construction and oil industries. By combining a fluid organizational style that incorporated the experience and culture of the harvest workers with the division of labor and bureaucracy of an industrial union the AWO brought a wavering stability to the hitherto unstable IWW.

THE HARVEST HAND

“The harvest drive is on again,
John Farmer needs a lot of men;
to work beneath the Kansas heat,
and shock and stack and thresh his wheat.”
~ Harvest Land, by T.D. and H,
From the *Little Red Song Book*.

The harvest worker was new to the IWW when it launched the AWO. The organization that came to be synonymous with the tramping farm laborer had only 100 paid up members in the agricultural industry in 1913 (Brissenden 268). The 200,000 workers that followed the wheat harvest faced many conditions that made collective action and protection necessary. According to E.F. Doree, an organizer for the AWO, the conditions of work were the most pressing concern of the harvest worker. Doree described the working conditions of the wheat harvest in a 1915 article, “The men are expected to be in the fields at half past five or six o’clock in the morning until seven or half past seven o’clock at night with from an hour to an hour and a half for dinner. It is a common slang expression of the worker that they have an “eight-hour work day” – eight in the morning and eight in the afternoon.”(Brier 229). On top of the long hours, workers faced heat, which killed “twenty five men . . . in one day last year in a single county in Kansas [1914].”(Brier 229). The workers also faced lice infested camps, meager earnings of \$2.50 a day, and job sharks that demanded payment for placement on a harvesting crew.

The harvest worker represented the All-American version of the “generic worker” that the IWW sought to bring in to its ranks. Harvest workers were generally native born white men. These workers differed greatly from immigrant textile workers that formed the core of the IWW’s organization up to 1916 (Brissenden 354). The harvest workers had “heterogeneous backgrounds. They were not divided into racial groups and were predisposed, from an early date, to a radical type of trade unionism”(McWilliams 92). The AWO was able to tap into the culture built by these heterogeneous workers as a means to develop the organization.

When the harvest was over these workers often procured employment working on a highway or railroad labor gang or as a lumberjack in the northwest woods. Before the harvest many workers would end up in the bars and flop houses of Midwestern cities like, Kansas City, Omaha and Minneapolis. It was in these urban centers that the job sharks that hired laborers for different farmers spread the word about the up coming crop. Cities also gave the workers access to an IWW union hall or reading room where the migrant worker could relax and catch up on the news of the latest industrial battle.

These workers maintained a mass informal work group as they traveled the country, job to job, via the undercarriages, grainers and boxcars of the freight train. Workers used the railroad as a form of mass transportation from job to job and created instant communities in migrant camps. The migratory nature of harvest work separated the workers from the society that they helped feed. This independent harvest worker culture adopted membership in the AWO as one of its major aspects.

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

“The employing class and the working class have nothing in common.”
~ preamble to the 1905 IWW constitution.

The AWO was the first concerted attempt by the IWW to organize workers in an industry-wide campaign. From 1905 to 1915, the IWW had made a name for itself as the radical labor center of the United States. The organization was founded on June 27th, 1905, with the main purpose as described by the former hard rock miner, and IWW leader, Big Bill Haywood:

“to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class for the slave bondage of capitalism. . . The aims and objects of this organization should be to put the working class in possession of the economic power, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution, without regard to capitalist masters. . . . This organization will be formed, based and founded on the class struggle, having in view no compromise and no surrender, and but one object and one purpose and that is to bring the workers of this country into the possession of the full value of the product of their toil”(Dubofsky 46).

While the IWW was well endowed when it came to radical propaganda it had troubles making the jump from rhetoric to theory and from theory to practice. From the founding the IWW was composed of socialists, syndicalists, Deleonites, trade unionists, and workers with no political line at all. Accordingly, the IWW had no concrete guiding theory that was set in one single philosophical or political tendency. Rather, the IWW was a wishwash of the radical tendencies of the day. These internal divisions caused a series of organizational splits and general confusion between 1905 and 1915.

The creation of the AWO provided a brief relief from this confusion by providing a model for industrial organization that brought members into the union while simultaneously improving conditions in the fields. Before the AWO the IWW had made a name for itself in two areas of action: the free speech fights in the west and strike support in the east. The explosion of the free speech fights from 1910-1914 taught the IWW how to attract attention of workers and local authorities via ‘soapboxing’ from the street corner. The free speech fights proved to be important battles in the areas of constitutional rights and civil liberties, but failed to create the industrial organization of the working class that the IWW had as its mandate. This tactic gave the IWW some basic access to migratory workers who would stop and listen to the soapboxers. However, when it came to the actual practice of organizing a union the AWO found that soapboxing was not a very effective way to build the union and banned the practice.

The other arena in which the IWW had success was strike support for textile and other manufacturing workers in the east. The most famous of these cases is the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike of 1912. The IWW used the experienced leadership of Arturo Giovannitti, Big Bill Haywood, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to turn the struggle for better wages and working conditions into a class room where “the involved [could] gain valuable experience in the class struggle and. . . [develop their own] sense of power”(Dubofsky 93). The strike united many different nationalities who the factory owners had tried to pit against each other. Although the strike was victorious the IWW was not able to transform the victory at Lawrence into an industry wide organization of textile workers.

THE AWO: IMPORTANCE, TACTICS AND VICTORIES:

“Some means should be taken for concerted and efficient action in the harvest fields next year”
~ Frank Little, IWW General Convention, 1914.

During the harvest of 1914, workers showed signs of resistance to the long hours, low wages and exploitation in the fields. The September 25th 1914 issue of Harper’s Weekly reported, “thousands of men, marching in great bands, have broken down the rules of the railroads. . . and acted as aggressive units in making wage demands”(McWilliams 96). This spontaneous action was noticed by many in the IWW including Local 61 in Kansas City, which attempted, with little success, to organize some harvest workers in 1914.

With the aims of channeling the unrest of 1914 into an industry-wide union the IWW created the AWO. Based out of Kansas City for its first two years the new organization was headed by Walter Nef. Nef was a veteran of the IWW free speech fights in Spokane Washington and had worked various laborer positions in the Midwest. Walter Nef rarely talked politics but was one of the most organizationally minded officials the IWW had. Under his watch the AWO expanded its membership to 100,000 workers in a number of industries. This massive influx of members along with the higher initiation fees instituted by Nef gave the IWW the financial stability to increase its organizing

capacity. This continued throughout the life of the organization with over half of the IWW's finances coming from the AWO, and later the AWIU, for the years of 1915 through 1925 (OSU 3).

The AWO developed the tactic of the job delegate, which helped them organize the harvest. Job delegates were IWW members assigned to go on the harvest and work on farms indifferent regions. The delegates would ride the rails and sleep in jungles (migrant worker camps) with the rest of the hoboing farm hands. Along the way they would talk up the IWW and the need for industrial organization. Organization became increasingly important on the trains where harvest workers were subject to muggings, beatings and sometimes death by various criminals. It was not uncommon to have a band of robbers go from boxcar to boxcar robbing harvest workers and "greasing the rails" with those who put up a fight. The AWO took on these criminals and formed a sort of protective association for the harvest worker off the job.

In the fields, the job delegate employed the tactics of direct shop floor democracy and direct action. Under the job delegate system, "members set wage and hour demands beforehand, selected an individual or committee to negotiate with a farmer, then as a group, ratified any agreement"(Sellars 49). If a farmer failed to meet the agreed wage the workers would engage in the on the job strike, often referred to by the infamous but all too misunderstood term, sabotage. As described by in a pamphlet by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, sabotage to the IWW meant the conscious, "withdrawal of efficiency. . . either to slacken up and interfere with the quantity, or to botch in your skill and interfere with the quality of capitalist production"(Renshaw 180). Harvest workers would use the combination of the conscious withdrawal of efficiency with the necessity of a quick harvest (most of the wheat harvests took about seven days) as leverage to win their demands.



Shop floor democracy in action, AWO members take vote in the fields

The use of new tactics such as the job delegate and the on the job strike proved to be a success for the AWO. The AWO increased its membership by over 18,000 within the first year and were able to contribute \$50,000 to the IWW's organizational coffers (Renshaw 176-178). The organization was also able to set the 10 hour day as an industry standard and retain a slight wage raise of .50 cents a day. With these victories under its belt the AWO looked forward to the coming harvest of 1917. While the AWO was preparing to launch another harvest campaign the United States entered into a war that would unequivocally change the organization.

WORLD WAR I:

"I love my country, yes, I do, I hope her folks do well.
With out our arms and legs and things, I think we'd look like hell.
Young men with faces half shot off, are unfit to be kissed.
I've read in books it spoils their looks; I guess I won't enlist.

~ Anonymous, *Industrial Worker*, April 14, 1917.

During World War One the value of wheat rose drastically. Farmers from the American grain belt were supplying a mass amount of wheat for both the European and domestic markets. With many American workers going over seas during the war the labor market shrunk and provided greater bargaining leverage for the AWO. The economics of war production helped the AWO in their organization as they were able to steadily increase their membership to

100,000 by the end of the 1917 harvest (Sellars 93). At the same time the politics of the war aligned both the government and employers against the IWW.

The leadership of the AWO was split on the issue of the war. Nationally the IWW had called WWI ‘a rich mans war but a poor mans fight’ suggesting that the war was in the interest of employing class. The AWO leadership agreed with this assessment but was divided on what the organization should do in response to the war. IWW martyr and former AWO organizer Frank Little took a hard stand against the war siding with the minority faction within the union that called for a general strike to halt all war production. On the other hand, the majority in the IWW and AWO leadership felt that a hard stance against the war would cause the IWW to face swift repression. Leaders in the majority felt that government repression would cause the IWW to fail to achieve its mandate of organizing the unorganized into one big union. Walter Nef weighted in on the war debate by stating, “We are against the war but not organized and can do nothing”(Renshaw 217). In the May 12th, 1917 issue of the IWW’s main paper *Solidarity*, an editorial summarized the position of Nef and those who thought organizing was still more important than anti-war propoganda. The editorial reads, “We are unalterably opposed to war and conscription. . . had we the power we would stop every ship, train, mine, mill, every food and supply plant-every wheel of industry”(Renshaw 217). In 1917 they had the membership numbers to show a popular resentment of the war, around 200,000 according to the U.S. government case against Big Bill Haywood, but they had not organized a critical mass in any of the major war industries (Bressenden 357). Quite simply many of the leadership felt that the IWW did not hold enough organized strength to strategically act against the war.

The decision of the leadership not to proceed with a general strike against the war, did not stop the government from linking every industrial action, taken on behalf of better wages and conditions, with acts of treason and support of the Kaiser. While the AWO was able to grow in membership during the beginning of the war the national leadership was under attack. Many of the IWW’s leaders and organizers faced jail time for criminal actions of sedition connected to their union activity. Judges in Wichita Kansas, Omaha Nebraska, Kansas City Kansas and Chicago Illinois sentenced IWW leaders to jail under criminal sedition laws. On June 9th 1917, Missouri National Guardsmen sacked the IWW hall in Kansas City, beating members and arresting one organizer (Sellars 99). IWW members also faced self-described “citizens groups” like the Knights of Liberty and the KKK who used threats of violence to terrify workers and silence organizers.

This persecution did not stop the AWO from expanding into the oil fields of southern Kansas and Oklahoma, in 1917. The Oil Workers Industrial Union no. 450 was founded out of the AWO members employed in the oil industry. The organizers of the OWIU called for \$5 a day, double pay for over time or dangerous work, the eight hour day and an end to discrimination against IWW members (Sellars 72). In spring of 1917 the OWIU led a strike at a Prairie Pipeline camp in Augusta Kansas that won paid transportation for workers as well as an hour lunch break (Sellars 73).

POST WORLD WAR I:

“Arise like lions after slumber,
In unvanquishabel number.
Shake your chains to earth like dew,
Which in sleep have falled on You.
Ye are many, they are few.”

~ E.F. Doree, AWO/IWW organizer,

Letter to the *Industrial Worker* from a Louisiana jail.

Coming out of the war years the IWW looked to the AWO, now called the Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, to regain its strength in the agriculture industry as well as much needed financial stability. The AWIU was not completely destroyed by the war time repression that beheaded the IWW of most of its leadership. The AWIU retained many of its on the ground organizers who where ready to rebuild the organization. The combination of the post WWI strikes in many major industries and the upcoming harvest of a ‘bumper crop’ that would demand a massive amount of workers gave organizers hope that if farmers did not raise wages the AWIU could turn the workers dissatisfaction in to a recruitment tool.

To organize such a massive number of workers the AWIU would rely heavily on the job delegate system. At the beginning of the harvest, the AWIU’s new secretary-treasurer, Mat Fox, issued job delegate credentials to anyone who had been in the union for six months (Sellars 145). The repression that the IWW faced in the war years was still around, in fact it was heightened in many places due to the red scare that was intensified by the Bolshevik revolution. According to the AWIU Bulletin No. 45, August 11, 1919 an estimated 100 job delegates had been

arrested in Kansas, while around 1000 members remained behind bars for activity during the harvest campaign. Despite the efforts of local authorities, the AWIU enrolled 4,000 new members to its ranks. The organization was also able to raise \$8,658, some of which was donated to help striking IWW's in Brooklyn, New York (Sellars 145).

The AWIU entered into a rollercoaster of membership drives until its post war peak of late 1922. In 1922 the AWIU organized 14,459 new members. The organization was still the most important financial contributor to the IWW. "Nearly \$85,000 of the money the AWIU had raised in 1922 [\$135,055 total] went to support strikes in Oregon and California; and harvesters had also provided defense funds for Wobblies in Centralia, Washington, and made a large donation to the IWW's Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota"(Sellars 150). This financial burden wore heavy on the AWIU. At the May, 1923 convention in Oklahoma City the AWIU decided to break with its policy of financially supporting the organizational efforts of other IWW unions. This decision along with several other factors lead to the internal strife that would bring an end to the AWIU as the organized force amongst Americas farm workers.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

Improvements on machinery take your tool and skill away,
And you'll be among the common slaves upon some fateful day.
Now the things of which we're talking we are mighty sure about.
So what's the use to strike the way you can't win out?
~ From the song "Tie 'Em Up!" By G. Allen

There were several objective changes that had a major impact on the AWIU's ability to organize, but the internal divisions within the IWW did not make the task any simpler. One of the resounding issues during the IWW's organizationally stable period was the question of where the power should lie within the organization. On one side there were the centralizers, represented foremost by the IWW's General Executive Board and the financially powerful AWIU. The centralizer's main goal was to create One Big Union, in line with the founding documents of the IWW. The centralizers wanted the power to remain with the General Executive Board. The decentralizers, represented by the lumberjacks and construction workers, thought the General Executive Board had too much power. The decentralizers favored giving more autonomy to the various industrial unions much in line with the structure of the American Federation of Labor. Beyond the debate between the centralizers and the decentralizers internal, "disputes emerged over how to deal with the newly formed Communist Party, haphazard strike policies, and the advisability of class-war prisoners accepting conditional pardons. Other debate centered on a perceived toning down of rhetoric in IWW publications and on a plan to buy a headquarters, which some more radical Wobblies saw as a betrayal of principles regarding private property"(Sellars 174). This rift created two IWW's in 1924. The centralizers who held the majority of both the centralizer and decentralizer rank and file headquartered themselves in Chicago. And the decentralizers, lead by lumberjack leader James Rowan, stationed themselves in Portland, Oregon. The internal strife of 1924 led many rank and file members to leave the IWW, never to return.

Outside of its internal strife the IWW and particularly the AWIU faced economic changes that challenged their methods of organizing. The mechanization of the wheat harvest began in the 1920's. The combine – with which five men could do the work of 320, had a devastating effect of both the AWIU as an organization and the harvest worker as an occupation. By 1928, the Oklahoma state Department of Labor estimated that wheat farmers owned 4,045 combines and the number of harvest workers was down to only 1,482 (Sellars 180).

The few farm workers that remained on the harvest were dramatically differently, in terms of demographics, transportation and experience, from the rail riding "harvest stiffs" that made up the AWIU's ranks. During the 1920's, the automobile entered into the fields and along with it, families who made their living following the harvest. These new workers did not have the same collective experience, as did the harvest hobos. In general the new migrant families represented a new form of labor relations that differed greatly from the former hoboing harvesters, to quote an article by John J. Hader, "congenial to each other and there is less possibility of dissension in the ranks [of harvest workers] while the work is on; in hiring this way the farmer does not run so great a risk of having his work interrupted by a strike"(McWilliams 101). The AWIU never developed a concrete plan to deal with these two major changes in the industry and as a result steadily lost membership from 1923 on.

CONCLUSION

"If the working class could only see and realize
What mighty power labor has
Then the exploiting master class

It would soon fade away.
~ From the song, "What We Want", By Joe Hill.

The closest the IWW ever came to ironing out its internal divisions came via the organization of the harvest workers in the Midwest. In just a few short years the AWO was able to organize thousands upon thousands of workers into relatively stable units that could win concessions on the job. The AWO did most of its organizing against great historical odds. While the AWO did not succeed in its mandate of organizing all harvest workers into one big union, it is important to know how close it came. If the IWW had been able to get over the internal divisions that plagued it from the start, it may have overcome the objective obstacles of the day and it is possible that industrial unionism could have been established in the United States ten years before the CIO. Sadly this was not in the cards. Without romanticizing or writing off the IWW it is important to look at its history to understand how workers have succeeded and failed at creating the organizations that could make the working class realize what a mighty power labor has.

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