

We Shall Be All

A History of the Industrial Workers
of the World

Abridged Edition

Melvyn Dubofsky

Edited by Joseph A. McCartin

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Editor's Introduction

Very few books in American social or labor history have stood the test of time as well as this one. More than thirty years after its publication in 1969, Melvyn Dubofsky's history of that hardy band of working-class radicals, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), remains the definitive account of its subject. This book's endurance is all the more remarkable considering how the field of labor history has changed since its publication. Over the past generation, in part because of the influence of studies like this one, labor history claimed its place as a legitimate academic subdiscipline in departments of history. Contributing to the rise of this field, hundreds of scholars, publishing thousands of books and articles, helped shape a new labor history in the years since the 1960s. Those scholars helped recover the untold stories of ordinary workers, rank-and-file labor activists, and radicals. More than a few participants in this scholarly renaissance directed their attention to the Wobblies (as IWW members were called). But none has yet attempted to duplicate or surpass Dubofsky's comprehensive, archive-based history of the IWW. This book has introduced more readers to the history of the Wobblies than any other.

Reasons for this book's enduring influence are not difficult to find. In addition to the massive research and careful analysis that informed its engaging prose, the popularity of this account can be attributed to at least three factors. Surely among these factors was the timing of its appearance. What more propitious moment than 1969 for the appearance of a full-length study of an unabashed radical movement—a movement that offered a vision of racial equality, that pioneered the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action so central to the insurgent politics of the 1960s?

Dubofsky's history of the IWW appeared at just the moment when proponents of the New Left and the civil rights and antiwar struggles, having suffered the disillusionments and defeats of 1968, began to cast about for models of an authentic American radicalism that could sustain them over the long haul

and rescue them from encroaching despair. In Dubofsky's IWW, they found joyful champions of what the New Left called participatory democracy, ardent visionaries of what the civil rights movement called the beloved community, and principled foes of what antiwar activists dubbed the military-industrial complex. They also found radicals undaunted by crushing defeats, men and women who had come to believe that "in the struggle itself lies the happiness of the fighter," as one IWW die-hard once put it.

But Dubofsky's account could scarcely be characterized as an effort to find a usable past for 1960s activists. This book was first and foremost a careful work of history, not a prescription for social change or an ideological brief. Indeed, it was Dubofsky's fealty to detail, balanced historical context, and measured judgment, and his unwillingness to bend his narrative in the service of any particular agenda, that constitutes a second reason for this book's lasting popularity.

As the following chapters make clear, Dubofsky refused to romanticize the Wobblies, to posthumously recruit them for the political battles of the day, or to settle for merely reinforcing their place in American mythology. Rather, he sought to probe beneath the IWW legend and to understand the movement and its leaders, their contradictions and failings, warts and all. The IWW's radicalism, as depicted in this account, defied simple categorization. Nor did it offer clear answers to the dilemmas that confronted radicals at the end of the 1960s, when this book first appeared. The Wobblies of whom Dubofsky wrote were presented as complex and sometimes contradictory figures who simultaneously embraced a radical vision and a realistic concern with the here and now that workers struggled with every day. They believed they could fight for concrete gains in the real world without sacrificing their ultimate vision of an industrial democracy administered at the point of production. Yet when forced to choose between the dictates of their revolutionary rhetoric and the immediate demands of their rank and file, Wobbly leaders usually opted for a pragmatic approach. It is ironic, given the Wobblies' incendiary reputation, that it was their decision to forgo grand radical gestures and instead concentrate on practical, job-centered organizing during World War I (a conflict the IWW opposed on principle) that led to the organization's repression. So effective were the Wobblies at organizing workers and leading them out on strike during the war that the United States government used nearly every means in its power to destroy the IWW in 1917.

By illuminating precisely such ironies as this one in the IWW's story, Dubofsky avoided casting the Wobblies in the role of mere radical icons or heroic

martyrs. Rather, they emerge as real men and women, both flawed and admirable. Their principled political commitments, Dubofsky made clear, did not give the Wobblies pat answers to the problems of organizing workers in their time. Nor did the passion or purity of those commitments rescue them from the costs of poor political analysis, the chaos of bitter factional strife and administrative incompetency, and the opposition of powerful forces beyond their control. Ultimately, the Wobblies who emerge in these pages are all the more compelling—and their contributions to American radicalism, labor organizing, and democracy all the more apparent—because their imperfections and contradictions are so well illuminated.

Yet the final—perhaps the most obvious—factor contributing to the enduring popularity of this book is surely its subject. Few stories in American history can match the one told here for stirring passion, pathos, romance, and tragedy. Few casts of historical figures can match the color or fiery eloquence of the Wobbly band, which included such figures as “Big Bill” Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Arturo Giovanitti, Ben Fletcher, and Father Thomas J. Hagerty.

But it is not only the dramatic character of the Wobblies and their story that have made them compelling figures through the years. They and their movement raised questions that have not yet been answered adequately, posed challenges that have yet to be met, and suggested alternatives that have yet to be consigned forever to the ash heap of history. Wobblies questioned whether a democracy was worthy of the name if it did not empower its poorest, its most maligned and marginalized. They challenged workers to build an inclusive labor movement capable of achieving that empowerment. And they envisioned a society of tolerance and material abundance administered for the benefit of all, a world in which international solidarity would make war obsolete.

The Wobblies’ vision continues to challenge those who share their dream of equality and justice. Nor is there any reason to believe that they will soon be forgotten. Indeed, the developments of recent decades arguably make the Wobblies’ story more relevant than when this book was first published. The Wobblies’ anarcho-syndicalist suspicion of government and its reform initiatives may have seemed somewhat anachronistic in the 1960s in an America reconstructed by the New Deal and the Great Society. But that critique seems eminently more plausible in an era marked by the dismantling of the welfare state, the paralysis of labor law reform efforts, and the growing power of transnational corporations. The Wobblies’ disparagement of the limitations of the American Federation of Labor’s “pork chop unionism” may have seemed

unreasonable in an era when powerful unions were achieving generous contracts for an increasing proportion of American workers. Yet that critique seems far more apt in an era when organized labor is able to deliver less power and fewer benefits to a shrinking slice of the American work force. If the Wobblies' story does not furnish obvious strategies for reversing such trends as these, it at least provides inspiration for those who would resist the globalization of unaccountable corporate power, redeem the unmet promises of democracy, and achieve dignity and security for the poor and neglected.

* * *

This is not the same book Melvyn Dubofsky published thirty years ago. In an effort to make this narrative more accessible to a new generation of readers, especially undergraduate students, I have abridged his account of the Wobblies' history. Although I have retained the original narrative and chapter structure of the book, I have excised roughly one-third of the original text along with Dubofsky's scholarly annotation. At times this effort led me to trim sentences, combine or cut entire paragraphs, or shorten quotations. However, I have not eliminated any significant episode from Dubofsky's 1969 narrative. I have attempted to make my cuts in a way that keeps faith with the careful tone, colorful detail, and complex analysis that informed the original book. To minimize distractions, I have not drawn attention to my cuts by the use of ellipsis points (except when I have shortened quotations). At the end of this volume, I have appended a bibliographical essay surveying recent works on the IWW.

I have made a special effort to preserve the nuances of Dubofsky's original analysis. Yet careful readers will note that I have altered Dubofsky's language when it was dated by current standards of usage. I have also eliminated most historiographic and theoretical references from this abridged account. In my judgment, removing such references (which would naturally seem outdated to today's readers) makes the text more accessible without materially altering Dubofsky's original argument. Of course, for those who seek the finer points of IWW history, there is no better starting place than Dubofsky's original volume.

* * *

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Thanks also to managing editor Theresa L. Sears and copyeditor Carol Anne Peschke for their help in preparing this volume. Thomas Featherstone helped me locate Wobbly photographs in the holdings of the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University. My brother and fellow historian, Jim McCartin, helped me digitize the original text that I edited into this book. My wife, Diane Reis, and daughters Mara and Elisa brightened my work with their love. And Melvyn Dubofsky left me free to make whatever decisions I felt appropriate in abridging his work while providing steady support as both a mentor and a friend. For this, and for his guidance over the years, I owe him a large debt of gratitude.

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A Setting for Radicalism, 1877–1917

The history of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) can be understood only in relation to the economic and social changes that between 1877 and 1917 transformed the United States into the world's leading industrial nation. IWW members, whether American-born or foreign-born, were first-generation immigrants to that industrial society. Hence they mirrored the perplexities and confusions, the strivings and ambitions of a generation compelled to contend with a world it had never made, a world it sometimes barely understood.

With the end of the Civil War, Americans shifted their energies from waging battles to building steel mills, digging coal, packing meat, and constructing cities. In the process of accomplishing all this, they created a new urban nation. In 1870 only about one of every four Americans lived in what the Census Bureau defined as an urban area; by 1900 the proportion had increased to more than two of every five, and by 1920 more than half the population resided in urban areas.

Americans also built immense industrial combinations. Between 1897 and 1904 the so-called first American trust movement spawned its corporate colossi. Wall Street analyst John Moody in 1904 reported the existence of 318 active industrial trusts with a capital of over \$7 billion, representing the consolidation of over 5,300 distinctive plants in every line of production. The acme of industrial combination came in 1901 when J. P. Morgan purchased Andrew Carnegie's iron and steel holdings, merging them with his own Federal Steel Company to form United States Steel, the first billion-dollar corporation in American history.

While America's total wealth increased enormously, its distribution remained uneven. The more wealth Henry George discovered, the more dismal poverty he perceived, leading him to conclude that progress and poverty went hand in glove. Jacob Riis also found no signs of affluence among his "Other Half" in New York's slums. Nor did Jane Addams at Hull House, nor did Lillian Wald at her settlement house on Henry Street. The nation's great wealth, so impres-

sive in the aggregate, was being distributed very unevenly among the groups making up American society.

Although the standard of living improved for most American workers between 1877 and 1917, poverty remained a fact of life for most working-class families and a condition of existence for many, if not for most. Robert Hunter, in his classic study *Poverty*, published in 1904, reported that not less than 14 percent of the people in prosperous times, and not less than 20 percent in bad times, suffered from dire poverty, with unemployment causing the bulk of the distress.

Other observers of working-class life in early twentieth-century America found conditions reminiscent of the worst features of nineteenth-century industrial England. At a twine factory in New York City, a social worker watched the women file out at day's end: "Pale, narrow-chested, from hand to foot . . . covered with fibrous dust. . . . They were the types of factory workers—pale, haggard feeders of machines—like those described in the days of a century past in England."

Yet not all workers labored for a pittance. For the skilled, who were always in scarce supply, a seller's market guaranteed high wages. And the influx into industry of millions of non-English-speaking immigrants created numerous well-paid supervisory plant positions for those who could read and write English. Native Americans and acculturated immigrants could move from the blast furnace or the work bench to the foreman's post. And their children could wear a white collar in place of the blue one. Their skills and their relative scarcity also enabled these workers to establish potent trade unions.

And what of the workers who did not qualify for membership in labor's aristocracy? Occupying a position somewhere between the elite and the lumpen-proletariat, these workers probably received just enough from the system in good times to keep them contented. As long as the promise of improvement beckoned and opportunity for it existed, the great mass of American workers had no irreconcilable quarrel with capitalism.

But if most workers benefited to a greater or lesser degree from American capitalism, a significant minority appeared to be bypassed altogether by industrial progress. Of these, none had a stronger grievance against the system than African Americans. Freed at last from the bondage of chattel slavery, they found new forms of economic subservience waiting for them. At a time when industry cried for workers, black men saw themselves in desperate, unsuccessful competition for factory employment with the immigrant millions from eastern and southern Europe. The black man thus typically remained in the Southland of his birth, there to work a white man's land with a white man's

plow, a white man's mule, and a white man's money. When industrial America finally did call him, it was too often to serve as a strikebreaker.

The new immigrants fared better than African Americans, but they too were second-class citizens in relation to native whites. Every survey of immigrant earnings shows that the latest arrivals ranked at the bottom of the economic ladder, the less industrialized their country of origin the lower their earnings in America. Only the African American's presence kept the Italian, the Pole, and the Slav above society's mudsill.

Although most immigrants found life in the New World sweeter than what they had known in the Old, sometimes they concluded, as did a Rumanian immigrant, "This was the boasted American freedom and opportunity—the freedom for respectable citizens to sell cabbages from hideous carts, the opportunity to live in those monstrous dirty caves [tenements] that shut out the sunshine."

One native American group with higher status than African Americans or immigrants also fared ill in the land that bred it. If the first half of the nineteenth century had been the golden age of the farmer in America, then the second half was the time of testing. The farms of New England, New York, and Pennsylvania now had to compete with the vast, fertile prairies of the West. From the noncompetitive farms of the Northeast, the foreclosed farms of the South and West, and from some successful farms everywhere, thousands of young men were pushed off the land. Eventually many of them drifted into the growing ranks of migratory workers: the men who followed the wheat harvest north from Texas to Canada; picked the fruits, vegetables, and hops of the West Coast; labored in the mines, construction camps, and lumber camps of the West, always ready to move on with the job to a new region, a new camp, a new life. But the region, the camp, and the life too often turned out to be the same as the old: primitive, brutal, lonely, drudging, and poorly paid.

From such as these—oppressed American blacks, immigrants disillusioned with America's promise, native-born Americans forced off the land—the Industrial Workers of the World attempted to forge a movement to revolutionize American society. Blacks, immigrants, and migratories always served as the major objects of the IWW's efforts and (such as they were) the sources of its strength. Of the three groups, the migratories were to prove the most militant, revolutionary, and loyal.

If American capitalism in the best of times provided just adequately for most citizens and hardly that well for millions more, in the worst of times it failed to provide even the fortunate with jobs, income, and security. Industrial de-

pressions and recessions occurred like clockwork in the half-century following Appomattox: first from 1873 to 1878, then again in 1883–85, 1893–97, 1907–9, and 1913–15. Always the story was the same: poverty in the midst of plenty. Idle people and idle capital. Sullen discontent and sporadic protest by the workers, gnawing fear by the middle and upper classes, and harsh repression by the authorities.

Desiring a measure of security in a time of economic fluctuation, workers sought to organize. The founders of the modern American labor movement learned the cardinal lesson of industrial society: the imperviousness of its basic problems to individual solution. For workers, this knowledge dictated the pooling of strength in trade unions and the creation of a national labor movement.

The wonder of labor history in the late nineteenth century is not that unions emerged but rather that they were so weak and that so few workers joined them. But a little reflection shows why. Although American society was hardly classless, it lacked the traditional bonds that tied European workers together into a class characterized by common patterns of thought and behavior. Indeed, America's working class was most notable for its religious and ethnic heterogeneity. Native-born workers had nothing but contempt for Irish Catholic immigrants, and Irish workers in turn looked down upon the late-coming Poles, Slavs, and Italians. Whites feared blacks; Jews suspected Gentiles. Employers easily played off one group against another and shrewdly mixed their labor forces to weaken group solidarity.

What judicious mixing could not accomplish, economic conditions and the law did. Too many workers had only their brawn to sell, and in a labor market periodically flooded by immigrants, brawn commanded a low premium. Better to win approval of one's boss by avoiding labor agitators and their unions than to lose one's job to a greenhorn or a scab! Those with skills to sell faced other barriers to union organization. American law sanctioned employers' anti-union devices but outlawed basic trade union tactics. The American judiciary, it has been said, tied one hand (and sometimes both) behind the worker's back before sending him into the Darwinian ring to fight a more powerful adversary.

The whole American environment seemed to conspire against the labor movement. From 1877 to 1893 social mobility was writ large. Everywhere one looked, evidence emerged of poor boys who had "made good." Perhaps they were the exception, but men live by fantasies as much as by reality, and if the reality of great wealth eluded a worker, he could still dream about it for his son.

So when times were good and opportunities abounded, the ambitious worker showed slight interest in trade unions or in any institution that threatened

to alter America's social structure. With depression, however, opportunities shriveled and dreams faded, driving the worker into the embrace of the union organizer, but unions, barely able to survive in prosperity, often collapsed at the first hint of depression.

The first important national labor organization to appear in industrial America was the Knights of Labor. Organized initially as a local secret society in 1869, made public and national in 1878, it invited all producers to join. Only capitalists, lawyers, gamblers, and drunkards were excluded from membership. Proclaiming universality of membership as its guiding principle, and solidarity—"An injury to one is the concern of all"—as its motto, the Knights functioned as a conventional labor organization. Most members were wage workers who joined to fight for higher wages and better working conditions.

As the only prominent national labor organization in existence, the Knights grew rapidly during the prosperous years from 1879 to 1886. By 1886 membership approached one million, and some middle-class Americans came to fear the organization's Grand Master Workman, Terence Powderly—a mild-mannered, narcissistic, administratively incompetent, constitutionally ineffective, teetotaling bumbler—much as later Americans feared the post-New Deal generation of powerful labor leaders.

But the Knights lacked real substance and power. Their membership diminished after 1886 as rapidly as it had previously increased. By 1888 the organization, if not dead, was certainly dying. The age demanded planning, executive ability, and a rational grasp of the issues. The Knights lacked all three.

Some elements in the labor movement did dwell on efficiency and results, notably the national trade unions, which in 1886 reorganized themselves as the American Federation of Labor (AFL). A rival national labor center competing with the Knights for members and for survival, the AFL lived and eventually thrived while the Knights declined and died.

What happened was that the trade unions recognized and acted upon what *was*; the Knights proposed what *could be*. The Knights, one historian wrote, "tried to teach the American wage-earner that he was a wage-earner first and a bricklayer, carpenter, miner, shoemaker after; that he was a wage-earner first and a Catholic, Protestant, Jew, white, black, Democrat, Republican after. This meant that the Order was teaching something that was not so in the hope that sometime it would be." But the AFL affiliates organized carpenters as carpenters, bricklayers as bricklayers, and so forth, teaching them all to place their own craft interests before those of other workers.

More and more after 1900, as the AFL under Samuel Gompers's leadership grew and prospered, it sought to sell itself to employers as the conservative

alternative to working-class radicalism. It could do so because its members were by and large the workers most satisfied with the status quo. In return for the good treatment accorded to the skilled elite dominant in the AFL, the federation became in time one of the strongest defenders of the American system. So long as wages rose, and they did, hours fell, and they did, security increased, and it appeared to, the AFL could grow fat while neglecting millions of laborers doomed to lives of misery and want.

Here the IWW entered the picture, for it offered to do what the AFL declined to attempt: organize the blacks, the new immigrants, and the workers in mass-production industries where craft lines dissolved under the pressures of technology. The IWW, like the Knights before it, told men and women that they were workers first and Jews, Catholics, whites or blacks, skilled or unskilled second. The IWW would also try to teach "something that was not so in the hope that sometime it would be."

Workers, however, were not the only Americans dissatisfied with the prevailing industrial order. This was also the era of populism, progressivism, and the rise of American socialism: The Age of Reform. While it lasted, all manner of things seemed possible in America. Myriad reformers hoped to transform America into a just and good, if not "Great," society.

Arising out of the agrarian depression of the 1880s and 1890s, populism presented the first effective challenge to thirty years of political complacency and drift. Discontent united the Populists. They agreed that production for profit, not for use, made the few rich at the expense of the many. They sensed that to compel workers to obey "natural" laws of supply and demand turned them into just another commodity, like lumps of coal or sacks of flour. Populists saw no sense in an economic order that forced farmers off the land because they produced a surplus yet could not feed hungry millions, they saw less sense in a system that laid off millions of workers because they could not consume what they had produced, and they found no sense at all in a political order that repressed the discontents of the masses but did little to curb the excesses, follies, and even tyrannies of great wealth. Populists instead proposed to keep the farmer on the land, the worker at the bench, and to return government to the service of the many, not the few.

Although populism died after the Democratic defeat in 1896 and the return of prosperity, reform survived. Progressivism followed. More urban, much more successful economically and socially, and much less alienated, Progressives nonetheless were well aware of the inadequacies and injustices rooted in American society. Through reform of the prevailing order, which they con-

sidered by and large to be satisfactory, Progressives sought to eliminate the occasion for future working-class uprisings or Populist revolts.

Progressive-era reforms included a little something for everyone: stricter antitrust laws and business regulation for the small manufacturer, merchant, and farmer; lower tariffs for the agrarians of the South and West, and also for consumers; and rural free delivery, postal savings banks, federal farm land banks, and other measures for the nation's farmers. Nor were workers and immigrants excluded from the bounty of progressive reform. For them, Progressives provided factory and social welfare legislation. Child labor was restricted, women workers gained new legal protection, factories were made safer and cleaner, workers gained compensation and liability laws, some states moved in the direction of minimum-wage legislation, and many cities began to tidy up their noisome slums.

Progressivism did of course terminate in a conservative *cul de sac*. But that was not the intention of most reformers. The capitalism they sanctioned was clearly not that of J. P. Morgan, Henry Frick, or George F. Baer; they favored a vague, undefined democratic version. Perhaps capitalism was not compatible with the progressive reformers' notions of a democratic and just society, but they could not know that until the nation had tried their reforms. Many reformers for a time had more in common with Socialists than with the businessmen and major party politicians of the period.

Indeed, during the progressive years socialism enjoyed its only period of sustained nationwide political success. Socialists benefited from the nation's awakened social conscience. To citizens alarmed about unrestrained and unregulated industrial capitalism, only the Socialist party offered a complete blueprint for a fundamentally different and, it believed, better America.

Socialism in this period also became Americanized. Previously thought of as the importation of European intellectuals and workers, the Socialist party's complexion appeared to change after 1900. Eugene Debs, its outstanding leader, though the child of immigrant parents, was himself American to the core, born and bred in the Midwest. Countless other prominent native Americans followed Debs into the party: The muckraking journalist Charles Edward Russell, Walter Lippmann, Florence Kelley, Frances Perkins, Upton Sinclair, John and Anna Sloan, Theodore Dreiser, and Max Eastman were only a few of the many Americans who found in socialism an antidote to their alienation from American society.

Americanization brought the Socialist party votes. Debs's presidential campaigns of 1904, 1908, and 1912 spread socialism's message broadcast. Locally,

where the possibilities of electoral victory were greater than at the national level, Socialists did exceedingly well. By 1911, as they captured the cities of Berkeley, Scranton, Bridgeport, Butte, and Schenectady, among others, articles were appearing in popular magazines voicing alarm at the “rising tide of socialism.”

Political success, however, only obscured basic weaknesses. Within the Socialist party, factionalism and personality clashes ran riot. Although factions and individuals usually united or divided on specific issues without much attention to ideological consistency, a right (reformist) and a left (revolutionary) wing struggled for party ascendancy. More important than factionalism was the party's inability to widen its ethnic appeal beyond a limited number of new immigrants—Jews, most notably—and its consequent abysmal failure to win mass support from Catholic workers. American socialism never captured the primary bastion of the labor movement, the AFL, as most European Socialists had done in their native lands.

While the age of reform lasted, millions of Americans challenged the old capitalist order. The system as described fifty years earlier by Marx and Engels was dying throughout the industrial world, the United States included, and various social groups were struggling to shape the economic order to come. None was absolutely certain of what the future would hold, but all wanted it to accord with their conceptions of a just and good society. In America, many options then appeared to exist, for in the 1890s and early 1900s the triumph of the modern corporation and the corporate state did not seem final or inevitable. Among the Americans who opted for an alternative to the capitalist system were the many Western workers who became the backbone of the IWW.