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One Big Union—One Big Strike: The Story of the Wobblies

Early in the 20th century, the Industrial Workers of the World, called the "Wobblies," organized thousands of immigrant and unskilled workers in the United States. The union eventually failed, but it helped shape the modern American labor movement.

In 1900, only about 5 percent of American industrial workers belonged to labor unions. Most unions were organized for skilled craft workers like carpenters and machinists. Membership in these craft unions was almost always restricted to American-born white men. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), led by [Samuel Gompers](#), dominated the labor movement. Gompers wanted to assemble the independent craft unions into one organization, which would work to improve the pay and working conditions of the union members. Gompers and the AFL believed that unskilled factory and other industrial workers could not be organized into unions. Therefore, the vast majority of American workers, including immigrants, racial minorities, and women, remained outside the labor union movement.

In 1905, a new radical union, the [Industrial Workers of the World](#) (IWW), began to organize workers excluded from the AFL. Known as the "Wobblies," these unionists wanted to form "One Big Union." Their ultimate goal was to call "One Big Strike," which would overthrow the capitalist system.

Big Bill Haywood and One Big Union

One of the main organizers for the IWW was ["Big Bill" Haywood](#). William Dudley Haywood grew up on the rough and violent Western frontier. At age 9, he began working in copper mines. Haywood eventually married and took up homesteading in Nevada. He discovered that he liked working for himself rather than for an employer, but he lost his homestead when the land became part of an Indian reservation. Haywood reluctantly returned to the harsh life of a mine wage worker.

In the 1890s, Haywood helped form the [Western Federation of Miners](#) union. A powerful speaker, he gained the reputation as a militant union organizer and strike leader. His followers called him "Big Bill."

In 1905, Big Bill joined like-minded union leaders and socialists, anarchists, and other radicals to organize a new national union. The founding convention took place in

Chicago. Big Bill called the convention to order by pounding a piece of board on the podium. He announced that the purpose of the meeting was to create a working-class movement to free workers from the "slave bondage of capitalism" and to bring workers "up to a decent plane of living."

The delegates at the convention condemned the American Federation of Labor for failing to organize the vast majority of industrial workers. They called for all workers to join their "One Big Union," which they named the Industrial Workers of the World. Their goal was to organize the working class to declare one big general strike to "take possession of the earth and the machinery of production." According to the [IWW's founding document](#), "It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism." Once this was accomplished, a "Cooperative Commonwealth" would be established with the workers in control.

The delegates split over one important issue. The socialists at the convention, like [Eugene V. Debs](#), wanted the IWW to engage in politics and elections. But the anarchists believed that the election system was merely a tool of capitalism. They rejected political participation and argued for "direct action" in the form of strikes, worker demonstrations, and even sabotage. The two sides finally compromised by agreeing that the IWW would operate in both areas, but would not become attached to any political party.

The Struggles of the "Wobblies"

The willingness of the IWW to sign up almost anyone gave it the reputation of being a union of hoboes, drifters, and other lowlifes. Some said that IWW stood for "I Won't Work." But [Harrison Gray Otis](#), the anti-union owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, put into print the IWW's most lasting name: the "Wobblies."

During the early years of the IWW, the Wobblies had some successes. For example, a strike by Nevada gold miners won them an eight-hour day. But after winning a strike, the IWW often failed to follow up and establish a strong, permanent local union.

In addition, IWW leaders were often arrested and accused of violent acts. Two trials in particular stand out. In 1907, Big Bill Haywood was put on [trial](#) for the bombing murder of a former Idaho governor. Defended by famed attorney Clarence Darrow, Big Bill was acquitted when the only witness against him proved to be a liar. In 1915, union organizer [Joe Hill](#) was tried, convicted, and executed in Utah for murdering a store owner during an armed robbery. The IWW considered Hill innocent and rallied supporters with his memory. Others believed him guilty. The question of his guilt still causes controversy.

The IWW met annually in Chicago. Bitter arguments between the socialists and anarchists weakened the union. One thing, however, drew the Wobblies together--the so-called "free speech fights" in Western cities. IWW union organizers held street meetings, condemning employers for the low pay and poor working conditions of lumberjacks, migrant laborers, and other unorganized workers. In several cities, employers persuaded the local government to pass laws banning IWW speakers from public places. The

Wobblies resisted and held mass meetings, which resulted in many arrests that crowded the jails and clogged the courts. In some towns, vigilantes, supported by employers and the police, beat up the Wobblies. Things came to a climax in 1916 when vigilantes and police shot to death five Wobblies in [Everett, Washington](#).

One Big Strike

In Lawrence, Massachusetts, more than 40,000 immigrant textile mill workers, including women and children, worked 56-hour weeks at low wages (between 12 and 16 cents per hour). In 1912, the Massachusetts state legislature reduced the legal work week for women and children to 54 hours. In response, the mill owners immediately cut the pay of all workers.

To cries of "short pay!" the Lawrence mill workers left their machines and went on [strike](#). The small struggling IWW local union called for a general city-wide strike. "Better to starve fighting than to starve working!" the Wobblies said.

Overwhelmed by the massive walkout, the IWW local called for outside help. IWW leaders from New York City and elsewhere soon arrived to take charge. They set up a strike board made up of two representatives from each of the 25 immigrant groups participating in the strike. The board members then made their demands: a 15-percent wage increase for a 54-hour week and double pay for overtime.

The Lawrence city government called out the police and a city militia who, together with company guards, began to harass the strikers picketing the mills. Many of them were beaten and arrested. On a very cold January day, 15,000 strikers assembled in front of one factory to listen to IWW speakers. Suddenly, from inside the factory grounds, fire hoses sprayed freezing water onto the crowd. Workers rushed the factory gates and slashed the hoses. More than 30 were arrested.

On January 21, Big Bill Haywood arrived to encourage the strikers. His booming voice told workers: "Their weapon is the bayonet! Yours is solidarity! Stand fast, fellow workers, and those bayonets are less dangerous than toothpicks! Solidarity! That's the stuff!"

Haywood realized that the Lawrence strike was the first involving large numbers of unorganized foreign-born workers. He wondered if this were the beginning of the one big strike that would break the back of capitalism.

As the bitter cold days wore on, the strikers and especially their young children suffered from the lack of adequate food, clothing, and housing. Early in February, the strike board decided to evacuate the children by train to New York City and other places. After the New York press reported the arrival of the first group of ragged and starving Lawrence children, public opinion began to swing to the strikers.

When a second group of children and their mothers waited at the Lawrence train station for another evacuation, police and militia members attacked them with clubs and rifle butts. Reported in the press, this attack produced national outrage. The mill owners gave up and agreed to the strikers' demands.

The Lawrence strike proved to be the high point of IWW influence on the American labor movement. It did not spark the long-awaited big strike to end the capitalist system. And again, the Wobblies did not develop a strong local union after the strike succeeded. Within a few years, the hard-won wage gains were wiped out by the mill owners who speeded up the pace of production.

The Chicago Trial of 1918

In 1914, World War I began in Europe. Big Bill Haywood and most other Wobblies believed the war was a capitalist plot to increase their profits. The Wobblies opposed U.S. entry into the war in 1917 and spoke out against the military draft. One IWW [poster](#) said: "Why Be a Soldier? Be a Man Join the IWW. And Fight on the Job for Yourself and Your Class."

The IWW continued to agitate for better pay and working conditions. It even led a handful of strikes against industries necessary for the war effort. But the Wobblies were called traitors and became the targets of more vigilante violence. One IWW union organizer was [lynched in Butte](#), Montana.

Angered by the IWW's anti-war and anti-draft positions, President Woodrow Wilson authorized raids on IWW offices across the country on September 5, 1917. Based on the documents that were seized, 101 IWW leaders were charged with conspiracy to obstruct America's participation in the war.

The mass trial of IWW leaders, including Big Bill Haywood, took place in Chicago during April 1918, only months after the Russian Revolution. The defense tried to show that the IWW was only attempting in non-violent ways to improve the pay and conditions of American workers. The Wobblies testified that they were not trying to obstruct the war effort or to incite a revolution. Although the prosecution had a weak legal case, the radical reputation of the Wobblies influenced the jury, which found all of them guilty. Big Bill Haywood and the others were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to 20 years plus heavy fines.

Big Bill was released from prison on bail to work on the IWW court appeal. But when the court upheld the IWW convictions in 1920, he and several others fled to Russia rather than return to prison. Big Bill's desertion of the IWW cause shocked and demoralized the IWW rank and file.

With most of their leaders in prison or exile, huge fines and court costs to pay, and disagreements over the future of the IWW, members began to abandon the union. By

1924, the IWW had dwindled to fewer than 100 members. Four years later, Big Bill Haywood died in Moscow, a broken and forgotten man.

Despite the failure of the IWW, the Wobblies did prove that large numbers of unskilled industrial workers could be successfully unionized. In the 1930s, many of them joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The Wobblies also pioneered non-violent tactics like large public demonstrations and the sit-down strike.

The IWW's failure to attract a strong, permanent membership set the course for unions in the United States. American workers didn't try to overthrow capitalism and take control of industry themselves. Higher pay and better working conditions, not "one big union--one big strike," became the main priorities of most union members in the 20th century.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What was the meaning of "one big union--one big strike"?
2. Do you think the federal government was justified in putting the IWW leaders on trial in 1918? Why or why not?
3. What do you think was the most important reason for the failure of the IWW? Explain your answer.

For Further Information

[Memories of the Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\)](#) Transcript of a speech by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, an IWW member, delivered at Northern Illinois University in 1962.

[The Lawrence Strike: A Study](#) An article in the May 1912 *Atlantic Monthly* on the Lawrence strike.