

## Longshore Labour and Radicalism

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

### Longshore Labour and Radicalism

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Robert W. Cherny, *Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend*  
(Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2023)

Harvey Schwartz, with Ronald Magden, *Labor under Siege: Big Bob McEllrath and the ILWU's Fight for Organized Labor in an Anti-union Era*  
(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022)

Ahmed White, *Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022)

WHILE NOT AS WELL STUDIED as textile (which has many hundreds of books and articles) or auto and coal, longshore work has been examined at length by several previous generations of scholars. There are now a number of new books on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the West Coast longshore union, and its founding leader Harry Bridges. While coal and textile work have largely disappeared from North America, and auto production, though still critical, is no longer overwhelmingly located in the United States and Canada, West Coast longshore work in both countries plays an even more central role today in the global economy and is a major cog in the logistics industry, the global supply chain. In addition, there is a recent spate of material on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies), which, along with the ILWU, is often presented as a model for radical labour organizing, in contrast to the business unionism – or worse – of most contemporary labour organizations. In this essay, I will examine several of these new works and their relevance for today.

This scholarship and the questions raised are not just of arcane, prurient, or antiquarian interest but relevant to understanding the tasks of radical labour activists today. I will argue that these earlier histories – the IWW in the 1910s

and 1920s, the Communist Party (CP) and other radicals in the 1930s and 1940s, and present labour struggles – are an aid in understanding current labour activities and the tasks of organizers today.

One question is about who are the most strategically placed workers – those with the most leverage against capitalists and, not always the same thing, which workers can inspire others to mobilize. Closely related is the question of how to go about organizing workers in the most solidaristic fashion, supporting both all segments of the working class – especially those who are most oppressed, including women, Blacks and other people of colour, and immigrants – and the struggles of all of oppressed humanity, including LGBTQ communities. These are big questions, on which some of the recent material sheds some light.

Where do workers have the most power? Workers in society have two types of power: what I have called elsewhere structural power and associational power.<sup>1</sup> Structural power refers to the type of economic leverage that different groups of workers have. Certain workers have more leverage than others. For example, during the 1930s, coal miners, subjected to brutality, harsh conditions, and violence, when finally organized were able, when they struck en masse, to exert enormous leverage. By 1933, before the passage of section 7a of the *National Industrial Recovery Act* (NIRA), the United Mine Workers of America had organized virtually all of the 600,000 North American coal miners. Coal was still the dominant source of energy; when coal miners struck, their workplaces could not be moved. They also could not be easily replaced except by other skilled miners. Coal miners worked in dangerous conditions underground with dynamite, bracing rooms so they would not collapse, and so on. No one in their right mind would go down and work in a mine without such skilled co-workers. So, during World War II, when coal miners struck and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said the mines would be seized and coal mined by the military, miners correctly replied that coal could not be mined by bayonets. After a series of massive strikes, the government finally conceded to the miners' demands.

This situation stands in contrast to that of textile workers, who had little structural power, whose jobs could be easily moved (today as then), and who could be replaced with new workers who were easily trained. Presently, coal miners in North America are negligible in number, with little leverage. Manufacturing workers in major industries – auto, aerospace, food production, and others – still have important leverage, and thus structural power, although the “choke points” are at times more international than local. Especially central today is the logistics industry: shipping, longshore, railroads, trucking, warehouse, and distribution, including, as the COVID-19

1. See, for example, Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 24–26; Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

pandemic made clear, food distribution. These jobs are central to the flow of goods and the functioning of the world economy; workers in these jobs potentially have a great deal of power. In contrast, Starbucks workers (whose elan and organizing are inspirational) have little structural power. Today there are approximately 15,000 Starbucks stores in the United States out of a total of roughly 40,000 total such coffee houses. Even if all the Starbucks workers struck en masse they would not deprive people of coffee, much less shut down the economy. This is why the government and ruling class have been much more concerned with potential rail strikes (which the Biden administration crushed in December 2022); West Coast longshore work stoppages, including the strike of Canadian longshore workers in 2023; and a threatened, but averted, United Parcel Service (UPS) strike in the same year.

## **The Founding of the ILWU and the 1934 West Coast Longshore Strike**

WHILE THE STORY CLEARLY begins earlier, it is the 1934 strike, which included the San Francisco general strike, where most histories begin. A large number of earlier books deal with the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike and the rise of Harry Bridges to longshore leadership.<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Cherny's book, *Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend*, adds to this literature and gives us many important details. Although somewhat of an in-house biography, it is the most careful and thoroughly researched book to date on Bridges and many historical aspects of the ILWU. Cherny notes Bridges' early IWW activism and his commitment to and engagement in militant civil rights activity as early as 1921 in New Orleans, where he and fellow white Wobblies defiantly sat in the backs of buses or in the "coloured" sections of movie theatres and refused to move (15). This was to be a defining feature of his career, including breaking with the CP on the 1943 rounding up and internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II (which ILWU secretary-treasurer Louis Goldblatt, also secretary of the California Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) industrial council, speaking for Bridges and the whole union, denounced as "hysteria and vigilantism" [203]). Also during World War II, Bridges offered

2. These include Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); David Wellman, *The Union Makes Us Strong: Radical Unionism on the San Francisco Waterfront* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); David Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996); Mike Quin, *The Big Strike* (New York: International Publishers, 1949); Charles P. Larrowe, *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1972); and John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), the latter of which insightfully attempts to explain the broad left-wing politics of the ILWU and its Australian counterpart.

the San Francisco CIO headquarters basement for Black jazz performers who were not allowed into the city's segregated venues (218).

Cherny's discussion of the early work of Bridges and the Communist Party in championing racial issues is important (e.g. 61). This stance, especially in Bridges' home San Francisco local, where he seemingly had the most influence, is highlighted by John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi and in several works by Peter Cole.<sup>3</sup> Of course, there have also been criticisms of Bridges and his role in not dealing more decisively with racist practices, especially those of the racially discriminatory Portland local, and with the B-man controversy. Still, despite perhaps some warts, Bridges' Local 10 was in many ways exemplary, including during the post-World War II period.<sup>4</sup>

Cherny gives more detail and information than anyone else of the decades-long attempt by the the government and employers to deport Bridges back to his native Australia, trying to prove that he was an undesirable Communist. This assault on Bridges and, through him, the ILWU has many parallels to the repression faced by the IWW, which will be discussed below.

Cherny also provides by far the most detailed and carefully researched discussion of whether Bridges was actually a member of the CP, as the federal government tried to prove and the Cold War researchers John Haynes and Harvey Klehr – erroneously, according to Cherny – thought they had decisively proved (chap. 8). Cherny's account is by far the most convincing.

Less covered in many of these works is the importance and the degree to which other groups supported the 1934 strike, preventing scabbing and lending needed bodies for the frequent battles with police and company thugs and gunmen (associational power). Cherny is, in my opinion, wrong in belittling

3. Ahlquist and Levi, *In the Interest of Others*; the works by Cole include *Dockworker Power* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

4. The B-man controversy is covered in more detail, and more critically, in Larrowe, *Harry Bridges*, 362–370. This controversy and the issues are manifold and often complex. A-men had first preferences for jobs at ports. Those newly added to the labour force were less assured of work and were usually assigned the least desirable jobs. The understanding was that B-men would eventually be promoted to A-men. The 1959 contract on containerization froze the status of the B-men, most of whom were Black. In 1963, they still had not been promoted. Additionally, the union and management agreed to prune their number, which was highly controversial. Stan Weir, who was a major actor in the case, writes about this extensively. Not the least of these issues, at least on the left, was Weir's bringing the case to the courts, and Weir and others lining up as supporters right-wing Cold Warriors, including Paul Jacobs, Irving Howe, and others, all of whom supported uncritically the most racist and undemocratic of the right-wing CIO leaders, including Walter Reuther and Philip Murray. For my take on Murray, see Goldfield, *Southern Key*, 158–179. On Reuther, see my review and debate with Nelson Lichtenstein on his book *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), where I critique a more subtle, modern version of the defence of Reuther's authoritarianism, and racial obtuseness by Lichtenstein. Goldfield, "On Walter Reuther: Legends and Lessons," *Against the Current*, no. 67 (March/April 1997), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc067/p2281/>; "A Reply to Nelson Lichtenstein: Assessing Union Leaderships," *Against the Current*, no. 70 (September/October 1997), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc070/p1993/>.

the importance of the union itself when he says, "The ILWU was always a relatively small and regional union, and Bridges' national reputation owed more to him personally than to the national prominence of the ILWU," given the decisive leverage it had, and increasingly continues to have, in Asian–North American trade (342). It is also clear, however, that longshore workers, unlike coal miners, gained much more structural leverage when allied with other workers in the supply chain (especially truckers, seamen, and warehouse workers) and by the support of other workers and groups, which I refer to generally as associational power.

These other groups, important during the 1934 strike, included woodworkers, especially in the Pacific Northwest, and the unemployed, as well as seamen and truckers. Although these workers did not necessarily have the structural power of the longshore workers, they possessed associational power and were crucial to longshore success. This necessity was, at times and to a certain extent, recognized by Bridges and the ILWU, but not sufficiently, in my opinion. While Cherny does not discuss woodworkers or the unemployed more than casually, he does show how seamen and teamsters bucked their conservative leaders and were crucial in supporting and helping to win the 1934 struggle. Their failure in doing so later weakened the ILWU's leverage (as the soon to be mentioned *Labor under Siege* makes clear).

Balkanization then, as today, continued to be an important constraint and roadblock in the labour movement. In longshore, even before the split of the ILWU in 1937 from the East Coast–based International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), the union was divided into two different and uncooperative flanks.<sup>5</sup> Other parts of the supply chain, including various seafarer unions, warehousing, and trucking (the latter often represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters), were also often in conflict with the ILWU.

The ILWU under Bridges did make some important attempts to solidify its leverage, including an unsuccessful attempt to win ILA members on the Gulf Coast, especially in New Orleans, and its March Inland, which for a time was quite successful in organizing thousands of related warehouse workers.<sup>6</sup> The union's situation was, to be sure, complex. It continues to this day, despite balkanization, to have important structural power, given the immense amount of goods from Asia that go through the West Coast ports, especially Long Beach and Los Angeles to the south and, secondarily, Oakland, Tacoma, Seattle, and Vancouver, BC, as one heads north.<sup>7</sup> Even more balkanized is rail, with

5. See Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets*.

6. Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 89–110; Harvey Schwartz, *The March Inland: Origins of the ILWU Warehouse Division, 1934–1938* (San Francisco: International Longshore and Warehouse Union, 2000).

7. Critical for understanding the evolution of modern ports under containerization is Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World*

fourteen unions representing workers in the industry, making it far easier for the Biden administration to have forced a contract on rail workers that a majority had rejected.

Local delivery trucking faces its own version of these problems, with the largest delivery company, UPS (which has perhaps 30 to 40 per cent of the local delivery business), the only one that is unionized (the definitive book here is Joe Allen's *Package King*), in contrast to FedEx and others. Some of the major warehouse and distribution hubs are undergoing organizing campaigns, including those in Laredo, Texas – by far the biggest inland port, with miles and miles of warehouses.<sup>8</sup>

The ILWU still remains, as Howard Kimeldorf noted back in 1988, the only formerly left-wing union that emerged in the 1930s that remains intact today (5–6). A number of other left unions were destroyed during the McCarthy period, including the United Electrical Workers (UE still exists today but is a fraction of its former size), Food and Tobacco Workers of America, Marine Cooks, and public sector workers. Others were forced to be absorbed by more established unions (e.g. Farm Equipment Workers by United Auto Workers [UAW] in 1955; Mine-Mill merged into Steel; United Packinghouse Workers, first by the Meatcutters, then by United Food and Commercial Workers). Still others were defeated internally, like the National Maritime Union and the Transport Workers. Contrary to established myths, parallel events took place in Canada, especially with the government and trade union movement vendetta against the left-wing Canadian Seamen's Union.

While its important structural power was essential, some would argue that what saved the ILWU was its “wall to wall” success in Hawaii, where the ILWU organized not only virtually all the structurally key workers but many of the secondary workers as well. The union thus had as its members virtually all production and transport workers, but also the broadest possible support – not only longshore but also pineapple and sugar, eventually hotels and tourism, and many ancillary industries including trucking and public transport.

Such comprehensive organizing has been rare in North America. Two examples are the Independent Union of All Workers in Minnesota, made famous by Peter Rachleff, and the largely unrecognized unionization of workers in Alabama in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, anchored by the structurally important coal miners, metal miners, and steel workers, and extending to textile, wood, agriculture, and others.<sup>9</sup> When the federal government came to arrest Jack Hall, the ILWU director in Hawaii, all the islands' workers struck,

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*Economy Bigger*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

8. Joe Allen, *The Package King: A Rank and File History of UPS* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).

9. Peter Rachleff, “Organizing ‘Wall to Wall’: The Independent Union of All Workers, 1933–1937,” in Staughton Lynd, ed., “*We Are All Leaders*”: *The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 51–71; Goldfield, *Southern Key*, esp. 8–10.



supported by necessity by the whole Democratic Party political establishment, beholden to the union; the Democrats – in good part, based on their support of the ILWU – swept the formerly dominant Republican Party out of any offices of importance. The workers, formerly semi-feudal, brutalized, and mostly non-white, saw their wages and benefits dramatically escalated and working conditions improved as a result of their union struggles; they were not about to accept that their radical leaders were the enemy.<sup>10</sup> Hall and the others arrested with him were freed the next day. As Jack Heyman has pointed out to me, Hawaii was the only place in the United States where a strike to free political prisoners occurred and succeeded. Hawaii, based on the dominance of its labour radicalism, became the US version of Kerala, India – an alleged social-democratic bastion for a while, with high wages and benefits, universal health care, good education, extensive social welfare, within a larger conservative, unforgiving capitalist society – although some have suggested Hawaii is no longer the blue state outlier that it once was. Even in its isolated space, Hawaii also demonstrates the importance of interracial solidarity in fighting class oppression and racial division, as opposed to separate, racial essentialist strategies, which had doomed workers there in the past.

### ***The pluses of the ILWU and Bridges***

Cherny, to his credit, is not uncritical of Harry Bridges. He documents how Bridges became more conservative and more strike averse during his later years. Unlike other leaders in the ILWU, he did not have sympathy for the 1960s movements (much less how they could actually aid and be an adjunct to the ILWU, developing important associational power); he did not understand that the largely student protests at the 1960 House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco (largely directed at him!) were to be embraced, not dismissed. But to be fair, Bridges and the ILWU, unlike Walter Reuther and the UAW (totally whitewashed by their modern sycophant Nelson Lichtenstein), supported the 1964 challenge by the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the racist, all-white official Mississippi Democratic Party delegation.

But the story does not end here, for there is a larger picture. The ILWU was – in contrast to most of the other industrial unions, which were often adored by liberals – highly democratic, as even more conservative researchers have noted.<sup>11</sup> And Bridges' relation to and support by the hundreds of Communist activists helped sustain the commitments to racial egalitarianism and

10. Among the places to start are Moon-kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Gerald Horne, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Sanford Zallburg, *A Spark Is Struck! Jack Hall and the ILWU in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979).

11. See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman, *Union Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1956), 132.



militancy of the early union. Yet on major issues, his embracing of many CP positions based on both sectarianism and reliance and subservience to established conservative union leaders and Democratic Party politicians played a major role in destroying the radical wing of the North American labour movement. These, of course, are serious charges.

What the ILWU needed were allies with structural power related to the supply chain and other key industries. The Sailors' Union of the Pacific (SUP), under Harry Lundeberg, had many defects. Still, more of an effort could have been made to work with it. After all, the ILWU, during the 1960s and later, developed working alliances with the much more problematic ILA, and even the Teamsters. One of the issues, of course, was the involvement of Trotskyists with Lundeberg.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the radical and racially progressive United Packinghouse Workers of America, under radical president Ralph Helstein, had space for both CP and Trotskyist activists, to its credit. On the other side, Lundeberg's tolerance of racism and his extreme anticommunism made such an alliance quite difficult. More decisive, perhaps, was the ILWU's failure to work with more radical elements in the Teamsters Union. The ILWU had continuous conflicts and suffered scabbing by the conservative leadership of the Teamsters. Within the Teamsters, however, there was a radical wing, centred in Minneapolis, successfully organizing over-the-road drivers around the country, with whom the ILWU could have allied, to the mutual benefit of both. Bridges escalated tensions by falsely accusing the Minneapolis Teamsters and their Trotskyist leaders of having hired a hitman to assassinate him.<sup>13</sup> Yet this was CP sectarianism and villainy at its worst. These hypotheticals would have required a decisive break from Stalinism and its anti-Trotskyist mania. Even more telling was the CP's abandonment of its own left cadres in doing the bidding of very conservative CIO leaders. As I and others have argued, the CP-led Unity Caucus and its popular leader, Wyndham Mortimer, dominated the fledgling auto workers' union, with overwhelming rank-and-file support. National Communist leadership forced its members, at the behest of conservative CIO leaders, to abandon the Unity Caucus bid for union leadership in both 1936 and 1939. And, in the name of maintaining their subservient centre-left coalition, the Communists kowtowed to the United Steelworkers of America leader, Philip Murray, abandoning any bid for greater influence in a union they were largely responsible for organizing.<sup>14</sup>

12. This relationship is most carefully documented in Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), On page 884, Palmer describes how the young Trotskyist Barney Mayes became editor of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific newspaper. The MFP included both the SUP and the ILWU but was headed by Lundeberg.

13. Palmer, *Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism*, 1068.

14. Harvey Levenstein, *Communism, Anti-communism and the CIO* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 84; Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era* (Albany: SUNY Press 1988, 18–29); Goldfield, *Southern Key*, 358.

Closer to home, the ILWU's alliance with woodworkers during the 1934 strike had been important both in terms of picket line support and in preventing scabs from working the docks. Woodworkers, the most numerous workers in all the US and Canadian West Coast states and provinces (i.e. California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia), elected a popular Communist leadership that was committed to organizing the several hundred thousand woodworkers in the US South, half of whom were Black. In 1939, the CIO demoted Bridges from West Coast CIO director and appointed conservative officials in Oregon, in Washington, and within the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) who were determined to break the IWA left-wing leadership. The CP, along with a disgruntled Bridges, made no major attempt to fight these moves, basically leaving the IWA leadership out to dry. The battle in the IWA was bitter, yet close. A determined ILWU most likely would have swung the balance, maintaining an important ally in the whole West Coast. However, the CP policy of not rocking the boat with the CIO national office undermined this promise. Many clichés are applicable here, but perhaps "cutting off one's nose to spite one's face" fits best. Having a large, militant left-wing union as an ally might have changed the dynamics and lessened the ILWU's isolation.

There are, of course, a number of other critiques of Bridges, and some make valid points. Still, even the best – among which I would include Frank Lovell's small book on maritime workers – fail to draw a balance sheet and look at the positive features of the Bridges leadership.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Otilie Markholt's *Maritime Solidarity*, despite some interesting information, is largely an uncritical glorification of SUP leader Harry Lundeborg.<sup>16</sup>

*Labor under Siege*, the book by Harvey Schwartz (with Ronald Magden) on recent union president Bob McEllrath (2006–18), is largely a collection of oral history remembrances celebrating him. Despite its occasionally interesting tidbits, it is an example of hagiology at its worst, an in-house glorification of one of the more compromised ILWU presidents. McEllrath was on the right wing of the union. A battle took place at the 2009 ILWU convention to change the name of the union back to what it had been before 1997: *Longshoremen* and *Warehousemen*. By this time, perhaps 10 to 15 per cent of longshore workers were women, and the percentage was higher in warehouses and in Hawaii. Still, McEllrath and the more conservative faction wanted to change the name back. None of this is reported in *Labor under Siege*.<sup>17</sup>

McEllrath's handling of the EGT (Export Grain Terminal) struggle at the Longview, Washington, port (2011–12) is defended, not critically evaluated. Rather than mobilize sympathetic allies, McEllrath's appeals to American

15. Frederick J. Lang [Frank Lovell], *Maritime: A Historical Sketch and a Workers' Program* (New York: Pioneer, 1943).

16. Otilie Markholt, *Maritime Solidarity: Pacific Coast Unionism, 1929–1938* (Tacoma, WA: Pacific Coast Maritime History Committee, 1998).

17. I am indebted to Jack Heyman for a description of these convention proceedings.

Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) president Richard Trumka and the business unionists of the AFL-CIO to stop the raiding by the International Union of Operating Engineers at Longview during the apex of the conflict went nowhere (183). He was shocked that the anti-labour Democratic president Barack Obama allowed heavily armed Coast Guard ships to protect strikebreakers brought by sea against the Longview workers (163). When the Occupy Wall Street movement began in New York, he supported it; when it reached a militant highpoint on the West Coast, he rejected it. When tens of thousands of multi-racial protesters in Oakland and other ports were aiding longshore workers and others (fully supported by the embattled Longview ILWU and its Local 21 leaders, including president Dan Coffman, as well as San Francisco ILWU Local 10, Bridges' old local), effectively shutting down several ports, McEllrath disavowed them. When the San Francisco Labor Council, the Portland Labor Council, and the King County (Seattle) Labor Council voted to send caravans to the port of Longview, this was too much for him. McEllrath had ILWU thugs break up an Occupy meeting at the Seattle Labor Temple that was co-organized by Local 21 and members of Local 10 and included longshore speakers. None of this is reported or mentioned in the glowing book *Labor under Siege*. After repressing the more militant locals and members, McElrath then wondered why he was not able to mobilize for a better settlement.<sup>18</sup>

While one can draw important positive lessons from Harry Bridges and the ILWU, there are also, as I suggest, some negative lessons to be learned. In light of the failures of certain historically left-wing unions like the ILWU, some have looked elsewhere for models and inspiration.

### ***The IWW as alternative***

Many have posited the revolutionary unionism of the early IWW as an alternative to both the establishment business unionism and the left-wing unionism of the 1930s and 1940s. By far, the best recent work on this subject is Ahmed White's new book. *Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers* provides a huge amount of new archival material, as well as the most balanced evaluation.

It is, of course, no mystery why so many US radicals since the 1960s have been attracted to the heritage of the IWW. The Wobblies were perhaps the most courageous, committed, and fearless revolutionary workers' group in US history. In their "free speech" battles in the early 1910s, they would at times burn American flags, stating that their allegiance was to the workers of the world, not US imperialists. Many who were arrested and given long prison terms for

18. For harsh critiques of McEllrath's leadership, see Robert Brenner and Suzie Weissman, "Unions That Used to Strike," *Jacobin*, 6 August 2014, <https://jacobin.com/2014/08/unions-that-used-to-strike/>; for some later remarks, see Jack Heyman, "The Survival of the ILWU at Stake!," *CounterPunch*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/02/12/the-survival-of-the-ilwu-at-stake/>.

spurious crimes like vagrancy refused pardons, claiming that accepting a pardon would be an admission of guilt and they would rather go to jail (4). The union's early leaders at the time of its 1905 founding were legends, including Big Bill Haywood, then secretary-treasurer of the Western Federation of Miners; Eugene Debs, Socialist Party leader jailed for leading the 1894 Pullman Strike and again for denouncing World War I; and Lucy Parsons, widow of the executed Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons and a legend in her own right. There was the Wobbly poet and songwriter Ralph Chaplin, who wrote "Solidarity Forever" (and who later, unfortunately, was to become a virulent and relatively conservative anticommunist in the 1920s), and the martyred Joe Hill, who, when about to be hanged for a murder he almost certainly did not commit, told his fellow workers, "Don't mourn, organize!" Wobblies were active in the Mexican Revolution and in many other places around the world. As the IWW constitution preamble stated,

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Inspired by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, many of the more radical Wobblies joined the fledgling communist movement, although most did not. James Cannon, former IWWer, founding member of the CP, and later the leader of US Trotskyism, considered it "an historic miscarriage" that more were not recruited.<sup>19</sup>

As the previous anecdotes of Harry Bridges' involvement with the Wobblies suggests, the IWW was fully committed to an all-inclusive view of class – especially with respect to race – put into practice, brooking no compromise from the Philadelphia docks to the Deep South Piney Woods.

The horrors of US capitalist development are, of course, many, from the genocidal slaughter of Native Americans to the brutalities and murders of the slave trade and slave labour to the atrocities that continue to be instigated and supported around the world to this day. Yet the continuing repression of labour and radical struggles, especially when they seem to be nearing high points of influence and success, reached their apex with the violence against the Wobblies. While the broad outlines have been known for a good while by historians, White's book gives us a depth and detail that has not been seen before, including on the involvement of hitherto revered liberal figures.

Many historians extol the role of liberals in aiding the growth of labour unions (see, for instance, Michael Kazin's fairly critical review of White); even some radicals argue for the progressive features of certain pieces of

19. Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 94. For lengthy and fascinating details about Cannon's involvement with the IWW, see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 52–86.

liberal labour legislation (like the 1935 *Wagner Act*).<sup>20</sup> White, however, is uncompromising in his discussions of the ineffectiveness of these laws and the involvement of many of the most celebrated liberals in US history in this repression, including such jurists as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis Brandeis, and Felix Frankfurter, who played clearly despicable roles. There are one or two notable exceptions, which White duly notes – like former hobo, itinerant farm worker, and IWW sympathizer Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas – although they are few and far between (229–230). White is superb not only as a labour historian but as a legal scholar; he stands out among many so-called left-wing legal scholars, some of whom celebrate the alleged progressive features of various pieces of New Deal labour legislation. And it was this repression – which included the arrest of and lengthy jail terms for thousands of Wobblies, the horrendous conditions in jails that led to loss of health and even life for many, as well as a large number of murders – that helped destroy the Wobs.<sup>21</sup>

The scope of the IWW in organizing workers was broad, though, with a few exceptions, largely ephemeral. Aside from more well-known struggles, like the 1911 Lawrence, Massachusetts, “Bread and Roses” strike of 25,000 woollen workers or the 1911–13 organization of Black and white southern woodworkers, there were many other large-scale campaigns. By 1917, the Wobblies had perhaps several hundred thousand members, among them many itinerant agricultural workers (88). In that same year, they led a strike of 40,000 metal miners across the West (89). Also in 1917, 50,000 or so lumber workers in the Northwest struck, led by the IWW’s Lumber Workers Industrial Union (93). In February 1919, Seattle workers went on a general strike (132).<sup>22</sup> And all across the country, but especially in the West, tens of thousands of striking Wobblies were arrested with no charges, many sentenced to years in jail for criminal syndicalism, on the basis merely of IWW membership. Quite a few were rounded up and sentenced by the Progressive Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, soon to be celebrated as the first commissioner of professional baseball (117).

20. Michael Kazin, “One Big Union: The Red Scare and the Fall of the IWW,” *The Nation*, 15 May 2023; Karl Klare, “Judicial Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the Origins of Modern Legal Consciousness, 1937–1941,” *Minnesota Law Review* 62, 3 (1978): 265–339.

21. While I believe that most of White’s analysis is on target, there are, as always, some warts. One is the statement that Haywood was lonely and isolated in his stay in Moscow during the 1920s, a claim initially made by Theodore Draper (White, 230). I have found no evidence for this. Rather, he seems to have kept a close watch on US activities, enjoying lengthy political conversations with the many US Communists who visited Moscow and providing analysis and commentary, including playing a major role in suggesting and aiding James Cannon with the establishment of the International Labor Defense in 1926 and 1927. Palmer describes the origination of the ILD in conversations that Cannon, Rose Karsner, and Haywood had in Moscow in Palmer, *Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 261–263.

22. For a definitive account, see Cal Winslow, *Radical Seattle: The General Strike of 1919* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

Those who testified for the Wobs at their trials were arrested as they left the courtrooms. Even their lawyers were attacked, beaten, and arrested, even tarred and feathered, and, of course, disbarred (152, 155, 178).

While White celebrates certain of the extraordinary features of the Wobblies, unlike much of the recent romanticization, he notes some of their fatal problems leading to inevitable contradictions and inadequacies. He also gives new perspectives on the periodization of the IWW, its high points, and its final demise, contradicting some of the newer romantics but also the older scholarship (209, 216–217).

### ***Contradictions and problems with the Wobblies***

Part of the allure of the Wobblies, of course, is that they often combined their struggles over basic, bread-and-butter union issues (i.e. wages, working conditions, and union recognition) with their revolutionary anti-capitalist perspective. This conflation of what, I will argue, may be related but are also two separate tasks led to problems.

With their trade unions, they refused to sign contracts, believing that they had a right to strike and struggle at every moment. In turn, in many cases, this led employers to believe that they too had a right to repress their workers and attack the workers' organizations whenever the time seemed ripe. Thus, all but a few of the IWW unions disintegrated within short periods of time – whether in wood, textile, or auto, in agriculture, or among seamen and other venues – even when they at times won dramatic strikes. The unions' intransigent revolutionary perspective usually undermined their own and, most importantly, their constituents' bread-and-butter needs. In addition, as many have noted, winning over workers' support for their union demands was often a long way from gaining support for their revolutionary goals.<sup>23</sup> The separation of these two functions was often important, since winning over large numbers to this latter goal would be a much longer process.

Yet the IWW's emphasis on continuous local militancy often belied an understanding of what was necessary to gain the structural leverage in an entire industry and to achieve long-term gains for the workers involved. So, unlike the ILWU, which succeeded in gaining substantial leverage by organizing all the ports on North America's West Coast and Hawaii, the IWW attempted to organize longshore workers on a radical basis at times in just one port (a goal even more illusory than establishing socialism in just one country). In Philadelphia longshore, an isolated local with commendable, impressive, interracial solidarity, which had failed to organize other East Coast ports, was only really successful, as White and the earlier work of Peter Cole point out,

23. See especially James Cannon's rather sympathetic evaluation: "The I.W.W.," *Fourth International* [later *International Socialist Review*] (Summer 1955), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1955/iww.htm>.



as long as many of the Philadelphia shippers were local companies.<sup>24</sup> As things became more national and international, such localism failed completely. Similar problems existed in agriculture and timber. As large companies took over, the small companies and local farmers over which the IWW had leverage could no longer be breached.

Many IWW leaders at the national level argued for more national coordinated strategies. They were opposed, however, by localists, who wanted the national office to have no say in their activities and believed that it was only local workers who knew the issues and the score – a typical anarchist and syndicalist claim.

Although the IWW had an allegedly – and in numerous arenas, a quite laudable – internationalist perspective, this was often combined with an opposition to engaging in national and international politics. This position at times served to undermine their struggles and even their radicalism.

First, it resulted in a lack of a coherent strategy to combat the extreme repression they faced, leading instead to differing strategies in different places. In addition, it led them to be ambivalent or even at times to refuse to mobilize potential allies, including elected officials in broad united front defences. That such an approach might have yielded more favourable results was suggested in North Dakota, where the somewhat radical, pro-labour Nonpartisan League controlled state politics for a time, including the governorship. There, the state refused to enact criminal syndicalism laws and enforce draconian “vagrancy” sweeps, leading to far less repression of IWW members. We might also see the contrast to how Bridges, the ILWU, and its allies mobilized to battle the persecution of Bridges.

Second, at times this position undermined the Wobblies’ supposed revolutionary politics, eventually leading to some very reactionary tendencies. Even in Philadelphia, with little leverage against the national onslaught, the IWW longshore local, in order to maintain its legitimacy with the state (which turned out to be unsuccessful in the end), sold war bonds and loaded armament ships during World War I – this while many Socialists (most, but not all, left wingers) and many IWWers were being thrown in jail for their opposition to the war.<sup>25</sup> Localism inevitably led to such right-wing tendencies. Some claimed that Local 8 in Philadelphia, far from being international revolutionists, may have ended up after the Bolshevik Revolution loading arms for the counter-revolutionary white armies in Russia during the civil war there.<sup>26</sup> This heritage of localism – as the more revolutionary IWWers split from the organization after 1919, supporting the Bolsheviks and joining the fledgling

24. See, for example, Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront*, chaps. 2 and 8.

25. See, among other places, Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 81–88.

26. There is, of course, some controversy about this claim. See, for example, Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront*, 128, among many discussions.



communist movement – led to a variety of unconscionable behaviour. Their emphasis on syndicalist local militancy led certain seamen to lead and support work stoppages on ships with the aim of keeping Black seamen off their boats. Their extreme anticommunism at times put them in alliance with the most reactionary forces in the country – and among trade union officials, as happened in the IWA.<sup>27</sup> Those in the IWA right wing, claiming their IWW localist and anti-political heritage, joined with the most right-wing of CIO officials – including the authoritarian, anticommunist, but also anti-direct action Adolph Germer – in denouncing the left leaders of the IWA for putting “political” articles in the union newspaper (including items in support of the Loyalists in Spain) rather than sticking to workplace issues.

Thus, the IWW by the mid-1920s had changed politically but was also largely decimated. This view is contrary to that of the romanticists, as White documents, although he disagrees with those like Melvyn Dubofsky who saw the Wobblies destroyed during World War I.<sup>28</sup> White demonstrates clearly that the combination of devastating repression and a failure to adapt to the changing structural conditions of US capitalism, both of which foreshadowed broader corporate entities and more stable workforces (no longer relying on the itinerant hobo armies), led the IWW to mostly collapse by 1924 or 1925. The remnants that remained were largely devoid of the successful organizing and revolutionary fervour that had characterized the union previously. Thus, those who posit the IWW as an alternative form of labour organization for the present would seem, at best, to be over a century out of date.

## Conclusion

IN SUM, THESE NEW BOOKS remind us of the militancy, courage, and solidarity that union rank-and-file radicals exhibited during the campaigns of the early IWW and the longshore campaigns on the West Coast and Hawaii. They also highlight the severe repression that companies and the US and Canadian governments have been willing to unleash to attempt to crush worker organizing, especially when it takes place on a radical basis.

These books also suggest, as I have argued, the importance of a clear structural analysis, identifying those workers and workplaces with the most leverage and power, and the importance of the broadest possible structural organization. This is one reason that the goal of the Railroad Workers United today to amalgamate the fourteen balkanized railway craft unions is central and why the unionization of other delivery drivers in addition to UPS is necessary. Longshore workers gain greater power when all port workers in North

27. See Goldfield, *Southern Key*, chap. 5.

28. For the earliest, pathbreaking academic account of the IWW, see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969).

America and throughout the world are united. Localism was a defect of one wing of the IWW that is a dead end.

In addition, unions must not feel they should go it alone. The broadest types of alliances are necessary, as the 1934 longshore strike shows and as the wall-to-wall organizing in Hawaii demonstrates. Those labour leaders that turn away from associational power and reject support from other militant groups often set themselves up for failure, as seen in the 2011–12 Longview ILWU battle.

While one can admire the courage, militancy, and internationalism of the IWW, its heritage of localism and rejection of politics is not a useful metric. These are among the lessons that the IWW in its heyday, the ILWU, and the union under Harry Bridges leave with us for today.