

# **The One Big Union in International Perspective** **Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925**

Larry Peterson

Volume 7, 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt7art02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Peterson, L. (1981). The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7, 41–66.

# *The One Big Union in International Perspective:*

## *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925*

Larry Peterson

DURING THE FIRST decades of the twentieth century, workers in the advanced industrial nations attempted for the first time to organize themselves into industrial unions. Antecedents of modern industrial unionism date to the latter nineteenth century, when workers began to respond to the second wave of industrialization, but the movement to reorganize the labour-union movement along industrial lines did not become general until after the turn of the century. Thus, between 1900 and 1925, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France became the first major labour union federation to base itself on industrial unions. Unskilled workers in the U.S.A. made persistent efforts to found either single industrial unions, as in steel or mining, or central industrial organizations, as in the American Labor Union (ALU) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Canadian workers, especially in the west, repudiated their traditional trades unions to join first the IWW and then the One Big Union (OBU). In Great Britain, the general workers' unions expanded phenomenally in the great unrest between 1910 and 1920, and groups of skilled workers in the older craft unions began to advocate greater union solidarity in a variety of syndicalist, revolutionary industrial unionist, amalgamationist, and shop stewards movements. Finally, German industrial workers in the largest centres of industry in the Ruhr, the North Sea ports, and middle Germany reacted to World War I and the revolution of 1918-19 by repudiating the social democratic free unions in favour of revolutionary general workers' unionism.

Common to all these movements in favour of industrial unionism were the leadership of revolutionaries and the advocacy of the solidarity of all workers in single, unified labour unions. Revolutionaries emerged from the labour-union movements of the advanced capitalist countries to demand the inclusion of economic organization and action as an integral part of the socialist revolution, alongside and at times in place of the political action of social democracy. Emphasis on the economic solidarity of all workers was not in itself new to labour unionism. The industrial unionists of the early twentieth century consciously looked to Robert Owens' Grand National Consolidated Trades Union of the 1830s and the Knights of Labor of the 1880s as predecessors.<sup>1</sup> However,

<sup>1</sup> Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918-1923. Zur Geschichte und Soziologie der Freien Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (Syndikalistin), der*

Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 41-66.

the call for a single union of all workers took on new forms after 1900. In particular, the call for "one big union" was coupled with revolutionary industrial unionism in response to the emergence of corporate capitalism in the mass production industries, and this call for the first time took on international proportions that extended well beyond the Anglo-Saxon origins of "one big unionism."

The purpose of this article is to analyze the movements of revolutionary industrial unionists in five countries. The analysis will concentrate, in turn, on the structural economic changes which motivated the movement to form industrial unions, the general international nature of the movement and its national peculiarities, the role of syndicalism, the movement's social and economic composition, and its tactical originality during the highpoint of labour unrest from 1910 to 1925. I have chosen Great Britain, France, Germany, the United States, and Canada for comparison because they show clearly the international similarities and national differences of the movement for industrial unionism.<sup>2</sup> The historiography of industrial unionism in these countries has developed to the point where it is possible to compare the movement for industrial unionism across national boundaries. Indeed, a simultaneous reading of the labour historiography of these countries leads one to the inescapable conclusion that industrial unionism after 1900 was a truly international phenomenon. The national focus of virtually all previous studies tends to obscure the general nature of the movement and makes a cross-national comparison all the more urgent if one is to understand the full dimensions and significance of revolutionary industrial unionism in the early twentieth century.

I will not attempt to narrate the general history of these movements. Nor will I concentrate on their differences, since the national historiographies of each country already deal in detail with the unique features of each example.

---

*Allgemeinen Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands und der Kommunistischen Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*, Marburger Abhandlungen zur Politischen Wissenschaft Band 13 (Meisenheim am Glan 1969), 124ff.; Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working-Class Radicalism, 1890-1905," in Peter N. Stearns and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds. *Workers in the Industrial Revolution: Recent Studies of Labor in the United States and Europe* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1974), 382-83. There was also a *Chevaliers du Travail belges* and a *Chevalerie du Travail française*, the latter one of several forerunners of the CGT. Cf. Henri Dubief, *Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire* (Paris 1969), 27-29; and Maurice Dommanget, *La Chevalerie du Travail française* (Lausanne 1967).

<sup>2</sup> The movement was not, of course, limited to these countries. It extended to Australia, Latin America, southern Europe, and Scandinavia. However, the movements in these areas introduced no features that did not already appear in the "models" of the rww in America, the OBU in Canada, or the CGT in France, nor did they add to the politicization and works councils of the German example and the organizational diversity of revolutionary British unionists. Cf. Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies. The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (Garden City, N.Y. 1967), 273-93; David L. Horowitz, *The Italian Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass. 1963), 51-87; Gerald H. Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 1914-1923* (Stanford 1974).

Rather, I will employ a method of abstraction from local peculiarities to analyze those features that all five countries had in common in order to demonstrate the general tendency toward revolutionary industrial unionism. The article is a first attempt at synthesis. For, although the extensive labour historiography on each of the five countries provides the elements and evidence on which to base a comparative analysis, most of the literature does not approach the problem of industrial unionism from the social, structural, and comparative viewpoints that can lead to definitive international conclusions. If this article stimulates greater interest in cross-national research and analysis, then it will have achieved one of its primary goals.

Moreover, much of the existing literature, when it is not devoted to a narrative reconstruction of national industrial unions, concentrates on the problems of ideology and theory. I do not mean to deny the importance of ideas, but one of the cardinal features of industrial unionism after 1900 was its ability to accommodate and pass through a variety of ideologies, none of which ever succeeded in dominating or defining the movement as a whole. British industrial unionism was symptomatic of this trend, for it passed through no fewer than five phases with varying ideologies even as the movement maintained an integrity all its own. How important was ideology in a movement whose leaders moved from syndicalism through various mutations to communism while remaining loyal primarily to industrial unionism as a form of organization, action, and class struggle? I will therefore say little about the ideology of industrial unionism, on which much has already been written, and concentrate instead on the social movement of workers. Workers developed their consciousness through this social movement primarily by means of economic action and organization, rather than formal ideology. This paper will analyze those social structural factors which gave rise to revolutionary industrial unionism and the way in which workers responded to them in the course of the class struggle.

## I

### Economic Change and the Emergence of Revolutionary Industrial Unionism

INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM after 1900 was a movement of reaction that led to further progress in labour-union and socialist organization. It was, in the first instance, a reaction against the rise of corporate capital and the concentration of industry. The emergence of monopolies in control of vast industrial complexes at the end of the nineteenth century underscored the weakness of a divided working class. The concentrated economic power of corporations and their ability to attack existing craft unions through technological innovation led to greater aggressiveness of employers against the labour movement. The need for unity among workers as a precondition for the defense of even limited economic goals was greatest in the United States and Germany, where

monopolization had advanced furthest, but even in a country like France, where small-scale production was still predominant, the labour-union movement felt the need for the unity of workers across craft lines. Especially in France, the active intervention of the state on the side of corporate capital before 1914 reinforced the advocates of a more industrially unified labour-union movement. But the factor of repressive state intervention in strikes was apparent throughout the advanced capitalist countries. Loosely federated unions of craft workers, which organized only small groups of workers, if indeed any, in the new mass production industries and which left uncontested the control of management over the mass of unskilled workers, were no match for the state-backed resistance of employers.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of large-scale, monopolized industry challenged the traditional, craft-based labour-union movement by undermining or eliminating the base of unions of skilled tradesmen. This occurred either through the dequalification of previously skilled labour, or the creation of entirely new, technologically advanced industries and factories which relied from the start primarily on unskilled and semiskilled labour, or the concentration of capital in industries, such as construction, where a plethora of craft unions began to face single, powerful employers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the rise of industrial unionism was not only a reaction to changes in industry, but also to the obsolescence of craft unions which resulted from these changes. Advocacy of industrial unionism was everywhere a reaction to the inability of the traditional craft unions to defend workers in the newer industries and to the refusal of these unions to go beyond the defense of the privileged position of small groups of skilled workers at the expense of the unskilled and the labour movement as a whole. Where monopolized industry was most advanced and the refusal of the existing unions

<sup>3</sup> Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914. Myths and Realities* (London 1976), 27ff.; Jacques Julliard, *Clemenceau briseurs de grèves. L'affaire de Draveil-Villeneuve-Saint Georges* (Paris 1965); Melvyn Dubofsky *We Shall Be All. A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago 1969), 5-56; Bock, *passim*; Larry Peterson, "The Policies and Work of the KPD in the Free Labor Unions of Rhineland-Westphalia 1920-1924," Ph.D., Columbia University, 1978, 1-27. For an overview of developments in the Ruhr, see Norman J.G. Pounds, *The Ruhr. A Study in Historical and Economic Geography* (Bloomington 1952); Walter Neumann, *Die Gewerkschaften im Ruhrgebiet. Voraussetzungen, Entwicklung und Wirksamkeit* (Cologne 1951); Fritz Mogs, *Die sozialgeschichtliche Entwicklung der Stadt Oberhausen (Rhld.) zwischen 1850 und 1933*, Inaugural-Dissertation, Cologne, 1956; and David Crew, *Town in the Ruhr. A Social History of Bochum, 1860-1914* (New York 1979).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the above, see Branko Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922* (Oxford 1959); H.A. Clegg, *General Union in a Changing Society. A Short History of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, 1889-1964* (Oxford 1964); Richard Hyman, *The Workers' Union* (Oxford 1974); Karl-Gustav Werner, *Organisation und Politik der Gewerkschaften und Arbeitgeberverbände in der deutschen Bauwirtschaft, Untersuchungen über Gruppen und Verbände Band 9* (Berlin 1968); Helmut Kral, *Streik auf den Helgen. Die gewerkschaftlichen Kämpfe der deutschen Werftarbeiter vor dem ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin 1964).

to organize the unskilled most blatant — in Germany, the United States, and the Canadian west — this reaction took the form of a rejection of craft unionism altogether. Where the labour movement had longer traditions, in France and Britain, attempts at compromise solutions were made — in Britain the amalgamation of craft unions and the creation of general unions alongside them, in France the peaceful transformation of the CGT from local craft-based unions to industrial federations.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, the industrial unification of the working class presupposed the superseding of the existing unions.

Moreover, by the early twentieth century, the state responded to industrialization and labour unrest by attempting to integrate the existing unions into the capitalist system. The state adopted "more subtle forms of social control" in addition to overt repression, including collective bargaining, conciliation schemes, state welfare measures, and union recognition.<sup>6</sup> Employers and state officials began to see the value of defusing worker discontent by recognizing the existing labour unions. The consequent integration and bureaucratization of unions in state welfare and collective bargaining institutions led to some material improvements for workers but also to a widening gap between workers and union members on the local level and the increasingly centralized national union leadership. Industrial unionists reacted to this trend after 1900 by seizing on local dissatisfaction and by trying to organize the mass of unskilled workers who were largely left out of the new arrangements among state, union leadership, and employers.<sup>7</sup>

The intervention of the state, both repressively on the side of corporations in labour disputes and cooptively in social welfare measures, also exposed the political weakness of the labour movement. It did not appear possible to the advocates of industrial unionism after 1900 to break the combined power of the state and employers through parliamentary reform. Nor were they satisfied with the new forms of social control that tamed the existing unions by incorporating reformist labourism into the welfare state. The new industrial unionists were not at first hostile to political action as such. In Germany, they remained active in the political parties, first in the SPD and later the USPD, KPD, and KAPD; in Great Britain the organizers of the general unions were early supporters of various socialist parties; in the U.S.A. the ALU and IWW were at first closely associated with socialist politics; in Canada the OBU was led by members of the Socialist Party of Canada; even in France many socialists were active in the CGT and were probably numerically larger than the syndicalists who controlled the national organization. However, if the difficulties of organizing unskilled workers pushed industrial unionists to support a revolution-

<sup>5</sup> See below, Section II.

<sup>6</sup> Holton, 31.

<sup>7</sup> This is a theme to which Holton repeatedly returns. It was also very prominent in the leftwing opposition in the German unions and is discussed at length by Bock. For French syndicalist hostility to bureaucratization, cf. F.F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France. The Direct Action of its Time* (Cambridge 1970).

ary socialist goal, the limitations of parliamentary parties convinced them that political action was insufficient either to defend the short-term economic interests of industrial workers or to achieve the long-range socialization of industry. Parliamentary social democrats ignored the positive role of economic militancy. Instead of using economic action to pressure the state for reforms or to further a revolutionary socialist goal, the socialists of the Second International tended to divide labour unionism from politics through a doctrine of economic determinism.<sup>8</sup>

Industrial unionists added an economic component to socialist revolution. They saw industrial militancy, in the form of direct economic action, as a necessary aspect of the revolutionary takeover of capitalist industry, alongside the overthrow of the bourgeois state, and they assigned to revolutionary labour unions the tasks of transforming capitalist production and organizing socialist industry after the revolution. The addition of an economic component to socialist revolution was the defining feature of all forms of the new industrial unionism. From the co-operative workshop control envisioned by the CGT, to the IWW's projected administration of socialist production through industrial unions, to the revolutionary works councils of German revolutionary unionism after World War I, general unions on the workshop, factory, and industrial levels were elevated to a position equal to or above political parties in the revolutionary socialist movement.<sup>9</sup>

The industrial unionism of the period after 1900 was thus a reaction to the growth of state-backed monopolized industry, to the inability of craft unions to defend or organize the unskilled in the new and transformed industries, and to the limitations of socialist political action. As an alternative, the new unionists called for the economic solidarity of all workers, which in its most rigorous

<sup>8</sup> Holton, 27; Ridley, 53-62, 88-94, 177-79; Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921. The Origins of British Communism* (London 1969), 12-13, 28-33; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 69-76, 91-119, 131-45; Val R. Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass. 1954), 43; Vernon H. Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict. Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1950), 54-71, 160-96; Joseph R. Conlin, *Big Bill Haywood and the Radical Union Movement* (Syracuse, N.Y. 1969); Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Volume IV: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York 1965), especially 167-71. For the discussions in the German labour movement before 1914, see Bock; Peterson, 28-43; and Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917. The Origins of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1955). For Canada, see Gerald Friesen, "Yours in Revolt: Regionalism, Socialism and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 139-57.

<sup>9</sup> Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 166-68; Foner, 142-44; Bernard H. Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement 1830-1914. The Socialism of Skilled Workers* (Berkeley 1976); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution. Eine politikwissenschaftlichen Untersuchung über Ideengehalt und Struktur der betrieblichen und wirtschaftlichen Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Revolution* (Düsseldorf 1963); Karl Korsch, *Arbeitsrecht für Betriebsräte* (Berlin 1922).

form ended in attempts to create "one big union" of all workers. The preponderant power of corporations and the state, which circumscribed the possibilities of economic reform, also led them to tie the immediate defense of economic interests to a revolutionary economic goal and to see industrial unions as the most appropriate vehicle with which to oppose employers. Finally, the primitive organization and lack of union traditions among unorganized, unskilled workers in the new mass production industries encouraged demands for all-inclusive general and industrial unions. Industrial unionism grew from a negative reaction to monopolized industry, craft unionism, and the limitations of socialist politics to a positive attempt to develop a new form of industrial economic action.

## II

### International Similarities and National Differences

ALTHOUGH INDUSTRIAL unionism after 1900 was an international phenomenon, it varied according to different national conditions. There were many instances of industrial unionist ideas being spread directly from one country to another, often through seamen and labour unionists in port cities, through the international contacts of labour leaders, or through Europeans who carried such ideas back to Europe after a period of activity in North America.<sup>10</sup> However, the spread of industrial unionism only became possible because workers and labour unionists were receptive to foreign ideas. More important, forms of industrial unionism developed directly from conditions in each country, even without foreign influences. Industrial unionism was international in scope after 1900 because of similar conditions throughout the advanced capitalist world.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, each country produced its own version (or versions) of revolutionary industrial unionism, and it would be misleading to define the general movement by one model. Rather, there emerged a range of options, with related fundamental assumptions, and these options can be analyzed according to a scale of tendencies within the movement. Such a scale can be established according to three major criteria: the period of industrialization and its effect on labour union organization, the type of economic organization adopted in each country to meet national conditions, and the attitude of industrial unionists toward political affiliation.

The first major division among industrial unionists grew directly from the

<sup>10</sup> Renshaw, 273-93; Bock, 77-80, 211-14; C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (New York 1961). Such internationally known labour leaders as Tom Mann, William Z. Foster, James Larkin, James Connolly, and Fritz Wolffheim were at one time or another active in foreign countries, not to speak of international syndicalist conferences as forums for the spread of ideas.

<sup>11</sup> Dubofsky, "Origins of Western Working-Class Radicalism," *We Shall Be All*, 13-56; Foner, 23; Holton, 27; Peterson, *passim*; David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men. The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 252ff.



period of each country's industrialization and the age of its labour movement. Although some authors have seen the division between industrial unionists as one between Europe and North America,<sup>12</sup> in fact it occurred between those countries where the labour movement had already been strongly developed in the mid-nineteenth century and those where it grew primarily in response to the second wave of industrialization.<sup>13</sup>

In the older industrial nations with long labour histories — primarily in France and Britain — industrial unionists tended to work inside the established unions. This was feasible in part because unions in these countries began to organize unskilled workers at an earlier date, such as in the new "general" unions in Britain from the late 1880s which were quickly incorporated into the established labour-union movement. Moreover, industrial concentration developed more slowly. In Britain, the craft unions adapted themselves to the slower pace of industrial change with fewer internal structural breaks, whereas in France the union movement continued the long tradition of what one historian has called the "socialism of skilled workers."<sup>14</sup> Although there was friction with some of the newer general and industrial unions, the older unions themselves produced strong internal movements toward amalgamation and co-operation with the new unions. Revolutionary industrial unionism developed in an environment of labour-union continuity, and the industrial unionist, OBU, and syndicalist groups could act effectively as organized factions within the existing unions. In France, the syndicalists eventually won control of the CGT, having started out as only one of several factions. In Britain, the movement never coalesced into one organization, but remained split among numerous radical groups (syndicalists, amalgamationists, industrial unionists, shop stewards), most of which sought to transform the craft unions, and the general unions (all of which were founded under radical leadership).<sup>15</sup>

In the countries which industrialized largely after 1870 — in the United States, Canada, and Germany — revolutionary industrial unionism tended persistently toward dual unionism. In these countries industrial concentration, the growth of mass production industries, technological changes, and corporate control all developed in largely virgin territory, preceding, superseding, or breaking whatever labour-union traditions had previously existed. In Germany monopolization and industrial concentration were already far advanced when the modern German union movement was founded in the 1890s; in the United States in the period from 1873 to 1900 these same economic forces disrupted

<sup>12</sup> Holton, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Conlin also notes the international complexity of the movement, which did not follow European-North American divisions. Joseph Robert Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too. Studies of the Wobblies* (Westport, Ct. 1969), 17ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Moss.

<sup>15</sup> See the works on Britain by Holton, Clegg, Hyman, Pribicevic; and James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London 1973). For the continuity of the French labour movement see Moss.

the continuity of those older labour union traditions which culminated and then withered away with the Knights of Labor; in Canada the economy of the west grew largely outside the industrial and union traditions of the east. Thus, in all these countries the gap between craft unions and unskilled workers in the new industries was great, and the craft unions widened the gap by retrenching in the face of corporate capital to defend the special interests of the skilled rather than by adapting union structures to technological changes or by organizing the unskilled. Moreover, in Germany the socialist movement was founded before the labour unions, and the unions were consequently very closely associated from the start with social democratic politics, another aspect of the late, technologically advanced industrialization of Germany. In reaction, the movement for industrial unionism grew out of opposition to the subordinate, reformist role to which social democratic politics relegated the unions.<sup>16</sup> In all these countries, the impact of corporate industrialism was paramount in demonstrating the obsolescence of craft unionism and the need for an entirely new type of union. "Boring from within" appeared — and indeed largely was — futile, and industrial unionists drew the conclusion that new unions had to be created in competition with the craft unions.<sup>17</sup>

The movement for industrial unionism was also characterized by different types of economic organization. Six major types (or degrees) of organization can be delineated.

Single, local unions comprising all workers in one factory or local industry — what the Germans call a *Betriebsorganisation* — were most commonly breakaway unions that attempted prematurely to reorganize existing unions before union members and workers in other areas were ready to follow the lead of the vanguard. They were founded primarily in Germany after the 1918-19 revolution; they were usually closely aligned with political radicalism (with the KPD or KAPD); and they seceded from existing craft unions because of differences over strike tactics, politics, and industrial organization.<sup>18</sup>

Single industrial unions of a national scope were a step beyond revolutionary localism. They were most common in the United States as an attempt to

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Schorske, Bock, and Peterson. The same can be said of Italy, where unions also came early under socialist influence and where the syndicalists, and after 1918 the councils movement, took on a critical anti-socialist or leftwing socialist orientation with a tendency toward dual unionism and direct action outside the influence of national union leaders. Cf. Horowitz, 86-87; Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too*, 22; Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, trans. by Gwyn A. Williams (London 1975); John Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford 1967).

<sup>17</sup> Dubofsky, "Origins of Western Working-Class Radicalism," *We Shall Be All*, 57-87; Jensen, 38-53, 54-71; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), 3-17; David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974), 1-44; *Fools and Wise Men*, ix-xvi, 1-28.

<sup>18</sup> Peterson, 415-17, 634-63.

overcome craft union divisions by uniting all workers in concentrated industries. Thus, Eugene Debs' American Railway Union attempted to bring together all railway and rail shop workers into a single industrial front, while the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) completely bypassed eastern craft unionism by organizing western miners from the start in an industrial union. The British amalgamation movement also worked for the creation of this type of unified industrial union.<sup>19</sup>

Once industrial unionism expanded to several industries or became a more general movement, there appeared a natural tendency to form national union organizations to cover labour in all industries. The classic solution — and the only one to survive as a vital form of union organization to the present day — was found by the CGT in France. The CGT subdivided its national federation into a dual organization, horizontally (by geography) as a general union of all workers (united in *unions locales* and *unions départementales*) and vertically by industrial federations. The CGT thus functions as "one big union" but also as a *federation of autonomous industrial unions*.<sup>20</sup>

A second, more radical solution to national organization was adopted by the IWW. Largely because of the concentrated power of American monopoly capital, the IWW wanted to create a centralized union on the national level (as opposed to the CGT's federal organization), which could confront the centralized power of capital. The central union would be subdivided into industrial unions to defend the specific interests of workers in each major industry and to prepare for the eventual takeover of production by the revolutionary unions.<sup>21</sup>

German-American Wobblies carried the IWW model directly to Germany, but once in the German environment of monopolized heavy industry and post-war revolution they reinterpreted this model in an even more centralized manner. Both the *Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union* (which was strongest in the North Sea ports and the steel industry of Düsseldorf) and the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter* (which grew out of coal mining and iron and steel production in the Ruhr and Upper Silesia) placed emphasis on a single, central union of all workers. Such unions were based on works councils, elected by all workers in each factory or mine, in the major monopolized industries and attracted lesser

<sup>19</sup> For the U.S.A., see Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike. The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval* (Chicago 1942); Stanley Buder, *Pullman . . . An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930* (New York 1967); Dubofsky, "Origins of Western Working-Class Radicalism," Jensen, 54-71. For Britain, cf. Pribicevic on the amalgamation movement, 65-82.

<sup>20</sup> In general, see Jean-Daniel Reynaud, *Les syndicats en France*, 1 (Paris 1975); and André Barjonet, *La CGT. Histoire, structure, doctrine* (Paris 1968). For organizational developments, see Moss, 143-53; Lorwin, 23-25; J.A. Estey, *Revolutionary Syndicalism. An Exposition and a Criticism* (London 1913), 32-48; Ridley, 69-77; Marjorie Ruth Clark, *A History of the French Labor Movement (1910-1928)*, University of California Publications in Economics VIII, 1 (Berkeley 1930), 24-39.

<sup>21</sup> For the proposed structure of the IWW ("Father Hagerty's Wheel" of industrial unions), see Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 84-85; see also Foner, 37-38.

categories of workers to this industrial core.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the German *Arbeiter-Unionen* maintained subordinate industrial subdivisions, although they were not given separate status as industrial unions until forced to by the KPD and Red International of Labor Unions in 1924. Revolutionary unionists in Canada carried centralized organization to its logical extreme by founding the One Big Union in 1919. All workers were organized in one union without regard to craft or industry, either in mixed locals or in central labour councils in larger towns. To be sure, there were strong movements for separate industrial unions within the OBU, especially among lumber workers in British Columbia and northern Ontario. However, the core of the OBU recognized only general local unions, not unlike the *unions locales* of the CGT.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the movement for revolutionary industrial unionism exhibited a variety of attitudes toward socialist and labour politics, ranging from rejection of political parties to subordination to a vanguard party. The industrial unionists of the period after 1900 are often considered to have been opposed to political parties, and this was indeed true of the syndicalists. The CGT, of course, came out openly against political parties, and the OBU in Canada later adopted a similar position, although it is questionable whether these organizations did so out of a general repudiation of political socialism or rather because they wanted to prevent the disruption of union work by hostile political factions.<sup>25</sup> Still, the anti-party position of the CGT and OBU merely defined one extreme and by no means the general sentiment of industrial unionists. The IWW, for instance, declared its political neutrality in order to concentrate its efforts on economic action and organization. It wanted to elevate the importance of industrial action within the revolutionary movement, but it did not oppose the participation of individual Wobblies in socialist politics. No less a leader than William Haywood made this point clear.<sup>26</sup> In Britain the early leaders of the general unions and in France and Germany left-wing socialists (and later communists) actively favoured the participation of union leaders in labour and socialist politics.<sup>26</sup> Germany, finally, produced the two most con-

<sup>23</sup> Bock, 125-26, 195-224; Peterson, 871-83.

<sup>24</sup> Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 166-68. The most informative writer on the OBU's organization is Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 187-89.

<sup>25</sup> Moss, 136-55, especially 141 ff.; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 220-27; William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International. A History of the Communist Party of Canada 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 45-58; Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada. A History* (Toronto 1975), 28-31; Robin, 193-97. The OBU was not initially opposed to political parties. Indeed, its leaders in 1919 came almost to the man from the SPC. The anti-party stance of the OBU dates from 1921 when the main issue was adherence to the Third International and RILU.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Conlin, *Big Bill Haywood; Bread and Roses Too*, 27-35, 41-63.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Clegg and Hyman; Kendall, 7; Peterson, *passim*; Clark for the pro-communist CGTU in France.

scious and organized versions of union participation in left-wing politics. In Hamburg, the *Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union* advocated the creation of what was called an *Einheitsorganisation*, a single organization of workers, based on the factory, which united political and economic work in one body. Labour unions and political party were surpassed by integrating their functions in a single revolutionary organization.<sup>27</sup> The *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter*, on the other hand, formally endorsed the KPD, belonged to the Red International of Labor Unions, and eventually (in 1923-24) came under complete Communist Party control.<sup>28</sup> The syndicalists of the CGT opposed political parties out of fear that a Marxist party would win control of and then subordinate the unions and thus hinder the revolutionary direct action of workers; the counterparts of the French syndicalists in the revolutionary *Arbeiter-Unionen* of Germany interpreted the needs of the revolutionary movement in exactly the opposite way by affiliating with the KPD or KAPD as the necessary precondition of furthering both the economic and political sides of the class struggle. In both cases, national conditions determined the options open to revolutionary unionists. Whereas in France the disunity and divisiveness of the socialist movement made the political neutrality of the CGT imperative for its successful functioning, in Germany the long traditions of revolutionary Marxism and the outbreak of a political revolution in 1918 made political commitment seem just as imperative.

What was in fact common to the political stance of all revolutionary industrial unionists was not hostility toward political parties as such. Rather, it was a position critical of the dominant wing of labour and social democratic parties before 1914 and the advocacy of industrial militancy as a necessary part of the revolutionary class struggle.

In conclusion, it is misleading to define one big unionism or revolutionary industrial unionism according to a single, exclusive model. Though an international phenomenon, it manifested itself concretely in direct relation to national conditions and traditions. The process of industrialization and union traditions were clearly important in deciding the receptiveness of workers to dual unionism. The relative maturity and degree of general support for the movement determined the type of local or national organization that could be created, although in terms of economic organization one can speak of a definite tendency toward "one big unionism." Finally, political traditions — whether of divisiveness (France, Canada, and the United States), parliamentary politics (Britain), or revolutionary Marxism (Germany) — affected the attitude of industrial unionists to political parties. The internationalism of the movement grew out of similar economic conditions in the advanced capitalist countries, the critique of social democratic politics, and the common desire to organize unskilled workers in industrial unions, but the specific response of workers in each country varied among numerous alternatives and nuances.

<sup>27</sup> Bock, 214-24.

<sup>28</sup> Peterson, 198-99, 471-73, 640-46, 683-84; Bock, 167-87.

## III

## Was Revolutionary Industrial Unionism "Syndicalist"?

BECAUSE OF THE anti-political position of the CGT and its imitators in other countries, most historians have labelled the revolutionary industrial unionism of the early twentieth century "syndicalist" without necessarily giving this word a precise definition. The syndicalists of the CGT, of course, won adoption of a coherent syndicalist philosophy in the charter of the union.<sup>29</sup> But elsewhere the case is not nearly so clearcut.

Most historians of the IWW have labelled it "syndicalist," despite the fact that Wobbly leaders consistently called themselves industrial unionists and distinguished themselves from syndicalists; indeed, the most dedicated syndicalists, like William Z. Foster, left or drifted away from the IWW because of differences of opinion over organization and tactics.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, David Montgomery calls the industrial unrest of the period 1909-22 "syndicalist" without defining what he means by this term or how avowed syndicalists fit into the movement.<sup>31</sup> The major historians of the Canadian OBU repeatedly call this union a Canadian version of syndicalism, but nowhere do they show how the OBU was syndicalist or why this term is specifically relevant in this case. They could easily have left off the label without affecting their overall analysis of the OBU.<sup>32</sup> In Germany, social democrats have traditionally accused the KPD

<sup>29</sup> For details on the *Charte d'Amiens*, see any of the major works on the CGT, Ridley, Moss, Reynaud, Dubief.

<sup>30</sup> Dubofsky, 169-70; Renshaw; Foner, 19-24, 157-71; Paul Brissenden, *The IWW A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York 1919). For Foster, see Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too*, 11-13, 23-24; Foner, 415-34. Conlin, in both *Bread and Roses Too* and his biography of Big Bill Haywood, argues forcefully that the IWW was not syndicalist, and I agree with his argument. He emphasizes the native American origins of the IWW and explains the similarity of some (but by no means all) IWW policies with those of syndicalist groups in other countries by pointing to similar socioeconomic developments throughout the industrialized west. However, the IWW, in developing its approach to industrial unionism in the American context, never limited itself to a narrowly syndicalist program and ignored or repudiated syndicalism when this interfered with the Wobblies' industrial union practice, as with the disagreement between Foster and the IWW.

<sup>31</sup> David Montgomery, "The 'New Unionism' and the Transformation of Workers' Consciousness in America, 1909-1922," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 509-29. See the critique of Montgomery's use of "syndicalism" by James R. Green, "Comments on the Montgomery Paper," *ibid.*, 530-31.

<sup>32</sup> Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 89; *Fools and Wise Men*, *passim*; McCormack, 98, 112-13, 143ff; Robin, 150-51, 171-77, 275. Robin is perhaps the most explicit, certainly the most insistent in labelling the OBU syndicalist. However, he writes in exceedingly simplistic categories. For Robin, syndicalism is equated with support for the general strike, whereas "politics" means parliamentary, electoral politics, although even a cursory knowledge of labour history in Canada (not to speak of other countries) would show that highly political socialists supported general strikes and

and its leftwing unions of being "syndicalist," but in this case the purpose is patently propagandistic and is based upon no analysis of the communist *Arbeiter-Unionen*.<sup>33</sup> In fact, there was a syndicalist union in Germany which briefly won mass support from miners and steelworkers in the Ruhr,<sup>34</sup> but this union failed to keep pace with mass sentiment for revolutionary industrial unionism and was quickly superseded by the communist *Freie Arbeiter-Union (Gelsenkirchen)* and *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter*.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Bob Holton, in an analysis of British syndicalism in the period 1910-14, tries to extend the use of this term from uncontestedly syndicalist organizations to the mass industrial insurgency and general labour unrest before 1914.<sup>36</sup> Whereas syndicalists were probably the most influential group of revolutionary industrial unionists in Britain from 1910 to 1914, this had not always been the case, and syndicalist influence declined once again after 1914 in favour of a variety of other organized groups of shop stewards and industrial unionists.

---

that political action is a very broad field of activity that extends well beyond elections and parliaments. To assert this dichotomy between "syndicalism" and "politics" Robin ignores a number of crucial facts: the SPD affiliation of OBU leaders (hardly a sign of anti-party attitudes); the fact that a labour union's political neutrality does not necessarily make it hostile to politics; the role of direct economic action and the general strike as a supplement to (and not a replacement of) political action; the possibility of political positions outside of parliamentarianism; and the explicit support of OBU leaders for the Russian and German revolutions, both of which were obviously political and socialist or communist, not syndicalist, in goal. Robin does not try to understand the nature of the OBU, and instead paints an inaccurate, tendentious, and biased account of OBU positions on economic action and politics. He creates a false alternative between "syndicalism" (the "utopian" OBU) and "politics" (reformist parliamentarianism), in order to brandmark the former and turn the latter into the only "realistic" course. This says more about Robin's own politics than about the OBU or syndicalism.

<sup>33</sup> This was a standard part of SPD and free union propaganda against the communist opposition in the Weimar Republic. It is repeated by Ossip K. Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (2. Auflage, Frankfurt am Main 1971), 122-23, 261, 273; and Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus. Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main 1969), 329; cf. Peterson, 827-37, for a critique.

<sup>34</sup> Bock, 118-20, 122-38, 160-61, 167-87; Erhard Lucas, "Ursachen und Verlauf der Bergarbeiterbewegung in Hamborn und im westlichen Ruhrgebiet 1918/19. Zum Syndikalismus in der Novemberrevolution," *Duisburger Forschungen* 15 (Duisburg 1971), 1-119; Erhard Lucas, *Zwei Formen von Radikalismus in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Frankfurt am Main 1976).

<sup>35</sup> For the relative strength of *Unionisten* and syndicalists in works councils elections in Ruhr mining, see Peterson, 343-45; and Martin Martiny, "Arbeiterbewegung an Rhein und Ruhr vom Scheitern der Räte- und Sozialisierungsbewegung bis zum Ende der letzten parlamentarischen Regierung der Weimarer Republik (1920-1930)," in Jürgen Reulecke, ed. *Arbeiterbewegung an Rhein und Ruhr. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Rheinland-Westfalen* (Wuppertal 1974), 241-73.

<sup>36</sup> Holton, 17-21.

It is necessary first to define what one means by "syndicalism" before one can decide its applicability to revolutionary industrial unionism. Melvyn Dubofsky has offered a general definition that underlies the judgment of many historians. He refers to "syndicalism" as a form of industrial militancy among workers at the point of production, which is directed at the takeover and running of industry by the workers themselves, outside the control or influence of political parties.<sup>37</sup> In my opinion, this definition is too narrow. It describes revolutionary industrial unionism in general but not what was specifically (and vocally) advocated by syndicalists, and it applies equally to explicitly non-syndicalist movements such as works councils and shop stewards. There are five distinguishing features of syndicalism which must be included in any definition. First, syndicalism favored federalism over central forms of organization and thus emphasized local autonomy. It opposed political parties, and replaced political work with economic action and organization. Its supreme revolutionary strategy was the general economic strike, not the overthrow of the bourgeois state. After the general strike, workers would abolish the political state altogether and replace it with a federal, economic organization of society. Finally, this new social organization would be based on *syndicats* (hence the name of the movement), basic local units derived from the structure of craft and industry. Although many syndicalists supported industrial unions, industrial unionism itself was never a universally accepted part of syndicalist philosophy, and many syndicalists continued to envision the *syndicats* of the new society as craft- (not industry-) based units.<sup>38</sup> And revolutionary industrial unionists, though often in agreement with individual syndicalist positions, never generally accepted the syndicalist philosophy as a whole.

A short digression on the terminology of the labour movement might be instructive at this point. The real terminological unity of the international movement for industrial unionism was not in the use of "syndicalism," but in the use of "unionism" in a new, specific sense. In English, "union" can have two meanings in the labour movement: the first and most common refers to labour unionism in general — whether craft, trade, or industrial — while the second sense denotes the unification of all workers in a single, general organization. This second meaning was that of the OBU after 1900. In French, these meanings are rendered by different words. *Syndicalisme* — not to be confused with *syndicalisme révolutionnaire* which is usually translated into English simply as "syndicalism" — means labour unionism in general. At the same time the CGT calls its subordinate geographic units *unions locales* and *unions*

<sup>37</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920* (Arlington Heights, Ill. 1975), 105.

<sup>38</sup> Whereas both one big unionism and industrial unionism became central tenets of the CGT (and indeed outlived syndicalist control) the German syndicalists of the *Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften* and the *Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands* (*Syndikalisten*) never evolved even after 1918 beyond the original syndicalism of craft-based unions. Cf. Bock, 23-24, 109.



*départementales*, bodies which unite all workers without regard to trade or industry, analogous to the OBU of Anglo-Saxon countries. In German, the distinction of meanings is even more explicit. The general term for labour unions in German is *Gewerkschaft*, whereas *Verband* refers to concrete individual unions. *Union*, on the other hand, is a foreign word imported directly from the English after 1918 to denote the OBU. Hence, one speaks in general of the *freie Gewerkschaften* or concretely of the *Deutscher Metallarbeiter-Verband*. But the German counterparts of the OBU were called the *Bergarbeiter-Union*, the *Freie Arbeiter-Union*, the *Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union* and the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter*. *Unionismus*, not *Syndikalismus*, was the name of the new movement. "Union" is the common international expression of the movement, and one should speak of "Unionism" (with a capital "U") instead of "syndicalism."

If one accepts this definition of terms, then syndicalism was only one of several factions within a general movement in favour of industrial unionism. Only in a few — albeit major cases like the COT — was this faction predominant, but in the other countries it remained one relatively small tendency among several others. What is really at issue is a movement in favour of revolutionary industrial unionism that arose under specific social, economic, and political conditions after 1900. The term "syndicalism" does not accurately describe this movement.

Bob Holton, although he himself prefers to call the movement syndicalist or proto-syndicalist, is on the right track when he makes an important distinction between the movement of unrest among industrial workers and the organized groups which tried to lead and influence it.<sup>39</sup> For there is a logical and historical difference between the two. This difference is obscured and confused when one tries to render both as "syndicalist."

For example, Holton calls the mass strikes in Britain between 1910 and 1914 "proto-syndicalist," above and beyond any involvement of committed syndicalist militants. By "proto-syndicalist" he means the unofficial, insurgent, and expansive nature of many of the strikes in mining, transportation, or engineering. In such movements, which union leaders had difficulty containing, Holton points to the "primary importance of direct action over parliamentary pressures as a means of settling grievances, the desirability of industrial solidarity between workers in different industries, and above all at this stage the need for rank-and-file control over industrial policy."<sup>40</sup> He also emphasizes mass support for industrial unionism to oppose employers and further workers' control and to mass sentiment against the union leadership in favour of periodic union elections and the recall of union leaders.

The interesting aspect of Holton's description of British strikes is not their syndicalism but rather their similarity to expansive wildcat strikes in other

<sup>39</sup> Holton, 19-21.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-19.

countries between 1910 and 1925. His description of the water transport, dockers, and railway strikes of 1911, for example, could easily be transferred to the wildcat strikes in Rhineland-Westphalia from 1918 to 1924, and the fluid, flexible relationship of radical leaders and militants to the spontaneous mass unrest was fundamentally the same in Germany as in the earlier strikes in Britain. Yet in Germany, the unofficial movements tended to come under communist leadership: workers turned to the KPD as the largest, best organized, and most prominent radical force in Germany to give the movement co-ordination.<sup>41</sup> Just as syndicalists increased their influence in Britain in 1910-14, so communists entered the German strike wave as propagandists, agitators, and organizers. But it would be just as wrong to call the German strikes "communist" as it is to call the British ones "syndicalist." What is common to both, is the kind of mass unrest and the insurgent, industrial aspect of workers' direct action. National traditions, economic and political conditions, and the general options open to the revolutionary left determined why the influence of syndicalists was on the rise in Britain before 1914 but that of the communists more important after the Bolshevik revolution and the founding of the Comintern. But the *mass movement* is the interesting feature of such strikes. This, and the relation of organized left-wing groups to it, that is, the structure of such movements, were fundamentally similar in both examples, although the ideologies of syndicalists and communists were themselves different.

All the factions that actively worked for industrial unionism took the raw material of industrial unrest and tried to raise the lessons drawn from it to the level of theory and tactics. They seized in the first instance on the economic grievances of workers, which preceded any coherent political consciousness. These immediate grievances tended to be localized in scope and encouraged opposition to state policies and national union leaders. And such discontent, as it grew, focused quite naturally on the local control of production by workers. Finally, mass unrest tended more and more often to take the form of wildcat strikes as the most effective way to break through the containment policies of the state and national union leaders. Once underway, under unstable social and economic conditions, wildcat strikes expanded spontaneously both geographically and from industry to industry until they took on increasingly general proportions. Not only syndicalists, but revolutionary industrial unionists, councils activists, and communists developed their tactics in different, even opposing, directions from the same mass movement of social unrest.

One of the cardinal features of the industrial unrest and the movement in favour of industrial unionism from 1900 to 1925 was the convergence of three forces. After 1900 individual union militants and activists, formal left-wing organizations and propagandist groups, and mass unrest among industrial workers all converged in a general movement in favour of industrial unionism.

<sup>41</sup> Peterson, 117-39, 242-54, 361ff., 387-411, 476-501, 518-56, 604-26.

The role of left-wing organizations lent the movement its revolutionary ideology; the participation of union activists, whether or not members of left-wing organizations, established a vital link between revolutionaries and unions; and the unrest of industrial workers provided the mass force to sustain and extend the movement. This was a real social movement in which the initially spontaneous industrial action of workers (mostly in strikes) opened the way for leaders and militants, and in which industrial workers themselves joined slowly in more organized forms of industrial unionism and direct action as they responded to the leadership and propaganda of union militants. To call this convergence of factors "syndicalist" is to miss the historical forces at work and to replace a process of change and revitalization in the labour movement with an arbitrary (and partisan) definition. Specific groups tried to give organization, leadership, and ideological coherence to this movement among rank-and-file workers, but they could never contain it entirely within one doctrine or organization, whether syndicalist or otherwise.

#### IV

#### The Social Composition of Revolutionary Industrial Unionism

THE INTERNATIONAL NATURE of this movement among workers comes out in the social composition of workers who supported it or whose industrial militancy served as a spur or context for industrial union militants. Two groups of workers were especially prominent in strikes that led to demands for industrial organization. Unskilled workers in new or rapidly expanding industries were the most visible and characteristic supporters of the movement. Nevertheless, a significant number of skilled, traditionally unionized workers, usually in large industrial settings subjected to technological change, turned to industrial unionism as it became apparent that defense of union standards and adaptation to changes in production required the additional support of the mass of unskilled and semiskilled workers.

By far the most common supporters of revolutionary industrial unionism were miners. Hard-rock miners in the American west formed the core of the WFM, WLU, ALU, and early IWW in the United States, and hard-rock and coal miners were prominent in both the IWW and OBU in Canada. Syndicalists first won mass influence in Britain among Welsh miners, and the continuing unrest among British miners after 1910 provided a context for the agitation of a variety of radical, industrial union groups. In France, syndicalists won support from miners around Saint Étienne. In Germany coal miners in the Ruhr, and to a lesser extent in Upper Silesia and middle Germany, formed the backbone of the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter* and provided the extensive mass support which made both the KPD and revolutionary one big unionism major economic forces in this most basic and politically sensitive German industry.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Jensen; Foner, 14-15, 486-517; Dubofsky, "Origins of Western Working-Class

Next to mining, workers in a variety of mass production industries and transportation joined the movement for industrial unionism or responded to the agitation of revolutionary unions. The specific industries varied largely according to the economic structure of each country. After mining, transportation was the most frequent setting of militant strikes and industrial union agitation. Railroad workers were drawn into the movement to a greater or lesser extent in all five countries; dockers supported the movement in parts of the U.S.A., British Columbia, Britain, and Germany; British, American, and German seamen also joined the movement at different times, often carrying revolutionary industrial union propaganda from country to country.<sup>43</sup>

Textile workers in the American east gave support to the IWW, while German textile workers in the region around Mönchen-Gladbach formed a secondary source of support for the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter* in Rhineland-Westphalia. Also typical of support for the IWW in the eastern United States were the new mass production industries that were later organized by the CIO: the IWW at its highpoint led major strikes in the steel, rubber, and automobile industries. In Germany, the comparable mass production industries were to be found in the heavy industries developed from 1895 to 1918: virtually every major steel mill in the Ruhr, the shipbuilding centres of Hamburg and Bremen, and all the big centres of chemical production (especially Leverkusen, Ludwigshafen, and Leuna) supported either one big unionism or revolutionary industrial unionism in one form or another. In Great Britain, the general workers' unions organized the unskilled in these same mass production industries, especially in the period of labour unrest from 1910 to 1920. Lumber, wood, and agriculture formed another centre of support where these industries were relevant, that is, in the Canadian west, northern Ontario, the American west and south, and middle Germany. Indeed, the IWW was perhaps most successful in organizing the lumber industry and migratory agricultural labourers; the strongest group in the Canadian OBU was at first the industrial union of lumber workers; and one of the constituent organizations of

---

Radicalism;" *We Shall Be All*, 19-56, 120-26, 301-07, 319-33, 366-93, 476-77; Richard E. Lingenselter, *The Hardrock Miners. A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West 1863-1893* (Berkeley 1974); Holton, Chapter 5; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 114-15, 136-46, 188-214, 234-46; McCormack, 36-41, 98-114; Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners." *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979), 53-54, 56-57, 80-82; Robin, 179-80ff., 275; Bock, 160-61; Peterson, 735-43; Peter N. Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labour. A Cause without Rebels* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1971), 39, 98-99.

<sup>43</sup> Lindsey; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 448, 474-75; Montgomery, 523-24; Holton, 89-110; Bock, 160-61; Peterson, 638, 650; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 114-15, 155ff.; McCormack, 44-48, 98-117; Robin, 150-51; Stearns, 50, 70-71; Lorwin, 25; Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français 1914-1920. Contributions à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris 1964), 359-547.

the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter* was the communist *Freier Landarbeiterverein* of middle Germany.<sup>44</sup>

Common to all these industries was their creation or general expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and their reliance on vast pools of unskilled, often migratory, or immigrant labour. To be organized at all, workers in such industries had to adopt some form of industrial organization that would comprise all workers in the factory or workplace. Both the weakness of individual unskilled workers and the concentrated economic power of large corporations in these industries made a similar concentration of worker power in industrial unions a precondition of even limited economic goals. The power of corporations was underscored by the industrial settings involved: the list of industrial workers who supported revolutionary industrial unionism and one big unionism contains a disproportionate number who worked in one-industry or company towns. Coal mining, steel, textiles, and chemicals in Germany, mining and lumber in the United States and Canada, coal mining in South Wales, automobiles, rubber, steel, and textiles in the American east — all were predominantly one-industry settings and many were dominated by company towns. The dual power of corporations on the local and the national industrial level, which made it possible to suppress labour organizations, forced industrial unionists to adopt more radical or revolutionary positions that foresaw the elimination of privately-owned industry. And one-industry settings acted as a definite spur to one big unionism, a kind of unionism designed to unite all workers on the local level, most of whom worked in the same industry in any case, against the domination of the local economy by one or several large employers.

The unskilled, immigrant, and migratory background of such workers tended to blur the influence of national and indigenous working-class cultures and to underscore the common international conditions behind revolutionary industrial unions. Nevertheless, revolutionary industrial unionism was not confined to the unskilled but appealed as well to at least some groups of native, unionized, skilled workers. Most craft workers did not support industrial unions; they remained loyal to the traditional craft-based unions in most advanced industrial nations. Only in France did craft workers in the CGT give

<sup>44</sup> Foner and Dubofsky go into detail on these sources of IWW support. For Germany, see Peterson, 168, 198, 415-17, 638-39, 743-48, 749-50; and Bock, 160-61. Also, Eva Cornelia Schöck, *Arbeitslosigkeit und Rationalisierung. Die Lage der Arbeiter und die kommunistische Gewerkschaftspolitik 1920-28* (Frankfurt/Main 1977), especially 123-40 on the chemical industry; Helmut Gätsch, *Die Freien Gewerkschaften in Bremen 1919-1933*, Bremer Veröffentlichungen zur Zeitgeschichte Heft 4 (Bremen 1969); Richard A. Comfort, *Revolutionary Hamburg. Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic* (Stanford 1966). For Britain, see Hyman and Clegg. For Canada, Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 134-36, 165-70; McCormack, 98-117; Avery, 80-82; Robin, 179-80ff., 275. Specifically on the American lumber industry, see Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels in the Woods: The IWW in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, Ore. 1967).

their support to syndicalism in significant numbers and agreed to the introduction of industrial unions even while they controlled the national union federation. Elsewhere, only specific categories of skilled workers turned to industrial unionism, in particular workers in metals and engineering and in construction. In France, metalworkers in Paris, Saint Étienne, and Saint Nazaire gave support to the syndicalists, and workers in metallurgy, foundries, and metal trades had organized industrial unions by 1914. In Britain, many industrial union activists, like Tom Mann, came from metals and engineering, and the amalgamation and shop stewards movements won their greatest support in old centres of metal production and engineering.<sup>40</sup> The Clyde shipbuilding industry is a particularly interesting case and can be contrasted with the one big unionism of the German North Sea ports.

In Scotland, the impetus for amalgamation and the shop stewards movement came from long unionized, skilled workers faced with the dissolution of skills during World War I; such workers were trying to defend the traditional job control of unionized skilled workers by adapting it to changes in technology and production, in the process turning to new forms of union organization, shop committees, and workers' control. In contrast, in Germany, where unionized skilled workers lacked the power and traditions of British metalworkers, revolutionary industrial unionism after 1918 was based directly upon the semiskilled workers which German employers had relied upon to man the shipbuilding industry since the industrialization of the 1890s and 1900s. The industry was the same in both countries, but the constellation of forces behind revolutionary industrial unionism was different.<sup>41</sup>

Another centre of support among metalworkers for revolutionary industrial unionism was in railway shops such as those in Winnipeg, the Pullman works in Chicago, and the railway repair shops in Berlin and Opladen. Such skilled workers were no longer isolated craftsmen but worked instead in concentrated industrial settings, alongside a growing number of semiskilled workers, in one of the major transportation industries. Just as railway workers were receptive to industrial unionism, so railway shop workers tended to see the advantage of industrial organization.<sup>42</sup>

Construction workers were of secondary importance in the movement for industrial unions, although in some areas they too gave support to the movement. As with skilled metalworkers and engineers, the main factors encouraging industrial unionism were the dequalification of skilled labour, the growing employment of unskilled labour, and the concentration of capital in large industrial construction firms and employers' associations. Such factors, to differing degrees, were at work in the Canadian west, where mostly unskilled

<sup>40</sup> Pribicevic, *passim*; Holton, 148-54; Stearns, 39, 42, 98-99; Lorwin, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Pribicevic; Hinton, Kendall, 105-141; Kral; Volker Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung vom Vorabend des ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Revolution 1918/19* (Dissertation, Hamburg 1976).

<sup>42</sup> Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*; Robin, 189ff.; Lindsey; Peterson, 638.

## 62 LABOUR/LE TRAVAILLEUR

railway construction workers employed by railway corporations joined the IWW before 1914, and in Great Britain, where syndicalists found some support among construction workers, especially in London.<sup>48</sup> In Germany after 1920, the communists were able to keep most revolutionary construction workers inside the free unions;<sup>49</sup> however, in the Ruhr, where the construction industry was exceptionally concentrated and integrated with coal mining, engineering, and the heavy steel industry, many construction workers defied communist directives and joined the *Union der Hand- und Kopfarbeiter*.<sup>50</sup> In France, Parisian construction workers formed part of the core of syndicalist support, and the individual craft unions in the construction industry united to form an industrial federation between 1906 and 1914.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the movement for industrial unionism from 1900 to 1925 was the expression of workers in two settings, each tied in different ways to the expansion of industry, concentration of corporate power, and technological changes since the late nineteenth century. The simultaneous radicalization of the unskilled and of specific categories of skilled workers reinforced the general movement in its tendency to spread from one group of workers to another. Finally, the complexity of the movement, especially the participation of unionized skilled workers, made it a more direct threat to the existing labour movement by creating a general industrial alternative, going well beyond just the unskilled, that challenged existing union structures, practices, and politics.

### V

#### Highpoint and Decline of the Movement

IN THE DECADE prior to 1910 industrial unionists gathered their forces and achieved their initial breakthroughs. The first groups of industrial unionists and syndicalists were founded in Britain at this time; in the United States the IWW was founded, although it spent its first four years consolidating its organization in a series of factional fights; in Germany left social democrats began haltingly to reconsider union tactics in the mass strike debate. Only in France were revolutionary unionists successful in winning control of the CGT and in adopting the syndicalist *Charte d'Amiens* in 1906. Even in France, however, the transition to industrial unionism was only initiated between 1905 and 1910 and did not lead to immediate organizational successes.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Holton, 154-63; McCormack, 48, 98-117; Avery, 54-55; Foner, 227-31.

<sup>49</sup> In Germany the construction unions had already turned to amalgamated and semi-industrial forms of organization before 1914, so that the communists could argue against the necessity of forming revolutionary dual unions. Thus, even when KPD-controlled construction union locals were expelled from the free unions, the KPD organized a "union of the expelled" (the *Verband der Ausgeschlossenen Bauarbeiter*) to fight for readmission rather than an independent revolutionary industrial union.

<sup>50</sup> Peterson, 748-49.

<sup>51</sup> Stearns, 42, 50-51, 96; Lorwin, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Holton, 39-51. All the major writers on the IWW, Conlin, Foner and Dubofsky, go

After 1910 the movement gained momentum, expanded its organization, and began to penetrate the mass of industrial workers. The exact timing of its growth depended largely on social and economic conditions in each country. And of primary importance in the conjuncture of the movement's development was the impact of inflation. Prices had been steadily rising throughout the industrialized world since the turn of the century, and by 1910 the price increases — and the consequent decline in real wages and workers' living standards — began to make themselves generally felt. Holton has pointed to this factor in the outburst of labour unrest in Britain between 1910 and 1914.

Economic trends of this kind produced a massive build up of material grievance among workers. Mass unrest developed because the long-term trend of rising spending power was now checked, and because of the sharp contrast between working-class living standards and the conspicuous luxury consumption of Edwardian rentiers and manufacturers. Economic unrest of this kind did not by itself stimulate syndicalism, but it did provide a general sense of material deprivation on which revolutionary industrial movements might build. For grievances over wages inevitably created great pressure on orthodox trade unionism and on parliamentary socialism to bring improvement and reform. Any failure here led the disaffected to look further afield, in particular to the direct action philosophy of syndicalism which by-passed collective bargaining and parliament altogether.<sup>53</sup>

It is thus not surprising that industrial militancy and the spread of revolutionary unionism reached a first peak in Britain just prior to the outbreak of war, and on the left the syndicalists were the primary beneficiaries of the strike unrest. French syndicalism grew in an environment of stagnating real wages before 1910. The period from 1909 to the entry of the United States into World War I was also the highpoint of the IWW. The IWW reached its maximum influence in the American east in these years when it led a series of major strikes in the mass production industries, then built its organization of agricultural labourers in the prairie states. David Montgomery has also pointed to the impact of inflation after 1909 on the emergence of what he calls the "new industrial unionism" among unskilled workers outside the IWW.<sup>54</sup>

World War I made inflation a propelling force behind industrial unionism throughout the capitalist world. The pent-up grievances of workers over the decline of living standards, alongside the war profiteering of the possessing classes, burst open in the wave of revolutions and mass strikes after 1918. David Bercuson has clearly shown the role of wages in the Winnipeg general strike and the mass movement behind the formation of the OBU. The renewed revolutionization of the CGT after the period of wartime collaboration — a revolutionization that culminated in the general railway workers' strike of May 1920 and which contributed to the adherence of the French Socialist Party to

---

into detail on its early factionalism and decline after 1905.

<sup>53</sup> Holton, 28.

<sup>54</sup> Stearns, 17-18. For the U.S.A., see Foner, Dubofsky and Montgomery.



the Comintern at the Congress of Tours — was also closely bound up with wartime sacrifices and expectations for economic improvements after the armistice. Germany, however, stands out as the classic example of the impact of inflation in radicalizing industrial workers. Not only did the decline in living standards lead directly to the mass strikes of industrial workers in 1918-19 — especially among Ruhr miners, but also among metalworkers and chemical workers throughout Germany — but the great inflation of the years 1921-23 revived and spread the revolutionary movement after the initial defeats of the 1918-19 revolution and the 1920 Ruhr uprising. It is no coincidence that the history of the *Arbeiter-Unionen* runs exactly parallel with the post-war inflation.<sup>55</sup>

Groups of industrial unionists seized upon such economic unrest and mass action to organize industrial unions and to coordinate strike movements. They developed a set of tactics to meet the needs of unskilled, previously unorganized workers. David Montgomery has succinctly summarized these tactics for the IWW, but his description could be used, with only a few changes, for any of the groups active in Canada, Britain, France, or Germany.

Agreeing that "trade lines have been swallowed up in a common servitude of all workers to the machines which they tend," the delegates [at the founding IWW congress] decided to organize workers from the bottom up, enlisting first the unskilled and using their enthusiasm and power to pull the more highly skilled workers into action. This meant that the IWW had to replace the craft unions' meticulous caution with dramatic tactics. It would scorn large strike funds, relying instead on mass appeals for aid, on the workers' own spirit of sacrifice and on short strikes. It would reject all reliance on negotiations, labels, written contracts, trade autonomy and benefit funds and it would summon the workers to leave the decrepit "American Separation of Labor" and enlist in the new revolutionary union.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, German communist *Unionisten* spoke in almost identical terms in attempting to build an alternative to reformist trade unionism.<sup>57</sup> Such tactics were not just an abstract ideology but rather grew out of the conditions of industrial workers.

Revolutionary unionists elaborated these tactics in two major directions during and after World War I. On the one hand, they tried to put their previous advocacy of the general or mass strike weapon into practice. World War I and the post-war period in fact led to a series of mass strikes, general strikes in individual industries, and general strikes. All types of revolutionary unionists

<sup>55</sup> Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 22-44; Masters in his older study also emphasizes the role of basic economic (rather than ideological) reasons in propelling sentiment for a strike; cf. D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto 1950). Kriegel; Peterson, 199-203, 211-26, 347-61, 387ff., 476-80, 518ff.; Bock, 87; Jürgen Kuczynski, *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Vols. 4-5 (Berlin 1966); Erhard Lucas, *Märzrevolution 1920*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1970-74); "Zur Ursachen;" *Zwei Formen von Radikalismus*.

<sup>56</sup> Montgomery, 510.

<sup>57</sup> Peterson, Chapter 12.

used the industrial militancy of workers to put their ideas in practice: French syndicalists in the general railway strike of May 1920, their American followers in the steel strike of 1919, German communists in the waves of mass strikes in 1918-19, 1920, and 1921-24, and other groups of revolutionary unionists, not previously associated with syndicalism, such as those who led the Winnipeg general strike in Canada. And these were only the most spectacular examples. Second, revolutionary unionists introduced new forms of organization, aimed specifically at workers' control of production, during and after the war. Indeed, "control of production" became a major slogan of both the British and German labour movements after World War I. The shop stewards movement in Britain and Germany and the revolutionary councils movement in Germany and Italy were the primary examples of this new mode of action. General/mass strikes and works councils/shop stewards together amounted to a revolutionary challenge to capitalist control of the economy: the first was aimed at the eventual seizure of industry as a whole, while the second attempted to establish workers' control at the point of production. Both were predicated upon industrial unions uniting all workers in factory, mine or workshop organizations. Between 1910 and 1925 the erosion of living standards, which was accelerated by the war, activated workers who were already affected by the structural changes of capitalist industry and mobilized them to take direct economic action. This general industrial unrest created the environment in which union activists could translate their ideas about tactics and organization into concrete action.<sup>58</sup>

The movement for revolutionary industrial unionism rose and fell with this industrial unrest. It was defeated everywhere between 1919 and 1925. The reasons for the defeat were complex, but they were closely bound up with the revolutionary nature of the movement. For the movement culminated in an open confrontation with employers and the state, and it relied upon a loose form of organization and upon tactics adapted to mass unrest among industrial workers. The confrontation with employers and the state took the form of major strikes, pitched battles in which compromise solutions were rarely possible; the revolutionary intentions with which industrial unionists used direct economic action (and the revolutionary implications of many of the larger unofficial strikes) made the state and employers defend their positions with all the weapons at their disposal. Moreover, the craft unions fought back to defend

<sup>58</sup> For the post-war strikes, see the studies by Kriegel, 359-547; Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*; McCormack, 158-64; Lucas, "Zur Ursachen;" *Zwei Formen von Radikalismus*; Peter von Oertzen, "Die grossen Streiks der Ruhrbergarbeiterschaft im Frühjahr 1919. Ein Beitrag zur Diskussion über die revolutionäre Entstehungsphase der Weimarer Republik," in Eberhard Kolb, ed. *Vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik* (Cologne 1972), 185-217; Gerald D. Feldman, Eberhard Kolb, and Reinhard Rürup, "Die Massenbewegungen der Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland am Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges (1917-1920)," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 12 (1972), 84-105. For the councils movement, see Pribicevic; Hinton; Kendall, 142-69; von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte*; Peterson, 871-90; Spriano; Cammett, 19-31, 65-122; Horowitz, 142-53.

their own position against the industrial unionists, and they found themselves tacit — and often open — allies of employers and the state. All of the strikes were eventually defeated by the superior power of these combined forces. The loose organization of the revolutionary unionists could not survive such defeat, and one by one the organizations dissolved, split, or declined. Finally, the inflation, which had propelled the movement for two decades, was followed by a deflationary cycle in the mid-1920s. Economic crisis and unemployment, followed by downward pressure on wages and economic stabilization, put an end to the mass unrest and industrial militancy in which revolutionary industrial unionism had grown. It was left for the Comintern to pick up the pieces and to save what was left to be saved. Perhaps the greatest weakness of revolutionary industrial unionism between 1900 and 1925 was its dependence upon the spontaneous movement of unrest among industrial workers; it failed — by and large consciously — to create stable, permanent union organizations because the goal of the movement was not just the reformist defense of limited material demands, but also the socialist transformation of the economy.

THOUGH DEFEATED everywhere by 1925, one big unionism fed into both international communism and later industrial unionism. The revolt of the unskilled between 1910 and 1925 was, from a longer historical perspective, a dress rehearsal for the wave of industrial unionization that overtook the western capitalist world in the mid-1930s and 1940s. Later organizations of industrial unions dropped the revolutionary side of the earlier movement and established in its stead a stable, workable compromise between autonomous industrial unions and general national federations of all industries. The CIO, CCL, CGT, and *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* all achieved such a compromise. On the other hand, the successful creation of stable, officially recognized industrial unions seems to have put an end to the call for "one big union" since 1950. The OBU may thus be called historically specific. In western Europe and North America it was the first stage in the general organizing of the unskilled, the ideology of the unskilled in their first period of revolt. Nevertheless, one should not be too quick to close the book on the OBU. It has, on more than one occasion, been associated with intense working-class radicalism and industrial challenge to the wage system; it has given such radicalism a pronounced ideology of class solidarity on the economic front with the ultimate goal of the taking over of industry by workers to be run by workers themselves. In a future upsurge of industrial militancy — perhaps around workers' councils instead of industrial unions — the call for "one big union" may be heard again.

*I would like to thank Gregory Kealey and the members of the North American Seminar of the History Department at Dalhousie University for their criticism and suggestions in revising an earlier version of this article.*