

100 YEARS AGO: THE PHILADELPHIA DOCKERS STRIKE AND LOCAL 8 OF THE IWW

INTRODUCTION

Exactly a hundred years ago, on 14 May 1913, the victorious strike of the 4,000 Philadelphia dockers (who dealt with international traffic) began. It finished on 28 May 1913.

Why revisit a strike that happened so long ago? Because it was exemplary on more than one level and some of the lessons are still relevant¹. Some salient points:

- The strike was victorious and broke the weight of defeat felt since the previous strike of 1898,
- Its determination and its organisation were exemplary in the face of stevedoring companies, ship-owners and the police,
- The strike was (at that time) the only example where dockers formed a united front without distinction of race (or religion). Indeed, 52% of the dockers were black (39% Polish and Lithuanians and 9% Italians and Irish). For the first time, the leadership of the strike was carried out on a basis of equality and the leading activist was Benjamin Fletcher (1890-1949), a black man and member of the IWW (*Industrial Workers of the World*). In a country where the bosses and the state systematically used the weapon of racism to divide the workers (and still do today), the fact that the most oppressed, the blacks, were able to participate fully in the strike constitutes a major event.
- The inhabitants of the *South Philadelphia* area (where most of the dockers lived), including many women, actively supported the strikers.
- The dockers obtained wage increases and improvements, along with control over hiring.

Faithful to the principles of the IWW, Local 8 of the MTW (*Maritime Transport Workers*), created out of the strike, refused to sign a contract and maintained this position during the whole of its existence. Indeed, a contract signed by a union guaranteed advantages to the workers in exchange for renouncing the right to strike for its duration.

After the strike, Local 8 organised the cultural life of the dockers such that the strength of the strike would not be diluted by the normality of working in a port where links between workers were irregular and strained. And let's remember that from its birth, on every 16 May (apart from 1918) until 1921, Local 8 organised a strike day, stopping the port, with a march of 40,000 people.

Having stabilised its strength in the port, Local 8 organised sailors, drivers and sugar refinery workers (the factories were next to the port), and helped the other Locals of Philadelphia (TWIU – *Textile Workers Industrial Union* – 1000, for the textile industry and MTW 100 for the sailors).

But the United States' entry into the war, in April 1917, changed the game. While being a victim like all the other IWW sections of police raids (arrest and imprisonment of six of its leaders, including Ben Fletcher), Local 8 had more of a wait-and-see attitude during the war, refusing to oppose it and guaranteeing for the American war effort the most reliable port for the transport of goods, arms and ammunition to Europe.

¹ This Letter owes a great deal to the remarkable work of Peter Cole, "*Wobblies on the waterfront. Interracial unionism in progressive-era Philadelphia*", 2007, University of Illinois Press.

THE BACKGROUND

PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia was, at the time, the third largest city of the US by population (1.6 million), behind New York and Chicago; the second industrial centre behind Chicago and the second port behind New York.

Industry there was diverse and all industrial sectors were represented: textiles (which accounted for a third of jobs), food processing, engineering, ship building, and railway construction. There were around 250,000 industrial workers overall.

But except for Baldwin (locomotive construction) and Cramp (shipyards) which employed around 10,000 workers, the workplaces were of medium size (from 500 to 1,000 employees). Engineering and machine-tools were the second industrial sector, represented by medium-sized companies including particularly the skilled workers who gave Philadelphia its name as “*workshop of the world*”. The banking sector was also the third biggest in the US, and the port which employed around 25,000, was the economic heart of the city.

THE PORT

The port possessed 40 km of docks along the Delaware River and its tributary the Schuylkill. Although it was 120 km from the sea it was a deep-water port. Cereals, coal, oil, steel and products of mechanised industry were exported. Sugar cane, fruits (bananas, pineapples), cotton were imported.

There was still no centralised port authority and many dozens of maritime companies (without counting the stevedoring companies) meant that the bosses were fragmented. At the time, the organisation of the maritime industry in Philadelphia was as follows:

- The shipping companies brought in and took away goods on their ships,
- The storage companies ran the warehouses located on the docks (*piers*),
- The owners of the piers charge the shipping companies for docking rights (proportional to the time the ships are present),
- The stevedoring companies hire a certain number of dockers according to the level of traffic to load and unload the ships,
- The railway and trucking companies transport goods to their final destination or from their original location.

A company can engage in several of these activities at once, apart from those involving the stevedores.

The Navy owned a few docks but even they had to go through the stevedoring companies. Three big railway companies, the *Pennsylvania*, the *Reading* and the *Baltimore & Ohio* had their own ports.

CONDITIONS OF WORK

In the US we can distinguish the “*Deep sea longshoremen*” (in Philadelphia, in 1913, there were 4,200 dockers of whom 2,200 were black) who loaded and unloaded the ships carrying out international trade, and the “*Coastal longshoremen*” who loaded and unloaded ships involved in domestic trade. The first were, in general, more skilled and a bit less badly treated than the second. Nevertheless, what characterised the condition of the dockers was job insecurity. Indeed, maritime traffic (on account of the various goods imported and exported) is by its nature irregular. Secondly, when a ship has to be loaded or unloaded, according to the more or less perishable nature of the goods, the work of the docker is only finished when this process is complete.

This means that periods of unemployment can alternate with periods of work with days longer than twelve hours. The docker has no permanent labour contract: he can be hired for a few hours, a day or the duration of the job (which rarely exceeds five days). Once hired by a stevedoring company and therefore obliged to be present on the dock, if the ship is late, he is not paid for the time spent waiting. There existed a core of regular dockers, in general the most skilled (whatever was the work of a docker in that era it was almost exclusively manual) working for the same stevedoring company and so being able to give priority to the hiring of some other dockers. When there was not enough work on the docks, the dockers went to other sectors: sugar refineries or construction yards. Conversely, during slack periods in industry, the port saw a rush of thousands of workers looking for a job, however insecure it may be which intensified competition between dockers and certainly made it easier for the stevedoring companies to lower wages.

Hiring happened three times a day: 7 in the morning, 1 in the afternoon and 7 in the evening. Each stevedoring company had its hiring spot on *Delaware avenue*, the arterial road along the docks, and made the dockers gather in concentric circles to be called one by one. We can imagine the jostling when there were more than a few posts to fill. Elsewhere, the stevedoring companies often left the dockers hanging about after the hiring to wait for a possible second call. The dockers therefore waited in the bars. Rampant alcoholism, coupled with the hard work of the docker and miserably insecure conditions, made accidents at work very frequent.

Once they had a job the dockers troubles were certainly not over. The shipping and stevedoring companies had an interest in unloading and reloading the ships as quickly as possible by pushing the dockers to the limit, on account of the weak mechanisation of labour. It was not unusual for the dockers to suffer four successive days of work of 12 hours each! No safety regulations existed and there was no medical assistance in case of accidents: it was naked exploitation. This system worked because, as elsewhere, the dockers were amongst the best paid workers in Philadelphia (apart from the skilled workers in mechanised industry). And relative to their colleagues in other ports on the East Coast, their wages (30c per hour) were situated between those of New York and Boston (35c per hour) and those of Baltimore (25c per hour) and Newport News (20c per hour).

THE UNIONS

In the East Coast ports the main dockers union was the ILA (*International Longshoremen's Association*), affiliated to the AFL (*American Federation of Labor*), whose "principles" followed those of the AFL. But because of local conditions, the ILA had one attitude that was different, notably its attitude towards black dockers:

- In Baltimore, Norfolk, and Hampton, the ILA was a whites-only union.
- In New Orleans, the ILA's Local was open to blacks and whites equally. But unlike the IWW, this was for pragmatic reasons rather than principled ones. With the black dockers representing almost half the workforce it would be delusional to organise anything without them. What's more, involving blacks in actions avoided them becoming strike-breakers.
- In Philadelphia, the ILA did not exist.

This is why it was the ISU (*International Seamen's Union*) which led the dockers' strike in Philadelphia in 1898 and was hostile to the AFL. The ISU did not survive the defeat of the strike.

THE IWW

Foundation and principles

This is not the place for an exhaustive look at the history, the theory and practice of the IWW, but rather to set out the principles, the actions, the victories and defeats so as to understand the background to the dockers' strike of May 1913. After a preparatory conference in January 1905 in Chicago, the constitutional congress took place from 27 June to 8 July 1905 in Chicago. It gathered together 203 delegates coming from all over America representing 43 organisations² which included all possible tendencies of socialism, anarchism and syndicalism. Beyond their differences, they were united by a rejection of the AFL, lead by Samuel Gompers, which was the centre for craft unions³, corporatism and the rejection of the unskilled, therefore the new immigrants, and generally, the blacks.

On the contrary, for the IWW, the unskilled, because of the evolution of the capitalist mode of production, represented the majority of the working class and therefore had to be organised along with the skilled workers. Because for the IWW "*the working class and the employing class have nothing in common*", it was a question of organising the workers, all the workers, into a single organ, "*One big union*", an attempt to surpass the separation between economic and political struggle even if, while being members of political organisations, a good number of IWW militants professed a rejection of politics (in fact of parliamentarism). The IWW therefore opened its doors without distinction of race, religion, sex or nationality.

From the start, beyond the general principles and the desire to have a practice other than the class collaboration personified by the AFL⁴, the IWW suffered from an imbalance in terms of the membership. Indeed, a particularly dynamic union, the WFM (*Western Federation of Miners*) with its 27,000 members provided almost half the members. It organised copper, lead and silver miners in the Rocky Mountains (Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado). Because of the combative bosses which it had to confront, it developed methods of direct action and was not afraid to use violence. From the start the IWW had two first class leaders: Vincent Saint-John and William "Big Bill" Haywood. Then came the ALU (*American Labor Union*), with 16,500 official members (but in fact far less) which was the sister organisation of the WFM for everyone who was not a western miner, the *United Metal Workers* (3,000 members), the *United Brotherhood of Railway Employees*⁵ (2,000 members) and the *Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance* (1,450 members) led by Daniel De Leon. The rest was composed of small unions of

² Various sources give different information about how representative the delegates were and the supposed membership represented at the Chicago congress.

³ Not only did the AFL refuse to organise the unskilled but it organised the skilled according to craft, that is to say that within the same workplace you would find several craft unions, all belonging to the AFL.

⁴ The IWW ironically referred to the AFL as "*American Separation of Labor*".

⁵ The URBE was founded in Winnipeg, in 1898, on the remains of the ARU (*American Railways Union*), the first inter-category union of the railway workers (1893-1897), and was a union implanted in the West of Canada. Its sister American organisation was founded in 1901 in Oregon, by G.Estes, an ex-member of the ARU. The ARU had been the first union to organise all the categories of railway workers across the USA and gathered 150,000 of them. Its titles to glory were the victorious strike against the *Great Northern Railway* (August 1893) and the defeated strike against the wagon manufacturer Pullman of Chicago in June-July 1894 during which the ARU launched a solidarity strike of 250,000 rail workers in the companies of the American West. At the end of the strike, the seven leaders of the ARU, including E. Debs, were sent to prison. Debs (1855-1926) there discovered the works of Marx, and became a member of the *Socialist Party* and stood for the presidential elections six successive times from 1900 to 1920. Debs was one of the founders of the IWW. When, in 1912, the *Socialist Party* declared that dual membership of the IWW and the SP was impossible, 40,000 of its activists left, including Haywood. Debs then left the IWW while keeping up contacts, notably with Haywood.

small local groups. This importance of the WFM conditioned the first years of the existence of the IWW and has left behind the image of an organisation engaged in violent conflicts, which was certainly not the case everywhere.

The organisation

The IWW was organised into thirteen industrial federations headed by the GEB (*General Executive Board*), based in Chicago, elected at the congress and charged between each congress with assuring the continuity of its decisions and publishing national journals in various languages, like the weekly *Solidarity* and innumerable pamphlets, also in many languages. Each federation was organised into Locals (sections which were territorial or, more rarely, by workplace). But when the members in a town were too few, a Local was common to several federations. Elsewhere a Local could be divided into *Branches* by specific functions.

What characterised the IWW was the lack of permanent members dedicated to “running the shop”. The permanents who did exist operated according to the principle of rotation of tasks, changing posting, profession or town according to the needs of the struggle, because a second characteristic of the IWW was to possess a central corps of agitators/organisers, who would go anywhere in the US (and even Canada) when called by a Local. Numbering around a hundred, they distinguished themselves, amongst other places, in big conflicts like the strikes of Lawrence (January-March 1912) and Paterson (March-July 1913). Some of the best known were William “Big Bill” Haywood (1869-1928), Elizabeth Gurley Finn (1890-1964), Arturo Giovanitti (1884-1959), Carlo Tresca (1879-1943) and Joey Ettore (1885-1948). These central organisers doubled as local organisers, often transferred from places of work.

The existence of these organisers was not a choice theorised by the IWW but represented, at the time, adaptation to the social conditions in the US (long periods of unemployment forcing workers to move around, combative bosses who didn't hesitate to sack workers *en masse*, etc.) and a necessity in the face of repression, sackings and black-listing affecting IWW activists. We mustn't reduce the IWW to a core of agitators separated from the “fixed” militants, because the passage from one category to the other was frequent. But when someone had become a “national” agitator, it was impossible to easily go back to work⁶.

Covered in pernickety statutes, the IWW actually had a federalist way of working. Certainly decentralisation meant that they avoided corruption and bureaucracy, but unification and homogenisation, education, was often left to local initiative or was simply based on respect for the founding principles. More contradictory still, was the incapacity, with a few exceptions such as Local 8 in Philadelphia, to maintain regular members and to capitalise on the success of strikes. For example, in Lawrence, before the strike there were a hundred or so IWW members in local workplaces. After the victorious strike of 25,000 workers (men and women), led by the IWW, their number remained basically the same.

The first time

The IWW was born at the end of a cycle of workers' struggles, as the product of that cycle which was marked by the emergence of unskilled workers. The years which followed, up until 1909, were difficult. This definite enthusiasm which had given rise to its creation went beyond the influence of its 60,000 members. But workers' struggles happened less frequently. In consequence, internal discussions took on a great importance.

⁶ Agitators/organisers were not specific to the IWW. The AFL had them too.

Thus, in 1908, the IWW expelled the militants and sympathisers of Daniel De Leon⁷, members of the SLP (“*Socialist Labour Party*”), on the grounds that they considered the IWW as just the trade union wing of the SLP and wanted to give primacy to political (i.e. parliamentary) action.



More seriously, while Haywood and Saint-John were in prison, the leadership of the WFM headed by C. Moyer supported giving a more sizeable orientation to the Federation and consolidating its gains. They were also opposed to the anti-political isolationism of the IWW. Faced with the refusal of the IWW, the great majority of the WFM⁸ left the IWW, considerably reducing their membership (around 40,000) and above all their financial resources.

While maintaining activity in the industrial centres of the American East, the IWW turned towards the West by trying to organise the seasonal workers in the industries of forestry (North-East first, then Arkansas and Louisiana), fruit (California) and agriculture (Great Plains). Without trying to be exhaustive, we can give more visibility to the involvement of the IWW in the workers' struggles of those years. 1906, Goldfield (Nevada): strike of hotel staff supported by miners. 1906, Youngstown (Ohio): strike by foundry workers. 1907, Skowhegan (Maine): strike of textile workers (3,000). 1907, Portland (Oregon): sawmill workers' strike (3,000). 1907, Bridgeport (Connecticut): strike of *American Tube* workers (1,200). 1907, Goldfield (Nevada): strike by miners and hotel workers which lasted 3 months. 1908, Detroit (Michigan): strike at *Studebaker* (6,000). 1908, Schenectady (New York): strike at *General Electric* (3,000) which was the first on-the-job strike in the US. 1908, Virginia, Hibbing (Minnesota): strike by iron miners. 1909, McKees Rocks (Pennsylvania): strike by foundry workers at *Press Steel Car* (3,000) which lasted 11 weeks and was defeated – a hard repression followed.

This last strike, apart from the violent confrontations with the police, the National Guard and the Pinkerton detectives, above all marked the break between skilled workers (Americans) who belonged to the AFL and the unskilled (immigrants) who were organised by the IWW. It was the rapid return to work by the skilled workers, on the instructions of the AFL, but also the split between skilled and unskilled due to mutual incomprehension, which weakened the strike, despite the imaginative tactics used by the IWW, and doomed it to fail.

⁷ Daniel De Leon (1852-1914). During the polemic leading up to his expulsion, De Leon called the other Wobblies “*bummery*”.

⁸ The WFM joined the AFL in 1911.

The campaigns

The IWW then, from 1909 to 1912, launched campaigns for “*Free Speech*” in all public places in American towns. To increase their visibility and to reach workers more rapidly outside places of work, the militants of the IWW climbed up on “*Soap boxes*” and harangued passers-by. Naturally, and particularly in the Western States (California, Oregon, Washington), IWW activists were arrested, beaten up and thrown in prison for a few months. This obliged the organisation to run campaigns to free these comrades. To do that the IWW made contact with liberal lawyers and those who constituted the progressive wing of democracy. This therefore increased the safety net for the IWW by giving them a visibility in the public sphere but, at the same time, reinforced a belief in democracy in the US and engendered dangerous illusions.

We can only salute the courage, the self-sacrifice of these militants of the IWW who systematically confronted repression in the towns where the administration, the police and the judiciary were hostile – all the more so when some were literally massacred by the cops and many died or were crippled. But we can also ask questions about this policy of pushing forward valuable activists to rot in prison and therefore to deprive workers of very useful organisers during a strike. The fact that thousands of militants participated in this activity proves that this policy was not imposed by their leaders (trying to institute a cycle of provocation-repression, for example), but rather corresponds to something strongly felt and widely shared. Nevertheless, these sacrifices and this martyrdom must be examined in the light of their effectiveness, which was not great. Perhaps the presence of numerous militants who’d been influenced by Christianity in the past and wanted to be perfect and exemplary can explain this tendency.

The Lawrence strike, a new beginning

The strike at Lawrence (Massachusetts) which involved at the start 25,000 workers of both sexes, then joined by 15,000 others afterwards, from several wool companies, between 25 January and 12 March 1912, is relatively well known. The IWW had their greatest success there (the strike was victorious and the demands were satisfied) which increased their visibility amongst the workers in the US and reversed the decline in their membership. They proved their capacity to organise a working class composed mostly of women, and of more than 20 nationalities (mostly not speaking English), to resist provocation and repression, to put in place measures on a Sunday to prevent a return to normal on Monday, while the strike was still on, and to use their imagination in using the newspapers in their favour, notably during the movements of strikers’ children. Unfortunately, the IWW was not capable of capitalising on this success, even right there in Lawrence, and their membership did not rise.

Flushed with success, they tried to use the same methods which had succeeded in Lawrence during the silk industry strike in Paterson (New Jersey), between 8 March and 11 July 1913. The situation was very similar in terms of conditions of exploitation and number of workplaces concerned, but not quite so many nationalities were involved and there wasn’t any previous experience of unions and strikes. The IWW, led by Haywood, Tresca, Lessig and Finn organised more big demonstrations in New York (30km from Paterson) to try to get the support of workers and the general population. They succeeded in drawing in socialist intellectuals (Eastman, etc.) and radical democrats (John Reed) and even to get a theatre performance put on by the strikers explaining their struggle at Madison Square Garden, on 7 June 1913.

But, in contrast to Lawrence, the bosses’ front constituted itself immediately and benefited from the support of the municipality and the local press. It reacted rapidly and organised provocations against the strikers by the strike-breakers. It carried on some of the required production in factories in Pennsylvania. The IWW wanted to resist non-violently, to counter the allegations of the press, who treated them as murderers. Above all, the state of New Jersey was firmly hostile to the strike. But it was

a very long strike, too long, and lost momentum before ending in defeat. It is in this context, in the middle of the Paterson strike, that the Philadelphia dockers strike broke out.

THE 1913 DOCKERS STRIKE

The Philadelphia dockers' strike, like any other, didn't come from nowhere. Many dockers, already members of the IWW like Ben Fletcher, a militant since 1911, had begun the work of propaganda and organisation among the dockers. The IWW was not absent from Philadelphia because since 1907 it had had a Local ("57", which in fact was made up of all the IWW members in the city) of foundry workers and had carried out a great work of agitation and organisation in the textile industry. The presence of the IWW *on the docks* started at the *Spreckles Sugar Refinery* where 400 workers (Polish, Lithuanians and some blacks) joined it, on the initiative of Joseph Schmidt, and were sacked as a result. The workers replied with a strike by 800 of them and a demonstration outside. Because the factory was near the docks, contacts were made between dockers and IWW members through the national organiser George Speed.

Elsewhere, Philadelphia was not without strikes, organisation and workers' solidarity, as was shown by the public transport employees of the PRT (*Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company*). In February 1910, strikers confronted the police on several occasions and solidarity strikes (and participation in confrontations) in industry (Brill and Baldwin, and in textile factories) began to turn into a general strike spreading to several sectors on 4 March. The strikes stopped on 14 March, with a victory which was ambiguous but certainly not a defeat, as was shown by the massive strikes accompanying the *Labor Day* demonstrations, on Monday 5 September 1910.

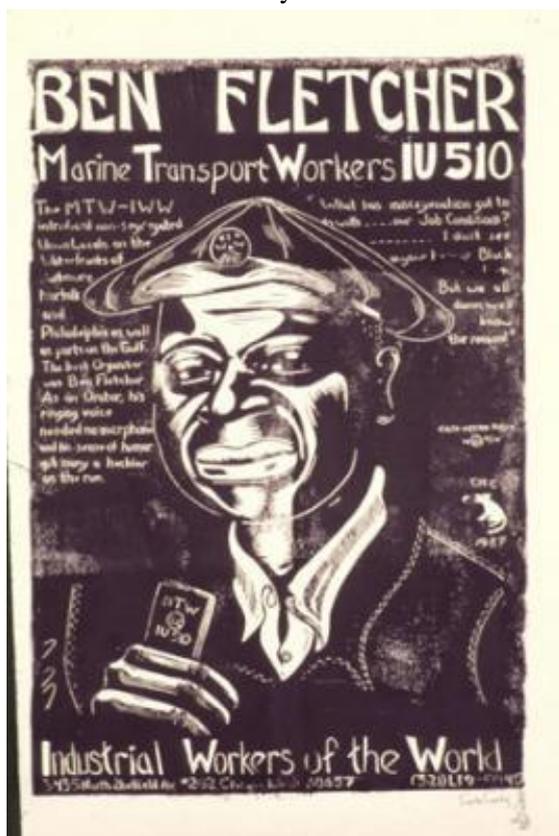
Thus on Wednesday 14 May 1913, 1,500 deep sea dockers went on strike for an hourly wage of 35c for all (without distinction of qualification), a 10-hour working day, night work paid at time-and-a-half and double-time on Sundays and public holidays, against discrimination between dockers, collective negotiation and for recognition of their strike committee. A hundred or so ships were then prevented from working. The IWW, national and local, provided the organisers (McKelvey, Lewis, Speed on one side; Renshaw and Fletcher, on the other) but the strike could only have succeeded with the presence of rank and file militants and the discovery of new ones. Above all, blacks and whites were side by side in the strike and its organisation. Decisions were taken collectively in assemblies, by dock, then centrally, and a strike committee was elected with at least one representative from each nationality to ensure that discussion was in all possible languages.

The fact that the deep-sea dockers (the most skilled) put themselves at the head of a strike demanding the same advantages for everyone surprised the bosses. Rapidly, the strikers tried to inform and to train the dockers of New York and Baltimore. In the enemy camp, if the ship-owners seemed stupefied, the police, with their long tradition of repression, attacked from the second day and sent McKelvey first to hospital and then to prison for two months. The ship-owners and the stevedoring companies nevertheless formed a committee to break the strike. The companies rerouted their ships to other ports, and the committee paid informers from the Pinkerton agency to mount provocations. They hired strike-breakers, often blacks coming from Baltimore and Virginia. There were several exchanges of gun fire. Elsewhere, the ILA tried to encroach on the territory of the IWW by offering membership to strikers, but without any success.

On the night of 21 May there was a veritable battle between 600 strikers and their sympathisers and 75 strike-breakers protected by the police. Women were not slow to hurl bricks at the cops. Strikers remained firm on the picket lines and it was the bosses' front which cracked⁹ (those who transported perishable goods were the quickest to want to sign an agreement), on 28 May. It was a result of goods waiting in the port, the threat of traffic being diverted elsewhere and the additional costs of breaking the

⁹ And it stayed that way until April 1917, when the USA entered the war.

strike. The hourly wage remained at 30c but the other demands were accepted. The dockers then created Local 8 of the MTW. The determination of the strikers, but above all their capacity to overcome the possible racial divisions was essential for the victory of the strike.



Ben Fletcher (1890-1949)

GROWTH (1913-1917)

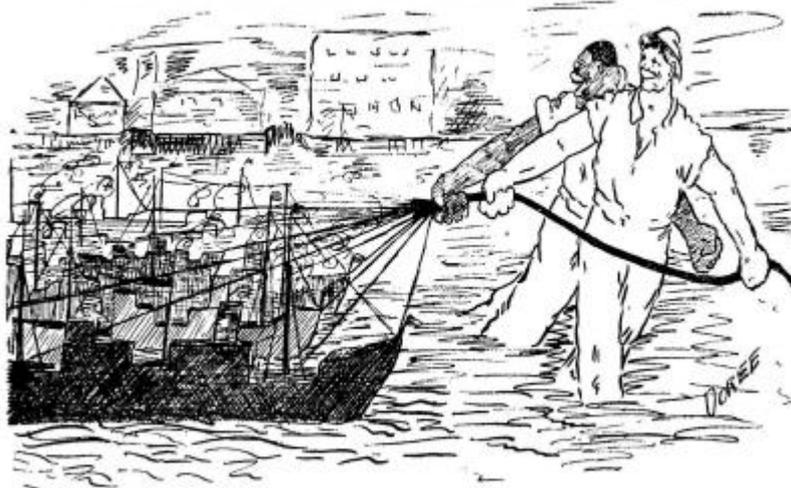
With the success of the strike, Local 8 went on to maintain and develop itself in the day-to-day struggle on the docks. Faithful to the principles of the IWW, Local 8 didn't sign any contract with the employers. Rotation of tasks, at all levels of responsibility, was applied (thus Fletcher would be the organiser of the Connecticut dockers in 1916, and those of Massachusetts at the start of 1917). Everything was overseen and the accounts were open to all the members of Local 8. Even if the role of the dock delegates who made sure everybody had IWW badges ("pins"), renewed monthly, on their caps and jackets, was fundamental, Local 8 favoured immediate action in daily conflicts. For example, the dockers hoisted goods half way up into the air, and if the employer did not give satisfaction then they left the goods hanging there and walked off the dock. This attitude of dockers repeatedly leaving work in case of a problem was testimony to their strength and their confidence in themselves and in Local 8. The first generation of delegates and leaders was very dynamic and militant. As well as being young (in general less than 25), they had learned street agitation during the campaigns for *Free Speech*, perched on a soap box. Elevated into minority militancy and as victims of repression, they were no less ready for the new activity.

But Local 8 was not content to encourage daily resistance. It went on to direct its work in four directions: to increase its field of intervention, to maintain unity between black and white workers, to regulate work on the docks and to organise cultural life outside the workplace.

So, from August 1913, it supported and then organised the strike of sailors working on the port tugs who demanded \$15 minimum per week, a working day of 10 hours and a six-day working week. The strike ended and the sailors joined Local 8, constituting a special section. In November 1913, Local

8 was made up of four sections: two for the dockers, one for the tugboat sailors and one for the port fire-fighters. Nevertheless, dockers made up 80% of the members.

I. W. W. LONGSHOREMEN TIE UP SHIPPING IN PHILADELPHIA



"HOLD FAST, BUDDIE, WE GOT 'EM"

Because of the irregular activity of the port and the varied traffic crossing it, the problem of the regulation of work, so as to avoid long periods of unemployment *or* overwork, was essential for the dockers. That's why, after the strike was over, Local 8 put in place the control of hiring by means of monthly pins. It still had to be imposed by force every day, because it was not a right but a practice to be constantly verified. What's more, as well as the two docks forbidden to Local 8, the presence of the IWW was not general, and it so happened that in some places non-members, or members not up to date with their contributions, were able to work without wearing the magic pin. Elsewhere, Local 8 stopped hiring from taking place in the street at the whim of the stevedoring companies. It had to happen at the Local 8 office, forcing the stevedoring companies to make their requests there, and allowing the Local to centralise the supply of labour.

To strengthen unity between blacks and whites, Local 8 broke up the teams of dockers that the stevedoring companies had created on a racial or ethnic basis and created mixed teams and imposed them on the employers. While black-white unity was emblematic of Local 8, it was never a permanent gain. Individually up until 1918, more massively starting in 1919, blacks started arriving again from the South with a different culture: hatred of whites as representatives of racism, the fact that the unions *de facto* excluded blacks, the hatred of unionism propagated by the black clergy of the South, a lack of reluctance to scab. All this "naturally" distanced them from Local 8 and its practice. But even when it didn't, we can't say that the membership went beyond honest trade unionism (maintaining jobs, decent wages, and good working conditions) and embraced all the ideas of the IWW. But, of course, that was true for many of the white dockers too. In addition, the universe of the dockers was exclusively masculine, male from the physical fact of the hardness of the almost entirely manual labour, which facilitated unity between whites and blacks. *"That boy there is as black as the Ace of Spades, but he is not a Negro, he is an IWW boy, he's a man and he's proved it!"* All the same, the blacks did not consider the Poles and Lithuanians as white because, as Catholics and Slavs, they were rejected by the white Protestants. To keep up the spirit of unity, Local 8 organised picnics which both black and whites families participated in.

From September 1913, Local 8 rented the second floor of an office block near the docks. The office was open 7 days a week. There was a regular meeting on Friday, a political education course, literacy classes, meetings in various languages (Wednesday, for example, for the Poles), discussion on the content of the weekly *Solidarity* and *Solidarność* (in Polish). In general, the meetings took place with a black president and a white secretary for each session. If English was not understood by

everybody, the discussion was translated into other languages: Polish, Lithuanian, Spanish (for the sailors), and Italian.

When a militant from another region or country was passing through, they organised a meeting with them to enlarge the dockers' political horizon. These were the methods which permeated Local 8 during the slack years of 1914 and 1915, following the contraction of international trade for a time after the outbreak of the First World War.

THE WAR (1917-1918)

Yet the year 1917 had begun well for Local 8 in the context of an elevated level of strikes - 4,450 strikes involving 1,230,000 workers, which was the highest level, particularly among the non-unionised, ever attained since the creation of the United States. On 1 February, the workers in the sugar refineries (generally situated close to the docks), beginning with those in the *Spreckles* refinery, spontaneously went on strike for a 5c per hour increase. They were joined two days later by those in the *McCahan* and the *Pennsylvania* refineries, and organised pickets. Local 8 decided to support the strike, extending it to other industries on the basis of unity between skilled/unskilled, whites/blacks, Americans/foreigners, organising rotating strikes in other sectors while directly refusing to unload ships transporting sugar cane to enterprises on strike. Local 497 of the SWIU (*Sugar Workers Industrial Union*) was created with 1,000 workers. There were daily confrontations with the police, with workers and inhabitants of surrounding areas participating, and women organising solidarity. A member of the IWW was killed. But the bosses' front pulled together refusing any agreement, transferring production¹⁰ to other towns where workers' solidarity didn't reach. Despite the strike funds set up by Local 8, the strike ended on 1 April. It was an ambiguous balance sheet: wages were raised to the level asked for, but two months wages had been partly lost, there was one death and dozens injured and a hundred sacked. More seriously, the bosses had imported black strike-breakers from the South to weaken the front of the strikers, which created additional difficulties for the militants of Locals 8 and 497.

On 6 April 1917, the United States went to war. Everything changed. The nationalist fervour, the hatred of Germany and the Kaiser, came to divide the working class and affected the IWW. The ports¹¹ became key nodes in the war effort.

Since 1914, the IWW had characterised the war in Europe as capitalist. Even in 1916, the general secretariat reaffirmed its opposition to all war. When the US entered the war, the leadership of the IWW did not give any anti-war instructions, but left it up to Locals, and above all to individuals, to make a free choice and to sign up, or not, for conscription. The result wasn't long in coming: in the MTW 100 Local, 100% of the sailors signed up. 700 of the 4,000 members of Local 8 enrolled and more than half bought war bonds. Worse still, at the beginning of April 1917, Fletcher, Nef and Walsh held a meeting in the Local 8 office, in front of 600 militants, where they called for no strikes for the duration of the war. If Local 8 went on strike, as in all years apart from 1918, on 16 May, to celebrate the strike of 1913, it was the only strike during the war. Always controlling the port (with the exception of two docks) and even extending its activity to the satellite ports of Philadelphia (Camden, Wilmington, etc.), it made the port the most reliable in the US, even more so than those controlled by the AFL or not unionised, including for the loading of gunpowder, arms and munitions, which caused the *Navy* to recognise it as non hostile, trustworthy. Local 8 then had more than 4,000 members, more than half of whom were black.

¹⁰ The *Spreckles Sugar refinery* was a subsidiary of the giant *American Sugar Company*.

¹¹ In value, traffic from the port of Philadelphia, while it remained constant from 1910 to 1914, at \$165 million, went up to \$310 million in 1916, then \$600 million, in 1917. The port went on to export 40% of all war supplies to Europe and that volume represented 75% of the traffic from Philadelphia.

The dockers obtained significant wage increases, reaching 65c per hour (compared to 30c in 1913). In addition, increases were always given in a uniform manner and not as a percentage. At the same time, the membership of the MTW (from New York to Philadelphia) reached 5,000.

Despite that, on a national level as well as in Philadelphia, the IWW was attacked by a united state-bosses-AFL front. From August 1917, the *National Adjustment Commission* (NAC) was created. It had participation from the government, the shipping companies, the port's ship-owners and the ILA (the AFL union), and it was tasked with removing the IWW from the ports. This was achieved apart from in Philadelphia, despite repeated attempts by the ILA to establish a Local there. Throughout the war, most of the newspapers took up the refrain that the IWW were spies in the pay of the Kaiser before becoming those of the Bolsheviks, starting in November 1917.

Six of its leaders (the best ones, B.Fletcher, W.Nef, J.Walsh, E.Doree, M.Rey and J.Graeber) were arrested (with 160 others across the whole of the US) for putting the security of the country in danger, and the police wrecked 64 IWW offices across the whole territory on 5 September 1917. The arrested were sentenced, in August 1918 after three months of trials, to prison terms of 10 to 20 years with major fines (between \$10,000 and \$20,000 each).

RETURN TO NORMAL (1919-1920)?

At the end of the war, the dockers organised in Local 8 were not too badly affected, even though their most capable leaders were rotting in prison (and for some time). They maintained their positions (always with the exception of two docks), increased their membership (to more than 4,000) and won improvements in wages and working conditions. The new leaders (Weitzen, Jones, Robinson, Baker, Green then McKenna, 4 blacks and 2 whites), although less experienced, maintained the course. The control of hiring was always in the hands of Local 8 and any attempt by the bosses to fire people was immediately countered and the delegates of the Local had free and permanent access to all the places of work. But the general and particular landscape had changed because of the following factors:

- The desire for revenge by the port bosses,
- The Russian Revolution as a pole of both attraction and repulsion,
- The economic recession, accompanied by galloping inflation,
- The anti-immigration policy,
- The appearance of a new black workforce, coming from the Deep South, to undermine the interracial unity of the dockers.

A more marginal but still significant point was the arrival of IWW militants from Seattle (from the AWIU, *Agricultural workers Industrial Union*), following the defeat and repression of the general strike of February 1919¹². They arrived in Philadelphia and, according to the principles of the IWW; they had to be given help in finding a job. But that created conflicts within Local 8, at the moment when the general recession¹³ began and work became scarcer. What's more, differences in lifestyle (those from Seattle being single, while many from Philadelphia – both whites and blacks – were married fathers) fuelled tensions between those who, to simplify it, were for “revolution” and those who were for “consolidation”.

A more significant point was the attempt by the general secretariat of the IWW (based in Chicago) to propose that all Locals working in the shipping industry (dockers, sailors and others) be grouped into a single federation. Although they were not hostile in principle, the Local 8 militants

¹² This began in the shipyards where 25,000 workers went on strike on 21 January 1919, later joined by all of the workers (around 100,000) transforming itself into a general strike on 6 February, until 11 February 1919.

¹³ At the same time as the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce wanted to increase traffic to replace New York as the number one port. As nutty as this objective was, in value the Philadelphia traffic really did continue to grow – from \$550 million in 1918 (not counting Navy traffic), to \$675 million in 1919.

refused this at the May 1919 congress in Philadelphia, to preserve their independence, to not see their subscriptions profit a faraway headquarters, but, above all, to protect their “war chest” accumulated against the supposed spendthrift habits of the general secretariat. In January 1920, Local 8, within the MTW, demanded that federation representation should be based on real membership and not on a fixed quota.

What annoyed the port bosses the most was the monopoly of hiring which Local 8 had and the associated control exercised by the Local delegates. They had taken part in it during the war and the most “honest” of them had recognised its advantages. But Philadelphia became a blot on the landscape of the American ports. In April 1919, a national tripartite agreement (signed by the ILA) had frozen the wages of dockers making the port of Philadelphia less competitive in case of recession.

In the middle of major strikes¹⁴, against a backdrop of threatened communist revolution, where everything considered as radical was hunted down and, starting in April 1919, systematic police raids, hatred for the IWW had replaced hatred for the Prussian in the hearts of American nationalists. *De facto*, unwillingly or not, Local 8 had become a wart which had to be removed, all the more so because when the war ended it set off again to try to form an international union of sailors with Tom Mann’s British union and some other small groups in Spain, Chile and Cuba. And whatever the militants of Local 8 thought, for remaining proudly within the IWW they were considered as dangerous “reds”.

THE STRIKE IN MAY-JUNE 1920

The scene was set, the actors were ready, and the confrontation could begin with the strike on 26 May 1920. At the call from Local 8, 9,000 dockers and other port workers (of whom half belonged to Local 8 and the other half were not in an organisation) went on strike, setting up pickets and immediately tying up 150 ships and bringing the port to a standstill. Apart from wage demands (the dockers wanted 95c per hour to counter inflation) and the increase of 24c per hour demanded by Local 8 for all the port workers irrespective of their qualifications, an essential point was the demand to go from working 50 to 44 hours per week while keeping the same income and reducing the amount of overtime offered in favour of hiring more seasonal and casual workers. This last point was a real sticking point for the bosses because if it was conceded Local 8 would have taken away their traditional weapon of control, the reserve army of labour. As success seemed to be the order of the day, the coastal shipping dockers actively participated and joined Local 8, taking its membership to 7,500. IWW pins were an obligatory pass card not only on the docks but also in the town where many merchants would only give credit to men wearing them.

Sugar refining was the first industry to be affected, causing its workers to be laid off. Starting on 7 June, the tension rose. Mounted police charged the pickets who were attacking the strike-breakers who were trying to unload a ship. These “scabs” were mostly blacks from the Deep South taken on for the occasion by the stevedoring companies. There was a dramatic incident – a black strike-breaker attacked a picket and killed a Polish striker and injured a black one. He was captured by members of the Local, interrogated and then handed over to the police. The funeral of Stanley Pavzlack saw the unfailing unity of all the white and black workers on 9 June. Even an attempt by the bosses to approach the Polish strikers and offer them the earth if only they would return to work was unanimously rejected. Similarly, after two weeks on strike, the attempt by the Chamber of Commerce to only discuss with the skilled (deep sea) dockers was rejected by the strike committee.

¹⁴ Among the 3,600 strikes identified, involving around 4,100,000 strikers for the year 1919, we can mention the steelworkers’ strike involving 350,000 workers (22 September 1919 to 8 January 1920), the national coal miners’ strikes, involving 400,000 miners (1 November 1919 to 10 December 1919) and, on a smaller scale but symbolically important, that by the Boston police involving 1,100 officers (9-13 September 1919).

At that point, there were more than 500 strike-breakers in the port, protected by the police, which increased confrontations with the strikers, including one in which two women supporting the pickets were killed. But after a month on strike, the morale of the strikers fell. All the more so as the bosses' front, under the leadership of the Chamber of Commerce, extended to all of the bosses, including Baldwin who made his company into an anti-union bastion¹⁵. A meeting of the industrialists in the port took place every day. At the end of June the strike had already cost \$50 million to the economy of the city and the banks were pressing for an agreement. The strikers cracked first and voted for the return to work on 6 July, after 41 days on strike. For the workers the balance was mixed: 80c per hour, \$1 on Sundays and public holidays, \$1.20 for an hour of overtime. For the rest: nothing.

With the return to work the bosses went on the offensive: only the deep sea dockers (apart from the two docks already mentioned) kept the control of hiring, the rest remained outside the control of Local 8 which did not therefore increase its "surface area". And the agreement on wages was not respected and, on some docks, the bosses regained the upper hand and lowered wages. The reconquest of the port was marked by the construction of new docks and warehouses where Local 8 could not be present. The balance sheet was therefore one of defeat but not total rout.

Although they were on conditional bail, Fletcher, Doree, Nef and Walsh returned clandestinely to Philadelphia to participate in the strike but they were not the key organisers. Those who were (Carter, Jones, Barlack and Baker) were not without merit but they had no experience of the strike of 1913 or previous ones. But the acceptance of the conflict, provoked by the employers, at a point where the general course in the US was towards decline after the setback of the big strikes of winter and spring certainly indicated a lack of perceptiveness.

THE CONTROVERSY (SUMMER 1920-WINTER 1921)

On 10 August 1920, the central commission of the IWW decided to suspend Local 8 on the pretext that it had loaded a ship on 5 August, the *Westmount*, transporting arms to the white armies of general Wrangel in Russia. Under pressure from the Soviet bureau of New York, Scott, the leader of the MTW in that city, decided to go to Philadelphia on 6 August to suspend Local 8, in the name of the Chicago GEB, outside the usual procedure. The sanction was for "*crime against the working class*".

The IWW president, George Speed, went to Philadelphia on 17 August for an explanatory meeting with the leaders of Local 8. It emerged that for the last year Local 8 had been in opposition to Scott and the MTW, whose office was now in New York, and that the GEB had not given any order in connection with loading the *Westmount*. Local 8 was, what's more, ready to refuse to load any ship going to fight against Soviet Russia. Speed then annulled the sanction and, on the contrary, suspended the leadership of the MTW until the internal elections in October.

A second problem came up, that of monthly contributions and the right of admission. Confronted with the decline in hiring, in consequence of the defeat of the strike of May-July, Local 8 imposed a \$2 enrolment fee (set out in the statutes of the IWW) but also a \$22 engagement fee. For the leaders of Local 8 (Doree, Nef), it was not a question of principle but they wanted to ensure the means of survival of the Local. In fact, for Doree, Local 8 was the only example of keeping control of hiring within the IWW (all the other attempts had failed). Limitation of hiring (by high contributions), was a means of regulating the seasonal labour market in the ports, therefore of guaranteeing good wages and good working conditions, therefore regular income for the Local¹⁶. According to Doree, this

¹⁵ Since the defeat of the 1911 strike and the continued transfer of production to the new Eddystone factory 23km to the south west of Philadelphia.

¹⁶ In fact, if a docker forgot to pay his contribution for a month (apart from exceptional circumstances), he had to repay the engagement fee.

engagement fee was vital for the Local, but he accepted that it could be discussed at the next national congress. Once again, Local 8 was suspended, from 4 December 1920 to 1 November 1921.

In fact it was about a lot more than Local 8, even if the particular situation amplified some aspects. The proletarian cycle in the US ended with the defeat of the big strikes and the absence of any creation of formal independent workers' organs. The IWW kept, despite all its weaknesses and contradictions, and its numerical shrinkage, to its line of a double organ (union/party). Something new, also minoritarian, was appearing on the scene, the CPA¹⁷.

The IWW saluted the October Revolution and participated in contacts with the Bolshevik Party and the Third International. But since the publication of Lenin's "*Infantile Disorder*" and the theses of the Second Congress of the Communist International (which had taken place from 17 July to 7 August 1920), the IWW (like the British *shop-stewards*, in relation to the TUC), according to the CI, had to go and work within the AFL. Yet that, more than anything, was contrary to the "genetic code" of the IWW since 1905, whatever it might be for, rightly or wrongly, by whichever member or whichever Local.

In addition, the CP-ers wanted to consolidate their position gained in the MTW and to integrate Local 8 into it. As the opposition between them grew the *Westmount* affair was amplified. The issue of the contributions revealed more than just the "internal affairs" of the IWW and acted as a pointer to the contradictions of Local 8 and its tendency to transform itself into a local and localist base union, proud of its independence gained against the bosses during the two big strikes of 1913 and 1920. But this affair was also revealing of the contradictions of the IWW in general, notably the absence of political and organisational centralisation, and the absence of a critical view of the relation between "theory" and "practice".

THE END

But this contradiction within Local 8 could not go on for too long in a context of general downturn and polemics (or competition) with the CPA but also radical Black Nationalism represented by the UNIA (*Universal Negro Improvement Association*) of Marcus Garvey, which made several attempts to extract black dockers from Local 8, without success. Pulling back *de facto* from the IWW in Philadelphia, Local 8 survived thanks to its rootedness. It was not a membership union but a union based on militancy which defended to the end equality between blacks and whites and continued to carry out several short strikes in 1921, limited to one or two docks, but also organised a strike in solidarity with the British miners in March-April of the same year, refusing to load coal ships heading for the UK.

In early 1922, Local 8 was reintegrated into the IWW, but in a context of economic stagnation¹⁸, repeated attempts by the ILA, with the support of the bosses, to implant itself on the docks, and for the blacks, the appearance in Philadelphia of a branch of the KKK in May 1921.

The employers came to strike the definitive blow during the lock-out of October-November 1922. Local 8, even though it was in decline (it had no more than 3,500 members in summer 1922), still held its positions and relaunched its 8-hour campaign, that is to say a 44-hour week. Given the (obvious) refusal of the employers, the strike began on Monday 16 October. Rather than going for a frontal attack and proclaiming a strike by Local 8, the dockers went on strike for the first hour and if the bosses wanted to pay them an hour's overtime, they went to work.

The employers, organised in an Emergency Committee, reacted by satisfying, blow by blow, the demands on some of the docks to divide the strikers. When that wasn't enough, they locked out the strikers and organised contingents of non-strikers controlled by the ILA, and coming from New York

¹⁷ The two CPs, that led by L. Fraina (*Communist Party of America*) and that of J. Reed (*Communist Labor Party of America*), came to fuse and give rise to the *Communist Party of America*, in May 1921.

¹⁸ In 1921 the port traffic of Philadelphia fell in value by \$500 million.

where unemployment was rife. The army offered its new dock, number 98, for the unloading of ships by strike-breakers. The employers used the press, obviously, to denounce Local 8 but also to call for hiring in a place out of reach of the strikers. To support the bosses, including some believed to be turning traffic towards other ports, without even mentioning the competition from Montreal for cereals when the Saint Lawrence river was not iced over, the USSB (*United States Shipping Board*) offered them a subsidy of 10% (on their business figures from before the strike) to cover the employment of strike-breakers during the strike.

The strikers were divided during an assembly on 21 October over what to do when faced with a lock-out: total strike with pickets or not? These hesitations, amongst the organisers as much as the strikers pushed back the starting date but, a week afterwards, a pernicious division emerged: it was amongst the blacks that there were the fewest partisans of a serious strike. On 26 October, the bosses announced that they already had workers (strike-breakers from the ILA) capable of loading 33 ships (around a third of the ships that were waiting). But on 27 October, the Local 8 strikers voted in a large majority for the strike demanding that the MTW extend it to other ports. Pickets were put in place, on the 28th. Another problem appeared: more than 50% of the strike-breakers were black, which risked creating problems during the confrontations to come.

At the end of 10 days the strike fell apart and those who could (if the employers would take them back) returned to work, but the fact that the majority of them were black increased the discontent of the rest of the strikers and so weakened the end of the strike even more. It was all over on 14 November. Even if Local 8 did not formally disappear it lost its monopoly of hiring. Numerous militants were black-listed. Worse, the bosses' offensive had destroyed the unity between black and white dockers. The 1922 strike appeared as a sad remake of that of 1920. Having illusions in their still significant strength, the dockers (in great part) and their leaders (Richards and Baker) totally underestimated the strength of their adversary, its organisation and the support of the state, its desire for revenge and the capacity of the ILA to organise strike-breakers. When the wind had changed so rapidly, rather than organise a retreat in good order, while maintaining a "difficult" objective, the dockers wanted to use a radical method while dithering for a precious week, something which was exploited by their enemy.

In addition the ILA was not thanked by the employers, rather the opposite. Having been used to break the IWW, the ILA was rejected and had to wait until 1928 to have some influence when the former members of Local 8, including blacks led by Baker, joined it, and it obtained an 8-hour day by putting pressure on the employers with the support of the state. Part of the members of Local 8, mostly whites behind Jack Walsh, maintained an IWW presence for a time. Fletcher and Jones organised an independent union, on the basis of the principles of Local 8, the PLU (*Philadelphia Longshoremen's Union*) in 1923, but with only black dockers. Lacking success, caught between the ILA and the IWW, the PLU disappeared in 1925. For the dockers, deep sea or coastal, the years which followed the defeat of 1922 saw wage levels (returned to pre-war rates) and working conditions degrade rapidly, while productivity increased by five times.

LOCAL 8 AS A MIRROR OF THE IWW

Here it's not a question of making an exhaustive critique of the IWW but rather of seeing how the strengths and weaknesses of Local 8 were specific or representative of the whole of the IWW and, if possible, to draw some conclusions for today.

Local 8, as we've shown, was exemplary in more than one way. Principally, in the American context, it was able to maintain for nine years an organisation where blacks and whites not only fought side by side at work and outside, but where militant black workers, symbolised by Benjamin Fletcher, were shown to be capable militants and organisers. What's more it was the end of this unity (strongly provoked by the bosses) during the lost strike of 1922 which brought about its end.

The second point is that it applied the principles of the IWW on the ground (developing direct action by the dockers themselves faced with everyday problems), on the question of organisation (refusal of delegation, refusal to sign contracts with the employers) and more generally around organising dockers without distinction of skill and always on a unifying basis. Finally, Local 8 was capable of creating a cultural, associative life outside working hours which assured material solidarity towards the unemployed, allowing the maintenance of living links born from the struggle, the workers having understood that strikes are not only won in the workplaces but outside as well.

They were able to do this because they were steeped in the principles and ideas of the IWW, according to which the working class and the capitalist class were irreconcilable, that it was necessary to get rid of capitalism and that this would require the immediate unification of workers against all the separations that capitalism did its utmost to create or maintain. As long as the IWW only existed in a visible fashion as “strike cultivators”, with more or less success (Lawrence versus Paterson, for example), moreover one generally incapable of capitalising on its success, the contradiction between the struggles of today and those of tomorrow did not appear.

Local 8, whose experience was unique in the IWW, succeeded in maintaining itself long-term and so permanently living the contradiction between being a base union, effective, non-bureaucratic, calling for direct action and for real solidarity struggles with other sectors of workers, *and* maintaining a revolutionary perspective.

If the militant initiators of strikes, and certain strikers, were very conscious of this contradiction and thought that it was viable, this was not so certain for the new arrivals from 1914 onwards, who may have seen in Local 8 only an honest base union in which, what’s more, they themselves were really active. This contradictory situation could moreover maintain itself for a fair period of time if the enemy did not modify the conditions of existence of the Local. But when it was a question of a country entering into war, the contradiction exploded.

But from before April 1917, another contradiction pressed on Local 8 that of control of hiring by which a docker, if he did not have a Local 8 pin, could not expect to work. The bosses took advantage of the seasonal and irregular character of port activity to casualise the workforce by creating an excess “reserve army” to put pressure on wages. It was therefore vital for Local 8 to stop this pressure, so that dockers no longer had to bend to this means of regulating the labour market. And it was this (with the control exercised by dock delegates) that the bosses hated most of all and that they wanted to see abolished so as to return to the old way of doing things.

This policy of controlling hiring (the “*closed shop*”) was not new, either in the US, or in the world, or in that era, or even today. In the US, this practice, notably in other ports, had been a powerful factor in the corruption, even criminalisation of union organisations. Local 8 obviously never made that mistake. What’s more, when the economy was expanding it only had a small importance, and the Local grew with the economic activity. But when the economy contracted, as in the period immediately after the war, when the war orders dried up and unemployment rose, then the competition in the labour market became ferocious between dockers in one town and between dockers in different ports. Then the contradiction exploded and those who had nothing saw the members of Local 8 as privileged. It didn’t matter that they were in the IWW and practiced racial non-discrimination. And the bosses knew perfectly well how to exploit this situation¹⁹.

To return to the IWW, we salute them for having represented the most successful attempt to go beyond the social democratic dichotomy between Politics and Economics, between defensive and

¹⁹ Something similar happened with the organisations of small peasants and agricultural workers of the Pô plain, who followed the socialist unions and excluded the anarchists. After the First World War, when the landowners set out to crush the organisations and the trade union centres, unleashing the fascists, numerous anarchists followed the fascists in a spirit of revenge. But that’s another story.

offensive combat of the exploited class. This remains true of their principles but demands a more precise examination of their real practice over time.

THE TEST OF WAR

When the war broke out in August 1914, the IWW at national as well as local levels maintained the principles of internationalism and denounced the war as capitalist. Haywood even declared in a speech in April 1914, *“It’s better to be a traitor to your country than your class!”* Still in November 1916, at their tenth congress in Chicago, the IWW reaffirmed their opposition to the war. When the American economy was stimulated by exports to Europe, the militants of Local 8, like other workers elsewhere, benefited from this situation and strikes were more successful. When the US entered the war, the growth of production coupled with the lack of manpower favoured workers’ demands, even if the intervention of the state to guarantee the war effort increased the potential for repression.

The attitude of Local 8 then became less ambiguous and very social-democratic (*“Revolution for holidays, collaboration for working days”*). Not only were militants not opposed to the war but they called for no strikes during the conflict! And what’s more they were followed by the whole of the membership of Local 8. How could this have happened so rapidly? The fact that the IWW leaders were arrested on 5 September 1917, that the organisation and its militants were subjected to or had already been subjected to a ferocious repression (the Everett massacre on 5 November 1916, the deportation of 1,300 copper miners from Arizona on 5 July 1917, amongst others) does not excuse this practice.

Without talking about hysteria, American patriotism surfaced and touched not only the petty bourgeoisie but also large sectors of the working class. What’s more, its response was not uniform. Many immigrants saw a chance to be “naturalised”, while others (curiously those from Germany or the Entente countries) maintained for some time a practice of taking no account of the American war effort. The climate was therefore not favourable. In Philadelphia itself, black nationalists like W.E.B. Dubois encouraged the participation of blacks in the war so as to be fully recognised as Americans and to blend into the national community.

The members of Local 8 were torn. On the one hand was the “instinct” which told them that the war was going to allow improvements in the situation of the dockers and that the situation was not favourable to a consistent internationalism, that it would be better to wait for the end of the war, which would therefore be a digression, a pair of brackets, after which the battle could begin again in happier days... and on the other were the principles of internationalism. They succumbed to the first option. Preservation of the organisation also played a role. Local 8 was left to its own devices because the GEB did not give it any direction, leaving everything to the assessments of the Local and the individuals in it. Rather than demonstrating the value of the “federalism”²⁰ advocated by the IWW, it showed, on the contrary, that it was a complete failure. This weakened the IWW even more when it was hit by repression.

But it is not because the GEB kept quiet that Local 8 could not go against the current, with its power base on the docks. It was just that this power was linked to a given situation within the contradictions that we’ve mentioned previously, within a dockers-employers-state equilibrium. This equilibrium could not continue because of the fact of being at war. Local 8 (and here we’re talking with all the benefits of hindsight) had to recognise the unfavourable balance of forces and examine it before considering other possibilities. The absence of theoretical analysis (relative to other people in other countries²¹) should not be put forward as an excuse, but as a proof of opportunism.

²⁰ The paradox is that while the IWW declined after the war, the GEB, in reaction to its federalism, became more and more centralising (as is proved by the suspensions against Local 8), until there was nothing left to centralise.

²¹ We’re thinking of the Turatists in Italy.

Now let's take a look at the sort of practice that the GEB had in 1917. Between the anti-war rhetoric and the actions carried out when it broke out, there was certainly a big gap. The abandonment of the anti-war discourse by the IWW didn't happen from one day to the next, in April 1917, in the camp of those who went to war and participated in state organs, like the AFL did.

In February 1917, Ben Williams, the former editor of *Solidarity*, replied to a militant from Spokane who wanted "*that in case of war, the IWW is going to stop the war rather than support it*", declaring: "*We will not sacrifice the One Big Union [...], at the end of the war we have to be strong to prepare for class conflicts. We are not going to sacrifice the interests of the working class for a few bleating and impotent pacifist demonstrations. War or no war, the class struggle continues.*"

And still, in February 1917, James M. Slovick, leader of the MTW, proposed to Haywood to call a general strike in case of the US joining the war. While recognising the lack of feasibility of this proposition, because of the weak forces of the IWW, he added that, in any case, if the war lasted the state would launch mass conscription and that it would be necessary to oppose it, because it would destroy the IWW. He was more concerned with acting in the name of principles and for posterity, because the state and the bosses were going to use the war to eradicate the IWW. He demanded that an emergency congress be called to decide what action to take.

We could cite many examples of these discussions inside the IWW, up until May 1917, proof of a living organisation which continued to develop while suffering repression. Thus up until July, leaders like Little, Chaplin and Brazier held meetings against the war²². But as Haywood admitted, the IWW did not take a clear decision, neither on the general plain, nor on the practical one (what to do, for example, in case of conscription?). They decided to not decide. Haywood explained that, taking account of the unfavourable balance of forces, if the IWW had to take a stand it would have to be on the front of the class struggle, not on that of opposing US engagement in the war.

Faced with this major and unprecedented test, the IWW (like 90% of the organised worker's movement globally) gave in. If the class struggle continued during the war, and it *was* by strikes for their own demands, starting from the end of 1916, that workers in Europe brought about the end of the war, it was not by means of their organisations, which were completely enfeebled and which could not call for struggle against the everyday conditions at work and outside it, *and* against the war. This was not completely decoupled from the framework which gave birth to it and amplified certain aspects of it.

By disorganising the ranks of the workers by conscription, and reinforcing national unity against the external danger, the war gave enormous advantages to the bosses and the state against the working class. The war therefore had to be understood and fought firmly, as much through principles as on the basis of everyday necessity. The hesitations of the IWW on this subject only reflect their pre-existing contradictions which arose, principally, from a lack of theory of the state and war.

Ardent and courageous fighters against capitalism on an everyday level, by rejecting the AFL (from their start) and the *Socialist party* (since 1912) in which they identified the politics of class collaboration (parliamentarism amongst other things), they contented themselves with doing that and did not want to or could not carry out a theoretical work, continuing their critique of the separation between "politics" and "economics", which would allow them to understand the political part of the tasks of the proletariat.

The IWW always tried, in the course of its existence and its fights, to improve the lot of proletarians, but as a general rule it did not succeed in leaving the framework of defensive struggles (wages and working conditions). Faced with the entry into the war, they found themselves without any solution, because this frontal attack went far beyond anything that they were prepared for. The struggle

²² Brazier even wrote an open letter to President Wilson announcing his intentions and his opposition to the war! A member of the GEB, he was arrested in September 1917 and then sentenced. He's known for publishing the IWW songbook.

to overthrow capital was not the central point of their activity, even if their everyday practice went in that direction. And, logically, faced with the war, the IWW had no alternative.

It's clear (not only today, with the lack of class struggle, but already in 1917), that the miraculous means of the general strike, particularly without preparation, could not prevent war. But not recognising this explicitly, not accepting the consequences and preparing the response (and therefore recognising in some way its errors or foreseeable weaknesses) condemns, and *will* condemn, an organisation like the IWW to disintegration, more surely than repression itself.

The class trade union function always prevailed over the political potential which the organisation possessed. Such an approach also explains all the limits (theoretical as well as practical) that the organisation maintained, including at the height of its power and autonomy. The non-development of its political potential also allows us understand its almost painless decline, compared to other mass revolutionary experiences.

The example of Local 8 that we have tried to present in the most nuanced possible way, shows that following a policy of “neutrality” during a war, explicitly refusing to go on strike, will be paid for dearly, sooner or later.

MC/KpK, 14 May 2013

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