

Industrial Workers of the World Founded (1905)

The Industrial Workers of the World was established in Chicago, in 1905, by members of the socialist-led Western Federation of Miners and other groups opposed to what they saw as "class collaboration" by the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.).

The driving force behind the I.W.W. was William D. Haywood, the leader of the Western Federation of Miners, which had established a reputation for work stoppages in Colorado mines. Joining Haywood at the launch of the I.W.W., which he described as the "first continental congress of the working class," were Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party and Daniel De Leon of the Socialist Labor Party. Also present were Mother Jones, the "angel of the miners," and Lucy Parsons, whose husband had been executed in the Haymarket affair.

In the west, the ranks of I.W.W. were filled primarily by unskilled workers, mostly of the low-wage, migratory type. The I.W.W. organized unskilled factory workers in the eastern United States. But the union also spread its message to many distant lands through its maritime workers unit. Farm workers, miners, and loggers were heavily represented and they hoped that collective action would bring pay increases, shorter hours, and safer working conditions. Unlike other unions of the day, the I.W.W. organized on a class basis, welcoming all working people — including immigrants, minorities, women, and the unemployed. When children found organizing necessary for their own protection — for example, in schools during a strike by their parents — contingents of "Junior Wobblies" were formed.

From its inception in 1905, the I.W.W. advocated the overthrow of the wage system, and putting workers in control of their own work lives through industrial organization. These goals were to be accomplished via class warfare. The I.W.W. willingly employed strikes, boycotts, slowdowns, and other forms of direct action to achieve their ends. They were initially opposed to the use of labor contract and quickly rejected electoral politics as a solution to the problems of poor working folk. The I.W.W. advocated the use of sabotage, defining this concept according to its original meaning, "the withdrawal of efficiency." Thus, according to the Wobblies, even a strike was one form of sabotage. Their tenacious advocacy of direct action, often in opposition to collective bargaining, brought harsh criticism in some quarters, and ultimately resulted in labor laws aimed at curtailing such creative tactics.



William D. Haywood