

The I. W. W.: An American Export¹

Its Relation to Certain Ideas in the British Labor Movement.

J. T. Murphy

EVERY attempt to establish the I. W. W. on a large scale in Great Britain has failed. The long, steady growth of the trade union movement has presented us with phenomena of such a character, that the industrial unionists, who set out to build new industrial unions to compete with and ultimately to wipe out the older trade unions, stood little chance of success.

The organization known as the Industrial Workers of Great Britain, which later changed its name to the Workers' International Industrial Union ("Workers' Union") and stood for practically the same kind of organization as the I. W. W., has reached a membership of about 4,000 at best. The Building Workers' Industrial Union has been subject to a similar fate, and for exactly the

¹ This is an article by a member of the "Extreme Left" on the ideas, the men, the instinctive mass movements, and the economic conditions, which enter into the revolutionary wing of British labor. An American will note that the impulse has received a little of its shaping from American influences and sources. This is natural, because a partially suppressed labor movement, such as that of unskilled labor in the United States, swings to the left.

To the average American, especially one under the hectic tutelage of the newspaper headline writers, the I. W. W. has stood for nothing more than the tactics with which its chief branches became identified at an early stage (sabotage, for example). That it was a groping after a newer and more satisfying industrial structure by the underlying body of unskilled and migratory labor, left out of the existing trade union system, has not been so readily recognized. The influence of the American movement upon British labor, where tendencies are more mature and can be more easily visualized, may be of service in appraising it as a factor in later American developments.

This article is written by J. T. Murphy, perhaps the most brilliant mind among the shop stewards. He is Chairman of the Sheffield Workers' Committee. He sets out the effect of the various British Socialist Party groups, of the educational classes, of the propaganda of industrial unionism and the syndicalists, on the growth of the unofficial industrial movement of Great Britain, of which the shop stewards are one manifestation. The shop stewards created during the war many of the workers' committees to which Mr. Murphy refers.

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same reasons which determined the form and character of the Workers' Union.

The Workers' Union

The pioneers of the Workers' Union—Tom Mann and Charles Duncan—looked to this union as an all-embracing union of the working class.

But because there existed prior to its formation, large, stable organizations of skilled workers, whose vested interests and traditions had not yet been thoroughly disturbed, they could only absorb or enroll those workers who were outside these unions. Hence the Workers' Union became largely a union of general labor, unskilled and semi-skilled. That it enrolled numbers of skilled men is true, but ere long they were arranging agreements with skilled unions with regard to what is called poaching of members.

The vested interests of the trade unions, such as out-of-work pay, superannuation, sick benefit and so on, produced a conservatism which has been a considerable bulwark against the onslaughts of the I. W. W. and the corresponding British organizations. It must not be thought, however, because these organizations are small, that the propaganda of industrial unionism has had no effect.

Socialist Labor Party

Since 1903, when the Social Democratic Federation split on the issue of industrial unionism, a small but vigorous body known as the Socialist Labor Party has carried on a persistent propaganda. Its principal center has been Glasgow, and in this city the Industrial Workers of Great Britain thrived best and here also probably more experiments have been tried in the application of the industrial unionist principles than in any other town in Britain.

James Connolly, the Irish labor leader, who perished in the Easter rising, was one of the pioneers of industrial unionism in Glasgow, and his pamphlet, "Socialism Made Easy," is still widely sold. The Socialist Labor Party remained small in membership for a long time, but the small group of men who were trained in their classes have since played a prominent part in the struggles toward industrial unionism through the many industrial fights in Glasgow and elsewhere. Arthur MacManus, chairman of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees, was one of the group, as also was J. W. Muir, of the Clyde Workers' Committee, W. Paul, who has done much to spread the class movement in the Midlands, and T. Bell, ex-president of the Scottish Ironmoulders, now editor of the *Socialist*.

In the classes, the works of Marx, Engels, Morgan, De Leon, were thoroughly studied. Hence we find the materialist conception of history stressed as a means to understand social movements, and industrial unionism as the solution to society's problems. For a considerable period these men simply reflected De Leon, and it was not until they had passed through many experiences that we can see an independent direction given to the impulse towards industrial unionism, coincident with the peculiarities of British labor history. All these men experimented with the Industrial Workers of Great Britain at its inception, and later, launched into the shop stewards movement.

The Socialist Labor Party started its own press, and from here have come incessantly for years thousands of De Leon's pamphlets, and Kerr's social science and sociological publications. However insignificant the party membership may have been, the work of the press has been influential in the fermentation of ideas on industrial unionism.

The Independent Labor Party (the opportunist, socialist left wing of the British Labor Party) has never stood for industrial unionism. Neither has the British Socialist Party (Marxian socialists) until last year, when it half-heartedly supported it. The tendency of these two political parties is to

support trades-unionism, and stress the conquest of Parliament. But through numbers of their branches the publications have circulated and a goodly number of the members of each party now propagate the Socialist Labor Party slogan.

Change of Tactics

The Socialist Labor Party from its inception was so severe in its restrictions on the liberty of its members so far as theory and practice were concerned that its development was retarded. Since the Russian revolution and as a result also of the experiences of S. L. P. members in the industrial conflicts of the last four years, there has been a recasting of the constitution, which now recommends the same kind of industrial organization as the Workers' Committees. The party preamble reads, after making the same declaration with regard to the class struggle as the I. W. W. drew up at the 1905 Chicago convention,

The unit of organization industrially is the workshop or yard committee, wherein the workers are organized as workers, irrespective of craft, grade, or sex. These committees are co-ordinated by the formation of works or plant committees, composed of delegates from each workshop or yard committee. The plant or works committees are co-ordinated by delegates from each of these committees, in a village, town, city, or district, forming a workers' council, in which there are also delegates from the residential committees, these latter being the units of the social aspects of the organization.

In addition to the Socialist Labor Party, the Workers' Socialist Federation, the British Socialist Party, and the Communist League advocated practically the same structure. These organizations in large part have recently fused into a single Communist Party. When it is considered, too, that a section of the Independent Labor Party is working in accord with those mentioned, it will be recognized that however structurally insignificant the movement may appear, its ideas are spreading among the organized workers in no small volume.

The Labor College

England has been subject to propaganda influences from two other directions, viz., the

Central Labor College, and syndicalist propagandists such as Tom Mann. With regard to the Labor College, which is now the possession of the National Union of Railwaymen and the South Wales Miners' Federation, the clear-cut Marxian teaching conducted there has resulted in the production of a number of active industrial unionists, who have gone back particularly to the Welsh coalfields and exercised great influence.

The students produce a magazine of their own called the *Plebs Magazine*, and by forming classes in many towns and districts, give an impetus to working class education. Every week hundreds of classes under the auspices either of the Central Labor College or the Socialist Labor Party, or some local labor college group, affiliated to the Central Labor College, are grappling with economics, industrial history, and such like subjects. The effect was commented upon by the Government Commissioners of Industrial Unrest in 1917, particularly in South Wales.

In nearly every large town classes, varying from thirty to eighty members, are attending several nights per week during the winter months. The writer, during the whole of last winter for example, had two classes per week, with an average attendance of forty students. Other teachers were doing likewise. Now, when it is remembered that these classes are producing industrial unionist students capable of expressing themselves, it will be realized that weighty forces are persistently at work throughout the whole of the trade union organizations, suggesting and applying the principles for which they stand.

In South Wales in particular, men such as Noah Ablett, Reynolds, and Mainwaring, with many others, have succeeded in making marked advances in the direction of industrial unionism, not by creating a fresh organization, but by modifying the existing organizations and bringing the South Wales Miners' Federation in part under their control.

The Central Labor College is now called the Labor College. It has twenty-seven students in residence, but through correspon-

dence and tutorial classes, it reaches 6,000 students a year.

Tom Mann and the Syndicalists

With regard to the syndicalists, Tom Mann has been undoubtedly the outstanding figure. Regarded by many as the "Stormy Petrel" of the British labor movement, he has yet had a remarkable influence in several important directions. His efforts to organize the unskilled workers are well known; so also the part he played in the dockers' strike of 1889, and the railway strike of 1911. His positive contributions lie in those directions, along with his amalgamation propaganda as exemplified in his campaign for syndicalism. His anti-parliamentarism created a prejudice against him for a long time, which now becomes an asset, as the feeling against parliamentarism becomes more general.

For some reason he has not yet given, he entered and topped the poll in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers' *parliamentary* candidate election. It is this apparent vacillation in tactics and his repeated appearance in unexpected quarters that have created a certain amount of distrust as to his capacity to hold the leading-strings of an organization such as the A. S. E. He had tried to become general secretary of this society several times and failed, but he succeeded in getting this position in 1919 by an overwhelming vote.

Mann likes the freedom of the "freelance," to be a working-class gladiator in any part of the arena where the fight is raging, and whilst preaching organization chafes at the restraint which organization imposes. He has had a dramatic career, a wide experience, and is, besides being an agitator, capable of leadership. But any office will sit lightly upon him for the temperamental reasons I have indicated. At sixty-four, he is full of vitality, and the glamor of the fight is upon him. He may head a revolutionary movement, he may finish his career as an agitator, but to settle down as a mundane official seems to those who know him as likely an event as to see him settle down as a poultry keeper. In any case he has rendered good service to the industrial unionist move-

ment by his amalgamation propaganda and his support of the Workers' Committees.

Mann picked up American syndicalist ideas in Australia, and further studied syndicalism in France. On his return to England, he carried on a powerful propaganda on the platform and through pamphlets and the press. He did much to popularize the idea of the short working day.

He received an ovation at the Trades Union Congress of December, 1919. As secretary of the A. S. E., the king craft union, he is now inside the citadel, and his influence upon the machinists will be powerful in these critical years. It is possible that he will bulk almost as large in the headlines of 1921 as Mr. Smillie did in those of 1919 and 1920.

But even with Tom Mann, the syndicalist, the movement takes the form of propaganda for amalgamation of existing organizations. It is in this direction that industrial unionism has found expression in Great Britain until the rise of the unofficial fighting workers' committees. There has been an amalgamation movement in the engineering industry. The rise of the unofficial shop stewards movement, however, meant the supersession of the amalgamation committees.

Organizations by Industry or Class?

Such have been the main elements giving direction to the tendencies towards the modification of the industrial organization of the British working class. They have now undergone a marked change, and because they represent the advance guard of the movement, with consciously formulated ideas, it is well that we should observe the character of the change.

The 1905 I. W. W. convention in America formulated a scheme of organization by industry. Each industry was to have its own particular union and these unions to be federated into one big organization. The National Guildsmen of Great Britain, as well as the old industrial unionists, still stand for this form of organization. It should be mentioned in passing that Cole and Mellor of the National Guilds League have helped consid-

erably in the way of spreading these ideas among trade unionists. The change from this position since the Russian revolution, has been marked, and the left wing of the socialist movement now express themselves more in terms of communism. The quotation from the platform of the Socialist Labor Party indicates the difference.

The communists recognize the need of departmentalization according to industry, but insist on the industry being subordinate to the class character of organization. They therefore propagate a class organization with departments within it corresponding to industry. The difference may not appear to be much, but on close examination it is a matter deserving careful consideration.

Organization by industry involves the recognition of each industry and each industrial union as a separate entity, and the executives thereof would be responsible to each industry's workers alone. It would tend to produce a psychology of a sectional character, too, in that the primary thought would be to defend one industry's workers against the others.

On the other hand, the communists urge that the class principle should be applied throughout, and just as all the workshop committees of any plant, whether composed of building workers, transport workers, or engineers, are united in the works committee, so also *the works of a locality* should be united in the Workers' Council. Then any departmental committee set up would be responsible, not simply to a department, but to the whole council.

The rival scheme of organization in relation to the existing trade unions should be noted too. Organization by industry has its problems, there is no doubt. The National Union of Railwaymen and the miners approximate to an industrial union while the engineering workers and particularly the skilled workers are trying to shape themselves in the same direction.

There exists, at the same time, the General Workers' Union, the Workers' Union, the National Amalgamated Union of Labor, which are about to be fused. All these have

workers spread over quite a number of industries. If, therefore, organization by industry has to be established, this huge body of about a million workers will have to be divided up among those unions which approximate to the industrial unions.

If it be asked how all these bodies, political, educational, propagandist, are related to the Workers' Committee movement, I have to answer that their literature is distributed in the workshops and trade union branches; their propagandists address workshop meetings; their classes are open to all workers, for the members of all these bodies are personally part of the industrial movement, too. And it must not be forgotten that wherever the workers extend their organizations in the factories, wherever they assume responsibility, such activities stimulate the demand for classes, for literature and the like.

Other Forces

While the political parties, the educational bodies, the propagandists, are directly contributing to the most revolutionary aspects of the working-class movement in every respect, there are other bodies more moderate in political outlook, who are nevertheless contributing to the structural developments. Ruskin College, the Independent Labor Party, the Workers' Educational Association, while not revolutionary bodies, direct considerable attention to the established structure of the trade union movement and its developments.

The Whitley Report proposals and all schemes immediately adaptable to the existing order, appeal to these members of the

working-class movement. Their attempts to apply them bring them up against the structural problems of trade unionism, and thus their practical experience compels them to contribute to the solution of the workers' difficulties on the very same lines as the extremists.

A simple illustration will make this clear. They wish the workers to share in control of their conditions in workshop and factory. To effect that, they must shift their ground from the trade union branch to the workshop. There, to have any organization at all, they must get the workers sufficiently interested to elect a shop committee. Immediately the problem of sectionalism is upon them. Experiment follows experiment to overcome the difficulties involved until it is eliminated. Thus are they doing the same thing as the extremists, viz., organizing the workshops and factories. The pressure of economic circumstances does the rest.

Developing Consciousness

For it must be clearly understood that, while all the efforts I have enumerated are going on, the workers as a whole have no conscious purpose. They do not visualize a new society and consciously march forward towards it. An ever increasing minority do that as the economic struggle proceeds, but the mass moves intuitively, consequent on the pressure of circumstances. Thus the social forces move, rise in their power, and the minority, conscious of the mightiest of these, anticipates it, interprets it, harnesses it, marches on to victory.