The Rhetoric of Inclusion: The I.W.W. and Asian Workers

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In early 1903, two thousand Mexican and Japanese sugar beet workers in Oxnard, California, collectively organized a large biracial strike, and then asked Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, for a union charter. Upon receiving the request, Gompers replied, "Your union must guarantee that it will under no circumstances accept membership of any Chinese or Japanese." His response was typical of American trade unionism because of its anti-Asian sentiment and for its refusal to organize Asian workers even when they were willing to organize themselves. Consequently, in a great act of solidarity the Mexican workers repudiated any charter that excluded Japanese workers.

The American Socialist Party also endorsed Asian exclusion from American labor organizations while simultaneously proclaiming the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite." Much in the same vein as Gompers and the AFL, the party supported workers' struggles in Japan, but not those of Japanese workers in the United States. The party even opposed the position of the Second International, which appointed a special committee in 1908 to study the question of immigration.

We therefore endorse every demand made and position taken by the International Congress... except those passages which refer to specific restrictions or to the exclusion of definite races or nations... We advocate the unconditional exclusion of Chinese, Japanese, Coreans and Hindus, not as races, per se, not as peoples with definite physiological characteristics – but for the evident reasons that these peoples occupy definite portions of the earth which are so far behind the general modern development of industry, psychologically as well as economically, that they constitute... an obstacle and menace to the progress... of our working class population.

Organized labor's position suited a general atmosphere of hostility to Asian immigrants that American labor played only one part in creating. Labor advocacy of Asian exclusion encouraged the institutionalization of Asian exclusion in other social, economic, and political areas. The large majority of both the populations of California and the Pacific Coast more generally, regardless of class, religion, party affiliation, or European immigrant status, seems to have agreed on the "necessity" for exclusion. California politicians Hiram Johnson, Chester Rowell, and James Phelan, and novelist Jack London were only a few examples of the similar attitudes held among Progressives, Democrats, Republicans, and Socialists on this issue. From the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to the 1913 Alien Land Act to the 1924 Immigration Act, which barred all Asians from entry into the United States, exclusionary legislation blocked Asians from citizenship and from participating in most American organizations and institutions.

Among labor and leftist organizations, the Industrial Workers of the World, the anarcho-syndicalist group, were the sole exception to this pattern of hostility towards Asian immigrants. The I.W.W. was the only major national labor organization of the period to open their door to Asian workers and consequently to remain consistent in a rhetoric of including all workers, regardless of race. In this, the I.W.W stood in stark contrast to all other labor organizations from conservative craft unions like the AFL to radical political groups such as the Socialist Party. Furthermore, the I.W.W. developed their rhetoric of Asian inclusion during a period of intense hostility to Asians and, in so doing, they challenged dominant racial assumptions and hierarchies. This paper will examine the organizational discourse on this issue by first briefly
surveying the historiography, then by providing a background on the I.W.W.’s philosophy and ideology, and finally by focusing on the organization’s position on Asian workers.

The racism of the American labor movement against Asian workers and immigrants has been well documented, particularly with recent contributions from Asian-American studies which have examined Asian workers not as mere victims, but also as active agents in shaping their own experiences.7 However, few studies have explored efforts like those of the I.W.W. to embrace all workers regardless of race. Within the historiography of the I.W.W., surprisingly few studies concentrate on the organization’s relationship to workers of color. The record of the Wobblies on race and ethnicity has piqued the interest of historians only recently. Early organizational history endeavored instead to tell the Wobbly story.

Two major authoritative works, published fifty years apart, mark the evolution of more than 70 years of I.W.W. historiography. For the first forty years, Paul Brisssenden’s The I.W.W.: The Study of American Syndicalism (1919) stood as the most authoritative and comprehensive examination of the organization. After 1932, John Gamb’s The Decline of the I.W.W. picked up the history where Brisssenden’s ended, but then little new scholarship surfaced until the late 1960s, when interest in the I.W.W. reemerged. Philip Foner led the way in 1965 with his volume on the I.W.W. in his History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Soon after Foner’s narrative history covering the victories and struggles of the organization during its most active years (1905-1917), several book-length studies followed: Patrick Renshaw’s The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States (1967), Robert Tyler’s The Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest (1967 focusing on timber workers), and Joseph Conlin’s analytical study Bread and Roses (1969). Also in 1969, Melvin Dubofsky published We Shall Be All: A History of the I.W.W., which remains the most comprehensive study of the organization. 8 All the studies fundamentally agreed that the I.W.W. represented a radical alternative to the conservative craft unions of the time. With their commitment to industrial unionism and a revolutionary working-class movement, the I.W.W. organized those workers excluded from the larger American labor movement. As Dubofsky stated, marginalized workers encompassed, “those workers neglected by the mainstream labor movement: timber beasts, hobo harvesters, itinerant construction workers, exploited eastern and southern European immigrants, racially excluded Negroes, Mexicans and Asian Americans.”9

Within the decade of the 1960s, historians began to give serious attention to those at the periphery of the labor movement, the so-called “submerged fifth” as Renshaw described them.10 Several recent historians have explored the I.W.W. in relationship to a particular racial or ethnic group that formed part of the larger marginalized section of the working class. Philip Dreyfus’ 1997 study, “The I.W.W. and the Limits of Interethnic Organizing,” scrutinized I.W.W. attempts to organize across white ethnic lines in Grays Harbor, Washington, in 1912. Dreyfus demonstrates, “that the I.W.W.’s international vision and profession was sorely tested by American racial realities.”11 On the question of Asians, Daniel Rosenberg and Philip Foner contend in their introduction to the I.W.W. section of the Racism, Dissent and Asian Americans (1993) that the I.W.W. was the first working-class organization to actively recruit Asians. Rosenberg elaborated on this claim in a separate journal article introducing a Wobbly speech, which supported organizing Asian workers. Rosenberg argued that the speech reflected consistency in the views of I.W.W. that “stress[ed] solidarity between Asian and non Asian labor.”12

This paper follows in the vein of this recent scholarship on the I.W.W. by focusing on the organization’s relationship to a particular racial group. By analyzing the I.W.W.’s policy on a specific group of workers—Asian immigrants—within the context of and in combination with their overall revolutionary framework and vision, this paper strives to link this specific topic with earlier organizational historiography. This paper surveys the I.W.W. rhetoric on Asian immigrant workers by examining regional I.W.W. newspapers and government documents—many not previously used by researchers of this topic. This paper concludes that the Industrial
Workers of the World devised a rhetoric to include Asian workers within their organization and the labor movement more generally, despite intense hostility and exclusionary sentiments against Asian immigrants. Ultimately, they began to challenge accepted racial hierarchies and the racism of the American labor movement by developing a rhetoric of inclusion stemming from their internationalist ideology and commitment to a working-class revolution. Although Wobblies continued to use racial labels and language, such as "Jap," from the exclusion movement, they nonetheless derived from their overall internationalist framework and analysis of immigration and foreign workers a unique set of arguments that called for solidarity with Asian workers. At the same time, they generated arguments relating more specifically to Asian workers.

"All who toil, be they young or old, male or female, skilled or unskilled, born here or abroad, are welcomed in the ranks of the One Big Union."13 "One Big Union," a major I.W.W. campaign slogan, captured the idea of one of the organization's essential goals — to organize workers into industrial unions, regardless of craft or skill, in order to abolish the wage system through direct action and general strikes. Founded in 1905 during the struggles of the Western Federation of Miners in the West, the I.W.W. believed in the "cardinal" principle that labor produces all wealth and is entitled to all the wealth it produces. Rooted in Marxist labor theory of value, the organization claimed workers and capitalists were engaged in a class struggle over the wealth the labor produced. Therefore, as they stated in the preamble to their constitution, the two classes "have nothing in common."14 For the I.W.W., this meant all workers had to be organized against the employer at the point of production regardless of craft, skill, race, ethnicity, or gender.

Organizing as we do at the point of where value is created, we must be at all times ready to admit to membership all members of the working class. The I.W.W. has no restrictions in this regard. Young and old, foreign born and native born, male and female, the black, the yellow, the red, and the white, the home-guard and the blanket stiff, the skilled and the unskilled are alike welcome to our ranks.15

This analysis logically derived from an internationalist conception of an industrial working class. The only "nation" to which workers belonged was the "nation of those who work."16 The I.W.W. viewed workers as carrying the same interests of labor across national boundaries. They deemed nationality as an artificial category that only served to divide the solidarity of workers.

The Industrial Workers of the World is an INTERNATIONAL movement...We realize workers have no country...As long as we quarrel among ourselves over differences of nationality we weaken our cause, we defeat our own purposes... Differences of color and language are not obstacles to us. In our organization, the Caucasian, the Malay, the Mongolian and the Negro, are all on the same footing. All are workers and as such their interests are the same. An injury to them is an injury to us.17

Furthermore, the nation state existed only to protect the interests of the capitalist class — the state was a part of a larger apparatus that oppressed workers. "The nations belong to his master, and therefore to protect any nation is to protect his master," wrote one Wobblie in 1912.18

Recognizing that workers possessed the same interest from nation to nation also entailed realizing that when workers moved from one nation to another their interests became inextricably bound with those of the host labor force into which they entered. The Wobblies' analysis of "foreign workers" understood the movement of labor across national boundaries as intrinsic to capitalism. Unlike some labor organizations of the time, the I.W.W. embraced foreign workers for two reasons. First, the organization recognized that foreign workers made up the majority of the pool they attempted to organize, particularly the unskilled migratory labor force. If they were
to succeed in launching a unified labor movement, the I.W.W. had to embrace foreign workers. Secondly, though the I.W.W. agreed with trade unions that immigrant labor constituted "cheap bundles of labor power," as other conservative labor unions accused, they reasoned the only way to reduce competition between native and foreign workers was to organize the latter rather than exclude them from labor organizations.

So long as labor is bought and sold upon the market, its price being regulated to a large extent by supply and demand, so long will the master class bring these people in to compete with us as sellers of labor power...We must educate and organize on class lines; we must do away with race prejudice and imaginary boundary lines; we must recognize that all workers belong to the international nation of wealth producers.

The real test of the commitment to these sentiments for Wobblies in California was how they handled the question of Asian workers.

The "merciless" tactics of Japanese agricultural workers had become almost legendary within the industry. A U.S. Department of Labor report in 1945 on labor unionism in American agriculture dedicated a section to describing the organization of Japanese agricultural laborers in the early twentieth century. The I.W.W. were quite aware of Japanese labor tactics at the time and often relied upon this knowledge to support their position of including Asians in unions and their stance against Asian exclusion policies. The use of this type of argument may represent what Rosenberg claims made the I.W.W. much more "forceful" in their presentation of class solidarity across racial lines than were other organizations that used a similar rhetoric. While their analysis of Asian workers fit neatly into their overall internationalist/anti-nationalist conception of a working class, the I.W.W. also generated an analysis that spoke specifically to the conditions of Asian workers. Not only did the I.W.W. apply their generic argument about internationalism and foreign workers to the Asian issue but they also constructed new, more specific reasons for welcoming Asians into their ranks.

In general, when applying their analysis of foreign workers to Asians, the I.W.W. appealed to Euroamerican workers that unionizing foreign workers was to the benefit of "American" workers. "The Japanese are here, they will not starve to death, and they will work as long as the boss will hire them... [Would it not] be better to unite with them to fight the common enemy, the master...?" inquired one Wobbly organizer, Joseph Biscay, in 1911. As long as Asian workers, like all foreign workers, resided in the United States and sold their labor power, native workers always had a potential pool of cheap labor with whom they might be forced to compete. "Of course we have to compete with the Orientals and we know that a glut in the labor market will lower the price of our commodity labor power," wrote one Wobbly in 1912. Excluding Asian workers or other foreign laborers from moving to the United States, entering the job market, or joining unions was not going to eliminate competition. The only way to end competition between workers was to own the means of production. Secondly the workers did not possess the power to control the flow of Asian immigrant labor into the United States. "Whenever the capitalists want the Asiatics they get them regardless of any exclusion leagues or laws and the whole purpose simply serves to keep up race prejudice," argued I.W.W. member Caroline Nelson. Although workers could not control immigration, they did have the power to unionize Asian workers and to unite all labor in order to prevent employers from forcing workers to compete with one another. To exclude certain segments of the working population because of race only served to defeat their cause, Wobblies argued. "Are we not correct when we say that trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry; thereby helping to defeat one another?" Also, the organization viewed the exclusion of Asian workers as a form of nationalism that stood in opposition to its own internationalism. It meant being "race conscious" rather than "class
conscious." "A worker who proclaims himself class conscious and then talks loftily about 'greasers', 'dagoes', 'coons', etc. is a fool. He is really nothing but race conscious... The worker has no nation to protect. The nations belong to the masters." Another argument offered was that exclusion served the interests not only of capitalists who tried to divide workers but also of the middle class of small merchants. The Wobbly J. Walsh, who was especially outspoken on the Asian issue, reasoned that much of the anti-Asian agitation originated within the American middle class who saw Japanese immigrants who launched small businesses as threats to their own economic interests. "These people," Walsh wrote in 1908, "are entering every business of the middle class, and our little American cock-roach merchants sees his finish, unless he can create some disturbances of some kind, and thereby drag the working class into a middle class fight."30

The I.W.W. also developed more specific reasons why Asians should be organized, explanations that went beyond the extension of their generic international and anti-nationalist framework. These types of explanations reflected attempts to fight stereotypes of Asian workers as unorganized, docile, and prone to scabbing. In fact, Wobbles claimed, Asian workers sometimes were better organized, less likely to scab, more likely to hold out longer for higher wages, and even more class conscious than whites.

The I.W.W. often cited the strike strategy of Japanese agricultural workers as their best quality as workers. With admiration, many Wobbles described the strategy of how Japanese eliminated labor competition and potential scabs before striking as a superior level of solidarity.

The Japs having worked one season at a wage and hours satisfactory to the boss, were again contracted for the next season. When they came back, the boss met them with smiles, everything looked good for him for another season, but a great surprise was in store for him. Mr. Jap said $1.75 per day and ten hours work, but said the boss, you have contracted to work for less wages and longer hours. One dollar and seventy-five cents and ten hours work answered the Jap. The bosses refused to comply with their demand, so they refused to work... Not a sufficient number of whites could be procured to harvest the fruit, so the bosses had to fall back on the Japs, who later demanded and received $2.00 per day and eight hours work.31

The I.W.W. often attributed the reason that Asian workers sometimes received higher wages than white workers to this superior organizational strategy. "Don't holler about the yellow peril, as the Japanese worker receives $2.00 per day; the free born American citizen $1.25. Why the difference? The Japanese are organized; they are past masters in the art of bringing John Farmer to his knees."32 The Japanese use of their strike strategy "is the very qualification in the Japanese that will make [them] one of the best industrialists ever known. While there may be many Japanese working for less than Americans, there are thousands of Americans working for less than Japanese."33 Wobbly organizer George Speed testified at a 1912 hearing of the Industrial Relations Commission that the Japanese labor tactic pushed native workers to realize the necessity for a higher level of organizing and solidarity. "The native worker through the agitation that has been going on in the state during the last several years is commencing to wake up and realize the necessity of some form of organization in order to keep in touch and develop."34

Many Wobbles argued that other Asian workers also possessed a long history of militancy and solidarity that white workers did not have. "[T]he Chinaman is the most rebellious worker in the world and there are thousands of them here."35 Asian workers' sense of loyalty and obligation made them good union men because it made them "timely on their dues," and prevented them from scabbing. Speed testified before the Industrial Relations Commission:
Now, the Jap does act true, has acted largely true. I have seen strikes on this coast when the Japs refused to take other men's place, while the white man would take them... [T]hey certainly have organization and they certainly have solidarity. They act more solid together than natives... the white is too individualistic as yet.\textsuperscript{35}

However, this system of reasoning proved to have little effect in the long run on how white workers saw their Asian counterparts.

After more than 40 years of anti-Asian agitation, the 1924 Immigration Act institutionally reinforced the hostility toward Asian immigrants when it in effect stopped the flow of all Asian people from entering the United States, regardless of occupation or gender. The Immigration Act, like many exclusionary policies preceding it, carried more than just the impact of ending immigration. These legislative policies, often supported and led by American labor, prevented Asians from participating in most aspects of American society. Nearly all economic and political doors on which Asians knocked before W.W.I. were locked, apparently with the exception of that of the Industrial Workers of the World. In policy and rhetoric, the I.W.W. remained open to Asian workers and consequently stood consistent with their internationalist vision of building a worldwide labor movement. Placing Asians within in an overall international and anti-nationalist framework, the I.W.W. advocated organizing Asian workers, thus opposed conservative and radical labor organizations.

In the preface to his paperback edition of \textit{We Shall Be All}, Dubofsky addressed a historiographical debate about the I.W.W.'s commitment to both industrial unionism and the building of a international movement of the proletariat. Some historians, like Renshaw, concluded at a certain point the I.W.W. ceased to be a revolutionary organization, and "became primarily a militant union.\textsuperscript{37}" In controverting Conlin's depiction of the I.W.W. as reformers, Dubofsky asserted, "They fought long and hard for reforms in working conditions... but reform and revolution need not be mutually exclusive. At any given historical moment, to be sure, tangible reforms may vitiate the spirit of revolution... But that in no way lessened the dedication of the typical I.W.W. leader to ultimate revolutionary goals.\textsuperscript{38}" The conclusions of this paper reinforce Dubofsky's assertion that though the I.W.W.'s commitment to industrial unionism lead them to work for reforms in working conditions, they retained their dedication at least in rhetoric to a working-class revolution. The I.W.W. challenged racial hierarchies and the racism of the American labor movement by developing a rhetoric of Asian inclusion. By arguing for solidarity with Asian workers, the I.W.W. kept in sight the larger goal of international working-class solidarity as essential to a revolutionary workers' movement. They refused to exchange their ideological commitments to revolutionary internationalism for short term advantages of trade union reform.

Much more study needs to occur before evaluating the depth of the I.W.W.'s commitment to including Asian workers. This paper only skims the rhetorical surface. Many questions need to be probed regarding the nature of the relationship between Asian workers and the I.W.W. Did Asian workers find the I.W.W. to be a welcoming home? Was the anti-racist and anti-exclusionary stance only a rhetoric, or did it carry into practice? What was the experience of everyday Asian workers in the I.W.W.? How did they see the organization and its members? A deeper investigation of these questions may unearth the rich diverse history of American radicalism and the stories of those participants who have been traditionally marginalized in the radical narrative.

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6 The AFL, Knights of Labor, and other organizations sometimes allowed African-Americans and often enrolled Mexican workers, but still blocked the door for Asians.


9 Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 148.


13 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 1 May 1913, 2

14 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 24 October 1912, 2.

15 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 24 October 1912, 2.

16 (New Castle, PA) *Industrial Solidarity*, 13 September 1913, 3.


18 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 10 October 1912, 2.

19 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 6 June 1912, 3.

20 (Spokane) *Industrial Worker*, 31 November 1912, 4.

21 The report stated, "The Japanese soon lost their docility once they had come to dominate the labor market in various crop areas...[T]hey were prone to put pressure on the employer when he was most vulnerable and subject to maximum loss...in case of a strike -- just when the crop was ripe and in highly perishable conditions. It was generally conceded the Japanese were merciless once they had their employer at a disadvantage." Department of Labor, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, Washington, D.C., 1945, 52.


23 Perhaps the racial politics of the West in general and the region's overall obsession with the Asian question pushed or forced the I.W.W. to deal with the question more pointedly. It seems the I.W.W. papers in the West dealt more with the Asian question than the organization's East Coast branch publications. For example, *Industrial
Solidarity published in New Castle, Pennsylvania, carried more articles on African Americans, while the Industrial Worker published in Spokane, Washington, produced more articles on Asian Americans. See (New Castle, Pa) Industrial Solidarity, 4 June 1921, 1 and (New Castle, Pa) Industrial Solidarity, 11 June 1921, 1.

24 Telegram, Joseph S. Biscay to Industrial Worker, in Industrial Worker, 5 June 1911 quoted in Racism, Dissent and Asian Americans, eds. Foner and Rosenberg, 195.
25 (Spokane) Industrial Worker, 31 November 1912, 4.
26 Ibid.
27 (Spokane) Industrial Worker, 10 October 1912, p. 3
29 Nelson, (Spokane) Industrial Worker, 10 October 1912, p. 3.
31 (Detroit) Industrial Union News, 14 February 1914, 3.
32 (Spokane) Industrial Worker, 18 May 1911, 2.
35 (Spokane) Industrial Worker, 10 October 1912, 3.
36 Industrial Relations, Final Report, 4947.
38 Dubofsky, We Shall Be All, vii.