“WE SHALL SING ONE SONG”: AMERICAN FEARS, REVOLUTION, AND SOLIDARITY IN THE MUSIC OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

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Crowded into a small jail cell that was quickly deteriorating from his and his fellow workers’ efforts to ravage it, Jack Miller heard something strange. At first the noise was garbled, but it slowly became clearer. A group of men was singing a familiar tune, “The Internationale,” in four different languages. Realizing that the men were supporting them, Jack and his cellmates, who were on trial for the murder of police officers during a strike at Everett, Washington, began singing back to the crowd that had gathered outside the prison. Trading their favorite Wobbly songs with the outside crowd’s revolutionary songs, they sang until nighttime. Although they were separated by prison walls and a partial language barrier, Jack and the other prisoners were no longer alone in their struggle, and they were encouraged by what they heard. The commonality of a revolutionary message and rebellious, uplifting songs had served to effectively unite them. Later acquitted of all charges, Jack remembered the event as “one of the most thrilling days of my life…we were on a revolutionary upsurge.”

Jack Miller and his fellow prisoners were not the only people in the radical labor movement to experience the power and camaraderie that song could inspire. From the French revolutionary anthem “The Internationale” to the Industrial Workers of the World classic “Solidarity Forever,” music played an essential role in unifying radical labor movements and articulating their messages. Experiencing its prime in the early twentieth century, the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a labor organization that rejected political action and the compromise of contracts with oppressive employers, artfully created a rich culture of protest songs, plays, and graphic art. In addition to publishing newsletters that often held poems, cartoons, and articles, the I.W.W. also published thirty-six editions of a songbook made to “fan the flames of discontent.”

I.W.W. songs gave power to their message that declared “by organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.” In fact, the songs were so influential in the movement and message that one historian noted, “The Little Red Song Book…was the closest thing the I.W.W. had to a catechism.” While the I.W.W. sought to destroy capitalism and the social structure that kept the system in place, the songs reveal the new society and common culture that they also sought to build. In songs set to old hymns or other popular tunes that speak of liberty, slavery, womanhood, and work, the traces of the old American society can be seen. Nevertheless, the songs also reveal the ways that the Wobblies, the nickname given to the members of the I.W.W., were constructing their new society. The I.W.W. was so prolific with its songs that adversaries, such as prosecutors, used the songs as evidence “to show juries how un-Christian, un-American, and just plain awful the I.W.W. really was.” The songs that the Wobblies composed and sang about revolution, liberty, slavery, sabotage, and women not only provided a concise articulation of the ideologies and concerns of the I.W.W., but also reveal a struggle to employ American ideologies and fears in order to construct their ideal world.

Historiography of the I.W.W.

Over the years, historians within the Wobbly community and outside of it have sought to understand the “One Big Union” that was one of the most unique and least compromising of the various labor movements of


4 Bird et al, Solidarity Forever, 22.
the time. In seeking this understanding, historians have employed various approaches and scopes through which to view the I.W.W. After the government fractured the I.W.W. when it cracked down on its leadership, believing that the I.W.W. was a threat to the World War I war effort, at first, only those historians personally connected to the I.W.W. cause sought to put the pieces of I.W.W. history back together. Wobbly historians were the first to articulate who the I.W.W. was and what it had accomplished, but it was decades before historians not associated with the I.W.W. began to examine the I.W.W. more extensively.

In the 1960s, a period of own social upheaval and renewed fights for equality and justice, scholarship on the I.W.W. was reborn. During this era, Marxist labor historian Philip S. Foner and English journalist Patrick Renshaw forged comprehensive histories of the I.W.W. with their books The Industrial Workers of the World 1905-1917 and The Wobblies: The Story of the I.W.W. and Syndicalism in the United States. In 1969, Melvyn Dubofsky published the most definitive and perhaps the most complete history of the I.W.W., with his nearly five-hundred-page book, We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World. Dubofsky made it clear that, although the book's title is from a popular I.W.W. song, he was reclaiming the history of the I.W.W. because it was “too important to be left solely to novelists and folk singers.”

Dubofsky’s history remained of such lasting importance in the historiography of the I.W.W. that it was recently republished. According to the editor of the reprint, Dubofsky’s analysis stood out because he “refused to romanticize the Wobblies, to posthumously recruit them for the political battles of the day, or to settle for merely reinforcing their place in American mythology.” Dubofsky’s refusal to romanticize the Wobblies or force them into an international Marxist narrative as Foner had done, allowed Dubofsky to provide a more balanced and insightful articulation of the I.W.W., which contented many labor historians in the following decades.

After We Shall Be All, historians of the I.W.W. focused with a much smaller scope on people, events, and places within the organization. In his 1998 book, Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930, Nigel Anthony Sellers narrows his focus to the actions of the I.W.W. in Oklahoma. Moreover, Sellers argues that “although previous studies have focused on more colorful and highly publicized events...Wobblies were rarely made at such levels.” More recent historians Peter Cole and Tom Copeland agreed with Sellers and limited their histories to individual places and events. Cole’s 2007 book, Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia, examines the “institutional history” of the I.W.W. longshoremen in Philadelphia, while Copeland’s Centrally Tragedy, 1919: Elmer Smith and the Wobblies focuses on a lawyer who took part in helping the Wobblies against oppression in a small town in Washington.

While both histories occasionally gesture towards a larger picture, they are firmly rooted in a local experience of Wobbly activism. The current study of some themes in the songs of the I.W.W. picks up on the various threads within the historiography. Although the analysis of I.W.W. songs is narrow in subject scope, it allows for a broader geographic range than many of the newest histories of the I.W.W., and reaches back to some of the over-arching narratives that can be found in histories of Dubofsky’s era. Finally, with its focus on music and its ideological impact, this study seeks to begin bridging the gap between the folk singers and folklorists and historians who have both taken interest in the I.W.W.

Identity and Ideology in Song

Songs had the advantages of being easy to transmit and simple to remember with ideas and stories embedded into their lyrics. One of the songwriters most popularly published in the I.W.W. songbook was Swedish immigrant Joel Hägglund, or as he was better known, Joe Hill. Although Hill was not arrested for a crime related to his activities as a Wobbly, he became one of the martyrs for the Wobbly cause when he was executed for a double-murder with ideas and stories embedded into their lyrics. One of the songwriters most popularly published in the I.W.W. songbook was Swedish immigrant Joel Hägglund, or as he was better known, Joe Hill. Although Hill was not arrested for a crime related to his activities as a Wobbly, he became one of the martyrs for the Wobbly cause when he was executed for a double-murder
nder during a robbery. Convicted on circumstantial evidence, Hill's status as a working-class victim of the American judicial system was further reinforced when President Woodrow Wilson, later an effective enemy of the I.W.W., asked for a “thorough reconsideration of Hill's sentence.”11 Hill loomed large in the consciousness of Wobblies during his trial and after his execution. Not only was his prison-gaunt portrait printed in every subsequent edition of the I.W.W. song book, in 1916, a few months after his execution, the entire ninth edition was dedicated to Hill. The ninth edition captured many of the Wobblies’ concerns as they continued to fight for free speech and better working conditions while the United States edged closer to joining WWI.12 In spite of the I.W.W.’s tendency to not adhere too closely to any solid social theory, even though it was deeply influenced by Marx,13 the songs of Hill and the other Wobbly songwriters reveal some of the more concrete ideologies that Wobblies believed.14 One of Hill’s biographers noted that “his lyrics, for the most, are tough, hard-bitten, and scornful of what seemed to him the futility of trying to improve the worker's lot within the existing framework of American society.”15 Reflecting this mindset, Joe Hill’s songs illustrated many of the preoccupations shared by the Wobblies as they sought to create a new world out of the oppressive one in which they currently lived.

Songs also allowed ideologies and often even the culture of the movement to spread easily as members taught each other songs on the assembly line or at the picket line. Through these songs, the I.W.W. effectively produced propaganda that by definition “solicits and arouses outside support or sympathy for a social movement… reinforces the value system of individuals who are a priori supporters…creates and promotes cohesion and solidarity in an organization or movement… [and] directs attention to some problem situation or discontent.”16 Performing these influential propagandist roles in an entertaining format, songs helped solidify and effectively transmit the ideologies of the Wobblies. Additionally, the style of song was just as important as the message. Not only would Wobbly writers take popular songs and hymns and change the words so that they fit the cause and were easily learned by other Wobblies, they also made their songs clear and uncomplicated. According to one Wobbly, “the songs were to help people define their problems and to suggest what the solutions might be. A lot of working folks came from other countries and could not speak much English…if the songs were going to communicate, they had to be simple.”17 In these ways, songs became an integral part of Wobbly culture and recruitment strategies.

Freedom and Slavery in Song

The struggles that I.W.W. songs portrayed were mainly contained within an experience of American culture and society. Like Joe Hill’s immigrant origins, the roots of the I.W.W. stemmed from an older and more international stock, whose past and future reflected the inclusion of “world” in the organization’s title. A time-honored anthem of radical laborers all over the world since the 1830s, “The Marseillaise” was among the first songs in the organization’s title. A time-honored anthem of radical laborers all over the world since the 1830s, “The Marseillaise” was among the first songs that unified workers under one goal and expressed their intent to act against the brutal system of labor. Recognizing the power of the song and understanding the need for unity in the I.W.W., which had battled capitalists and other labor organizations since its founding, the creators of the Little Red Songbook included “The Marseillaise” in the first edition and continued to print the song in subsequent editions.18 This song’s international origins

13 There is a wide gap in interpreting the theoretical orientation of the I.W.W. In Joe Hill: The I.W.W. and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture, Wobbly historian Franklin Rosemont argues that the I.W.W. was more truly Marxist than the American Communist and Socialist parties (19). But, in If We Shall Be All, Dubofsky argues that the Wobblies were just as influenced by Jefferson and Jackson as they were by Marx and Darwin (152). Because both have obvious biases in their interpretations, it seems safe to say that the truth lies somewhere in between, although it the truth is more likely towards the side of Rosemont.
14 Dubofsky, We Shall be All, 152.
15 Gibbs Smith, Joe Hill (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1969), 15-16.
18 Kornbluh and Thompson, Rebel Voices, 173.
speak to the influence of the worldwide radical movements on the I.W.W., which was infamous for its lack of interest in the technicalities and strict structure of radical theory and ideology. Moreover, the song sets the framework by which many other I.W.W. songwriters would frame the core of the Wobbly struggle against oppression and wage slavery through direct action.

The martial nature of “The Marseillaise” perfectly matched the spirit that the I.W.W. was cultivating. Its chorus called laborers “To arms! to arms! ye braves! Th’ avenging sword unsheathe! March on, march on, all hearts resolved/ On Victory of Death.” This message was more focused on overthrowing oppression by any means necessary rather than compromise or electing government officials to change the world for them. Also, in “The Marseillaise,” the theme of fighting in the name of freedom and liberty became one of the cornerstones of Wobbly ideology and songwriting. Proclaiming that “peace and liberty lie bleeding,” the song iterates the idea that the radicals are not the cause of unrest and violence, but rather are waging a war of defense for a good cause with “Freedom” as their “sword and shield.” As they grew in influence, the Wobblies did just as the song said, using the ideals of freedom both as a sword and shield as they discussed sabotage, enacted strikes, and stood at the battlefront over issues of free speech. Through these methods, the I.W.W. integrated its international influences with the very American ideologies of liberty and freedom.

In addition to liberty, the theme of slavery entered into the Wobbly songs with equal force. Nearly always tied with its opposite, liberty, slavery was not simply an abstract term for the Wobblies. Wobblies experienced brutal working conditions and poor wages that more often than not gave their employers freedom and left workers with only a faded image of freedom. Less than a full generation removed from the Civil War, members of the staunchly egalitarian I.W.W. were familiar with the American form of slavery and its cruel system, particularly in the South where white and black Wobblies often fought side by side. Wobbly publications declared that “the fight of the Negro wage slave,” yet in ignoring race as different but connected to the struggle of class, “the failure of the I.W.W. to understand…restricted its appeal to the black masses.” None of the popular Wobbly songs draw a solid link between black slavery and the regime of wage slavery that they were now fighting. Yet their songs of breaking free from slavery has an optimism that may have been influenced by the knowledge that while blacks had been forced from one slavery to the next, one system of slavery had already been broken and that this second form of slavery could also be destroyed. Three songs in particular reveal the tensions between freedom and slavery that the Wobblies struggled with as they fought against the entrenched systems of capitalism and wage labor that had also become fraught with American sentiments of identity.

Alongside “The Marseillaise” in the first edition of the Little Red Songbook, “The Banner of Labor” was one of the first songs that contrasted freedom and slavery in a uniquely American fashion. Sung to the tune “Star Spangled Banner,” the song was heavily laden with patriotic associations, even though it was twenty years before the song became the national anthem. By 1908, the I.W.W. had already weathered the storms of a hostile Socialist party and the arrest of Bill Haywood, one of its most influential leaders, whose time in jail “impelled [him] further in the direction of radicalism.” This radicalism pushed the I.W.W. towards a rejection of political action and voting in order to gain their desired ends, which seemed to go against American ideals of democratic involvement and patriotic citizenship. While the I.W.W. had not yet been branded as an anti-patriotic organization by capitalists and the American government alike, its founding preamble that pledged to organize “the army of production…to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown,” set it at odds with much of American society.

Nevertheless, “The Banner of Labor” was less of a parody of “The

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22 “Banner of Labor,” in Kornbluh and Thompson, eds., Rebel Voices, 12.
23 Dubofsky, We Shall be All, 105.
Star Spangled Banner,” and more a continuation of the martial and unifying sentiments found in the patriotic song. Playing on the idea of Francis Scott Key calling attention to the flag at Fort McHenry after a long night’s battle against the British, now the “Industrial Band” calls “Come all ye who labor’…come workers, unite!”25 Even as they have come to unite under “the banner of labor,” the workers are called to join in battle in a new kind of revolution. Instead of the Americans fighting against the British, the Wobblies are fighting for their freedom against the violent capitalist system that causes “the blood and the lives of children and wives…[to be] ground into dollars for parasites’ pleasure.”26 Moreover, in keeping with its international spirit, the song recognizes that “‘tis Humanity’s fight,” which reorients the nation-focused, patriotic tune into a call to battle to unite the various multinational Wobblies and potential Wobblies in one spirit of action and even some militancy as would befit a song of war.

Finally, like “The Star Spangled Banner,” “The Banner of Labor” ends on a high note as the song proclaims: “through bloodshed and tears, our day star appears, Industrial Union, the wage slave now cheers.”27 The “Industrial Union” becomes the savior of the “wage slave,” who can enjoy true liberty in “the land that is free, from the master and slave.”28 Although the song looks towards the setting free of the laborers, their freedom is not yet guaranteed in the current moment. In this way, the song pushes back against the American perception that not only was the United States free from the interference of Europe, it also no longer contained any slaves. This song stands as proof that slaves remained in the United States and that through the I.W.W. they would fight for their freedom, whether the battle was metaphorical or physical.

The second song that articulates the relationship between freedom and slavery is “Workers of the World Awaken!” This song was first published in the 1916 ninth edition of the I.W.W. songbook. With its own unique tune and words composed by Joe Hill himself in the year before his death, the song served as a stirring reminder that the I.W.W. had not yet achieved its goals and that wage slavery still existed all over the world. It also reminded Wobblies that, while Hill, one of their most influential songwriters, had been silenced, there were still other ways to fight. In the song, Hill calls on the “workers of the world” to “break your chains, demand your rights.”29 Hill reiterates that the capitalists had stripped the workers of their rights and their freedom. The workers will not be truly free until they fight back and destroy the system. As the workers “kneel in deep submission from [their] cradles to [their] graves,” Hill intimates that they were caught in a hereditary system of slavery that was much like that of American chattel slavery.30 As in many other songs, Hill calls for Wobblies to fight. This call to action against something other than the Central Powers had the danger of labeling Wobblies as subversive since by 1916 it became increasingly likely that the United States would enter into World War I, which the I.W.W. had already firmly denounced in 1914.31 Instead of the common Wobbly battle call to simply fight, Hill provides a new concrete way for the laborers to free themselves. As they break their own chains and shackles, they take up the chains of power as they “stop all speeding trains/ Every ship upon the ocean/ They can tie with mighty chains.”32 In doing so, the workers gain freedom and master the economy and technology that had held them as slaves for so long.

While the I.W.W. conception of what they were fighting against had started to evolve, the way that the songs related to the American ideologies of freedom and slavery continued to develop as well. Joe Hill still wrote strongly about freedom and slavery, but, even though the I.W.W. was still fighting for “freedom, love and health,” they would not be fighting under a vague banner of labor that still had opaque ties to American patriotism. Instead the I.W.W. would fight under “the grand red flag…in the Workers’

26 Ibid., 14.
27 Ibid., 14
28 Ibid., 14
30 Ibid, 1.
31 Kornbluh and Thompson, Rebel Voices, 316.
Commonwealth.”33 Through this articulation of how to resist and what the workers were fighting for, “Workers of the World Awaken!” embodies with greater specificity the I.W.W. preamble that proclaims, “by organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”34 By gaining control of the means of production and joining together into a new culture, the I.W.W. would create a new society.

In contrast to many of the other songs dealing with oppressive masters and the hard-working wage slave, “We Will Sing One Song” has a much softer attitude and departs from the more martial nature of many of the other Wobbly songs. This song represents the role of music in the I.W.W. as not only entertainment, a vent to emotion, or even the articulation of ideology, but also as a form of advocacy. Singing raises up the “meek and humble slave,/ horny handed son of the soil” who is quiet but strong and in harmony with his environment. On the other hand, it excoriates the “greedy master class” who are violent predators that spill “human blood…to satisfy their greed.”35 Additionally, the song declares that “we’ll sing one song of the girl below the line,/ she’s scorned and despised everywhere,/ while in their mansions the ‘keepers’ wine and dine/ from the profits that immoral traffic bear.” This reveals that the I.W.W. was not just concerned with the male “wage slave.” 36 Furthermore, the song illustrates the I.W.W. concern for the working-class woman, who was often looked down on as not quite feminine or truly moral, yet for whom the Wobblies promised a place “where womanhood can attain heights as yet undreamed and impossible under slavery.”37 As Wobblies sang “We Will Sing One Song” in each other’s company or on their own, they were bringing to attention both the world that they celebrated and the world that they fought against, as well as connecting and uniting with others who had the same purpose. In doing so, they fulfilled the purpose of the Wobbly songs—to share a common culture and message, and, most importantly, create a sense of unity among strangers.

### Sabotage and the Threat of Violence in Song

While nearly all of its songs promoted solidarity among the workers, the I.W.W. had no interest in finding common ground with its capitalist enemies. This antagonism was reflected in the Wobblies’ notoriously bad reputation in American society. The I.W.W. was known and feared by Americans as an organization that was eager to utilize violence and sabotage to achieve its goals of overthrowing the capitalist system. However, the historiography on the I.W.W. is somewhat divided on the degree to which the violent lyrics were enacted by Wobblies.38 The threat of violence took advantage of some useful (and often dangerous) American fears about anarchism and violent uprising in the working class, which the I.W.W. could use when it sat at the bargaining table with capitalists. Protest songs allowed Wobblies to vent their frustrations, as they were often met with violence by the police, vigilantes, and other government forces that they could not avoid and did not usually deserve. Even more importantly, the rhetoric of direct action, which sometimes meant violence and sabotage, fit in with the I.W.W.’s main purpose of revolution without compromise with employers or their capitalist system.

Many in the Wobbly community believed that sabotage was a faster and more effective method than voting, since they viewed the entire process as flawed with corruption and discrimination. As one Wobbly colorfully put it: “the ballot box…is only a rattle box for children to play with.”39 While Wobblies, who often could not vote anyways due to their gender or racial status, agreed that political action was useless, there was a variation in opinions about

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33 Hill, “Workers of the World Awaken!” 1..
the meaning of direct action and sabotage among Wobblies. For the Wobblies in the wheat fields, sabotage did not involve violence, like physically harming the farmer or even the threat burning the crop, for which a Wobbly violently asserted, “I’d wrap a pitchfork handle around [the offender’s] neck.” Instead, sabotage was “the conscious withdrawal of efficiency,” which entailed slowing down work and increasing waste on the job. On the other hand, some Wobblies “believed in wrecking machinery,” even over the protests of other Wobblies who argued that “we want to organize these workers and take over the means of production, not destroy them.” The Wobblies who fought against the system through the destruction of property, claimed the monikers of black-cats or sabo-cats, from the Wobbly symbol with anarchist roots of a black cat for sabotage. The real threat that the I.W.W. cultivated through sabotage was the fear that the saboteur was hidden in plain sight. This played on American fears of working-class violence and loss of production and property, because sabotage was relatively easy to commit and no one would have known what had happened until something went wrong. Although the threat of the United States joining WWI and a greater government crackdown on any group that undermined the war effort through strikes or sabotage was looming, I.W.W.’s promotion the “sabo-cat” and other proposals to use sabotage and violence to achieve their goals was at its height from 1913-1917. This continued rhetoric proved to contribute to the fracturing of the I.W.W. After a government raid that discovered letters in which the I.W.W. “officers corresponded luridly with each other about sab-cats, firebombs, and emery dust in machines,” prosecutors indicted many leaders within the I.W.W. These trials destroyed much of the organizational structure, confined Wobbly leaders in prison, and added to I.W.W.’s reputation for violence, which remained a frightening dark figure in the minds of the capitalists who dealt with the I.W.W.

The Wobbly songs about sabotage, particularly those regarding the “sab-cat” are couched in language and symbols that are simultaneously blatant and subtle, adding to the confusion over where the I.W.W. truly stood on sabotage. In the 1917 song, “The Kitten in the Wheat,” the sab-cat is linked with music, and to the particularly rebellious songs the Wobblies often sang. For anything to happen it takes “a sab-cat and a wobbly band, / A rebel song or two;/ And then we’ll show the Parasites/ Just what the cat can do.” This connection brings together both in the solidarity of song as a message and action, and in the decisiveness of sabotage. As one encourages or supports the other, the power of song and sabotage is reinforced by the song that articulates the relationship between the two. Moreover, with the threat that “they’d better not throw “wobs” in jail/ And leave the kitten free,” the song emphasizes that the Wobblies still have the upper hand as long as they had sabotage as an option.

Folklorist John Neuhaus interprets that “the kitten in the wheat was the black cat’s offspring…and the song may have been sung as much to appeal for cream for kitty as to incite action.” Even if Wobblies are imprisoned in their fight for “cream,” the capitalists still have to contend with the fear of sabotage. The sab-cat is used as a powerful threat against those who would persecute (or prosecute) Wobblies. Whether sabotage led to Wobblies escaping from jail or served as leverage to threaten the authorities into releasing Wobblies, their willingness to act gave the Wobblies an advantage. One instance reveals how the Wobblies did employ direct action, or sabotage. Of one of the many times that Wobblies were jailed for their activities, they were set to break rocks as hard labor, but instead “broke a big [rock]… [and] broke the handles off the sledges and threw them over the fence,” putting an end to their punishment. While this “sabotage” did not free them, it did allow them to have some control over their environment and their own work, much in the same way the Wobblies believed that sabotage would assist them in their workplace struggles.

Another song that relies on the threat of the sabo-cat to encourage Wobblies is the “That Sabo-Tabby Kitten,” published in the 1914 eighth edition of the I.W.W. songbook. There is much rat vs. cat imagery, as the song is.

40 Jack Miller in Bird et al., eds., Solidarity Forever, 39-40.
41 Ibid., 39.
42 Tom Scribner in Bird et al., eds., Solidarity Forever, 210-211.
44 Kornbluh and Thompson, Rebel Voices, 38.
45 Dubofsky, We Shall Be All, 407.
47 Ibid., 61.
49 Jack Miller, in Bird et al., eds., Solidarity Forever, 40.
declares, “you rotten rats go and hide your faces/ I’m right here so hunt your places…the rats all hate and fear me; meow! MEOW!/ The softest paw can be a CLAW!/ They seldom venture near me.” It is a song of triumph over the capitalist rats, who run in fear of the predatory nature of the Wobbly cat, who might seem safe until its claws flash with unexpected violence. The song not only shows the enemy as vermin, but also resoundingly proclaims that the Wobblies’ enemies could be intimidated by the sabo-cat. Also, in noting that “the tiger wild in his jungle sittin’/ never fights like this here kitten,” the song shows the ways that the Wobblies perceived their power. The sabo-cat is not a wild and foreign animal, despite the police, employers, and newspapers best efforts to paint them as a foreign threat that turned immigrants into a “menace.” Instead the sabo-cat is a civilized and domesticated “tabby kitten” that was born “at home” in the United States. While it might seem small, it is powerful and can be found everywhere. Pronouncing “trust in me instead of voting” and “shut your traps and a cat will do it,” action takes precedence over voting or voicing opinions and complaining. In promising that “this world should have but free men in it/ let me show you how to win it,” the song emphasizes the importance of sabotage to the Wobbly cause for freedom. Finally, the sab-cat is a fascinating symbol because it not only represents the threat of violence, but also makes the subtle point that the sab-cat was both a predator and ubiquitous household animal. Even though the cats (Wobblies) look harmless, they can be dangerous when provoked. Ultimately, this image of potential danger worked against the I.W.W. as much as it benefited them.

The Contradictory Role of Women in Song

Although the sabotage threat of the I.W.W. colored many Americans’ perceptions, the I.W.W. was more welcoming than threatening to its mem-

bers, and accepted nearly anyone who would join. In particular, women were embraced as leaders and symbols, and were considered highly important to the cause. One of the most prominent I.W.W. leaders, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, was called a “Rebel Girl” and friend by Joe Hill as she conducted strikes, made speeches, and desperately worked to get Hill out of jail. Many more women also played a crucial role in the I.W.W. For Wobbly women, the I.W.W. provided a way to advocate for themselves and their families and the songs helped them through their work. As a teenager involved with the I.W.W., Sophie Cohen remembered that the only way she “could endure that work was to sing along with the rhythm of the loom.” Whether it was through organizing women, participating in the danger of the strike, or simply singing the Wobbly songs in order to encourage themselves as they engaged in brutal working conditions, women in the I.W.W. showed that anyone in the working class could take part in the revolution. Despite the I.W.W.’s promotion of women within the organization, American mores of womanhood were still present and were embodied in the “elements of paternalism in the overly protective attitude of many male Wobblies toward their female leaders.” Reflecting the progressive spirit and the traditional American context in which they lived, the Wobbly songs envisioned various roles for women in the movement. There is a distinct tension between a celebration of the working woman and the frailty of the dependent wife and daughter that the working man needed to protect and return to when he had finally found some wages.

One of the most popular Wobbly songs was Joe Hill’s “The Rebel Girl,” which he wrote in 1915 in the hopes of bringing more women into the I.W.W. “The Rebel Girl” celebrates women in the I.W.W. as fellow soldiers and as inspiration to the men of the I.W.W. The song draws a contrast between wealthy women with good families, and the true “Thoroughbred Lady” who not only works with her hands but also fights against the system and its mores. While they might not “have charms made of diamonds and pearls,”

50 Ralph Chaplin, “That Sabo-Tabby Kitten,” in Kornbluh and Thompson, eds., Rebel Voices, 59.
51 Ibid., 59.
54 Ibid., 59
56 Sophie Cohen in Bird et al, Solidarity Forever, 64.
57 Bird et al, Solidarity Forever, 141.
the working-class women are “precious pearl[s],” who still have beauty and worth in their communities. Through the song, Hill redefines the ideal woman. Even though she works and her hands are not soft, she is still a true “lady.” A woman’s rebellion is something to be praised rather than observed with horror.

Nevertheless, Hill’s “Rebel Girl” did not wholly break ties with society, as she remains “true to her class and kind.” Her social place remains nearly entirely domesticated as “a muse or helpmate” who “instilled a pacifist and revolutionary ideology in her children.” She is only rebelling against an upper and middle-class notion of womanhood as she fights for the I.W.W. cause. While the sentiment in the song was strong, not all Wobblies appreciated it. One Wobbly woman “regarded it as unrepresentative of the militant egalitarian spirit of the real rebel girls in the union.” Women in the movement believed that they were more than motivators for their male compatriots. They saw themselves as true social revolutionaries in ways that Hill’s sympathetic song could not fully capture. Although this complaint reveals some of the tensions that the women of the I.W.W. had to negotiate with men—who did not always take them as seriously as they would have liked—the song itself, which was continuously published in all subsequent editions of the I.W.W. songbook, shows that the I.W.W. gave women an important place in the cause.

In sharp contrast to the actively defiant Rebel Girl, the song “The White Slave” paints a different picture of womanhood and the working-class woman. Instead of focusing on the strength and courage of the working-class woman, this song highlights her vulnerability to poverty as well as moral and physical degradation. The title itself plays on American fears of white slavery, particularly as white men in the South claimed that brutality against black men was the only way to protect the chastity and social place of white women. Moreover, the title reflects the rhetoric of slavery that the Wobblies often used when describing the working-class laborer. The song, which focuses on the plight of the working girl turned prostitute, had personal resonance with Wobblies, since many of the women protestors were arrested for prostitution because “the charge was intended simply to humiliate and degrade them.” Not only was the I.W.W. concerned about prostitution, but its members faced the social, criminal, and physical ramifications of prostitution on a regular basis.

The song emphasizes the beauty, whiteness, and purity of the girl, who is “fair as a pearl.” It also reveals her exposure to the world as she “slept on a park bench so soundly” because she could not afford the protection of a home or family. As the “old procuress…[whispers] in her ear…Come with me now, my girly,” the girl has no other choice. The only way to gain shelter is to prostitute herself. While the song shows that the girl had no other options and exorcizes “boss who pays starvation wages” as the cause of her problems, the girl has no possibility of moral or physical salvation. The song ends with the “same little girl, no more a pearl/ walk[ing] all alone…her health is gone.” A sad product of an evil environment, she is left without virtue, health, or purpose to live, as once again she is without shelter. The song exhibits some sympathy for the girl, but does not avoid moral condemnation. Ultimately, the pitiful story of the “white slave” is a call for working-class men and women to fight against the system that made her story possible rather than extending solidarity to the “fallen” working-class woman. Furthermore, it raised the specter of what working women faced if the cause of the I.W.W. failed.

**Conclusion**

Sophie Cohen, the woman who sang I.W.W. songs at her loom to keep going, nearly went to jail for an I.W.W. song. Cohen had taught some of white women due to the newly freed African-American men and women.
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The children along her street to sing Wobbly songs, and a girl sang the song in school, which led the worried principal to call the police. Soon enough, the police dispatched a “gigantic policeman” to investigate. Finding Sophie at home, “he must have realized how ridiculous the situation was…He had been sent to find a dangerous rebel, and there was a fifteen-year old girl eating lunch.” Nonplussed, the policeman left, but his presence revealed the power to motivate action and fear that a simple song had.

The recognition that song had the power to create commonalities and influence society has been one of the I.W.W.’s lasting contributions to American society. The Wobblies’ songs cannot supplant the importance of their commitment to and use of direct action to force the change that they wanted. Nevertheless, the songs can trace the development of the discourse surrounding direct action and the articulation of what the I.W.W.’s new society would look like. Still struggling with American complacencies about freedom and the abolition of slavery, I.W.W. songs confronted the fact that not all Americans were completely free while calling for the wage slave to rise up and fight against oppression. Yet, revolution was never simple. I.W.W. songs about sabotage inspired Wobblies to take direct action against their employers, but by making the waters almost intentionally murky over how much violence threats of sabotage truly engendered. In the end, American fear of sabotage created a strong backlash against the I.W.W. rather than a capitulation to its demands. Even with its aims to revolutionize society through its admirable ideal of complete egalitarianism, Wobblies still faced the presence of the ideology of the old capitalist society. I.W.W. songs empowered Wobbly women, but they also served as a constant reminder that women’s roles remained tied to traditional American gender norms. Despite the missteps over gender and tensions that the songs illustrate, the regular Wobbly’s experience with the songs of the I.W.W. truly reveal their meaning. Inspired to act, filled with solidarity, and encouraged to continue the violent and dangerous struggle, Wobblies all across the country became one in power and unity as they sang with all their heart about the corrupted world they saw and the beautiful world they wished to create.

69 Sophie Cohen, in Bird et al, Solidarity Forever, 68.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


