

The Point of Destruction: Sabotage, Speech, and Progressive-Era Politics

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020

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Abstract

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Strike waves in the late nineteenth century United States caused widespread property destruction, but strike leaders did not suggest threats to employer property as a comprehensive strategy until the I.W.W. adopted a deliberate program of sabotage. Contrary to historical consensus, sabotage was an intellectually coherent and politically generative response to progressive, technocratic dreams of frictionless social cooperation that would have major consequences for the labor movement. This dissertation treats sabotage as a significant contribution to the intellectual debates that were generated by labor conflict and rapid industrialization and examines its role in shaping federal labor policy. It contends that the suppression of sabotage staked out the limits of acceptable speech and the American political imagination.

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Introduction: The Limits of Change

This dissertation is about sabotage: its meaning, its historical importance, and the ways in which it persists and also remains hidden. It was inspired by my interest in the renewal and extension of Taylorism and the cult of productivity that accompanied the rise of the Internet and mobile, networked devices. Alongside the growing popularity of applications and devices that essentially brought the time-study into our most intimate activities was a resurgence of utopian thought in the form of so-called ‘luxury communism’ and fully automated ‘post-work’ societies. These developments, while dazzling at a technological level, were strikingly redundant at a conceptual one—a mindless reproduction of scientific management for a newly dispersed workforce and a recapitulation of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* with new gadgets. Given this cultural landscape, a serious consideration of the politics of technology seemed necessary. Machine-breaking offered a promising way to disentangle narratives of social progress from technological mandates. It has not been a simple task. The art historian Max J. Friedländer once remarked that “it’s easier to change your world view than how you hold your spoon.” Ideology is not a belief system but rather that which appears to be the natural condition of things. It is not one political position among many but the condition of political possibility itself—what can realistically be imagined. It is because technology is a concrete, daily practice that it is such a powerful means of ideological transmission. Hence, the pejorative use of the word ‘Luddite’ at the same moment that ‘anti-capitalist’ protest is a defining feature of the political landscape.

This is not to say that technology necessarily transmits a certain belief system to the exclusion of others, but that all this stuff forms an imperceptible yet definite

conceptual boundary within which we might imagine alterations to politics proper and outside of which is sheer wreckage. Sabotage posited a different horizon—the general strike and the end of capitalism. And it therefore suggested tactics that were aimed at the limits laid down by industrial capitalism. This is reminiscent of the debate about revolution and reformism, but sabotage was unique in that it was materialist in a particular and literal sense. Sabotage was concerned with demystifying capitalism. It distinguished itself from other political interventions of the time, such as the single tax or political socialism, in that it went after the very things that naturalized these beliefs. It was not threatening because it criticized capitalism or state policy but because it identified a target in easy reach of every worker—the property produced under a capitalist state. At the same time, it wasn't an emotional, individual reaction to working conditions but a class movement. As Arturo Giovannitti explained, sabotage “only becomes dangerous when it becomes the translated practical expression of an idea even though, or rather because, this idea has originated from the act itself.”¹ Sabotage, as a theory, arose from longstanding practice that combined political economy and practical tactics into one word. In attacking the actual products of capital, it had located a chink in the economic system's ideological armor.

Sabotage was broadly defined but what differentiated it from other forms of direct action was that it explicitly recommended property destruction. This did not always involve physical wreckage—although it often did—but property was not always a physical entity. Property existed in the form of machines as well as the profits and products that the machine was expected to produce at some future date. Sabotage is

¹ Arturo Giovannitti, “Introduction” from Emile Pouget, *Sabotage* trans. Arturo Giovannitti (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Co., 1913), 7.

always about the destruction of employer property in one way or another. This bears repeating because it has been so regularly and actively denied by historians.

Sabotage flourished at a moment that preceded a consensus around efficiency, private property, free markets, and non-violence as the sine qua non of legitimate protest. It was one of the ways that workers, in the words of David Montgomery, “vigorously and explicitly challenged management’s pretensions” during a time when the “cult of productivity” had yet to fully coalesce.² Progressive Era America was openly violent and repressive but in certain respects the conceptual field was wide open. The late Mark Fisher used the term ‘capitalist realism’ to describe “a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education.” Capitalist realism is not an aesthetic but “a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.”³ This particular form of realpolitik had yet to establish itself in 1905 when the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) was founded and so Progressive Era labor conflict offers us insight into how “the horizons of the thinkable” were established and what precisely those horizons might be.⁴ The active repression of the I.W.W. and the subsequent disappearance of sabotage from the lexicon of labor conflict, as well as the pages of labor history, limited the horizon of the American political imagination in complex and lasting ways. Sabotage now constitutes a sort of outside of what is considered realistic or even remotely possible. The philosophy of sabotage put forth by the I.W.W. gives us a sense of what needed to be expelled before

² David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 3.

³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009), 14.

⁴ Fisher, 5.

the conscious project that we now recognize as simple reality could begin to establish itself.

In both its philosophical and material form, sabotage made several propositions that were incompatible with the capitalist economic system as well as the American state. As a philosophy, sabotage articulated a critique of private property and industrial efficiency. As a practice, it immediately and materially threatened them both. Sabotage at the point of production illuminated two fundamental aspects of capitalist property relations that employers went to great lengths to disavow: that material control of production was the privileged site of power and that private property was fundamentally violent. By explicitly addressing the violence inherent in the production and control of private property, sabotage undermined another foundational myth of the free market, namely that it was in any way free or independent of political and legal power. As the United States entered the First World War, sabotage increasingly became a vehicle for articulating the relationship between class power and state power and was folded into anti-militarist and anti-imperialist arguments. It was not, as its detractors claimed, a violent call to arms but something even more threatening: the contravention of the capitalist social contract. As such, sabotage could not be peacefully metabolized by a nascent administrative state. Instead, what began as scattered efforts at repression by state and local governments with the crucial support of informal, vigilante violence, culminated in a coordinated federal effort to destroy the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and make the very idea of sabotage illegal.

Repression of I.W.W. thought and expression was also an exercise and expansion of the capitalist imagination. For every law implemented to prevent the circulation of

literature, for every pamphlet that was seized, and for every deportation of a non-citizen, a whole body of discourse, legal and otherwise, was generated. It was not purely a matter of negating a harmful ideology, but of creating and strengthening a legal and ideological language that expanded the reach of nativism, business interests, and the capitalist state. This is perhaps most apparent in the abundance of literature produced by manufacturers' associations. These organized coalitions of business owners devoted an enormous amount of energy and resources to justifying the natural economic conditions that enabled their existence. This was not the same as the limited public relations campaigns that we are familiar with today—BP's effort, for example, to transform its public image to that of a 'green' company in the face of climate change. This was a much more fundamental effort to vindicate capital and free markets themselves and to map the territory in which they operated. In the process, these business owners established the field of legitimate protest and negotiation as a non-violent and entirely discursive space of cooperation and rational discourse.

Much has been written about the I.W.W. but very little attention has been paid to their writings on sabotage. Historians Philip Foner, Melvyn Dubofsky and Paul Brissenden have each claimed that sabotage was a minor and purely rhetorical aspect of the I.W.W.'s organizing strategy. This position necessarily corrected the contemporary exaggeration of Wobbly violence in the pages of a conservative press gripped by wartime patriotism. William Preston's *Aliens and Dissenters* (1963) carefully considers the role that accusations of sabotage played in the repression of radicals and prosecution of immigrants during the Great War. Mike Davis, one of very few people to give I.W.W. writings on sabotage serious attention, drew on I.W.W. sources to argue that sabotage

was a rational response to Taylorism. These are the only attempts to engage with sabotage as a significant idea. Laura Weinrib's *The Taming of Free Speech: America's Civil Liberties Compromise*, is an important contribution to our understanding of the role that labor radicals, and I.W.W. free speech fights in particular, played in the establishment of civil rights. Weinrib, however, does not include anything that the I.W.W. actually wrote about sabotage. The attention paid is so cursory that Weinrib misattributes Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's contribution to these debates. In reproducing a long-standing omission—writing on sabotage by worker intellectuals—Weinrib, captures the importance of the economic threat posed by organized labor to early debates about expressive freedom, but severs the activity of radical labor from the content of its own radical speech. Other scholars, such as Salvatore Salerno and Francis Shor, have emphasized the culture of the I.W.W. and its role as a revolutionary social movement at the cost of its economic activities. Sabotage was threatening because it bound radical ideas to radical actions. It posed an economic threat because it was both a radical idea and an effective material strategy.

The avoidance of sabotage as a subject and the near disappearance of the word from labor history (replaced by “direct action”) seems to bear out the pronouncement of one of its earliest advocates: sabotage, claimed Walker Smith, is so dangerous that the capitalist class does not want to mention it for fear that workers will learn its meaning. Alternatively, we might speculate that following the systematic and often violent repression of radicals and their writings, historians on the Left have unconsciously internalized the logic of their prosecution. Whatever the reason, the result has been a scholarly dismissal of sabotage literature. Even when it is talked about, it is merely

glossed over. It is widely acknowledged that the I.W.W. made important contributions to the evolution of industrial unionism in the United States, held official positions on race, ethnicity, and gender that were far ahead of its time, and periodically demonstrated an incredible ability to mobilize so-called ‘unskilled’ workers. At the same time, the general consensus seems to be that their intellectual or philosophical contributions lack seriousness. Attentive and careful readings of I.W.W. and other literature on sabotage, therefore, are sorely lacking. This dissertation addresses many things by way of sabotage, but its main contribution to scholarship is that it assumes the concept’s intellectual and political importance.

It is widely acknowledged that the early twentieth century United States saw some of the most violent labor conflict on record. Several recent books have reconsidered the role of violence during this time period. Among them Beverly Gage’s *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in its First Age of Terror* and Christopher Capozzola’s *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen*. Gage argues for the reinsertion of violence into a labor historical tradition unduly influenced by Howard Taft as a means of correcting a narrative that diminishes the extent of class warfare on American soil. Capozzola’s study of wartime vigilantism shows how violence against labor radicals was contiguous with nascent federal police powers. A study of sabotage adds to this literature on Progressive Era violence because sabotage itself was concerned with the very definition of violence.

Sabotage pamphlets were some of the I.W.W.’s best-selling literature. These brief tracts presented a number of claims about capitalist political economy in an impressively economic manner. One of the central organizing principles presented in all sabotage

literature was the division between ‘worker sabotage’ and ‘capitalist sabotage’. The former was aimed only at property, while the latter was violent towards people in the service of protecting property. These pamphlets thus addressed what we would now refer to as the difference between structural and individual violence. By attacking property, so the claim went, actual violence—violence that threatened injury and death—was prevented. Violence was not ontological but political and economic. Assigning violence to certain actors and activities served specific class interests. The concomitant disavowal of the violence of economic activity required the further claim that the economy was separate from the sphere of coercive political power and thus the state’s legitimate enforcement of ‘order.’

The power of sabotage as a philosophy was descriptive rather than prescriptive. Sabotage was itself a longstanding practice among workers but the larger critique of property relations and the morality that derived from them also reflected the political and economic landscape of the time. The violence that marked the early twentieth century is almost unrecognizable from the perspective of the early twenty-first. Not only is open and armed class conflict largely absent, the contest itself has been settled.

The first two chapters of this dissertation are broadly concerned with establishing the occurrence and importance of sabotage during the first decades of the twentieth century. Chapter One analyzes the surprisingly understudied I.W.W. literature on sabotage. Sabotage was a simple vehicle for a sophisticated structural critique of capitalism that raised the disruptive practices of workers to the level of revolutionary theory. Distinct from the anarchist showmanship of the “propaganda of the deed,” it

espoused a non-violence that drew a clear distinction between people and property and thus provided a vehicle for a radical critique of capitalist ownership. Contrary to claims made by many historians, sabotage occupied an important place in the self-understanding of the union. It was ubiquitous in the I.W.W.'s iconography in the form of the 'sab-cat' and the wooden shoe. It appeared regularly in the pages of the *Industrial Worker* and *Solidarity* and pamphlets on sabotage were some the organization's most popular literature. Furthermore, the role that sabotage played was not merely rhetorical. The practice of sabotage is a feature of wage work and the notion that this literature had no bearing on practice is both unlikely and conceptually incoherent. Union organizing is first and foremost an educational endeavor and, as such, presupposes a relationship between speech and action. To claim that sabotage was 'just' a popular idea that had no significant bearing on the I.W.W.'s 'real' activity devalues the literature on sabotage and reinforces a false dichotomy between thought and action that the very idea of sabotage sought to undermine. This position also suggests that we ignore a rather extensive body of writing. It also furthers the idea that serious engagement with the philosophy of sabotage as a legitimate and intelligent proposal is lacking.

Chapter Two also aims to correct the misapprehension that sabotage was either the misguided rhetoric of radicals or an invention of *agents provocateurs*. It looks at the use of sabotage by the non-revolutionary International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (I.A.B.S.I.W.) who regularly resorted to dynamite as a form of economic coercion. The dynamite campaign of the I.A.B.S.I.W. lasted almost five years and resulted in damage to over eighty structures before the 1910 bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building which led to the arrest and trial of the John J. and James B.

McNamara. While the *L.A. Times* bombing is a well-known incident, the dynamite campaign has received much less attention. The notion that the McNamaras were either innocent or working with anarchists is still quite prevalent. Like the disavowal of sabotage, this is symptomatic of an unacknowledged repression of the violent nature of property contests. While the guilt or innocence of the McNamara brothers and the presence of operatives employed by the Burns detective agency will perhaps remain debatable, the union's knowing participation in violent and destructive tactics is difficult to refute. Furthermore, the association of the *L.A. Times* bombing—or dynamite attacks more generally—with anarchists rather than American trade unionists is a product of the propaganda campaigns launched by the many employers' associations that were formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The attempt to excise violence and property destruction from the field of domestic labor relations by associating it with foreign anarchists was one of the ways that the employers' associations naturalized the notion of an apolitical economy organized around individual liberty and freedom of contract. The I.A.B.S.I.W.'s dynamite campaign was part of an exceptionally aggressive contest between the union and the National Erector's Association (N.E.A.). In the absence of legal protections extended to employers, the union leveraged the threat of property destruction. It was, for a brief time, successful.

Chapter Three deals with the widespread strikes in the Northwest lumber industry in 1917. The lumber strike was in many ways the apogee of the I.W.W.'s organizing success. Because lumber was a war industry, and spruce was essential for a new American and Entente Air Force, the strike inspired widespread federal intervention in labor relations. This ranged from attempts at mediation by Progressive intellectuals to the

creation of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumberman under the auspices of the War Department's Spruce Production Division. Despite the fact that sabotage was downplayed in the I.W.W. press beginning with the war, the lumber industry was also particularly vulnerable to sabotage and there is a fair amount of evidence of its actual occurrence in both camps and mills. Furthermore, if sabotage was not encouraged, 'striking on the job' was a tactic that was repeatedly suggested. The working and living conditions in lumber camps were so abject that lumber workers were almost automatic objects of Progressive sympathy and the lumber workers thus found many allies in the Wilson administration. However, the I.W.W.'s positions went beyond the call to correct workplace problems such as filthy bunkhouses and inadequate food. The ways in which Progressive discourses intersected and significantly diverged from the radical philosophy of I.W.W. members and organizers were particularly apparent in the case of the lumber industry. It was this strike that led the Wilson administration to pursue a federal prosecution of I.W.W. members the following year.

Chapter Four examines the role of judicial review and changing conceptions of property in the composition of late nineteenth and early twentieth century labor conflict. It looks at the ways that private property shaped the content of what could be said and by whom vis-à-vis the enforcement of labor injunctions and freedom of contract. Here, I argue that speech has its own material conditions of production and that the repression of the I.W.W. cannot be viewed as *either* the suppression of radical ideas *or* the repression of economic activity at the point of production. Rather, the elimination of the organization required the suppression of its philosophy which was one and the same with its organizing strength. The First World War saw incredible state sponsored repression

and vigilante enforcement of patriotic duties, but sabotage is the only idea that was actually made illegal through the passage of anti-syndicalism legislation in 23 states.

Chapter Five looks at the literature of efficiency and progressive reform, particularly that of F.W. Taylor and Thorstein Veblen. Sabotage was a constitutive element of Taylor's management philosophy as well as a reaction to it. Veblen borrowed the I.W.W. definitions of worker and capitalist sabotage for *The Engineers and the Price System* and was sympathetic to the I.W.W.'s cause, an unusual position for an economics professor at the time. Nevertheless, his obsession with engineers as a class without class interests and his belief in the value of efficiency place him closer to Taylor than the I.W.W. This is not because Veblen was covertly anti-labor but because the celebration of efficiency and expertise as well as an aversion to conflict were hallmarks of progressive thought. Taylor was no exception to this and while his name has become a stand in for oppressive managerial practices, his *Principles of Scientific Management* was a product of, not an exception to, a progressive tradition of thought that sought the collective good through cooperation and expertise. This chapter addresses 'the machine question' directly by mining the intersections between scientific management and progressive social programs and assessing the limitations that a reification of machine production placed on Veblen's socialism. It also returns to the question of property as a social relation that is crystalized in, and reproduced by, machine technology.

An examination of how sabotage was used and framed by different institutions, organizations, and individual actors highlights the stakes of workers' challenges to ideologies of technological progress. It draws attention to the ways in which economic interests and labor conflict underwrote our conception of civil liberties and sheds light on

the ways in which American law has afforded corporate property particular protections. Sabotage posed a challenge to the conceptual and practical limits of a political imagination founded on principles of private property and the cult of productivity that is unrivalled in the history of American thought.

Chapter 1: No Interests in Common:

Sabotage as Structural Analysis

Sabotage is a little word,
Easily said and easily heard,
Expresses much and means disaster
When properly used against the master.

Sabotage is a thing that's banned,
By labor fakirs throughout the land,
By rebel workers used for ages
To make the bosses increase wages

Sabotage can always be used
To gain justice when workers are abused:
Bad bosses, too, are tamed in a day
When a little sab kitten strays their way.

If the strength of sabotage you should doubt,
There are many ways of finding out,
And if you think that is a lie,
Ask pickhandle Johnson or Governor Spry.¹

“Sabotage” by Herbert Mahler, *Industrial Worker*, April 16, 1916

Very few workers went to jail for committing acts of sabotage but thousands were arrested for talking about it. The practice of sabotage was not new but the word was, and there was something distinctly threatening about naming the disparate, rebellious practices of disgruntled workers. Sabotage gave an intellectual coherence and revolutionary meaning to activity that could easily be interpreted as irrational, impulsive, and apolitical. Much like the I.W.W. itself, it organized the disorganized and legitimated what appeared illegitimate. It also became a lightning rod for legal repression. Following the 1913 silk workers' strike in Patterson,

¹ William Spry was the governor of Utah from 1909-1917.

NJ, Frederick Sumner Boyd was tried for sedition, in part because he urged workers to incapacitate looms with vinegar. Boyd's trial inspired a heated defense of sabotage as "the guerilla warfare of the working class."² Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's pamphlet "Sabotage," a direct response to the charges against Boyd, was one of many writings by I.W.W. organizers and worker intellectuals advocating sabotage as a non-violent form of worker control and a legitimate means of coercion.³ Property destruction had long been a regular occurrence during labor conflicts in the United States, but its open defense was a disturbing novelty.

Sabotage literature consisted of songs, poems, allusions to 'sab kittens', and endless images of black cats and wooden shoes. Its traces were everywhere. A handful of pamphlets functioned as the intellectual core of this discourse. They were not numerous, but they were among the I.W.W.'s most widely distributed literature.⁴ Sabotage offered a sophisticated analysis of class conflict, presented in simple terms that were sung, recited, printed, stickered, and drawn across the complex landscape of American syndicalist thought. And it did not go

² Mike Davis, "The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World," *Radical America*, 9 (1975): 84. Popular pamphlets on sabotage include William Trautmann, *Direct Action and Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1912); Walker Smith, *Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913); *Jersey Justice at Work: First Decision on the Advocacy of Sabotage in the United States Courts* (New York: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn *Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1917).

³ Flynn ultimately regretted her advocacy of sabotage because of the dangers presented by legibility. While not going so far as to disavow sabotage, she explains in her memoir that her defense of sabotage was not a belief that it was effective, necessary or even desirable. It was very simply a defense—one inspired by a general obligation to defend I.W.W. members in general and Boyd in particular—of those who were being persecuted and prosecuted for advocating the tactic. Her pamphlet, published in 1915 and discontinued at her own request in 1917, resurfaced continually as proof of illegal intentions in her own political trials as late as the 1950s. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography*, 163-164; On the disappearance of sabotage from the pages of *Solidarity* see Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States vol. 4: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1997).

⁴ Phillip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, vol. 4: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1997), 159-160.

unnoticed by the public at large. First mentioned in 1907, worker sabotage continued to generate headlines in major newspapers well into the 1920s.⁵

Sabotage, as both a theory and a practice encompassed a critique of property, industrial progress, efficiency, and centralized bureaucratic control that enriched the understanding of class conflict in the industrialized United States of the early twentieth century. It destabilized the well-established association between industrial efficiency and social progress by negatively reimagining that progress as something external to technological development and productive capacity. Indeed, it suggested that social progress could be achieved by the *interruption* of industrial progress, the disruption of production, and the violation of property rights. Sabotage inverted one of modernity's foundational myths: "the story of the industrial revolution...as the triumph of new techniques, and the inevitable march of progress."⁶ According to Walker Smith, editor of *The Industrial Worker*, the word "sabotage" was so terrifying that the employer class did not even want to utter it for fear that the working class would learn what it was.⁷ This would appear to be true. Legal efforts to remove the word from circulation began in earnest during the

⁵ Newspapers began reporting on sabotage as early as 1907 and continued to run stories decrying the odious tactic well into the 1920s. Most early articles reported on its use by French railway unions, but by 1912 major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* had begun to report on its possibility and employment in the United States. After the US entrance into World War I, articles about sabotage generally linked the act to undermining patriotism and the war effort and 'sabotage' regularly featured in headlines that described the 1919 prosecution of Haywood and other I.W.W. members under the Espionage Act. Some characteristic prewar headlines include: "Meaning of Sabotage: The Acts of Workmen who deliberately Spoil their Product", *New York Times* May 17, 1909; "Ettor Harangues Meeting: Tells Strikers That They Must Fight and if They Lose, Then Sabotage", *Boston Daily Globe*, January 29, 1912; "I.W.W. Will Advocate Sabotage in New York Strikes", *Los Angeles Times* January 19, 1913; "Plan Sabotage in Soup: Striking Waiters Threaten 'Disgusting Time' for Public", *New York Tribune* January 22, 1913; "Driven Out by Sabotage: Manufacturers' Exodus to South Explained by Coler", *New York Tribune* February 8, 1913; "Sabotage Cooks Scheme to Make Mistress Kind", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1916.

⁶ Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy 1815-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9.

⁷ Walker Smith, *Sabotage: Its History Philosophy and Function* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913), Section VII. Retrieved from <https://archive.iww.org/history/library/WCSmith/sabotage/>

U.S. entrance into World War One through the passage of state-level laws that made speaking or writing about ‘sabotage’ a felony.

Workers in the United States clearly knew what sabotage was before it was named and they continued to employ it after the term fell out of fashion. They had flooded mines, set fire to rail yards, disabled engines, and variously rebelled against attempts by owners to increase and deskill production. Sabotage had been, and would continue to be, a relatively common occurrence during labor disputes. It was normal practice for journeymen to avoid exceeding stints by removing parts of the machine that they were using. The International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers (I.A.B.S.I.W.) carried out a prolonged dynamiting campaign that resulted in the destruction of at least 80 worksites and culminated in the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910. Workers smashed looms during the Lawrence Textile strike in 1912. In 1917, during the trial of William Haywood and nearly 100 other I.W.W. members, dissatisfied, itinerant farm laborers testified to the destruction of farm equipment and loggers and mill hands recounted the many ways to ruin lumber. In 1937, workers turned off refrigeration at Newton Meat Packing Co. destroying \$170,000.00 worth of meat. Explosions were more or less the central negotiating strategy in the unionization of irregular, overland trucking by Detroit teamsters. The Teamsters unions maintained this tradition of property destruction, setting up roving pickets and disabling non-union trucks attempting to enter Detroit in 1970. Greg Shotwell’s account of union organizing in Southwestern Michigan opens with following anecdote:

“A foreman who was new told us to get up and get to work. Right now, he said. ‘I’m the boss. We said Yes, sir boss. We went right to work. Thirty minutes later, every machine in the department was down. Then skilled trades came out, tore the

machines apart, left parts all over the floor, and went off to look for the missing parts. They didn't come back.”⁸

While organized labor does not—and indeed its more ‘legitimate’ organs never did—officially endorse sabotage as a negotiating tactic or a form of worker control at the point of production, sabotage has always been an important weapon in the workers’ arsenal.⁹ In light of this, the veritable absence of a literature on sabotage is intriguing.¹⁰ Certainly, Smith’s formulation of sabotage as too dangerous to mention lent the word a certain cache, but the observation also has enduring analytical value and seems to be born out in the tortured efforts of historians to excise the word from the I.W.W.’s history.

Writings on sabotage may have fallen victim to the ‘extreme condescension of posterity.’ Laura Weinrib has remarked that “theory of any type was never a Wobbly strong suit.”¹¹ Indeed, writings on sabotage were playful, flamboyant, and remain difficult to square with academic sensibilities but they were also serious works of political economy. The effort to distance the organization from a word that became the focus of federal prosecutors and widespread public

⁸ Greg Shotwell, *Autoworkers under the Gun: A Shopfloor View of the End of the American Dream*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 1.

⁹ David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13; Adamic, Louis. *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1931); Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict 1880-1917*, (New York: Monthly Review Press 1980), 246; U.S. v. Haywood et al.; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston, MA: South End Press 1997), 200, 233; Thaddeus Russell, *Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class* (New York: A.A. Knopf 2001), 20.

¹⁰ That labor conflict in the United States was exceptionally violent is widely acknowledged. I am making the narrower claim that “sabotage” the word, the writing about it and its significance has not been written about since the early twentieth century. Beverly Gage’s suggestion that American historians have taken as axiomatic Philip Taft’s claim that there was a lack of “ideological violence” in the United States applies to the marginalization of sabotage by post war historians. For example, the word “sabotage” does not appear in Jeremy Brecher’s *Strike!* despite it being a veritable catalog of property destruction.

¹¹ Laura Weinrib, *The Taming of Free Speech: America’s Civil Liberties Compromise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 84.

hysteria is another explanation for minimizing the word's importance. This legitimating move resulted in an over-correction by careful and sympathetic chroniclers of the I.W.W. that has produced its own significant and lasting blind spots.

Recent literature has greatly expanded our understanding of the I.W.W. through the careful study of local organizing drives as well as the organization's international composition and influence.¹² But the New Left framing of sabotage has remained in tact. Melvyn Dubofsky argued that sabotage was *only* an attention-grabbing tactic and that its use has caused lasting confusion in studies of the I.W.W. The idea that bloodshed and destruction followed the dangerous hobo Wobbly, he argues, "died hard because I.W.W. rhetoric and songs fed the myth of the Wobbly as a wild and wooly warrior."¹³ The reality, he writes, is that "Wobblies did not carry bombs, nor burn harvest fields, nor destroy timber, nor depend upon the machine that

¹² Salvatore Salerno's book *Red November Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989) was a major turning point in the study of the I.W.W. Countering the attempt by Melvyn Dubofsky to situate the I.W.W. as a specifically American phenomenon that emerged from the coal wars of the mountain west, Salerno emphasizes the international composition of the I.W.W. and links its rich culture to a variety of anarchist and syndicalist movements that its members brought from their countries of origin. Recent works on the I.W.W. that destabilize Dubofsky's American thesis and expand Philip Foner's analysis in large part through an emphasis on the international dimension of the I.W.W. and its close ties to anarchism include: David R. Berman, *Radicalism in the Mountain West, 1890-1920: Socialists, Populists, Miners, and Wobblies* (Boulder: University Press Of Colorado, 2013); Christopher J. Casteneda & Monse Feu, eds., *Writing Revolution: Hispanic Anarchism in the United* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); States Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Peter Cole, David M. Struthers, & Kenyon Zimmer, eds. *Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the I.W.W.* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Linda J. Lumsden, *Black, White, and Red All Over: A Cultural History of the Radical Press in its Heyday, 1900-1917* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014); Matthew S. May, *Soapbox Rebellion: The Hobo Orator Union and the Free Speech Fights of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1909-1916: Rhetoric Culture and Social Critique* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2013).

¹³ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 146.

works with a trigger.”¹⁴ But in 1914, the ninth annual convention of the I.W.W. passed a unanimous resolution instructing all speakers to recommend both slow downs and sabotage.¹⁵

Philip Foner similarly suggested that the promotion of sabotage coincided with the organizations’ focus on the free speech fights waged between 1907 and 1916 in the Western portion of the United States. The word, he notes, stopped appearing in official publications in 1917 at the same time that the I.W.W. decided to devote its resources to widespread strikes in war industries, particularly lumber. The implication here is that sabotage was, as Dubofsky claimed, a popular topic for soapbox speakers rather than a useful tactic and that it became unimportant, or even disappeared, after 1917 when the I.W.W. matured into a more effective organization. The consensus that sabotage was a passing rhetorical fad ignores what is difficult to prove but easy to infer. Sabotage *was* popular and Walker Smith’s pamphlet “Sabotage” was being advertised in the *Industrial Worker* as late as December of 1916. Joseph Murphey, who didn’t join the organization until 1919, recalled that “although organizing and teaching was a very good way of persuading people, you could not get along without the good old wooden shoe.” He and his fellow Wobblies would recite a poem reminding them “how to resist John Farmer”:

*If freedom’s road seems rough and hard
and strewn with rocks and thorns
Just put your wooden shoes on pard,
and you won’t hurt your corns.*¹⁶

¹⁴ Dubofsky, 147.

¹⁵ Eldridge Foster Dowell, *History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939), 33.

¹⁶ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas and Deborah Shaffer, eds. *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the I.W.W.* (Chicago: Lakeview Press, 1985), 43.

In addition to demonstrating the continued importance of sabotage, Murphey's anecdote suggests that the I.W.W.'s well-established oral tradition makes it unlikely that the removal of a word from a newspaper had much of an impact on that word's use by its membership.

The argument that Foner puts forth for minimizing the role of sabotage in the activities of the I.W.W. is similar to Dubofsky's: "it is easy to be carried away by slogans, songs and stories of sabotage, and it is extremely difficult to separate rhetoric from practice."¹⁷ But it should be noted that this is only a problem if "separating rhetoric from practice" is the operational framework for analysis. Even if instances of sabotage by I.W.W. members are difficult to locate and impossible to positively quantify, it is in no way misleading to give pride of place to an idea that was, if briefly, central to the writings, speeches, and overall project of the I.W.W. itself.¹⁸ While positive proof of its occurrence might demonstrate its tactical importance in a particular dispute, the announcement of its mere, incalculable existence arguably had a political effect far greater than any single strike. In other words, its use—even if it was 'just talk'—was significant.¹⁹ The word 'sabotage' was arguably the only difference between machine wrecking in 1910 and machine wrecking in 1890. Most importantly, it was a difference introduced to the

¹⁷ Foner, 162.

¹⁸ As a continuous and secret form of shop-floor rebellion and control, sabotage was difficult to locate and positively prove. In a rare book-length study of industrial sabotage in France, sociologist Pierre Dubois settled for indirect evidence, writing that the first sign of sabotage may be a "proliferation of controllers and repair workers" and the second "large-scale wastage of raw materials." Even blatantly destructive sabotage such as machine wrecking is hard to trace as the culprits may remain unknown and companies may decline to prosecute. Again, Dubois suggests that sabotage might be inferred from "the amount of time machinery is in use, records of quality, [and] reprimands for defective work."¹⁸ Sabotage is a form of worker resistance that evades managerial control at a practical and a discursive level. Pierre Dubois, *Sabotage in Industry* trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Penguin, 1979), 13-14.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the division between speech and organizing proper is another labor historical axiom that unintentionally dismisses years of Wobbly organizing as ineffective. As Matthew S. May has pointed out, "the most common interpretation among sympathetic labor historians and postwar Wobblies is that fighting for free speech distracted workers from their proper task of organizing workers at the point of production. Matthew S. May, *Soapbox Rebellion: The Hobo Orator Union and the Free Speech Fights of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1909-1916* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2013), 4.

United States by members of the I.W.W. To diminish its significance in the service of evidentiary ‘truth’ requires ignoring what these historical subjects were actually saying—repeatedly and with force.

The particular formulation of sabotage by French syndicalists that was taken up and modified by I.W.W. leaders was distinguished by several ideas, one of which was an insistence on its theoretical importance. The historian’s impulse to separate rhetoric from practice therefore contradicts one of the central arguments put forth by the theory of sabotage itself. This idea is clearly articulated by Arturo Giovannitti, the Italian born I.W.W. organizer who translated Émile Pouget’s 1896 pamphlet “Sabotage” from French. In the introduction to the English version published by the I.W.W., Giovannitti notes that “sabotage is a certain simple thing which is more or less generally practiced... [It only] becomes a monstrous thing, a crime and a blasphemy when it is openly advocated and advised.”²⁰ Rather than insisting that sabotage needs to be proven in order to have significance, we should take sabotage seriously as an idea that retrospectively organized a range of rebellious worker activity. Not because ideas necessarily have a material and historical force of their own but because they are—and this applies particularly to sabotage—both generated by practice and real in their effects. Revolutionary slogans are “a kind of lifeline between writing and politics” that have the ability to move mere language into the realm of the real.²¹ Given the revolutionary intentions of the I.W.W., sabotage—even if it was just a theory—was not ancillary to their project but absolutely central to their efforts to mobilize workers towards the horizon of the general strike. Reflecting on the

²⁰ Emile Pouget, *Sabotage*, trans. Arturo Giovannitti (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 6.

²¹ Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986), 68.

organization's influence, Foner notes that "although the I.W.W.'s membership was small, 'as a spirit and vocabulary [it] permeates to a large extent enormous masses of workers,'" and the same logic might be applied to the word sabotage.²² If we think of the I.W.W.'s history as a "telling and making at once," we can see that it was using sabotage to rewrite the moral, political, and economic history of the United States and that this revision was central to its revolutionary project.²³

Sabotage was compelling to marginalized, precarious workers for a number of reasons. Its etymology suggests that Pouget's choice to use the word sabotage, rather than its Scottish equivalent *Ca'Canny* (an older term of which he was aware), was a conscious act of re-appropriation.²⁴ The popular, but false, etymology of sabotage is evocative. Workers, the story goes, would throw their 'sabots' or wooden shoes into a machine causing it to come to a halt. The word "sabotage" is indeed derived from wooden shoes, but the relationship between sabots and rebellion is not nearly so theatrical. Prior to its use by syndicalists, the word simply referred to the fabrication of wooden shoes. In the late nineteenth century "sabots" was turned into an epithet for the unskilled workers who wore them and took on the connotation of poorly executed work.²⁵ The precise way that it tied revolutionary theory to everyday practices and linked these

²² Foner, 147.

²³ Kaplan, 68.

²⁴ While posterity would preserve the French word for the practice of revolutionary direct action, the Scottish, "Ca Canny" or "Go Canny" predated the anarcho-syndicalist use of sabotage and was familiar to French workers. In addition to its importation by the repatriated Pouget, at least one pamphlet celebrating the "Go Canny" was translated into French. In 1896, a long article on sabotage appeared in Pouget's journal *La Voix du Peuple* and in 1897, the CGT voted on whether to officially sanction sabotage along with the boycott as a means of advancing their cause. Sebastian Albertelli, *Histoire du Sabotage: De la CGT a la Resistance* (Paris: Perrin, 2016), 18-19.

²⁵ In France, as in the United States, the left was divided between the political action of traditional socialism and the economic, or direct action, of the anarchist tradition. While they shared the goal of a socialist future, the Section Francais de L'international Ouvriere (SFIO) sought to achieve that goal through political action within established political channels, by running candidates, recruiting voting party members and changing laws. The CGT was a syndicalist organization that had absorbed many anarchists as well as their beliefs and this included a general

practices to a population ignored by established craft unions, would have made it appealing to an organization that saw the intellectual development and political education of its marginalized membership as crucial to its on-the-ground organizing efforts. And, unlike other theories aimed at nurturing the class consciousness of workers, sabotage was also, very simply, a practice that was already in effect. It offered the I.W.W. a way of teaching political economy and revolutionary theory that didn't violate the intellectual autonomy of its workers because it described, rather than prescribed, their actions. Quite to the contrary, sabotage depended on this very autonomy—on the workers' ability to discern the proper forms of interference in their particular work environment. It assumed the expertise of a class that was generally described as 'unskilled'. It legitimated the tactics as well as the knowledge of *les sabots*. It also provided a way for a worker's daily resistance to rise to the level of theory—for individual actions to become, through their very enactment, part of a revolutionary program—without any program of action being imposed from above. The “particulars” of sabotage, Pouget wrote, “must issue from the temperament and initiative of each one of you and are subordinate to the various industries.”²⁶

The Critique of Property

Of the many things that sabotage could mean in practice, costly property damage and machine wrecking was certainly among them. Mike Davis has argued that the reason for “continued agitation around the idea of the workers' right to employ retaliatory property destruction as a tactic, whether actually used or not, was to demystify the sanctity of property

distrust of the state as a viable means for achieving socialist goals. They were, therefore, uninterested in activities such as voting and were dedicated to traditions of self-organization and direct action. Albertelli, 14.

²⁶ Pouget, 26.

and teach workers the methods of protracted struggle.”²⁷ Sabotage, even when only threatened “taught an invaluable lesson in political economy.”²⁸ What I.W.W. pamphleteers and orators did by advocating sabotage was to translate the socialist claim that workers *should* own the means of production into the simple claim that they *did* own them and could therefore act on this presumption with justification. Property destruction was more than justifiable retaliation—in this scheme it was the assertion of pre-existing, if not legally recognized, property rights. It might have been “legal for the bourgeoisie to keep [the instruments of production] in accordance to its own laws” but they had in fact been pilfered from the working class. “If it is just and right to force the capitalist to grant us certain concessions by withdrawing our labor and remaining inactive, why is it not equally just to render equally inactive our own machines, made by our own selves?”²⁹

Sabotage was, as Davis points out, a critique of property relations, but it was also a set of recommendations. It was a form of strong-arming that could be implemented when strikes failed and workers returned to work. It offered a type of rebellion that was sometimes more desirable than a walkout if replacement workers were readily available because it could be implemented by individuals and small groups in the absence of widespread organization. Its most visible iterations are not, therefore, an accurate means of assessing its occurrence. Sabotage was certainly not *the* way to win the class war, but it was more than a pedagogical tool. The *Industrial Worker* repeatedly encouraged it and occasionally gave specific instructions. One small item suggests that emery or any other gritty substance such as sand or glass will cause

²⁷ Davis, 83.

²⁸ Davis, 84.

²⁹ Pouget, 13.

bearings to heat, and soap or washing powder will disable a boiler. It warns that putting lye in a boiler will only “benefit the boss by removing the scale.”³⁰ Presumably this is meant to correct a piece of circulating misinformation and it does not seem unreasonable to infer that disabling boilers was a common enough practice that at least one worker had screwed it up. The *Industrial Worker* also gleefully reported that the Socialist Party’s recent membership clause banning sabotage was violated when arc light wires of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company were cut during an electrical workers strike in San Francisco.³¹ The paper reported incidents of stalled trains with boilers full of oil, encouraged lumber workers to spike timber, and insisted that the threat spiking posed to the sawyers was invented by someone who had never seen a sawmill.

Sabotage was, in the final analysis, justified as a legitimate response to an inherently illegitimate system of property claims. “Imagine,” wrote Louis Moreau in 1911, “the accidental breaking of machinery or costly tools. Bum work...Deliberate blunders, delays, blockading of the means of transportation: in fact thousands of devices can be used to create havoc...If we cannot get all we produce, why let others have it?”³²

Defining Sabotage, Using Sabotage

Sabotage made its way into the American vocabulary by 1907 at the latest—two years after the founding convention of the I.W.W. was held in Chicago.³³ The term appeared in both *Solidarity* and the *Industrial Worker* for the first time in 1910. In 1913, it was the subject of a 13-part article. A whole set of direct action tactics were brought together under the rubric

³⁰ *Industrial Worker*, July 3, 1913.

³¹ *Industrial Worker*, June 12, 1913.

³² “The Weapon Which Wins,” *Industrial Worker*, February, 23 1911.

³³ “Urge Workmen to Sabotage,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 28, 1907.

“sabotage” and given an intellectual coherence and revolutionary meaning they had heretofore lacked. It also transformed the lack of a union contract into an asset. Unlike trade-unionists, I.W.W. members were not hamstrung by agreements that obligated workers to, in effect, protect employer property.

At the level of individual actions, sabotage was an impossibly capacious category. Quoting a pamphlet on its English predecessor, the “Go Canny,” Pouget wrote that it consisted in “systematically applying the formula: ‘Bad wages, bad labour.’” The following example from an 1889 railwaymen’s strike—which Pouget claimed was the first manifestation of sabotage *as* sabotage in France—was an open threat by the union to “put the locomotives in such a condition as to make it impossible to run them.”³⁴ Sabotage was, in one example, precisely what it is typically understood to be: “a little sand or emery in the gear of those machines which like fabulous monsters mark the exploitation of the workers,” to render them “palsied and useless.”³⁵ In another example, sabotage was merely pickets to prevent the circulation of trains. Or, the changing of patterns before a strike in a fur factory. Printers could send uncorrected proofs to print and mix up cases of type. Wasting materials was another means of sabotage, reportedly practiced by Parisian bill posters who added tallow candles to their paste and used twice as much as was necessary. Painters could dilute and condense colors and anyone in a service industry or professional position could practice open mouth sabotage by announcing to consumers the “frauds and trickeries” of their employers.

Smith referred to what amounted to a slowdown pegged to wages. Because of a widespread practice of sabotage in England, “the brick masons there,” he recounted, “lay, as a

³⁴ Pouget, 20.

³⁵ Pouget, 44.

days work, less than one third the number of brick required from their brother craftsmen in America. Any reduction in pay is met with a counter reduction in the work.”³⁶ Workers could clock in and out for fellow workers; or, the time clock itself might “have the unaccountable habit of getting out of order.”³⁷ Sabotage could thus be a secret show of solidarity amongst workers. It could also be symbolic and even whimsical. Smith gives us an account of a farmer who, having replaced a striking crew, visits his farm to find that the union men he had unknowingly hired had planted “1000 young trees...upside down, their roots waving to the breeze as mute evidence of solidarity and sabotage.” Or, a “gang of section men working on a railroad” might respond to a cut in their wages by having “two inches cut from the scoops” of their shovels and return to work with the proclamation “short pay, short shovels.”³⁸ It was reported that during a strike in California's Imperial Valley, “every car on the local sidetrack Tuesday night, had its air hose cut. I.W.W. labels were also pasted on every glass of the many paned windows of the passenger depot.”³⁹

Apocryphal or not, the examples were both vindicating and plausible. Whether carried out by a group or an individual “by reason of his strong class desires,” sabotage was an expression of working class solidarity and “working class solidarity is simply the result of a consciousness of power.”⁴⁰ In self-reinforcing fashion, practicing sabotage allowed workers to experience this power. So while “sabotage may mean the direct destruction of property” or “indirect destruction through organized inefficiency” or, conversely “may proceed from a greater

³⁶ Smith, 6.

³⁷ Smith, 10.

³⁸ Smith, 11.

³⁹ Thom M. Dodson, “Sabotage is Working,” *Industrial Worker*, November 16, 1911.

⁴⁰ Smith, 13.

degree of efficiency than is desired by the employing class” the thing that made it sabotage and not vandalism was its “power to solidify labor.” The practice itself gave way to “a consciousness of economic might [that] springs from the knowledge...that employers have no force save that given by the labor of the slave class.”⁴¹

Jack Miller, an itinerant agricultural laborer, explained how sabotage could be used by workers to control the length of their workday. For Miller, the distinction between the “conscious withdrawal of efficiency” and the destruction of property was immaterial. Interrupting the rhythm of machinery by disabling it *was* the withdrawal of efficiency.

Sabotage meant the conscious withdrawal of worker efficiency. You might be working on a threshing machine. If you threw the bundles fast and in a certain way, there would be a lot of waste. Teeth in the machine might get broken off and the stacker could get clogged. The farmer saw that he would get less wheat in twelve hours than he could get in eight if we were working with more efficiency.⁴²

Flynn similarly argued that sabotage was “the withdrawal of worker efficiency” in any form: “Sabotage means either to slacken up and interfere with the quantity, or to botch in your skill and interfere with the quality...or to give poor service.”⁴³ But in the end, sabotage could not be precisely delineated. There could be no program of sabotage, properly speaking, because it was always contingent on particular working conditions. “I have not given you a rigidly defined thesis on sabotage,” Flynn wrote:

...because sabotage is in the process of making. Sabotage itself is not clearly defined. Sabotage is as broad and changing as industry, as flexible as the imagination and passions of humanity. Every day workingmen and women are

⁴¹ Smith, 14.

⁴² Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas and Deborah Shaffer, *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the I.W.W.* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985), 39.

⁴³ Flynn, 5.

discovering new forms of sabotage, and the stronger their rebellious imagination is the more sabotage they are going to develop.⁴⁴

To lay out a program of sabotage would be as pointless as laying out a program for production in all industries or defining invention once and for all.

What differentiated these activities from commonplace mischief and vandalism was their class feeling. Although from the perspective of legal authority, this sensibility did not need to be particularly evolved. Long before Pouget “baptized” sabotage, the French penal code recognized the threat and distinguished between vandalism generally and the destruction of an employer’s property by an employee, assigning to the latter a much more severe sentence.⁴⁵ But according to Pouget, sabotage was something of a different order entirely. It is slightly, but crucially different from intentional destruction and inefficiency for the sake of leverage in a localized dispute. In 1881, telegraph operators in France had cut off all telegraphic connections, but this was the result of a “sullen anger” that had begun to “circulate among them” and caused them to resort to a “trick.” Only after the CGT’s “theoretical consecration” in 1895, did sabotage “take its place amongst the other means of social warfare.” Only when it was conceptually shifted into the register of a class conscious action did it become, in the words of Giovannitti, “a monstrous thing.” Or as Flynn put it, “Everything is ‘against the law’ once it becomes large enough for the law to take cognizance that it is in the best interests of the working class.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Flynn, 29.

⁴⁵ The French Penal Code of 1863 clearly distinguishes between vandalism and vandalism by employees against employer property: “Whoever by means of corrosive liquid, or by any other means, shall willfully deteriorate merchandise, materials or instruments used in making goods, shall be punished by imprisonment from one month to two years and a fine not exceeding a quarter of the damage done nor less than sixteen francs. *If the offense had been committed by a workman of the shop or a clerk of a business house, the imprisonment shall be five years in addition to the fine.*” [Emphasis mine.] *The Detroit Free Press, Supra*, note 4.

⁴⁶ Flynn, 28.

Worker Sabotage and Capitalist Sabotage: A Critique of Violence

What distinguished sabotage from vandalism and even instrumentalized destruction and interference more generally, was its announcement or “baptism” as a source of working-class power. Sabotage, in its various practical forms, was elaborated into a theory through one central and predictable distinction—the working class and the capitalist class. Because of its precise location in workers’ interactions with the instruments of production, sabotage distilled these otherwise abstract categories into material terms. Articles, pamphlets, songs, and poems about sabotage not only threatened mischief, they effectively reduced class difference, class interest, and class conflict to an easily imaginable set of activities: ‘worker sabotage’ and ‘capitalist sabotage.’ This binary conceptualization allowed for the succinct elaboration of the central tenets of a Marxist theory of class while simultaneously identifying concrete examples of employer exploitation and suggesting immediate ways to assert working class power.

The categories of worker sabotage and capitalist sabotage also offered a sophisticated analysis of how violence was defined and deployed under capitalism. Worker sabotage was a very particular form of violence that restricted itself to ‘inert’ property and defined itself against—indeed offered itself as an antidote to—the often unacknowledged, inherent violence of capitalism. In suggesting these terms, Pouget outlined what we would now refer to as structural violence:

The detractors and slanderers of the working class were never scandalised and never show any anger against another sort of sabotage truly criminal, monstrous and abominable, which is the very life essence of modern society: the sabotage of

the capitalists which reaps human victims and deprives men of their health by sticking like a leech at the very sources of life.⁴⁷

Worker sabotage only appeared violent against the backdrop of an economic system dependent on wars, cheap goods, and disposable labor. By opposing the categories of worker and capitalist sabotage, the I.W.W. offered an analysis of objective violence and in the same breath—the same word—a strategy for interrupting the smooth functioning of this catastrophic apparatus. It also applied the logic offered by this schema repeatedly in articles with headlines such as “Violence is Legal for Bosses; Illegal for Workers” and articles justifying theft through similar inversions of common sense understandings of ownership.⁴⁸ The category of capitalist sabotage identified how intentional, specific, and subjective the systemic violence of capitalism actually was.⁴⁹ And it did this by enumerating the bodily injuries and deaths of workers and showing that these were, in fact, performed by a clearly identifiable agent. It named systemic or objective violence and in so doing assigned to it a subjective character—that of the ‘the boss’. Individual acts of violence are appealing in their way because their causes are identifiable, finite, and therefore subject to correction. By defining capitalist sabotage, the I.W.W. not only made the tacit, ‘everyday resistance’ of workers visible, it made the tacit, ‘everyday’ forms of capitalist control visible as well. This went beyond the symbolic challenge that James C. Scott ascribes to visible, political resistance. In offering a framework for such a reversal, sabotage presented

⁴⁷ Pouget, 49.

⁴⁸ *Industrial Worker*, October 28, 1916.

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek argues that “at the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict...violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent [but] subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence.” The first form of ‘objective violence’ Žižek identifies as symbolic and linguistic: “our ‘house of being.’” The second is the far less esoteric category of systemic violence: “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1-2.

something that was indeed “monstrous” to its targets: a clear announcement of the violence inherent to the smooth functioning of capitalist production and a declaration of workers’ ability to disrupt it without detection. Sabotage was thus a symbolic threat of continued tacit rebellion.⁵⁰

Worker sabotage, as one anonymous pamphlet defined it, was “anything that the worker, acting for his class interests, can do at the point of production or distribution to hamper the processes by which profit is made and capital perpetuated and increased.”⁵¹ These actions, however, were not without limits. Worker sabotage was emphatically non-violent if, that is, violence could be limited to harming persons. “It never results in the loss of life or limb.”⁵² The non-violent character of worker sabotage was constantly reiterated.⁵³ “The workers strongly

⁵⁰ This lack of visibility is characteristic of the “everyday forms of resistance” that, according to James C. Scott, constituted a vast portion of the political activity of subordinated groups. Scott argues that it is precisely the illegibility of these practices that allow them to thrive. Everyday forms of resistance are intended not to be noticed. Those who employ them “avoid calling attention to themselves” and while they often have the same goals as open, political confrontation, “the former aims at tacit, *de facto* gains while the latter aims at formal, *de jure* recognition of those gains.” Often, Scott suggests, the choice of tacit rather than public, formal resistance is tactical. Tacit resistance is often beneficial to participants and problematic for authorities. “There is no organization to be banned, no conspiratorial leaders to round up or buy off, no rioters to haul before the courts -- only generalized non-compliance.”⁵⁰ Everyday resistance, in Scott’s account, can have significant material and economic effects that usually go unrecorded if not unnoticed. Furthermore, even if it is enacted by individuals it usually involves a significant level of coordination and cannot be dismissed as anti-collective in nature. What it does *not* do is threaten political authority: “everyday resistance leaves dominant symbolic structures intact.” A tacit agreement among workers to complete tasks more slowly would threaten their bosses profits, but “by not openly contesting the dominant norms of law, custom, politeness, deference, loyalty and so on leaves the dominant in command of the public stage.” James C. Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* (1989), 4.

⁵¹ *Jersey Justice at Work: First Decision on the Advocacy of Sabotage in the United States* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913), 3.

⁵² *Jersey Justice*, 3.

⁵³ Dominique Pinsolle has suggested that what differentiates American uses of the theory of ‘sabotage’ from its French counterpart, is the emphasis placed by Bill Haywood in particular on the non-violent nature of sabotage. Part of the reason for this, he argues, is that “Haywood retained only the strictly labor aspect of sabotage at the same time that the French increasingly integrated this tactic into large-scale anti-militarist projects.” The other reason was that the recent *Los Angeles Times* bombing and the confession of the union members John J. and James B. McNamara made Haywood and other American radicals anxious to distance themselves and labor from violent activity. This is misleading for several reasons. First, Haywood openly supported the McNamaras—not by claiming that they were innocent—but by announcing in a speech given at New York City’s Cooper Union in 1911 that the twenty-one people they killed by the McNamaras were nothing in comparison to the hundreds of workers murdered by capital. Second, it ignores the fact that American sabotage literature imported the philosophy of violence and non-violence

insist,” wrote Pouget “on the specific character of sabotage which consists in hurting the boss not the consumer.” In many cases, sabotage was arguably in the service of the consumer, who was not so much exploited as extorted by the capitalist class. “Open mouth” sabotage was particularly effective in this regard; druggists and workers in the food industry should be sabotaging their bosses by announcing the myriad ways that food and pharmaceuticals are adulterated. Indeed, Pouget suggests that *not* engaging in this form of sabotage is a sort of criminal negligence:

It is indeed deplorable to notice how often the workers lend themselves to the most abominable tricks against their brothers and to the detriment of public health in general, without their realizing the great responsibility that befalls them for actions which, though not within the criminal law, nevertheless do not cease to be crimes.⁵⁴

That which does not fall “within the criminal law” yet does not cease to be a crime is an apt description of what French and American syndicalists dubbed “capitalist sabotage.” Like its working class counterpart, it encompassed a broad range of activities as well as failures or refusals to act at all. The term “capitalist sabotage” was assigned to a range of common practices by business owners so widespread and unexceptional that they collectively appeared normal, even natural.

laid out by Pouget along the lines of worker and capitalist sabotage. Pouget also claimed that worker sabotage was ‘non-violent’ in the strictest sense. Third, the U.S. entered World War One much later than France and when it did, sabotage and other forms of direct action were explicitly framed as ways to disrupt military action. Dominique Pinsolle, “Sabotage, the I.W.W., and Repression: How the American Reinterpretation of a French Concept Gave Rise to a New International Conception of Sabotage,” in Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront : Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia*. Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2007), 44-58.

⁵⁴ Pouget, 38.

The phrase “capitalist sabotage” was, in these formulations, almost redundant. Capitalists, so the arguments went, can’t actually run businesses without sabotage.⁵⁵ The crucial difference between the two forms of sabotage was not tactical or formal. Capitalist sabotage was, like its workerist variant, dependent on restriction, reduction, and interference. Nor was the difference strictly economic even though capitalists were in a position to capture surplus value whereas workers could only reduce it. The primary distinction between the two was that of violence: capitalist sabotage caused harm to people—both workers and consumers—rather than property. Thus renaming industrial accidents as “capitalist sabotage” pointed to and subjectivized the systemic violence of capitalism—violence that was ignored in part through an obsessive attention to the apparently subjective violence of the workers. The repeated condemnation of the workers’ sabotage “against inert, painless and lifeless things” functioned as a means of maintaining a definition of violence that was not only class-based, but solidly in the register of the “subjective.” That is, identifiable instances of violence that, because of the agents’ relative social position as workers, ruptured the social fabric and threatened the integrity of the legal foundation upon which this other structural violence was constructed—structural violence, in the face of which “the detractors and slanderers of the working class were never scandalized.”⁵⁶ Renaming the systemic violence of capitalism as “capitalist sabotage” allowed for an enumeration of activities that shifted the normal function of business from the objective,

⁵⁵ Thorstein Veblen borrowed the I.W.W. framework of capitalist and worker sabotage for his 1921 work *Engineers and the Price System*, where he elaborated on the necessity of sabotage to normal economic activity under financialized capitalism.

⁵⁶ Pouget, 49.

background conditions of social organization—that which “constitutes the element in which this society breathes”—into a subjective register.⁵⁷

Capitalist sabotage included much more than the aforementioned adulteration of pharmaceuticals. Pouget provided a long list of the “saboteurs” toward which the bourgeoisie remained largely “impassive” and “indifferent.” It included bakers who adulterate flour, iron and steel barons who built faulty and weak boilers for war ships, building and railway contractors who endangered passengers and residents with subpar construction materials. All captains of industry were saboteurs “because all trick, fake, adulterate, defraud, and swindle.”⁵⁸ From the injuries “inflicted by capitalist sabotage,” he dramatically concluded “it is human blood which gushes out in streams.”⁵⁹

Smith provided a litany of capitalist sabotage as well and even extended his analysis into the realm of speech.⁶⁰ Emphasizing the importance of propagandizing to both camps he wrote that “several of the so-called ‘muck-raking’ magazines have been forced to suspend through use of sabotage.”⁶¹ Sabotage, here, became a political activity but the loosening of its definition did not lessen its potency. The categorical linking of censorship to shirking and state power to misplaced or misused tools, legitimated and magnified the power of workers to disrupt an amorphous system with individual and very concrete actions. An open and political program of

⁵⁷ Pouget, 50.

⁵⁸ Pouget, 50.

⁵⁹ Pouget, 50.

⁶⁰ “Competitors of the Standard Oil Company often found that legal documents had been improperly executed for them. Rivals of the Sugar Trust had foreign materials introduced into their shipments, and in the fight of Havemeyer against Spreckels the latter’s machinery had an unaccountable habit of getting out of order. A Denver brewing company almost ruined a competitor by hiring men to spread the story that a decomposed body had been found at the bottom of its rival’s brew-vat.” Smith, 13.

⁶¹ Smith, 13.

sabotage thus had the power to legitimate the activities of the economically disenfranchised—to validate and thus encourage both their resentment and whatever actions were taken in relation to it—and to potentially multiply the acts of tacit everyday resistance that were both costly and difficult to detect. It not only raised practice to the level of theory, it anchored revolutionary theory in existing practices, amplifying an ideological disruption at the point of production. This was a terrifying proposition indeed, and one that was encouraged by endless references to the human cost of capitalist sabotage.

William “Big Bill” Haywood provided one of the most notorious examples during a 1911 speech given at New York City’s Cooper Union during which he unequivocally declared his solidarity with John J. and James B. McNamara who had recently confessed to dynamiting the *Los Angeles Times* building which led to the accidental deaths of twenty-one employees.

The McNamara boys who went to San Quentin out of Los Angeles know what the class struggle means. They knew and for that reason my heart is with them. Let the Capitalists count their own dead. There are 21 dead in Los Angeles and we have 207 dead in Briceville, Tenn. The deaths in Briceville were just as much murder as any premeditated crime could have been. The mine owners knew an unventilated mine meant a mine ready to explode.⁶²

Haywood made further remarks concerning class war and the general strike and repeatedly announced that there was no reason for workers to be “law-abiding.”

Haywood’s militaristic framing of the conflict through the comparison of human casualties on both sides, reflected the fatal reality of many industries, but sabotage was often far more mundane. Worker sabotage and capitalist sabotage often intersected, as in cases of open mouth sabotage where the worker’s interference was composed of announcing employer sabotage. The sabotage encouraged by Boyd during the Paterson silk strike—to adulterate the

⁶² “Haywood Declares an Industrial War,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 1911.

silk dyes using certain chemicals—provided a remarkable example of such a confluence. While discussing Boyd’s advice with the strikers, the I.W.W. discovered that this was, in many cases, precisely what the company was doing. Flynn recounts that an investigation by the I.W.W. into employer practices in the silk mills, revealed that “the sabotage of silk fabrics was being done as a usual practice by the employers.”⁶³

It would be a mistake to reduce sabotage to its most extreme expressions. It was not synonymous with the anarchist notion of “propaganda of the deed.” It did not always seek to call attention to itself. Likewise, gruesome industrial accidents, while tragically common, were hardly the sum total of exploitation and poverty. The literal explosions of violence on both sides of the class war were continuous with more subtle variations of conflict, control, and disruption, but the extremity of an event like the *LA Times* bombing can be misleading. When Giovannitti wrote that sabotage becomes a monstrous thing when it is named, he was not thinking of something so apparently monstrous as the death of twenty-one persons by dynamite but of something like Boyd’s advocacy of adulterated dyes.

Certain forms of sabotage were less offensive than others. Giovannitti argued that slowdowns needed little justification whereas sabotage that would destroy a piece of machinery or make a product unsalable was “a real and deliberate trespassing into the bourgeois sanctum—a direct interference with the bosses own property.” This form of sabotage “must create its own ethics.”⁶⁴

The working out of a new ethics, or the elaboration of a working class morality was a crucial aspect of the shift from mere vandalism to conscious sabotage. Violence is defined within

⁶³ Flynn, 163.

⁶⁴ Giovannitti, 12.

constantly shifting frameworks. It is generally within a legal framework that we distinguish between violence and non-violence and that legal framework does not permit inquiry into its own justification. A legal regime that seeks to monopolize violence must call every threat or challenge to that regime a violent one.⁶⁵ The constant reiteration of the non-violence of sabotage, the distinction between harm to people and harm to property, reflected an understanding of the ability of sanctioned violence to appear as civil order or to disappear into ‘accidents’. Insisting that property destruction by workers was morally justified was not a tidy, contained, and finite proposition. It challenged the basis of the morality on which acceptable forms of violence rested by identifying this morality as a collateral product of property relations. The bedrock of bourgeois morality, it turned out, was nothing more than private property and by attacking property—literally and figuratively—sabotage threatened more than the profits tied to that particular piece of property. It threatened the very concept of property and thus the entire moral framework upon which the designations ‘violent’ and ‘non-violent’ rested. Sabotage was an expansive moral argument against the sanctity of property. “Even so-called sexual immorality,” wrote Smith, “is condemned while universally practiced, because it violates the principle of inheritance in property.”⁶⁶

It was not by any means unknown that capital was organized in its own interests. Walter Lippmann, a journalist, author, and ambivalent socialist, recognized that employers were “organized for obstruction” against unions and that labor was fighting a legitimate battle that required a certain amount of illegality and violence. “Perhaps it is true,” he wrote, “that there is

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, “Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 52.

⁶⁶ Smith, Section V.

no such thing as peaceful picketing. There is no such thing as a peaceful coast defense or a gentlemanly border patrol.”⁶⁷ But the I.W.W. was not content with merely asserting that a certain type of violence was justified in a certain situation. They insisted that property destruction was of an entirely different order—that violence should be strictly defined as bodily harm. The oft-repeated call to “hit the boss where it really hurts...in his pocket book,” conveyed a meaningful displacement of workers’ anger from the body of their employer to his wealth. “Sabotage” wrote Giovannitti, “has nothing to do with violence.” It is a way of “chloroforming...the ogres of steel and fire that watch and multiply the treasures of king capital.”⁶⁸ In other words, sabotage wouldn’t ‘hurt’ at all. It couldn’t. It was hoped that great structural disruptions would follow these attacks on inanimate objects, but it was not a call to revolutionary violence as such. Like the general strike in which it would play a central role, it was supposed to bring about a sort of bloodless coup.

The emphasis on this distinction between property and people was not incidental or insignificant. Consider some of the other strains of revolutionary thought that would have been circulating at the time. Johann Most’s “propaganda of the deed” was a close anarchist cousin. In Italy, Marinetti had issued the Futurist Manifesto—a romantic celebration of violence, war and the destructive potential of technology. Alexander Berkman’s attempt to assassinate Henry Clay Frick was not so far in the past as to be forgotten. The successful 1901 assassination of William McKinley by the self-declared follower of Emma Goldman, Leon Czolgosz also colored the moment of the I.W.W.’s founding. But the distinction between people and property was more

⁶⁷ Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 84. Lippmann was one of several prominent socialists who protested the removal of William D. Haywood from the Executive Council of the Socialist Party in early 1913.

⁶⁸ Giovannitti, 6.

than a cynical attempt to avoid public disapprobation or distance the organization from its close anarchist cousin.

That one could wage a class war without harming anyone was idealistic to say the least.⁶⁹ But the justification of sabotage compelled I.W.W. worker-intellectuals to elaborate an alternative moral system anchored in this basic division between human beings and inanimate property that had yet to be clearly articulated by even the most humanist iterations of socialism. The revolutionary proletariat had a “special mentality and hence a special morality of its own,” one that is principally organized around the benefit of the working class and into which sabotage could be seamlessly integrated. Sabotage was a moral affront, not because it was violent, but simply because it announced itself. It claimed that every bit of theft and destruction by workers that interrupted, slowed down, or prevented the accumulation of wealth by their employers, was a moral good. Not tactically expedient in certain situations—just *good*. As Giovannitti put it in appropriately religious terms: “A sin is absolvable only when it is confessed as such, but becomes a damnable one when an explanation is found for it.”⁷⁰

As a general practice that remained hidden and thus compliant with reigning definitions of legality and morality, sabotage was just such an absolvable transgression. It fit neatly into a legal framework of crime and punishment. Once it had been announced, justified, and “advocated as a *good* thing,” it exited the realm of confession and absolution. It was, to extend the metaphor, transubstantiated, emerging as a “dynamic and disintegrating force,” because it “[wrested] from the political state one of its cardinal faculties.” Workers, in other words, had

⁶⁹ Foner, *History of Labor*, vol. 4, 354. There is a reasonable amount of evidence that the presence of I.W.W. leadership during strikes did minimize violence. A clergyman present during the Paterson strike, for example, claimed that not a single scab was attacked by striking workers.

⁷⁰ Giovannitti, 8.

claimed for themselves what Max Weber identified as the constitutive function of the state—the legitimate use of force. The rejection of the state’s legitimacy, implicit in the appropriation of the use of force, made the existence of the I.W.W. incompatible with government. But its insistence on direct action and sabotage in the economic field as the primary mode of social transformation also placed it in direct conflict with other opponents of capitalist state power. In 1912, the Socialist Party effectively excommunicated the I.W.W. As an organization that both saw the state apparatus as the means of restoring power to the working class and had a considerable ideological and practical investment in demonstrating its own legitimacy as a political party, it could not tolerate the I.W.W.’s advocacy of sabotage.

Socialism versus Syndicalism

Sabotage was officially banned by the Socialist Party in 1912 by way of a simple but profound linguistic substitution. The denunciation of sabotage took the form of an amendment to the membership clause in the Party’s constitution. Up to that point, any advocacy of violence “against the person” resulted in automatic expulsion. The revised version replaced this injunction against harm to persons with “sabotage.”

From a purely instrumental perspective, sabotage threatened the Socialist Party’s electoral legitimacy. The desire to expand socialism’s reach by appealing to middle class progressives made disassociating with the I.W.W., and their advocacy of a practice that attacked the principle of private property, seem particularly urgent. During the election years of 1910 and 1911, Socialist Party candidates had performed surprisingly well. The Party had elected “56 mayors, 305 aldermen and councilmen, 22 police officials, 155 members of school boards, and 4 pound keepers.” And they were gaining ground at the national level as well. Socialist Victor

Berger had already taken his seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁷¹ By the end of 1911, 1,141 socialists held public offices in 36 states across 324 municipalities. Party membership had doubled between 1909 and 1911 and by 1912 it had reached a record 118,000 members. Eugene Debs was running for president for the fourth time and would poll over 900,000 votes—a striking 6% of the votes cast nationally.⁷² Given these electoral and membership gains, the party was understandably anxious not to alienate the voting public. This aggravated old antipathies between the Party’s far left, syndicalist members, epitomized by Haywood (who held a seat on the executive council), and its more conservative, reformist wing most visibly represented by Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit of New York as well as Job Harriman, whose promising mayoral campaign in Los Angeles had been recently derailed by the McNamara confession. In its broadest definition—encompassing slowdowns as well as property destruction—sabotage occupied ambiguous legal territory. As a philosophy, it suggested that a certain amount of disorder was a necessary component of change. More importantly though, it’s “advocacy and use [helped to] destroy the ‘property illusion.’”⁷³ Sabotage was thus fundamentally incompatible with the ethos of a sympathetic, but comfortable and property-owning middle class whose experience of legal order was largely positive.

Sabotage was, among other things, a repository for more general class anxieties. Debates over sabotage within the Party expressed what were essentially class positions as tactical positions. Hillquit’s evaluation of the membership base of the I.W.W., made clear in *Socialism Summed Up* (published one year later), is telling. “The Socialist Party,” he wrote, “recruits its

⁷¹ Joseph R. Conlin, “The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party,” *Science & Society* 31, no. 1 (1967): 22.

⁷² Sari Bennett, “The Geography of American Socialism: Continuity and Change, 1900-1912”, *Social Science History* 7, no. 3 (1983), 268.

⁷³ Smith, Conclusion.

adherents mostly from among the better situated, better trained and more intelligent workers. The unfortunate ‘slum proletarians,’ whose energies, hopes and ambitions have been crushed out by misery and destitution, can only rarely be relied on to rally to the virile battle cry of Socialism.”⁷⁴ This then was not simply an argument about effective tactics, but a conflict between a better type of socialist and ‘slum proletarians’. On the one side were elections and political power; on the other, direct action and union power, each corresponding to a distinct class composition. Haywood, despite his membership and position on the executive council, firmly believed in the priority of union organization over political activity. The official organs of the I.W.W. regularly derided political participation and had little interest in encouraging workers to vote, viewing all state functions as a mere extension of capitalist interests and the law as a means of enforcing class divisions.

Haywood was in the habit of making provocative speeches declaring workers exempt from laws designed to exploit them. Even though his work with the Socialist Party indicated an implicit belief in the possibility of a state and legal system that would benefit workers, Haywood’s faith in industrial unionism remained thoroughly bound up in a principled disregard for the law and its enforcement. Working in the political field did not detract from his conviction that direct action by workers was the most effective means of obtaining widespread social transformation. The potential political fallout from these actions, including sabotage, remained, in his view, irrelevant. In 1911, these beliefs were made abundantly clear: “I am not a law-abiding citizen,” he announced to the crowd gathered at New York’s Cooper Union. “More than that,” he went on, “I do not think that you here ought be law-abiding citizens.”⁷⁵ Such a position

⁷⁴ Morris Hillquit, *Socialism Summed Up* (New York: The H.K. Fly Company, 1913), 53.

⁷⁵ “Haywood Declares an Industrial War,” *The New York Times* December 22, 1911.

was obviously untenable for a party invested in winning elections, but this announcement indicated a more fundamental disjuncture. While socialist and syndicalist beliefs concerning rightful ownership and the social organization of production were in concert, they operated in entirely different temporal registers generated by divergent strategies.

The I.W.W. was operating with what might be called a vulgar labor theory of value—insisting that the workers already had a right to the value that they produced. Socialists may have shared this belief but their claim on this property was politely deferred. Direct action, sabotage and strikes, did not occur in the future. These actions—the very locus and content of workers’ power according to the tenets of industrial unionism—did not slowly arise through small changes. They were not enacted within the terms—contractual, moral, legal—set by their antagonists. Sabotage was, in this sense, a sort of pre-figurative expropriation. It anticipated the moment in the future when property would be returned to its rightful owner and acted as if this moment had already arrived.

Socialism, by contrast, existed in the future and was, by its very nature as a political party. It was constituted by the procedures, institutions, and laws that Haywood deemed illegitimate. Presumably, Haywood would have urged workers to obey just, socialist laws but these conditions were yet mere abstractions. The very logic of union power was intractably presentist. Asking workers to express themselves through political participation was, in some sense, demanding that they indefinitely defer control over their working and living conditions. “No Socialist,” Haywood asserted “can be a law-abiding citizen.” Coercion was the only way to bring about socialism and acting within extant laws was not only ineffective, it was counter-revolutionary: “the trade unionist who becomes party to a contract takes his organization out of

the columns of fighting organizations...he removes it from the class struggle.”⁷⁶ The relationship between industrial unionism and political participation was not simply fraught, brought to its logical conclusion it was structurally unsustainable.

Debs’ aversion to property destruction developed directly out of his experience as president of the American Railway Union (A.R.U.). Bound up as it was with his time organizing an industrial union, his views on the role of violence in labor agitation were more ambivalent than those held by party members with primarily political careers. Called to testify to the United States Strike Commission in 1894 following the A.R.U.’s strike against Pullman, Debs was charged with the difficult task of denying accusations that the union encouraged property destruction, while simultaneously defending the workers who had engaged in it. When asked to relate his “own observations as to riot, acts of violence, destruction of property, or anything of that kind,” Debs was initially evasive. In response, he reiterated the conditions that led to the strike, delicately explaining that concessions could only be won by organized coercion without referencing any property destruction: “The railroad companies have never increased wages of their own accord. I would like to have that put upon record as one of the reasons for any unrest and lack of confidence in the ranks of railway employees, for every concession the railway companies have ever made has been wrung from them by the power of organized effort.”⁷⁷ After elaborating some of the specific conditions that led to the strike—the Santa Fe line, for example, had been in arrears to its employees for two to four months—he concluded, “any class of employees, working under such conditions, are almost right to enter a protest on behalf of labor

⁷⁶ William D. Haywood, quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 253.

⁷⁷ United States Strike Commission, ed. Tim Davenport “Testimony to the United States Strike Commission of Eugene Debs, Chicago August 20 & 25, 1894,” *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July 1894* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895), 16.

against the injustice of the corporations.”⁷⁸ Debs was adamant, however, that by protest he meant a peaceful withdrawal of labor power and nothing more. “We want to win as becomes law-abiding citizens; we have got a right to quit in a body, and our right ends there.” To this end, Debs and the union leadership responded to intimations of “trouble,” with a series of statements and documents that “appealed to our members throughout the country under no circumstances to countenance violence, but to keep away from the company’s property altogether.”⁷⁹ His position on sabotage, “that there is nothing to be gained by violence,” remained consistent and in 1912, in response to Haywood’s outrages, Debs reiterated his dedication to lawful tactics in the face of laws that were, as he stated to the strike commission, “enforced without merit against the employees and are ignored with reference to their application to the companies.”⁸⁰ Writing about the Socialist Party’s constitutional revision, he characterized sabotage as a “reactionary” tactic while defending industrial unionism in principle and reiterating his own disdain for capitalist property laws. “As a revolutionist I can have no respect for capitalist property laws, nor the least scruple about violating them. I hold all such laws to have been enacted through chicanery, fraud, and corruption, with the sole end in view of dispossessing, robbing, and enslaving the working class.”⁸¹ But Debs did have respect for these laws in practice. He had made this abundantly clear during his congressional testimony two decades earlier and held fast to his view that property destruction was never tactically desirable. This abstract understanding of injustice did not mean,

⁷⁸ Strike Commission, 19.

⁷⁹ Strike Commission, 21.

⁸⁰ Strike Commission, 64.

⁸¹ Eugene Debs, “Sound Socialist Tactics” *The International Socialist Review* 13, no. 8 (1913): 1.

he wrote, “that I propose making an individual lawbreaker of myself and butting my head against the stone wall of existing property laws.”⁸²

Given his early alliance with the I.W.W. and his dedication to industrial unionism more generally, Debs must have found the prospect of a break between union and party distressing. Furthermore, Debs was far from being on good terms with Berger and his allies. But in 1894, when asked by the strike commission if there was “any specific rule in [the ARU’s] constitution or in the constitution of the different unions providing that a man shall be expelled who participates in any violence,” Debs found that he could only answer that the regulation of member behavior was left to the locals. When asked whether he thought that such a provision should exist he answered “yes.”⁸³

Though their attitude toward the form and application of current laws was quite similar, Haywood and Debs couldn’t have been further apart on the practical question of legality in the labor movement. “[The worker] knows,” wrote Haywood and fellow I.W.W. Frank Bohn, “that the present laws of property are made by and for the capitalists. Therefore, he does not hesitate to break them.”⁸⁴ This inducement to action was not simply tactical. Haywood and many members of the I.W.W. saw sabotage as essentially empowering: “a consciousness of economic might springs from the knowledge thus gained.” It was a way for individual workers to put theory into practice and thus experience power, however fleeting. Debs, by contrast, thought that tactics such as sabotage “do violence to the class psychology of the workers and cannot be successfully

⁸² Debs, 1.

⁸³ Strike Commission, 34.

⁸⁴ William D. Haywood and Frank Bohn, *Industrial Socialism*, quoted in Eugene Debs, “Sound Socialist Tactics” *The International Socialist Review* 13, no. 8 (1913): 1.

inculcated as mass doctrine.”⁸⁵ This reflects a persistent misreading of I.W.W. endorsements of sabotage as individual rather than class activity. Furthermore, it may be noted that the anxiety fueling the sabotage debate resulted precisely from the possibility that such tactics *could* be successfully inculcated as mass doctrine. And the issue of industrial unionism’s relationship to the Socialist Party—as a parallel but autonomous actor in the economic field—was given urgency by the fear that such tactics would be adopted. Or fear that they already had.

Just days before the decision to add language about sabotage to the constitution’s membership clause, the left wing and supporters of Haywood had won a major victory with the adoption of a resolution put forth by the Committee on Labor Organizations and Their Relation to the Party. The resolution “reaffirmed the Socialist Party’s neutrality on ‘questions of form of organization or technical methods of action in the industrial struggle’ ... [and] called on unions to undertake the ‘task of organizing the unorganized, especially the immigrants who stand in greatest need of organized protection.’”⁸⁶ It was all but an endorsement of the I.W.W. and an apparent setback in ongoing reformist efforts to unseat Haywood from the Executive Council. An attempt to repudiate Haywood had been made in March of 1912 “on the grounds that he had made certain statements deprecating political action,” which was certainly true, but the recent success of the I.W.W. led strike against textile manufacturers in Lawrence, Massachusetts made the resolution unpopular.⁸⁷

The singular goal of ridding the party of Haywood’s noisome presence gave the amendment added momentum but banning sabotage also reflected the conservative members’ broader ideological commitments. Among these was a preference for the A.F.L. over the I.W.W.

⁸⁵ Eugene V. Debs, “Sound Socialist Tactics”, *International Socialist Review* 13, no. 8 (1913): 2.

⁸⁶ Foner, 404.

⁸⁷ Conlin, 28.

in spite of Gompers's venomous opposition to socialism.⁸⁸ Rather than supporting alternatives to the A.F.L., such as the I.W.W., many party members encouraged a program of spreading socialist doctrines among members of A.F.L. unions referred to as "boring from within." This preference for the A.F.L. not only reflected the reformist conviction that extant institutions could be politically altered without disrupting their essential forms, it demonstrated an affinity with the U.S. government's burgeoning policy of conciliation towards 'legitimate' and allegedly law-abiding unions.⁸⁹

The amendment that concerned the language of Article II, Section 6 of the party constitution, and changed 'against the person' to 'sabotage', was a clear statement of a deep aversion to the destruction of property regardless of the conditions under which that property was acquired and maintained. The Socialist Party position on sabotage was thus constructed in a manner identical to its articulation in anti-criminal syndicalism laws.⁹⁰ William Preston goes so far as to refer to it as the "ideological forerunner" of these laws.⁹¹ The difference between

⁸⁸ In 1903 Gompers directly addressed socialists at the A.F.L.'s convention in Boston. "Economically," he declared, "you are unsound; socially, you are wrong; industrially, you are an impossibility." Salvatore, 201.

⁸⁹ There is ample evidence that craft unions engaged in a range of illegal activity. The most dramatic example of this, the bombing of the *LA Times* building in 1910 by the International Brotherhood of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, was defended by Haywood on the grounds that all workers were justified in their sabotage of capitalist property. But the IABSIW was not a revolutionary union or in any affiliated with the I.W.W.. It was thus arguably the public support of sabotage more than its use that the Berger, Hillquit et al. found to be unfavorable to the socialist cause. Sidney Fine, *Without Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, The National Erectors' Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-1957* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995)

⁹⁰ Following World War One, 23 states passed Criminal Syndicalism laws. The broadest and most severe of these statutes was passed by the state of Montana in 1918. The language of the Montana act is typical, but particularly significant because it served as a model for the 1918 Sedition Act. A set of amendments to the 1917 espionage act under which hundreds of Wobblies, including labor leader William "Big Bill" Haywood were charged, convicted and either jailed or deported. See Robert C. Sims "Idaho's Criminal Syndicalism Act: One State's Response to Radical Labor" *Labor History*, 15, no. 4 (1974); F.G. Franklin, "Anti-Syndicalist Legislation" *The American Political Science Review* 14, no. 2 (1920).

⁹¹ William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals 1903-1933*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1963), 50.

sabotage according to the I.W.W. and the state or the Socialist Party did not lie in their definition of sabotage as such, but in the moral distinction to be drawn between people and things. The Socialist Party, along with the state, assumed a sort of moral equivalence between the destruction of property and bodily harm. The revised version thus read:

Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation shall be expelled from membership in the party. Political action shall be construed to mean participation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform.⁹²

W.L. Garver, a delegate from Missouri, who introduced the motion to “amend by striking out the word, ‘against the person’ in the second line and inserting the word ‘sabotage’” expressed his concerns as follows:

The qualifying words “against the person” imply that if the crime is against property it might be permitted. Under such a construction we might be considered as advocates of dynamite. Under that construction we might be considered advocates of railroad wrecking. I contend that it is high time for this convention to take a distinct stand and declare that it is opposed to every form of crime and violence (great cheering). Why this committee composed as it is of representative men of the convention should put in a qualifying clause implying that crime must be against the person to be denounced I cannot understand. You all know that Jim McNamara said that he didn’t intend to kill anyone in Los Angeles; that he simply intended to injure the building that was blown up.⁹³

The debates that follow the motion are largely semantic—many delegates suggested that section two be stricken altogether for the sheer confusion regarding the meaning of the word. Others contended that it was perfectly clear what sabotage meant. Only one delegate spoke against the

⁹² John Spargo, ed. *Stenographic Report of the National Convention of the Socialist Party*, Indianapolis: M.A. Donohue & Co., printers (1912), 208.

⁹³ Spargo, 130.

constitutional amendment in terms that addressed the use of so-called legal force by organized capital and indicated the danger of formally disavowing a tactic that was being regularly used to imprison and prosecute workers and organizers. An attempt to amend the amendment by striking the whole paragraph was then introduced. Max Hayes of Cleveland, echoing the resolution on trade unions, argued that the Socialist Party should not be telling labor organizers what to do and should “leave the industrial field to the unions.”⁹⁴

The argument failed. An open discussion of sabotage had made certain realities of labor power and class conflict unavoidable. The industrial field was murky legally speaking. If only because workers were operating in a landscape that was not of their own making, much of their activity was not ‘law-abiding’ The distinction between violence against people and violence against property was central to a morality born of the realities of on the ground conflict. Its rejection for a simpler injunction to accept and obey “the current definition of crime,” revealed an insurmountable difference between those operating in a political register and the workers negotiating conditions at the point of production.⁹⁵ In the words of one Wisconsin delegate, “the crime against property is a thing that this party cannot stand for.”⁹⁶

Conclusion

The avoidance of sabotage as a subject and the near disappearance of the word from labor history (replaced by ‘direct action’) bear out Walker Smith’s pronouncement that it is a term too dangerous to be mentioned. Sympathetic historians have unconsciously repeated and reinforced the systematic state repression of the philosophy of sabotage by attempting to distance the

⁹⁴ Spargo, 133.

⁹⁵ Spargo, 132.

⁹⁶ Spargo, 131.

organization from its advocacy. They have variously proclaimed that it played a minor role, entirely ignored it, attributed its advocacy to a handful of violent anarchists at the fringes of the organization and, most insidiously, declared that it was ‘merely’ speech rather than a practical tool for economic organization and resistance. In a sense, this could be seen as an internalization of the logic of its prosecution and thus maintained what Kristin Ross has dubbed a “police conception of history” —a repetition of the injunction to move along because there is “nothing to see here.”

But there is something to see. By avoiding sabotage, we not only willfully ignore large amounts of writing, we suppress an argument about the relationship between violence and property that remains useful. And, we reinforce the liberal consensus that protest must be non-violent—that property destruction is always illegitimate. Sabotage was not simply another word for direct action but a carefully articulated, radical critique of capitalist social relations that was inseparable from its existence as a tactic. Among other things, sabotage provided, and more importantly enacted, a critique of private property. As a consequence, the circulation of the word “sabotage” orally and in print was an unacceptable challenge to the status quo. A serious look at sabotage, and the vicious legal and extra-legal reactions that it elicited, exposes the relationship between politics, morality, and an economic order founded on private property. It suggests that property destruction constitutes a sort of limit to our collective political imagination—an unspeakable act haunting the margins of political power.

Chapter 2: Job Conscious Sabotage:

The Fiction of ‘Pure and Simple’ Unionism

There is a titanic struggle now being waged...wherein two classes of society meet in industrial warfare, and crash and jostle each other like two great ships in a storm, where the workmen are striving with a courage and manhood born in a liberty-loving people to resist the oppression and tyranny of the employers.

-- *The Bridgemen's Magazine*, February 1906

I tell you that the honest working people in this country are being most brutally tyrannized over by certain elements in the labor union and are driven, in some cases worse than the slaves were before the war. The common man is made to suffer and pay the bills and in many cases the oppression is so fiendish and subtle as to make the citizens cry out for and demand relief.

-- C.W. Post, *The Los Angeles Times*, January 1906

On October 1, 1910, the *Los Angeles Times* building exploded killing twenty-one people.¹ A suitcase full of dynamite left behind the building ignited several barrels of flammable printer's ink starting a fire that led to a secondary explosion of the gas piping. In April of 1911, James B. (J.B.) McNamara was arrested along with his brother, the Secretary Treasurer of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (I.A.B.S.I.W.), John Jay (J.J.) McNamara. Suspecting a frame-up, organized labor rallied to the brothers' defense and by the end of the month, the A.F.L. had concluded that the explosion was caused by a gas leak rather than dynamite. Then, in December, the defendants unexpectedly changed their plea to guilty.²

¹ The *LA Times* was owned by the head of the Los Angeles Merchant and Manufacturers Association (M.M.A.), Harrison Gray Otis. Otis had used his position in Los Angeles and the large circulation of his newspaper to wage an extended battle against the few unions left in the city. In 1910, the M.M.A. was engaged in an ongoing conflict with the metal workers over what was known as the open shop—the name adopted by employers' associations to describe workplaces employing non-union labor--and in June, the ironworkers called a strike.

² James B. McNamara for murder and John Jay for accessory to the dynamiting of the Llewellyn Iron Works.

The bombing of a news outlet was a symbolically hefty gesture much closer to the anarchist “propaganda of the deed” than the many worksite explosions that preceded it. It even recalled the anarchist appeal to target individual capitalists for assassination (unexploded bombs were also found near the homes of Harrison Gray Otis and the M.M.A.’s secretary Felix Zehandelaar).³ But the *Times* bombing was not an expression of revolutionary ideals. It was no more than a particularly visible event in an ongoing conflict that was being fought soundly within the familiar idiom of free markets and fair shares by a united front of owners against a largely non-revolutionary labor force. Non-revolutionary unionism was a necessarily violent and destructive affair. The conflict between employers and their workers was not, as both sympathetic reformers and antipathetic employers would have it, a matter of miscommunication between naturally cooperative parties but a contest of power. Both union members and employers understood this and both workers and owners organized to maximize their coercive strength. This belligerence produced forms of communication and speech acts that both blurred the line between philosophy and action and exceeded the discursive limits of contract and liberal consensus.

Between 1905 and 1911, the I.A.B.S.I.W. carried out between eighty-seven and one hundred and ten bombings. The targets were worksites that the union sought to secure for its membership. To borrow a phrase from Samuel Gompers, the explosions were a “pure and simple” defense of union territory. While every worksite explosion following an unmet union demand, occupied a liminal space between speech and action, the *LA Times* event represented the

³ John Rogers Commons, et al. *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1966), 320.

straightforward use of “bombs as an argument.”⁴ Because the *LA Times* was a newspaper, dynamite was shifted into the register of speech and propaganda. This particular explosion was an explicit acknowledgement of the central role of propaganda in class conflict and the relationship between ideological and material control. As such, it functions as a sort of coda for the extensive bombing campaign that preceded it. It was certainly not intended as the last explosion, but a newspaper as final act is narratively convenient and invites us to read these other explosions as articulate without assuming that anarchism or any other form of anti-statism was being expressed.

This chapter examines the decade leading up to the *LA Times* bombing—a period that not only saw the systematic dynamiting of worksites but also the establishment and growth of several employers’ associations aimed at promoting the open shop on a nationwide basis. It was also a period of formidable growth for unions, including the formation of a national organization for ironworkers, the I.A.B.S.I.W..⁵ The growth of employers’ associations was, in part, a response to union growth and the militancy of both labor unions and employers’ unions was self-reinforcing. It was at this moment that the very idea of “legitimate,” i.e. peaceful, non-militant labor began to emerge against an undesirable, socialistic, anarchist, radical, and generally dangerous element. In a 1915 report on the ironworkers for the Commission on Industrial Relations, Luke Grant observed that “it is puerile to contend that force and violence are not

⁴ “Bombs as an Argument: Contractors Tell of Explosions Following Refusal to Unionize Jobs” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1912.

⁵ “The total membership of American trade unions more than doubled in the three years after 1899. By 1902, union membership totaled almost 1.4 million; in 1903 it stood at just under two million.” Daniel R. Ernst, *Lawyers Against Labor: From Individual Rights to Corporate Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 51.

accompaniments of strikes and lockouts. In the very nature of things they must be.”⁶ Over time though, the ready acknowledgment that force and violence were “in the very nature of things” was displaced by a discourse that made it possible to imagine an essentially pacific American labor movement that suffered periodic paroxysms of destruction and violence. This peaceful, law-abiding version of organized labor was constructed against a foreign, anarchistic, and essentially violent element. As many people observed at the time, violence was endemic to ‘normal’ labor relations.

Characterizing labor violence as ‘anarchist’ was an opportunistic and convenient means of stoking anti-labor sentiment but it also helped to conceal the coercive nature of an increasingly united front of employers backed by political and legal institutions. Casting union coercion as criminal, exceptional, and alien to normal, American economic relations allowed employers to cite this other, albeit largely fabricated, ‘labor’ composed of law-abiding, honest Americans with whom there was no conflict. Making violence foreign, in turn, made peaceful workers American, and supported the contention that class conflict did not exist in the United States. As one N.A.M. member put it, “we have no classes in our country.”⁷

The I.A.B.S.I.W.’s use of dynamite reveals that ‘normal’ American labor relations were virtually organized around various forms of violence and coercion. Conflicts between unions and employers’ associations redefined violence and coercion along ideological lines, each claiming in turn, to be exercising their natural rights against the implicitly unjust actions of their adversary. In some cases, these contests entirely altered the legal status of certain organized

⁶ Luke Grant, United States Commission on Industrial Relations. *The National Erectors’ Association and the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers* (Chicago: Barnard and Miller Print, 1915), 108.

⁷ Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America’s Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 64.

actions such as the boycott. In others, they led to a reconsideration of individual responsibility and harm in industrial settings. The I.A.B.S.I.W.'s ongoing conflict with nationally organized employers' associations epitomized an era during which violence was both the engine and the object of a radical reorganization of economic and social relations.

Emergence of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the replacement of wooden timbers with structural steel in the construction of bridges and its use in the erection of skyscrapers and other buildings created the need for structural steel work as a distinct trade. The I.A.B.S.I.W. was founded in 1896 at a convention held in Pittsburgh. It had its origins in a mutual aid society dating back to 1880 and brought together pre-existing locals from Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and New York. Chicago's Bridge and Construction Men's Union, founded in 1891 became local no. 1 of the new International. For several years, the International maintained a largely formal existence. Its officers were not paid fixed salaries and continued to work at their trades. Local unions continued to bargain and operated independently in response to local conditions. In 1901, the I.A.B.S.I.W. began to function on a more organized basis. It launched its official organ, *The Bridgemen's Magazine*, in July of that year and elected a member of the Chicago local, future U.S. congressman Frank Buchanan, as president in September. Buchanan set the union on a course of national organization, attempting to win uniform contracts from nationally operating companies such as the United States Steel Corporation and setting uniform wage scales. Buchanan came into conflict with many union locals who wished to maintain their independence in negotiating their wages and working conditions, but a certain amount of

organizational cohesion was achieved alongside the local conditions. From 1901 forward, the I.A.B.S.I.W. proved itself a formidable organization.⁸

The I.A.B.S.I.W. did not see itself as part of a political or social movement in the way that the I.W.W. did. It was not concerned with educating its members in the political economy of capitalism or encouraging them to think in terms of the general strike or the expropriation of employer property. Ironworkers organized for wages, security, and working conditions and they were good at it. Structural ironworkers were not recognized as skilled laborers by other, more established trades. It was therefore difficult to obtain wages that reflected the physical risk entailed by their work. However, in the course of a mere fifteen years, the ironworkers went from being the lowest paid trade in the construction industry to one of the highest among thirty unions with an average increase of twenty-one cents an hour between 1902 and 1914.⁹ This was due, in part at least, to the organization's militancy.

Collective Bargaining by Explosion

The six year dynamite campaign aimed at securing union demands or punishing employers and contractors for hiring non-union labor ended with the *LA Times* explosion.¹⁰ In 1911, following the McNamaras' confessions, forty-six members of the I.A.B.S.I.W., including the union's president, Frank M. Ryan, were indicted in federal court on fifty-five counts of

⁸ Grant, 1-22.

⁹ Grant, 6.

¹⁰ These estimates vary from 87 to 110 depending on the source. See *The Wrong Hands: Popular Weapons Manuals and Their Historic Challenges to a Democratic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 38; Bruce Schapiro, "The McNamara Case: A Window on Class Antagonism in the Progressive Era." *Southern California Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (1988), 82.

criminal conspiracy to transport explosives across state lines.¹¹ The bombing campaign was part of the union's struggle against the nationwide open shop campaign led by the National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.). It was a defense of economic and class interests fought by way of intimidation and economic coercion distinct from the anarchist 'propaganda of the deed' that preceded it or the I.W.W.'s defense of sabotage as the guerilla warfare of the revolutionary working class. It was what might be referred to as 'job-conscious sabotage'. This does not, however, mean that the I.A.B.S.I.W. was apolitical. The strict division between job-conscious and political unions is a retrospectively imposed and ultimately false dichotomy. Indeed, what this case shows is that business oriented, job-conscious unions cannot be disentangled from political investments any more than open-shop advocates could be said to be waging an apolitical economic campaign.

It is worth noting that the membership of the I.A.B.S.I.W. bore some significant similarities to the workers that were often organized by the I.W.W. They were 'unskilled' and the nature of the industry required frequent movement from city to city to find employment. While official publications did not encourage, theorize, or celebrate dynamite, its use indicates the necessity of radical action, if not radical thought, for workers without either an established monopoly on skilled production or an institutional means of contract negotiation. The illegal dynamite campaign was continuous with a labor organizing effort that saw many of its legal channels blocked. It was meant, like a strike or a boycott, to obtain employment for union membership on union conditions. In 1908 Edward Clark, a business agent for local 44 in the city of Cincinnati wrote to John J. McNamara suggesting sabotage as a solution to unemployment:

¹¹ Criminal Case Files, Consolidated CR-3, 1, 3: *United States v. Frank Ryan, et al.*, October 3 1912, pp. 683-685. National Archives and Records Association, Chicago, Illinois.

Upon receipt of this you will kindly inform me what action the Executive Board took in the matter regarding financial help to this local. I have at present writing fifty or more members after me continually wanting to know....What I want to know is that we are going to do something that will help the whole membership at large to the Granger Company...but the truth of the matter is that we have got nothing at all in the treasure [sic]...There is nothing in sight but this viaduct work that Granger has got and we have made up our mind to go after him in the right way. I only wish to say that any money sent here will not be handled careless...Joe being well known here it would be a foolish thing for me to buy explosives. Could there be such a thing as you sending me such things as would be necessary for such work from Indianapolis. I have sized up the whole job here and I know it can be done. I am not drinking anything strong for some time and I know exactly what I am undertaking.¹²

On May 3, 1908, an explosion occurred in Dayton Ohio on a bridge being constructed by American Bridge Co within the jurisdiction of local 44. . On August 6th, the work of the Granger Construction Company in Cincinnati was dynamited as suggested. On December 11, 1905, in a more concise plea, George Hagerty of Cleveland wrote J.J. McNamara requesting that he “do anything for a few good strong armed men and clean this job and Duggan up. Work is getting scarce here.”¹³

It is obvious from the targets as well as the justifications given that the purpose of these ‘jobs’ was immediately economic. That the bombings were not bound up in a developed theory of class warfare or revolutionary change does not imply that class feeling was absent or that the destruction of work sites was not ‘read’ through the lens of class conflict. It was understood that a conflict of interests was built into the relations between employers and workers, but it was framed as a simple matter of economic control and distribution. Members of the ironworkers

¹² Criminal Case Files, Consolidated CR-3, 1, 3: *United States v. Frank Ryan, et al.*, October 3 1912, pp. 683-685. National Archives and Records Association, Chicago, Illinois.

¹³ Criminal Case Files, Consolidated CR-3, 1, 3: *United States v. Frank Ryan, et al.*, October 3 1912, pp. 798. National Archives and Records Association, Chicago, Illinois.

union did not, in general, condemn the dynamiting because the cost was borne by the boss, but they did not celebrate it as progress towards social change either.¹⁴

This did not prevent William Burns of the Burns Detective Agency from claiming that the Iron Workers were actually anarchists carrying out a “masked war” in the guise of labor organizing. Significant differences existed between anarchists and dynamite-wielding trade unionists and Burns’ conflation of the two was a total fabrication. But this fiction was central to the narrative being constructed by the employers’ associations. The assertion that anarchists were “at war,” whereas so-called legitimate forms of organized labor were not, was an expression of an important and lasting ideological position that defines legitimate protest as non-violent and dismisses resistance that does not adhere to a strictly discursive form of contract negotiation as foreign and invasive.

Burns claimed that the I.A.B.S.I.W. worked “hand in glove with anarchists to murder and destroy [and] fool the honest workmen supporting the union.”¹⁵ This was nothing less than the betrayal of “the workers of that union to Anarchists.” In this formulation, the dynamiting campaign had nothing to do with the interests of individual laborers or legitimate labor unions. Rather, “the war with dynamite was a war of Anarchy against the established form of government of this country. It was masked under the cause of Labor.”¹⁶

Burns’ characterization of the I.A.B.S.I.W. was not, especially after the confession of J.J. and J.B. McNamara, entirely at odds with organized labor’s own official narrative, which also

¹⁴ Sidney Fine, *Without Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, The National Erectors' Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-1957* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1995.

¹⁵ William J. Burns, *The Masked War: The Story of a Peril that Threatened the United States by the Man Who Uncovered the Dynamite Conspirators and Sent Them to Jail* (New York: George H. Doran, 1913), 1.

¹⁶ Burns, 11.

cast the *LA Times* bombing as an unfortunate anomaly. The McNamaras were, according to Samuel Gompers, “two poor, misguided fanatics, out of two million workers.”¹⁷ The strike and the boycott—the two primary legal weapons available to organized labor—were non-violent means of securing the “two primary rights” of workers which were, according to Gompers, “the right to control the one thing they have to sell, their own physical labor; and the right to buy, with their own money, where they choose.”¹⁸ But the use of violence to achieve these rights was “not a recognized part of labor’s plan of campaign... Labor needs to be strong in numbers, in effective organization, in the justice of its cause, and in the reasonableness of its methods. It relies on moral suasion.”¹⁹

The legitimacy of labor, in this view, rested on an ideologically invested fantasy of non-violent, non-destructive methods of labor organizing. What the McNamara case and the dynamite conspiracy makes apparent is not, however, the pacifist nature of the labor movement at large, but the inevitability of violence and property destruction in the service of enforcing—in the absence of the legal protections and advantages granted to their adversaries—the non-violent methods of the strike and the boycott. Methods that were, in any case, under attack by the courts and whose legal status was ambiguous at best. According to Louis Adamic, “at the time the destruction of property was a common thing in labor disputes. In telephone and telegraph troubles linemen cut wire cables; glaziers expressed their feelings against the bosses by smashing plate glass; and carpenters, in their effort to rise to a higher level, defaced fancy woodwork.”²⁰

¹⁷ “Gompers and Burns on Unionism and Dynamite,” *McClure’s Magazine* 37 no. 4, (1912): 363.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Samuel Gompers, quoted in Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1931), 187.

²⁰ Adamic, 193.

Whether or not ironworkers were aiming at the eventual overthrow of an entire economic system (they were not), the very purpose of labor organizing put workers in direct conflict with owners and bosses. It also put them in conflict with the state, which regularly intervened through the court system to issue injunctions, jail labor leaders for violating unevenly applied laws concerning interstate trade, and supplied, when necessary, armed soldiers and national guardsmen to break strikes. Demands as simple and non-revolutionary as the closed shop, the eight-hour day, accident compensation, and higher wages placed ironworkers on one side of what can only be fairly described as a class war that had absolutely nothing to do with anarchism or any other developed philosophy of violence. Property destruction, according to Adamic, was simply a tactic “resorted to only after the other methods to win their demands had failed.”²¹

This may have been true but it would be more accurate to say that property destruction and assault regularly occurred *alongside* other methods such as the strike and the boycott in order to augment and secure the efficacy of these officially sanctioned activities. Slugging and dynamiting functioned as labor’s proxy for the legal tactics assembled against them by employers. It is not mere pedantry to insist on the simultaneity of violent and non-violent tactics. Figuring them as a last resort, as coming after orderly legal challenges, misrecognizes the character of the conflict between unions and employers who refused to acknowledge the union’s existence let alone their right to strike, collectively bargain, or peacefully picket. Certainly, unions were driven to extreme measures by unrelenting opponents, but non-recognition of unions meant that this was built into the so-called negotiation from the start. According to Eugene Debs, the McNamara’s real crime consisted “in their having carried out the policy of Gompers’s

²¹ Adamic, 193.

craft unionism to its logical conclusion.”²² Without radical changes to the political order, Debs suggested, union activity could only exist as warfare.

It was not difficult to make this case. Despite the passage of the Erdman Act in 1898, which officially recognized the right of railway workers to organize, a majority of union activity was effectively criminalized. In 1905, courts in Massachusetts and Ohio had ruled against unions demanding the discharge of non-union men in one case and for paying the dues of new hires in the second (depriving the employer of his right to hire non-union men by automatically inducting them). Courts overturned legislation as well. A judge in Chicago ruled peaceful picketing by unionized typographers illegal, sentencing two officers to jail time and imposing the not insubstantial fine of \$1500 on the union for contempt. In the case of *Lochner v. New York*, a law granting a ten-hour day to bakers was declared illegal for interfering with the rights of both employers and employees to freely enter into employment contracts.²³

Courts also saw fit to regulate the consumer behavior of unions. The unequivocally non-violent method of the union organized boycott was deemed illegal by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1914. In 1902, the American Anti-Boycott Association (A.A.B.A.) organized for the specific purpose of eliminating the secondary boycott. The organization, which was formed with the explicit purpose of pursuing court cases against unions and their members, claimed that it was “in the interest of good will between employers and employed.” The boycotts organized by the American Federation of Labor and “numerous bands of unionists” was, by contrast, “a method of combat that was eminently a method of ill-will...It is a gross interference with a just industrial

²² Eugene V. Debs “The McNamara Case and the Labor Movement” *International Socialist Review* 12, no. 7 (1912): 397.

²³ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. Vol. 3, *The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor, 1900-1909* (New York: International Publishers, 1997), 309-310.

liberty...It makes good will between the employing class and the laboring class impossible.”²⁴ The Supreme Court’s decision in the now famous Danbury Hatters case, *Loewe v. Lawlor*, made it possible for companies to sue unions for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. It also made individual members responsible for trade union activities.²⁵

Rhetoric on both sides was pitched. Employers were fighting the ‘tyranny’ of the unions or ‘labor trusts’ and warfare was a common trope in union publications. Ironworkers repeatedly employed the idiom of warfare when describing their struggle. In the pages of *The Bridgemen’s Magazine*, writers took aim at “the open and insidious warfare of the National Erectors’ Association.”²⁶ An editorial declared that “thoughtful and unselfish persons among the farmers and in all walks of life already agree to the justice of labor’s warfare against injunctions.”²⁷ Boycott was a “legitimate means of warfare.”²⁸

This wasn’t just hyperbole. Describing labor conflict as war underscored the inherent difference between the interests of employers and workers respectively. It also implicitly contested the salience of regular legal categories and institutions. In this state of exception, militant labor activity was presented as a means of securing law and order *against* the state. Congress, the magazine reported, was nothing more than representation for “legalized looters” in all places save those where “organized labor is strong enough to carry on a constant warfare.”²⁹

²⁴ “Million Against One: A Conspiracy to Crush the Open Shop” *American Anti-Boycott Association*, 1904, 1.

²⁵ Ernst.

²⁶ *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* 9, no. 8 (August 1909): 464.

²⁷ *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* 9, no. 1 (January 1909): 8.

²⁸ *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* 9, no. 7 (July 1909): 404.

²⁹ *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* 9, no. 9 (September 1909): 559.

The *LA Times* bombing, precisely because it was *not* perpetrated by an organization with revolutionary intentions or even socialist affiliations, points to the practical impossibility of “keeping politics out of the unions” and disentangling straightforward economic demands from political conflict.³⁰ This is not the same as saying that union members who engaged in belligerent activity were anarchists, or that there is no functional difference between anarchism and trade unionism. The I.A.B.S.I.W., if it is to be judged by the contents of its official organ, *The Bridgemen’s Magazine*, was wholly uninterested in abolishing private property, establishing a socialist republic, or fomenting broad-based political action of any kind. It didn’t celebrate violence and while one could infer, given the record of union activity, that phrases such as “keeping their hands full” and “taking proper action” were simply ways to euphemize violence and property destruction, the magazine offered very little to support such a claim. Most references to dynamite in the magazine were defensive, vociferously denying union involvement and pointing the finger at the companies themselves, scabs furthering their interests by “uncovering” plots by union members, or simple accidents spun into ‘plots’ by an anti-union press.

Regardless of what the unions said, the conflation of anarchism with union violence was central to campaigns against labor. Employers’ associations, invested as they were in a nominal acceptance of labor’s right to organize, were keen to attribute violence to an anti-American radical fringe. Distinguishing between honest workers and “the anarchistic and revolutionary spirit breathed by the leaders in criminal unionism,” was crucial to maintaining their image as

³⁰ The National Civic Federation, which included labor leaders as well as finance capitalists, announced its intention to “keep politics out of unions.” Foner, vol. 3, 71.

supporters of republican freedoms.³¹ The conflation of “socialist labor agitator, anarchist and president-killer” functioned as inflammatory fodder while it towed the official line that a beneficial cooperation between employees and employers was desirable and possible in the absence of labor union violence.³² The use of injunctions, sedition charges, and armed militias were therefore not aimed at workers, but “president-killers.”

The historical record has retained a residue of this faulty but powerful conflation of anarchy and labor militancy. One particularly hysterical Cold War account of the 1912 ‘Dynamite Conspiracy’ contains almost no information about the case itself. Instead, it provides an erratic history of anarchist thought and action that includes commentary on Emma Goldman, the McKinley assassination, recrimination of Governor Altgeld of Illinois for his pardoning of the Haymarket Martyrs, the fiction of Maxim Gorky, the attempted 1878 assassination of Emperor Wilhelm, an 1894 bombing of a church in Paris, and a U.M.W. strike in Widen, West Virginia. One chapter in a multivolume work on famous court cases is hardly a representative text, but it is evidence that the association between the I.A.B.S.I.W. and anarchy that was promoted by employers’ associations and the detectives hired by them persisted long after the fact. It also speaks to the ongoing desire to attribute all violence to foreign political philosophies when in fact dynamite, slugging, and assassination were integral to the class relations of the industrial United States.³³

The Organized Revolt of Employers

³¹ *The Review*, November 1910, 18.

³² “Labor Agitator,” *Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association* 1, no 1. (July 1902): 16.

³³ Beverly Gage, “Why Violence Matters: Radicalism, Politics, and Class War in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 11, no. 1 (2007): 5.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, an increasingly self-aware class of corporate and proprietary capitalists emerged alongside the rapid growth of a permanent proletariat (i.e. life-long wage earners) demanded by mass production industries. The National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1895. A number of circumstances conspired to encourage the official organization of capitalists as a class during the late nineteenth century. It is not within the scope of this chapter to offer an economic history of the postbellum United States, but a brief, if incomplete, gloss on the conditions that shaped early twentieth century labor conflict is important. Conflict between workers and employers was not new, but the landscape within which the conflict between the N.E.A. and the I.A.B.S.I.W. unfolded was characterized by national, rather than regional, cooperation by employers as well as unions that had no precedent in the previous century.

Following the Civil War, federal debt management along with the creation of a national banking system encouraged the financing of business ventures that were not tied to an Atlantic economy of sugar and cotton exports. This led to investment in domestic industries traditionally not financed by banks and was supported by economic policies that encouraged the growth of domestic markets and transcontinental trade tied to westward expansion via the Homestead Act (1862) and railroad subsidies. The abdication of economic supremacy by the mercantile capitalists of the Eastern seaboard cities and the increasing integration of domestic industry and investment meant that cooperation between firms was increasingly possible and desirable.³⁴

Between the 1880s and the mid-1890s, the retention of market share required lower unit costs that could only be achieved through greater investment at a moment when capital's total

³⁴ James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 35-37.

share of non-farm income was being adversely affected by trends in labor productivity.³⁵ Employers found themselves faced with both an ideological and material problem of control. Worker militancy, buoyed by the continued monopoly on knowledge of shop-floor production processes and effective control of output by skilled workers, continued to be a problem for employers whose attempts to reorganize production and introduce new machines were met by strikes. Strikes that were local in nature frequently found community support. Community solidarity was due to more than conventional relationships and dependencies. An “uncanny coherence” existed in the grievances of disparate classes during the nineteenth century that can be traced to the conviction that consumption of goods was solely authorized by production. Between 1870 and 1900, “‘jackleg’ farmers, industrial workers, small entrepreneurs, and even certain proprietary capitalists used the same inherited language of ‘productive labor’ to argue that...one’s receipt and expenditure of income required one’s production of real value through work.”³⁶ It was against such a republican tradition, rooted in popular understandings of a labor theory of value and backed by worker agitation, that American capitalists began to organize at the turn of the century.³⁷

This organization did not emerge naturally from economic considerations concerning supply and demand. The legal environment of the nineteenth century favored the growth of corporate power and underwrote its ideological project. In the early nineteenth century, the American state still “conceived of itself as the sole legitimate embodiment of the public interest.”

³⁵ Livingston, 42.

³⁶ Livingston, 43.

³⁷ Livingston, 48. Part of this organization gave us ‘culture’ as we know it. Through the funding of museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions, the ‘unproductive’ class created a spectacle of society building that effectively erased the labor that went into these monumentalized signifiers of civilization, while recasting unproductive capital as a social good.

This power, though, was diffuse in comparison to European states. Despite the existence of a legal doctrine favoring the public interest over corporate interests, as well as the challenge to the state's monopoly on legitimate authority that was posed by the proliferation of business corporations during the 1820s, legal institutions regarded corporations as "agents of the public interest." In exchange for "privileges in the shape of subsidies, immunities, and franchises," corporations would encourage private investors to meet public needs.³⁸ They remained variously subject to local and state laws aimed at regulating operations and protecting local producers through the limitation of interstate imports, but out of state corporations could have their cases heard in federal court. In 1844, the states' ability to impose local regulations was further weakened by the Supreme Court's decision in *Swift v. Tyson* that "federal courts referred not to state law in deciding such cases but to a federal common law of commerce which they developed themselves." The limitation of state police powers mitigated the uncertainty produced by variations in local law and thus supported and encouraged interstate business.³⁹

While granted an unprecedented level of prestige and a central role in social organization, corporations were not the state. This was a crucial advantage in their legal confrontations with unions and it was this status that made the massive public relations campaign that accompanied the legal maneuvers for the open shop possible and effective. Corporations, while brought into being through legal institutions were not of the state and therefore not, in theory, characterized by the coercive "vertical relationships" of power reserved for the state vis-à-vis private citizens. Business corporations, no matter how large, were governed by the allegedly horizontal contractual relationships of private citizens. Contracts, it was assumed, lacked the potential for

³⁸ Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.

³⁹ Tomlins, 26-27.

coercion embedded in the vertical relations between citizens and states.⁴⁰ It was this logic—by which business corporations were private purveyors of public goods ‘horizontally’ contracting with workers and unions were intermediary associations exerting unlicensed ‘vertical’ control over workers and corporations alike—that was operating in the series of Supreme Court decisions that condemned unions for illegal, coercive interference with allegedly free, entrepreneurial activity.⁴¹

The organization into manufacturers’ and employers’ associations that began in the late nineteenth century was a class-conscious and overtly coercive project that had as its object an obverse an increasingly militant, even militarized, workforce. Open shop propaganda ritually invoked law-abiding labor and cooperation between workers and employers. Manufacturers’ associations hired private detectives, pursued legal prosecution, lobbied against federal legislation that favored workers, organized advertising boycotts against uncooperative newspapers, and used private militias, national guardsmen, and police forces to break strikes and protect strikebreakers. There simply was no organization of the capitalist class, as a class for itself, without organization against unions. Employers’ associations had many functions, but their primary mandate in the early twentieth century was wresting power from unions through a national open shop drive. This required coordinated efforts among employers to eliminate union labor from job sites, produce non-union laborers on demand, transport and guard those laborers, and devote considerable resources to the production and dissemination of literature that presented the open shop as a social good.

⁴⁰ Tomlins, 22.

⁴¹ Tomlins, 30.

In 1902, there were employers' associations in twenty-four large American cities. Within a few years, most large and medium-sized American cities were home to an employers' association engaged in promoting the open shop.⁴² Employers' associations were joined by The Citizens Alliance and various, sundry anti-union formations ranging from local chambers of commerce to self-organized, vigilante businessmen. Advocates for the open shop couched their rhetoric in the reasonable language of compromise and hedged their position on unions by distinguishing between organized labor (acceptable) and union methods such as the boycott, strike, or the persecution of scabs (unacceptable). But what the employers' associations were asking for when they demanded that unions bargain without coercion was, functionally speaking, the elimination of unions.

When N.A.M. met in New Orleans in 1903 with the mandate to organize a "crusade against unionism," it adopted a 'Declaration of Principles,' outlining that it did not oppose 'organizations of labor as such' but elaborating a set of restrictions on union activity that amounted to the same thing.⁴³ Following the adoption of the open shop resolutions N.A.M. founded the Citizens Industrial Association of America (C.I.A.A.), which was intended to organize all employers interested in the open shop and the promotion of open shop propaganda. It publicly claimed to be safeguarding the rights of individuals to enter work contracts without the interference of organizations. But, like all other iterations of the employer combination, the C.I.A.A. was concerned with power and control, which was incompatible with the rhetoric of cooperation that characterized their public positions. They would ostensibly bargain with workers over wages and hours but in exchange there would be:

⁴² Foner, 35.

⁴³ Foner, 37-38

...‘no restriction as to the use of tools, machinery or materials’ unless they were unsafe, no ‘limitation of output,’ no restriction on the number of apprentices or helpers of the proper age, no boycotts or sympathetic strikes, ‘no sacrifice of independent workmen to the labor union,” and ‘no compulsory use of the union label.’⁴⁴

The open shop fight was not about lowering wages and increasing hours in the most transparent and immediate sense but about employer control. This included total control of job sites, workers and, importantly, the rate at which workers performed their labor—control over the “stint” being a perennial point of conflict between craft workers and their employers.⁴⁵ It was also crucially aimed at dismantling union and worker power that had been established through the careful policing of craft jurisdiction—rules establishing who could do what type of work. The right sought by employers was not to decrease the rate at which skilled craftsmen were paid, but to replace skilled craftsmen with so-called ‘unskilled’ and presumably complacent laborers. This is clear from the principles adopted by N.A.M. and the predecessor to the N.E.A. for governing iron and steel construction:

No change in wages; the eight-hour day where it was the custom and the eight- or nine-hour day as agreed upon with the workers elsewhere; time and a half for overtime; no restriction by workers in handling materials used in construction; no limit on the amount of work performed by a worker during working hours; no restriction on the use of machinery or tools; no person, unless authorized by the employer, to interfere with workers during working hours; the right of the employer to hire and fire but without discrimination against workers because of their union membership; the stipulation that foremen who were union members were not to be subject to union rules...the right of the employer to hire as many laborers as he saw fit and to use laborers rather than skilled workers...a ban on sympathetic strikes...the arbitration of all disputes; and a ban on strikes and lockouts pending arbitration.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Fine, 5.

⁴⁵ David Montgomery, *Workers Control in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1979.

⁴⁶ Fine, 25

It was to this end that the N.E.A. along with the Allied Iron Association (A.I.A.) established its own employment bureau to fill jobs that had been tied up by the ongoing strike declared against American Bridge in 1905. After the union struck for higher wages on several jobs in New York, the A.I.A. “specified that no housesmith was to be employed unless he had a valid card from the association’s employment bureau.”⁴⁷

Employers’ offensives were not new. Organized opposition to labor organizations in a particular industry or location had long been a common occurrence. What the open shop represented was a nationwide offensive against organized labor as such.⁴⁸

To this end, many employers’ associations defined their jurisdictions broadly and organized in a manner mirroring the industrial unionism championed by organizations such as the Knights of Labor and the I.W.W. Employers had, as an article in *World’s Work* put it, “been educated to appreciate the value of organization.”⁴⁹ The founding of permanent unions in the late nineteenth century had made wage demands and union recognition into national rather than local affairs.⁵⁰ The National Metal Trades Association (N.M.T.A.) included in its membership interests employing “machinists, millwrights, blacksmiths, boilermakers, pattern makers, carpenters, structural iron workers, iron ship builders, polishers and buffers, brass workers, sheet iron workers, machine operators and helpers.”⁵¹ By 1906, iron fabrication and construction had

⁴⁷ Fine, 39.

⁴⁸ Foner, 36.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America’s Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 49.

⁵⁰ Ernst, 71.

⁵¹ National Metal Trades Association, Constitution and by-laws, 1901 (Hathi trust)

its own well-established, open shop advocate, the National Erector's Association (N.E.A.).⁵² The N.E.A. was originally organized as The National Association of Manufacturers and Erectors of Structural Steel in 1903. The renaming of the organization occurred when it launched its open shop campaign in 1906 and henceforth refused outright to recognize the legitimacy of the I.A.B.S.I.W. and negotiate with it.

According to Philip Taft, the newly renamed N.E.A. "turned into a belligerent employers' association" with the appointment, also in 1906, of Walter Drew. Sidney Fine echoed this conclusion, arguing that the N.E.A. was the "most class conscious and belligerent national employer association in the United States."⁵³ Drew was a lawyer who cut his teeth as an organizer of the Citizens Alliance of Grand Rapids, Michigan and chairman of the city's Board of Trades' Industrial Committee. He also served as legal counsel to the city's Employer Association. Drew's accomplishments included the 1904 defeat of a teamsters' strike brought about by an alliance of team owners, the Grand Rapids business community, and the Citizens Alliance. In 1903, the teamsters had established closed shop conditions that were effectively overturned by this cooperation. When Drew spoke at the CIAA that year, he could claim legal expertise in labor matters. More importantly, he could point to his involvement with a real and successful instance of employer cooperation. According to Drew, the total defeat of the closed shop in Grand Rapids had attracted investment in spite of an undesirable location due to high freight rates.⁵⁴

⁵² Fine, 33-36.

⁵³ Fine, vii.

⁵⁴ Fine, 36-37.

The contradiction between the discourse of liberty, non-intervention, and free contract, and the actual practice of the associations, was apparent in Drew's testimony during the dynamite conspiracy trial, although he said nothing all that extraordinary. The official position of the N.E.A. and other open shop advocates did not hold up terribly well under direct interrogation. During his cross examination, he dodged, equivocated, and lied when asked directly about the N.E.A. and its members' attempts to enforce the open shop. He denied that U.S. Steel Corporation and the American Bridge Company threatened to cut off supplies of steel to employers who employed union labor.⁵⁵ Senator J.W. Kern, serving as co-counsel for the defense, asked him repeatedly whether the N.E.A. interfered "with settlements that were about to be made with union labor organizations and contractors" to which Drew replied, "never to my knowledge." When asked if he had ever heard of the N.E.A. or its members warning against a settlement with labor, he replied, "I do not understand what you refer to Mr. Kern. I don't remember anything of that kind at all. Whenever we heard of any contractors that were considering the question of whether they should work open shop or closed shop, I would make whatever effort I could to get them to work open shop."⁵⁶ When asked about a telegraph he sent to an owner of the firm Marshal and McClintic, reminding them that the policy of the Erectors Association was to not recognize organized labor—and thus encouraging him to deny I.A.B.S.I.W. President Frank Ryan a meeting—Drew replied: "I don't remember that circumstance. I think the telegram would show what it is if I said anything of the kind." On the question of whether an open shop policy was effectively a refusal to bargain with any collective of workers, Drew repeatedly refused to answer, pointed out that he, personally, never made a

⁵⁵ Fine, 39. Fine suggests that it is likely that President Ryan's claim that U.S. steel withheld supplies was true.

⁵⁶ Criminal Case Files, Consolidated CR-3, 1, 3: *United States v. Frank Ryan, et al.*, October 25, 1912, pp. 3605-3606. National Archives and Records Association, Chicago, Illinois.

contract with an individual employee and instead stated repeatedly that the Association had a definite policy on wages and hours. In previous testimony, reflecting the well-documented position of the N.E.A. and other employers' associations, Drew frankly stated that the N.E.A. and its members did not "treat with organized labor at all."⁵⁷

More than anything, Drew's testimony is evidence of how important it was to employers' organizations to deny that they had any interest in organizing for the maintenance of power and control. A frank admission of any acts of coercion or intervention would have undermined a position carefully aligned with the horizontal, non-coercive contractualism of so-called 'free' markets. It would also have shown that this power was maintained by way of class solidarity that required its own mechanisms of internal enforcement. To this end, employers were punished for negotiating with unions. It was understood, for example, that union labor might threaten a contractor's steel supply and even newspapers were subject to strong-arming. The employers' offensive extended from control over raw materials to control over the public discourse. The latter came in the form of advertising boycotts. Anti-union newspapers and magazines were given "patronage in preference to those whose columns and pages are filled with the cheap sensational trash tending to breed discontent, chaos and anarchy."⁵⁸ Not only did advertising boycotts pose an existential threat to newspapers—the overlap between the Citizen's Alliance and the Advertiser's Association was significant—these boycotts were, in turn, enforced in the business community through threats of withdrawn financing, supplies and patronage.⁵⁹ N.A.M. members never walked into a boardroom and tossed ammonia in someone's face or dynamited

⁵⁷ Criminal Case Files, Consolidated CR-3, 1, 3: *United States v. Frank Ryan, et al.*, October 25, 1912, pp. 3357. National Archives and Records Association, Chicago, Illinois.

⁵⁸ Foner, 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

worksites staffed with union labor, but they were effectively operating in a manner identical to the most disruptive and belligerent of unions.

The Utility of Anarchism

Regardless of the pronouncements made (or not made) by the I.A.B.S.I.W., employers read labor militancy as both a political and economic threat. This was an accurate assessment. Struggles over domination and economic exploitation are inseparable from institutions of political power. The economic ‘base’ is more than the technical forces of production. It “exists in the shape of social juridical and political forms—in particular forms of property and domination.”⁶⁰ The open shop movement made this obvious while at the same time being deeply invested in denying it. The separation of the political from the economic allows production to appear “encased in eternal natural laws...at which opportunity bourgeois relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded.”⁶¹ The depoliticization of production—its depiction as a site of purely economic negotiations over wages and hours—serves the interests of capital by disguising the political nature of its own economic activity. Conversely, economic interests are papered over by political rhetoric—concern for ‘society’ and the ‘public’ in the face of “forceful men, preaching the vicious philosophy of organized force rather than of cooperative service as a means to industrial betterment.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, quoted in Ellen Meiksins Wood “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism” *New Left Review* no. 127 (1981): 69.

⁶¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 88.

⁶² Walter Drew, “Building and the Public” Lecture, Annual Meeting of the Associated Employers of Indianapolis, 16 February, 1922 (New York: National Association of Manufacturers of the United States of America, 1925), 4.

Maintaining the appearance of this separation between economic and political activity was difficult in the face of union dynamiting, employers' dependence on court issued injunctions, and unending references to warfare. Anarchism—foreign, political, and long associated with irrational destruction—provided a tidy solution. Members of militant craft unions could not have been further from anarchist philosophers, but through the literary production of employers' associations and the popular press, the two were soldered together by the force of sheer repetition. Anarchism could both amplify the threat of militant unions in the public imagination and absorb the political nature of their activities by making it foreign to labor relations proper. Violence could, in turn, be ideologically expelled from economic activity. It provided a perfect foil against which organizations such as the N.E.A. could present themselves as defenders of liberty, liberators of labor, and guardians of society and natural economic order. The closed shop, wrote Drew, was secured “against the rest of society” by the use of “the crudest forms of violence.” It was established in “poorly defended” industries by a “small group of able and forceful men, preaching vicious philosophy of organized force rather than of cooperative service.”⁶³ In a clever reversal of the language of organized labor, Drew declared that the closed shop resulted in the “common exploitation of the public.”⁶⁴ Individual employers and employers' associations repeatedly and explicitly disparaged unions as un-American. By contrast, they linked the open shop to citizenship (the language of patriotism is notably absent before the war) and fundamental American values such as freedom and cooperation. Employers were synonymous with the public good and general interest and both “the laws of business and the Constitution of our country.” And they were under attack. This is reflected in Louis Adamic's

⁶³ Drew, 4, 12.

⁶⁴ Drew, 4.

tongue-in-cheek account of the philosophy of the open shop or, as it was alternately called, the ‘American plan.’ “The industrialists were for ‘Industrial Freedom.’ America was a free country, and any worker in America ought to be free to work for any wage, at any task, anywhere he chose. And so they fought the unions’ boycott with the blacklist, the sympathetic strike with the sympathetic lock-out, dynamite with gun-fire, and so on.”⁶⁵

The Danbury Hatters could thus be described as perpetrating a “tyrannical attack conspicuously contrary to the American sense of fair play.” Boycotting within communities during a strike was “un-Christian, un-manly and un-American.” The fundamentally offensive nature of unions was “plain to any American citizen and every supporter of equality of rights.” To any right-minded individual the “whole system [of union organization] looks wrong and un-American.” This logic was easily extended to imply that labor organizations were not only un-American in sentiment, but “agents of disorder and anarchy who are striving to undermine the authority of the government in this country through associations of workingmen.”⁶⁶ Promotion of the open shop was not limited to the in-house publications of employers’ associations. The *LA Times*, for one, had plenty to say about the open shop, hailing it as “all we have in sight which gives even the suggestion of a promise of industrial peace,” and embodying “the spirit of true Americanism.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Adamic, 181.

⁶⁶ “Million Against One: The Conspiracy to Crush the Open Shop” American Anti-Boycott Association (1904), 20; *The Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association*, 1, no. 3 (September, 1902): 6; *The Review*, National Founders Association and the National Metal Trades Association (September 1910): 13; *The Review*, National Founders Association and the National Metal Trades Association October (1910): 26; *The Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association*, 1, no. 5 (November, 1902): 182.

⁶⁷ Foner, 53.

In some sense, the open shop drive of the early twentieth century could be said to have produced the boilerplate for conservative American politics of the coming century. The ostensible classlessness of American social and economic life—where one was expected to be “an American first and a merchant, manufacturer, metal worker, or whatever else he be afterward”—was crucial to this politics of the apolitical for three interrelated reasons.⁶⁸ It allowed for the proponents of the open shop to make claims (almost always in bad faith) that they were not against labor’s right to organize *per se*, but only its misguided and disruptive tactics. It facilitated the presentation of coercive labor activity as aberrant, un-American, and unduly political. And it obfuscated the class preferences of properly political, judicial, and legislative bodies, thus furthering the myth that capital—in reality supported by legislation, judicial decisions, and police powers—was an apolitical entity. Any preferential treatment of labor by courts or legislatures could thus be dismissed and derided for interfering with the natural state of things.

Accidental Politics

The I.A.B.S.I.W. was involved in what might reasonably be characterized as an ongoing, extralegal feud with individual employers and employers’ associations motivated by punishment and retaliation as well as the immediate end of securing material gains. The Weberian argument that “the state originated not in contract, as Hobbes and Locke argued, but in tort”, a legal system of injury compensation that replaced and regularized clan vengeance seems far more compelling in the context of the early twentieth century than the employers’ fantasies of freely contracting

⁶⁸ *The Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association* 1, no. 5 (November 1902): 182.

individuals.⁶⁹ The narrative presented by those, like Burns and his employers in the N.E.A., who wished to appear neutral on the question of the rights of the laboring classes, was dependent on the framework, both legal and ideological, of freedom of contract and the individual responsibility that it implied. But the way in which the struggle between the I.A.B.S.I.W. and the N.E.A. played out, with propaganda and legal strong-arming on one side and explosions and beatings on the other, indicates that what the employers' associations claimed to be protecting was an instrumental fiction of their own making.

The I.A.B.S.I.W. did not propose an alternative to capitalism or capitalist modes of production and ownership, but it did, through coercive forms of negotiation that were not far from “collective bargaining by riot,” play a role in forcing state reorganization around questions of workplace safety, employer liability, and just compensation. The notion of individual responsibility that subtended the open shop labor contract was difficult to reconcile with a workplace accident rate that was quantitatively higher and qualitatively different than it had been in the past. Industrialization brought higher rates of unintentional injury. Workplace accidents are arguably part of work, but pre-industrial production made causation easier to determine. By the turn of the century, normal economic activity contained, as a structural necessity, high rates of human casualties with no identifiable, individual cause.⁷⁰ Workers recognized and addressed this difference. At the thirteenth annual convention of the I.A.B.S.I.W., it was noted that:

The old stage driver stood the same show in the courts for redress for bodily injury done to him in following his occupation as does the engineer on the fast limited train...The motorman on the fast speeding street car...has no better chance for relief in court if he is injured ...than had the mule driver of a street car

⁶⁹ John Fabian Witt, *The Accidental Republic: Crippled Workingman, Destitute Widows, and the Remaking of American Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 7.

⁷⁰ Witt, 5.

a few years ago. Men who labor today must take chances which they never had to take before.⁷¹

Ironworkers were the victims of what the I.W.W. referred to as ‘capitalist sabotage’ in exceptionally high numbers. At the turn of the century, approximately one in every thousand Americans died in industrial accidents each year but the accident rate for dangerous industries could be considerably higher.⁷² For local 1 in Chicago alone, the accident roll from 1905 included twenty-three dead, seventeen fully disabled, and eighty-three merely injured. During the same year, 16 died in the construction of a bridge over the Mississippi River and fifty-five were killed during the construction of the Blackwell’s Island Bridge in New York.⁷³ The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in the years between 1910 and 1914, “structural steel workers suffered twelve deaths per one thousand workers and 353.2 accidents involving permanent or temporary disability.”⁷⁴ The union itself reported one death for every 199 members over a period of nineteen years.⁷⁵ Non-fatal accidents are difficult to quantify, but the rate of temporary and permanent disability was high, and it is likely that structural steel and ironworkers were not exaggerating when they claimed to be doing the most dangerous work. When accident insurance became more widespread in the 1920s, rates for ironworkers were between twenty-five and fifty percent higher than other trades. For a sense of what ‘more dangerous’ meant at the time, at least forty-two percent of workers involved in operating trains

⁷¹ 13th Annual Convention of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers, *The Bridgeman’s Magazine*.

⁷² Witt, 3.

⁷³ Schapiro, 76-77.

⁷⁴ Fine, 12.

⁷⁵ Fine, 12.

were injured on the job annually. According to one report structural ironwork was not only more dangerous than other construction trades but more so than coal-mining as well.⁷⁶

The radicalism precipitated by a life-threatening workplace produced a distinct and articulate analysis of class difference and exploitation that was both inspired by and intellectually organized around the danger of the job. The resulting critique was sometimes strikingly similar to the one proposed by the writings on sabotage produced by the otherwise philosophically distant I.W.W.—that industrial capitalism favored, as a necessity of profit, property over human life. It even echoed and particularized the claim made in the I.W.W. manifesto that “the moment the laborer no longer yields the maximum of profits he is thrown upon the scrap pile, to starve alongside the discarded machine.”⁷⁷ During the 1909 annual convention of the I.A.B.S.I.W., Minnesota’s State Commissioner of Labor, W.E. McEwen welcomed the men in attendance with an account of the “human wreckage in industry”:

Let a derrick fall, let a hoisting engine break, let an accident happen in the construction of a building, the derrick is replaced, the old engine is repaired and construction again takes place, yet man fills the most important part of the plan, and if he dies his family must pay the penalty.⁷⁸

Evoking an image of the coal fire that warmed workers during the Minnesota winter, McEwen continued with his morbid calculation:

The cost of exploring, the successful and the unsuccessful, the failures; all this...is figured scientifically. The labor, the dividends of stock and watered stock, everything is figured in the cost of production of a ton of coal except the human life that was spent in its mining, and the best statistics in this country show

⁷⁶ Fine 12-13.

⁷⁷ *Industrial Manifesto*, see Appendix B.

⁷⁸ Reports of the Officers and Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the International Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, Supplement to *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* (October 1909): 654.

that there are five men who are killed in every thousand miners in the United States.⁷⁹

The destruction of human life via industrial ‘accident’ does not excuse violence on the part of union members, but it deflates to a significant degree, employer claims to any asymmetry in the enactment of violence. Even when looked at from the narrow perspective of accident rates, the existence of a pacific employer class was impossible because profits were bound up with worker deaths.

Union leadership and membership was hardly innocent of counterviolence. The I.A.B.S.I.W. did not limit their violence to inert possessions of the employing class but regularly turned aggressive tactics toward other workers. Its members visited incredible violence on non-union labor with the implicit and sometimes explicit support of union leadership for the purpose of securing job sites for union members. The dynamiting campaign that lasted from roughly 1905-1911 may not have resulted in casualties, but a number of people were killed and scores seriously injured and permanently disabled by I.A.B.S.I.W. ‘entertainment committees’. If the violence of the rank and file can be explained, if not excused, by a combination of economic desperation and a working culture of physical risk, the I.A.B.S.I.W.’s active support, in the form of bail and legal fees, suggests that this violence cannot be explained away as an emotional or environmental response. Rather, it was, like its employer counterpart, consciously cultivated and institutionally supported. Both violence and its authorization were integral to building solidarity and increasing power—not just wages. Under the direction of President Frank Ryan and Treasurer J.J. McNamara, the I.A.B.S.I.W. was actively and consciously fighting against the open shop with strategies that were only superficially distinct from those of its opponents. The

⁷⁹ Reports, 655.

ends—making non-union construction more expensive and turning the open shop into a liability—justified the means. And the means included the destruction of machinery and structures by explosion as well as attacks on individual workers. Attacks on ‘snakes’ and ‘scabs’ working on non-union job sites were vicious and regular. Members were actively recruited by union business agents and paid to assault non-union workers and foremen. In 1906, members of the I.A.B.S.I.W. cut the guy ropes of a derrick on an open shop job and violently assaulted a guard. At least one strikebreaker died from a head injury inflicted by a union member, another strikebreaker was thrown into the Hudson River, and a foreman’s face was badly burnt with ammonia thrown at him by a man on roller skates.⁸⁰

Whatever the moral implications of dynamite, beatings, and extortion by ethically dubious walking delegates, this combination of strategies seemed to be working in the union’s favor. In 1900, the union had 1,731 members. This increased to 11,000 in 1902 and 16,000 in 1903.⁸¹ Certainly demand and material innovations in construction had an impact on these numbers, but the rough strategies employed for union control were, at the very least, not hurting. As one member remarked in regards to extortion charges brought against delegate Parks of Chicago, he “‘may have made a bunch of money’...but ‘he didn’t get it out of us.’”⁸² According to John Commons, neither small-scale, local sabotage nor the McNamara scandal hurt organized labor. The membership rolls of the A.F.L. swelled between 1911 and 1913 and the Iron Workers’ membership grew from 10,928 in 1911-12 to 13,189 in 1913-14.⁸³

⁸⁰ Fine, 40.

⁸¹ Fine, 24.

⁸² Fine, 19.

⁸³ Commons, et al., 325.

Conclusion

What emerged from the struggle over the open shop during the first decades of the twentieth century was a definition of organizational legitimacy based on non-violence. Open shop propaganda claiming neutrality on the right of workers to organize was a significant contribution to this legacy. An important historical truth is obfuscated by the argument that violence was a common, but not traditional, representative or official aspect of labor organizing. Both the employers' claims to an affiliation between anarchism, terrorism, and union violence and labor's claims that its sanctioned methods were non-violent, evolved into a conception of legitimacy that misrecognizes power as something equally distributed among individuals that can therefore be obtained through simple numbers. It is a fantasy that is consonant with a more general belief in electoral democracy and a liberal consensus that was, in reality, completely irrelevant to organized labor at the time. This is arguably still the case and evident in the aversion to even legitimate forms of labor militancy such as strikes. It is important to recognize the structural nature of violence during this earlier period and the open shop origins of the discourse linking non-violence to legitimacy. Organized labor's power developed from and remains solidly anchored in its capacity for coercive enforcement. This is not to say that coercive enforcement requires assault and sabotage, but coercion is in the very nature of organized labor. Richard Hofstadter famously claimed that Americans "have a remarkable lack of memory where violence is concerned." In the case of labor history, this amnesia performs a useful double function. It forgets the numerous forms of violence and expropriation at the heart of capital accumulation and the subsequent and often violent enforcement of those property interests. And it forgets the crucial role that counterviolence played in attenuating that accumulation and control. The reason

for the belief that America has a “history but not a tradition of domestic violence” argues Hofstadter, is that our “violence lacks both an ideological and a geographic center; it lacks cohesion; it has been too various, diffuse, and spontaneous to be forged into a single, sustained inveterate hatred shared by entire social classes.” The decades of industrial violence that began the twentieth century suggest that this is rather far off the mark.

Chapter 3: From Everett to Everest:

The 1917 Pacific Northwest Lumber Strike

Sabotage in the woods might mean working slow on the job....Sabotage may mean misplacing the tools where they are not easily found...Sabotage may mean that logs are cut shorter than the required size...Sabotage may mean the driving of spikes into the logs or even the trees...We know sabotage does not appeal to you....Remember your mutual interests with friends Weyerhauser, Kirby, Clark and Long...You could be where Kirby and Weyerhauser are, if you had stolen the timberlands first. And don't use sabotage. For the love of your boss and the glory of your soul, don't use sabotage.

--*Industrial Worker*, "Don't Do It, Boys!" December 26, 1912.

"Perhaps the real history of the rise of the lumber industry in the Pacific Northwest will never be written," mused Walker Smith in the opening lines of his account of the Everett Massacre. "But if that true history be written, it will tell no tales of 'self-made men' who toiled in the woods and mills amid poverty and privation and finally rose to fame and affluence by their own unaided effort."¹ The event that became known as the Everett Massacre was, like most violent, namable eruptions, singular only for its concentration in space and time. It was one incident among many during a period of relentless and extreme vigilante violence against striking workers, I.W.W. members, and their allies in the town of Everett, Washington. It lasted for months. And these months, in turn, were only one brief episode in the near constant violence against labor organizers and the I.W.W. in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

On May Day of 1916, unionized shingle workers affiliated with the A.F.L. walked off of their jobs when a wage increase, demanded in relation to the rising price in shingles, did not

¹ Walker Smith, *The Everett Massacre* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1918), 1.

materialize. What followed was unexceptional: mill owners hired armed, professional strike-breakers to attack pickets and escort scabs, while local law enforcement arrested striking workers. By the middle of the summer, most men had returned to work without union recognition let alone pay increases, and the few militant holdouts were repeatedly subjected to physical attack. On August 19, police escorted a small picket onto a bridge where they were hemmed in and attacked by hired thugs armed with brass knuckles and black jacks.²

It was at this time that the I.W.W. began organizing by sending James Rowan and other street speakers to Everett in an attempt to reignite the strike and roll back the apparent open shop victory of the Everett lumbermen. The speakers were beaten, arrested, jailed, and forced to run gauntlets upon release. More speakers arrived and the process was repeated. On October 30, a boat carrying forty Wobblies arrived at Everett. They were immediately arrested. “That night deputies removed the prisoners from jail and took them to Beverley Park, a local forest preserve, where they stripped their captives and made the Wobblies run a gauntlet of several hundred vigilantes.”³ It was this event that was dubbed the Everett Massacre. In response, 250 Wobblies chartered the steamer *Verona* from Seattle to Everett where they were met at the dock and fired on by armed deputies. Melvyn Dubofsky put the number of dead and wounded at two and twenty-two respectively; Walker Smith claimed five dead and thirty-two severely wounded. An unknown number fell overboard and drowned. The casualties on the side of the deputies were roughly equivalent. Smith claims that it was fired by an *agent-provocateur* aboard the boat. Thirty-Eight Wobblies were charged with unlawful assembly and seventy-four with first-degree

² Smith, 31.

³ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969), 340.

murder. The deputies led by Snohomish County Sherriff Donald McRae were not charged with crimes.⁴ This was the atmosphere in which the lumber strike of 1917 began.

Smith's description of the lumber industry is pointed but hardly wrong. The lumber industry, he wrote, was built with:

...the theft of public lands; with the bribery and corruption of public officials; with the destruction and 'sabotage' if the term may be so misused of the property of competitors; with base treachery and double dealing among associated employers; and with extortion and coercion of the actual worker...by any and every means from the 'robbersary' company stores to the commission of deliberate murder.⁵

The 1917 strike was staged in an industry plagued by crises of overproduction, reliant on federal land grants, and addicted to the environmentally devastating practice of rapid clear-cutting. It was dependent on cheap, itinerant labor facilitated by urban employment agencies that exploited the peripheral location of jobs to their fullest. And when the *de facto* coercion of subsistence wages failed to produce the labor power necessary to turn stumpage into use value, the U.S. Military sent conscripted men to fill in the void. The struggle culminated in the creation of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumberman, which grew out of the War Department's Spruce Production Division. The S.P.D. was placed under the direction of Colonel Brice P. Disque, a former prison warden in Jackson, Michigan who had done several tours in the Philippines. This military, quasi-union procured "by mid-1918 an oversize division of more than 25,000 enlisted soldiers, also in uniform who were armed with both rifle and woodcutting implements, and who were... subject to martial discipline. The bulk of the rank and file...was

⁴ Smith, 106.

⁵ Smith, 1.

composed of more than 100,000 civilians, mostly loggers and mill and kiln hands, who subjected themselves to the paramilitary authority of the union's leaders more or less voluntarily."⁶

The war had augmented labor's bargaining power. For the I.W.W., the needs of the state during wartime threw the importance of labor into relief. American soldiers could not "fight without food; without lumber, the military could not house recruits, transport them across the ocean, or challenge German pilots for control of the skies; without copper, production of military related hardware was hampered."⁷ For its part, the A.F.L. saw an opportunity to ally itself with progressive tendencies within the Wilson administration against the growing popularity of the I.W.W.

The itinerant nature of the lumber industry—not just its workers—required rapid construction of temporary camps that increased the problem of unsanitary and otherwise untenable living situations. It also produced its own incentive for overproduction—the rapid deterioration of lumber camps and equipment due to shoddy construction was an added reason for the policy of cutting as much wood as quickly as possible regardless of market demand.⁸ Thus the industry's two largest problems—rebellious workers and the inability to sell excess product at any sort of profit—were coproduced by its very organization. As one government report put it: "part of the problem is that of eliminating the business cycle."⁹

The wartime intervention in lumber began as an effort on the part of the War Department to procure spruce for aircraft. When this production process was interrupted by an intractable

⁶ Harold M. Hyman, *Soldiers and Spruce: Origins of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, 1963), 2.

⁷ Dubofsky, 359.

⁸ Cloice R. Howd, U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Industrial Relations in the West Coast Lumber Industry* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 26.

⁹ Howd, 28.

labor force newly empowered by an increased demand for their labor-time, a massive apparatus encompassing the military, the academy, local law enforcement, patriotic and vigilante organizations, and employers' associations, was set in motion for the purpose of obtaining dependable supplies of lumber.

The 1917 lumber strike was the last major show of organizing force by the I.W.W. It was at this moment that sabotage virtually disappeared from the organization's literature and, it has since been assumed, from its tactical repertoire. The lumber strike's success and the removal of the word sabotage from the *Industrial Worker* has been used as evidence of the strategy's marginal role. But this conclusion is unsupportable. The theory continued to circulate and there is a fair amount of evidence that the practice of sabotage in lumber camps was a regular occurrence. In a less direct, but no less important way, the arguments contained in sabotage literature concerning the rightful ownership and theft of property and the concept of 'capitalist sabotage' permeated the conflict between radical loggers and mill hands and their employers.

The Land

Timber procurement and production has been characterized by continual conflict and the ever-expanding frontiers of environmental destruction. By the early twentieth century, the giants of the U.S. lumber industry had depleted the abundant stores of timber in the Midwest and moved their operations south and west. The transformation of trees into lumber, and lumber into airplanes for a burgeoning American and Allied Air Force, was first and foremost the transformation of nature into value. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the Northwestern states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho contained an estimated eleven billion board feet of spruce. But these board feet remained locked into scattered, if dense, stands of spruce trees. Forests could not be converted into the salable commodity "board feet" without a

labor force. And they *would* not be converted unless board feet were profitable. Until the demand for airplane lumber emerged, the industry had ignored the relatively inaccessible spruce for far more readily available fir trees to supply lumber for ships and military cantonments. Interspersed with other species, and often requiring the construction of expensive railroads, spruce trees presented a far greater expense than lumberman cared to invest.¹⁰ The lumber industry was producing approximately five million board feet annually at the start of the war and in spite of requests from France and England (as well as sales to Germany through neutral third parties) for massive amounts of milled spruce, the industry had little incentive to increase the production of an historically unstable commodity at a moment when it had become so precious.¹¹

The rudimentary infrastructure of the lumber industry was not organized around spruce production, and logging roads therefore had no relation to spruce stands. The industry needed to be persuaded to considerably reorganize their operations to substantially increase the production of this particular type of lumber. Jason W. Moore has argued that capitalism “is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is a way of organizing nature.”¹² Rising exploitation depends on the appropriation of what he calls “cheap natures”: labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials. The state does not aid capitalism by offering materials for production, it produces capitalism by facilitating the appropriation of “cheap natures” including, as a structural necessity, cheap labor for the transformation of cheap land into surplus value. The state procurement of timberlands—followed in this case by the literal state procurement of labor from the military—

¹⁰ Robert E. Ficken, *The Forested Land: A History of Lumbering in Western Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 141.

¹¹ Hyman, 44; Ficken, 139.

¹² Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015), 2.

was not a one-way process of discovery, enclosure, and transfer from the state to private industry but itself a matter of state-making.

...the capitalist state does not *have* a relationship with nature, it *is* a relationship with nature. Capital's metabolic relationship with non-human nature is also always a relationship with the state, and mediated through the state. And, the capitalist state has always been an "environment making" institution. Managing, mediating, delivering, and producing the environment is a core and foundational feature of the modern, territorially defined, capitalist state. Furthermore, the state is central to the value form. If the utilities of non-human nature are important sources of wealth, which they are, then it is the state that delivers these to capital.¹³

The lumber industry originally consisted of many small producers but by the late nineteenth century it had begun to be dominated by a handful of large firms. The high cost of maintaining private roads and other initial investments contributed to this concentration, but the lumber wealth produced by the Northwest was a matter of state sponsored infrastructure and land procurement from the start. The completion of the transcontinental railroad system coincided with the depletion of forests in the Midwest and provided the impetus to firms with a "cut and get out" philosophy of resource exploitation," such as Weyerhaeuser to move their operations west.¹⁴ The firms benefited from railroad land grants but "lumber companies and speculators also amassed timberlands by manipulating legislation... [increasing] their holdings under the Homestead and Timber and Stone acts."¹⁵

The Weyerhaeuser Timber Company is a textbook example of state sponsored procurement. "Eighty percent of [their] land [two thirds of which was in the Northwest] originally had been part of the Northern Pacific land grant. Thus, the land grant policy of

¹³ Christian Parenti, "The Environment Making State: Territory, Nature and Value" *Antipode* 47 (2015): 830.

¹⁴ Richard A. Rajala, "Bill and the Boss: Labor Protest, Technological Change and the Transformation of the West Coast Logging Camp" *Forest and Conservation History* 33 (1989): 169.

¹⁵ Rajala, 169.

Congress can be charged with direct responsibility for the two or three greatest private holdings of timber wealth in the country.”¹⁶ By 1910, Weyerhaeuser was one of three owners controlling a large majority of the timber in the states of Oregon and Washington, the Southern Pacific and Northern Pacific railroads being the other two. Among them, they controlled 191 billion board feet. Compare this to eighty-three other owners who had accumulated control over the not insubstantial one billion board feet each.¹⁷

The lumber industry is one of the more striking examples of the state’s role in delivering value to members of the economic elite because here the bundle of rights being conferred was actual land. And through its many and various uses and users, the land generated an entanglement of legal rights, territorial claims, governmental regulations, and concomitant evasions that shaped the natural and social landscape in ways that were concrete and visible.

The process by which lumberman acquired and harvested farmable timber was varied. It involved many different purchasing arrangements, holding and development agreements, and relationships with state and federal governments. Acquisition of lands occurred across a spectrum of legality from fraudulent entries made under the 1863 Homestead Act to simple theft of wood from public lands. The first non-indigenous interventions in the landscape of the Northwest were made by farmers. The area was steadily populated beginning in the mid-nineteenth century by a steady flow of migrants who filed claims on land under the Donation Land Law for up to 320 un-surveyed acres or who purchased up to 160 acres of surveyed land for \$1.25 per acre under the Preemption Act of 1841. Land laws were subsequently altered and varied from state to state, but the distribution of state-owned land favored farming and made the

¹⁶ Roy E. Appleman, “Timber Empire from the Public Domain” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 26 (1939): 193-208.

¹⁷ Vernon Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York: Farrar & Rhinehart, Inc., 1945): 101.

acquisition of land for lumbering comparatively difficult.¹⁸ Forests, according to Richard White, “represented a special failure of the American land system.” Under the federal incentive system, prairie land was quickly settled, but seeing only farmland trees was conceived of as an obstacle on the road to productivity and profit. Federal laws reflected this view and “bore little relation to the realities of [regions] where the forests were the areas of real wealth.”¹⁹ Lumbermen therefore acquired stands of timber through fraud or simple theft—sending streams of dummy entry men to make small claims or logging forests for which they had no title.

The Strike

In July of 1916, the I.W.W. held a conference in Seattle during which they decided to devote considerable energy to an organizing drive in the lumber industry. The strike officially started on log drives in Idaho and Montana on April 1st, 1917, followed by a walk out at the Sand Point Camp in Idaho in June. They then called a strike for the entire Spokane district (Eastern Washington, Idaho, and Western Montana). On July 9th, owners of camps and mills throughout the Northwest formed the Lumberman’s Protective Association and its members agreed to fine anyone who granted the eight-hour day \$500. On July 14th, industry-wide strikes were called by the A.F.L. and the I.W.W. Both unions demanded the eight-hour day, higher wages, and sanitary working and living conditions. By late July, the strike began to immediately interfere with cantonment construction and ship carpenters in Grey’s Harbor refused to handle lumber from ten-hour mills. Meanwhile, employers refused, under any condition, to grant the eight-hour workday.²⁰

¹⁸ Richard White, *Land Use, Environment and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 37-38.

¹⁹ White, 79.

²⁰ Howd, 69-70.

The strikes involved at least 40,000 workers and cut production by four fifths.²¹ Another estimate puts the shutdown at 75-90 percent of capacity for mills and camps in Oregon and Washington for the month of July.²² The strike officially ended in the fall of the same year, but members of the I.W.W. continued to ‘strike on the job’. After returning to work they “restricted production...They loafed, they pretended ignorance...they perpetrated ‘accidents,’ and they acted as though their eight-hour day demand had been won, quitting work after eight hour stints.”²³ The I.W.W. posed a more substantial threat to lumber interests than the A.F.L. both because of its popularity in the industry but also because the practice of sabotage continued well after strikes were ended.²⁴

Sabotage was central to the 1917 lumber strike. Like any event, the strike had a long a complex organizational history and the reaction to it formed by equally extensive relationships and competing needs. But the flurry of government reports, attempts to force employers to negotiate and, ultimately, the creation of the military workforce and quasi-union of the Loyal Legion was, in substantial measure, a reaction to worker sabotage. Wartime market demands, obdurate lumbermen’s associations, pressure from so-called ‘legitimate’ labor unions, and the efforts of progressive reformers were instrumental to the eventual institution of an eight-hour day and workplace reforms. But all interested parties were motivated in some degree by the real and alleged use of sabotage. It was the strategy of ‘striking on the job’ that proved impossible to circumvent by anything less than the total eradication of the I.W.W. within the industry and this

²¹ Joshua Freeman, “Militarism, Empire, Labor Relations: The Case of Brice P. Disque” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80, (2007): 108.

²² Robert E. Ficken, “The Wobbly Horrors: Pacific Northwest Lumbermen and the Industrial Workers of the World, 1917-1918” *Labor History* 24, no. 3 (1983): 329.

²³ Robert Tyler, “The United States Government as Union Organizer: The Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 4 (1960): 438.

²⁴ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1916).

involved a far more extensive intervention in labor relations than mere regulation of wages, hours, and physical conditions. Furthermore, sabotage was galvanizing. Its elimination provided a common purpose for lumbermen and the state where there was otherwise, no common interests. Sabotage, as both a practice and a discourse—as a real threat as well as a repository of paranoia—permeated the conflict and its resolution.

Sabotage, in its non-military usage, was a philosophy derived from the actions of workers that confronted capitalist property relations on their own terms—that is, as an assertion of legitimate control by force rather than a negotiation within the logic of a pre-existing regime. The definition may have been broad, but its meaning was developed by a revolutionary organization that did not, on principle, acknowledge the legitimacy of private property. And this notion of property extended to its criticisms of the War, which it held to be an imperialist project for the benefit of capitalists alone. Patriotism not only failed to be an incentive for cooperation, it was an added reason to prevent the production of goods for military uses. If ownership was control, then sabotage was a direct assault on the very idea of ownership—a sort of pre-figurative expropriation of the means of production justified by a philosophy that recognized private property as a type of theft. Or, at the very least, the preferential transfer of wealth to a privileged few.

Words like ‘theft’ were not, in this instance, rhetorical hyperbole. Large swathes of Northwest timberlands were sold to lumber interests, and the railroads that made them accessible for a song, and transformed into wealth through sales to the state that had procured them in the first place. Sabotage was not a tactic limited to the dispute within the lumber industry, but its meaning was thrown into stark relief by the configuration of this particular landscape and the explicitly tautological nature of lumber wealth creation. The setting—vast old-growth forests in a

region where the transformation of land and trees into fungible commodities continues to be violently contested—is both evocative and significant. A forest, surveyed, valued, and appropriated by the state is not a theoretical commons but a sited one.

The violence of capitalism was graphically inscribed on the bodies of workers in all sectors of the lumber industry. Evidence for the I.W.W.'s assertion that 'capitalist sabotage' was characterized by violence against people was abundant in the woods of the Northwest. Thus 'worker sabotage' which only aimed to destroy the property and profits of the capitalist class, found ample sources of justification. Death on the job was frequent. Even the relentlessly positive *Four L Bulletin*, which printed death notices along with other regional, industry related news was unable to wholly avoid the gruesome reality produced by a landscape of concentrated exploitation. In a single issue of this monthly publication, we learn that Paul Delebasich, aged thirty, was instantly killed when "caught in the rigging and drawn into the drum of a donkey engine at camp 1 of the Aberdeen Lumber & Shingle company;" Thomas Hall was "instantly killed when hit by a flying log;" Jack Olson "fell eighty feet to his death...when he lost his grip on a line;" Hugh Rogers "fell into a sawdust bin and was suffocated;" John Severson was "struck by branches of a falling tree;" Dan Smith "suffered a compound fracture of both legs...when struck by a flying cable;" Sam Nassi "received a fatal injury from the fall of a tree;" Quinn W. Farr "fell under a logging train while attempting to make a coupling;" and Victor Suhonen was killed "when struck in the head by a line which snapped in two."²⁵

Death notices were printed, but we can only speculate on the number of lost fingers and limbs that could result from the work of lumberjacks and shingle weavers. Smith provides a

²⁵ *4L Bulletin* 3, no. 5 (May 1921), 24.

description of working conditions in the shingle mills that indicate the immanent dismemberment that faced workers on a daily basis:

For ten hours a day the sawyer faces two teathed steel discs whirling around two hundred times a minute. To the one on the left he feeds heavy blocks of cedar, reaching over with his left hand to remove the rough shingles it rips off. He...cannot stop to see what his left hand is doing. His eyes are too busy examining the shingles for knot holes to be cut out by the second saw whirling in front of him...the saw on his left sets the pace. If the singing blade rips fifty rough shingles off the block every minute, the sawyer must reach over to its teeth fifty times in sixty seconds...he must reach over, turn the shingle, trim its edge on the gleaming saw in front of him, cut out the narrow strip containing the knot hole with two quick movements of his right hand and toss the completed board down the chute to the packers.²⁶

Erik Loomis has argued that the “impact of the timber industry on workers’ bodies [at] the meeting point of labor and nature” motivated men otherwise “indifferent to larger theoretical questions but desperate to improve their conditions” to join the I.W.W. and engage in organized actions. Borrowing a concept from Rob Nixon, he suggests that the lumber industry exemplifies a “slow violence... a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight...an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” But nothing about the violence of the lumber industry was slow or covert. Being dragged into a donkey engine and crushed to death is hardly comparable to lead poisoning. Indeed, the operative word seems to be ‘sudden’. We might also want to ask what made this violence invisible. Invisible to whom exactly? Certainly not the lumber workers who, as Loomis details in the opening paragraphs of his book, contracted gonorrhoea in their *eyes*.²⁷

Workers bodies *were* subject to brutal violence. Working conditions were not a theoretical issue and this is precisely why the I.W.W. placed bodily violence by capitalists at the

²⁶ Smith, 27.

²⁷ Loomis, 11, 18.

center of the class analysis elaborated in its writings on sabotage. The separation between theoretical issues and environmental and bodily concerns did not—structurally, it could not—exist within the framework of this analysis. There were certainly any number of lumberman who simply did not want to get gonorrhea of the eye or meet a speedy death by donkey engine, but these were the same issues being addressed by the A.F.L.; the same issues raised by progressive reformers; issues that could easily be solved without a theory of class conflict, a discourse of worker control, a critique of ownership or revolutionary rhetoric of any kind. This distinction leaves us to explain what exactly the I.W.W.’s appeal was and how physical suffering was transformed into impressive collective action against organized capital and the state.

In the woods of the Northwest in 1917, the I.W.W. was apparently far more appealing than the A.F.L.—so appealing that it required relentless suppression by police powers at all levels. It is important to attend to the material reality of a worker’s body, but I would suggest that the I.W.W. and its talk of sabotage was appealing precisely because it appealed to the workers’ minds. I.W.W. halls provided places where workers could rest and socialize, receive mail, and learn from each other about camp conditions and particularly dishonest employment agencies. They were also stocked with literature that was read, discussed, sold, and presumably repeated. The importance of sabotage was that it enunciated a revolutionary theory through bodies; it gave bodies an importance that exceeded their particular experience of pain and suffering and combined this with the material, bodily activity of interrupting and preventing production. The experience of pain alone is not an organizing tool. If anything, the experience of physical suffering tends toward alienation because of its inherently inarticulate and strictly subjective nature.²⁸ Sabotage was not an intuitive, animal reaction to physical abuse but the raising of

²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

activity to a coherent practice. It is perfectly fair to infer, as Loomis does, that physical health and well-being were more important to most workers than the revolutionary goal of overthrowing capitalism. Once the industry, under government pressure, managed to meet many of the demands for sanitation, bedding, and eight-hour workdays, enthusiasm for the I.W.W. did begin to wane. But coincidence is not causation. There were other reasons for the organization's attrition, such as the expense of legal battles, the shuttering of I.W.W. halls, sustained harassment by vigilantes, the presence of federal troops in logging camps, and the difficulty of maintaining organized struggle over time under even the best conditions. Given all of this, the conclusion that workers never had any real interest in theoretical arguments because, at the end of the day, they were seduced by clean bedding and non-rancid butter, is unsatisfying.

One could even suggest that foregrounding bodies has made the intellects of workers invisible. Of course, claiming that workers found the theoretical aspect of the I.W.W. appealing is a matter of speculation as well, but barring any concrete evidence of its rejection, it seems fair to entertain the notion that these organizing efforts had an intellectual impact. It is no less speculative to assert that they did not. And the former assumption has the virtue of pushing against the notion, wildly popular at the time, of itinerant workers as irrational 'timber beasts' whose immediate, physical needs comprised the horizon of their intellectual lives.

For there is no denying that the 1917 strike was successful even if the organizing and coercion in the form of strikes, slow-downs, and sabotage—both real and threatened—did ultimately accomplish its ends through non-union institutions and organizations. The proportion of government reaction in 1917 is telling. The I.W.W. had struck the lumber industry in 1912 and 1915, but the 1917 strike was a “decisive factor impelling the Wilson administration toward... forceful repression of the I.W.W.,” and thus the last major action before the dragnet

prosecution of Wobblies under the Espionage Act in 1917.²⁹ It also produced prosecutions under Idaho's recently instituted criminal syndicalism legislation—laws aimed specifically at sabotage and its advocacy. Of course, pamphlets and revolutionary oratory were not the singular motor of the strike. Wartime labor shortages combined with rising profits—the fruits of full economic recovery from the Great Depression of 1873-1896—put organized labor in a relatively powerful position.³⁰ While the legal and political campaign against radicals was well underway by 1917 (citizens' alliances such as the American Protective League and business associations such as the National Association of Manufacturers had already formed) the threat posed by a revolutionary labor union was now, because of the war and the success of the strike, fully felt. The lumber strike produced an environment within which the state and radical organized labor both experienced themselves in their fullest expression of power and their coexistence, never without serious and violent conflict, suddenly became untenable. Sabotage, difficult to prove and quantify in practice, presumably encouraged by word of mouth among itinerant workers took on a metonymic function for the forces of repression and large segments of the public at large. It absorbed anxieties about domestic and foreign threats alike and the word began to slip between a military and an economic register. By “employing sabotage against the employers,” Carleton Parker suggested “the Wobblies in effect were serving the Kaiser.”³¹

Progressive Allies

The lumber strike did not only produce legal repression. It was characterized by serious attempts to regularize industrial relations, bring recalcitrant employers to heel, impose the eight-

²⁹ William Preston Jr. *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 95.

³⁰ Dubofsky, 358-359; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. Vol. 3. *The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor, 1900-1909* (New York: International Publishers, 1997), 12-13.

³¹ Hyman, 69.

hour workday, and address the labor question with something other than bayonets. It also occurred during a period of time when the federal government began to standardize and centralize police powers, and in many ways build the administrative state that is so often associated with the New Deal.³² At the same time that industrial conflict impelled the Wilson administration to acts of legal and military repression on a broad scale, it also generated attempts at negotiation, as well as the commission of innumerable investigations and reports on working conditions. This was, after all, a period of energetic progressive reform and the lumber industry became the site of vigorous activity by academics and military men alike.

The Cantonment Adjustment Commission was a promising endeavor that had succeeded in settling disputes with the building trades associations for the satisfactory, expedited construction of military garrisons. As its examiner on the West Coast, Parker had “successfully mediated more than two dozen actual or incipient work stoppages.”³³ U.S. entry into the War created conditions in which the anti-radicalism of Wilsonian progressives was given full vent. The repression of labor radicalism was not a simple, unilateral campaign by the government against workers in the service of individual, moneyed interests. To give a sense of how unflattering the findings of federally commissioned reports generally were to employers, one government investigation into the lumber industry was being read aloud by I.W.W. organizer James Rowan when he was arrested for street-speaking in Everett.³⁴ The Wilson administration forged earnest, if strategic, relationships with ‘legitimate’ organized labor, namely the A.F.L. at the same time that it aggressively pursued the suppression and expulsion of the radical I.W.W.

³² Capozzola, Christopher. “The Only Badge Needed is Your Patriotic Fervor.” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002).

³³ Hyman, 53.

³⁴ Foner, 523.

This was, undoubtedly, the prosecution of labor by way of radicalism, but this is significant in itself. To the extent that the state acts in the interests of capital, it is the eradication of radical critique—not simply local labor disruptions and wage demands—that is important over the long term. The ‘pure and simple’ unionism of Samuel Gompers had many of the same demands as the I.W.W. and when they both called strikes in 1917, it was for better living conditions and an eight-hour day. But the lack of a political critique made negotiations between the A.F.L. and the Wilson administration possible. Indeed, Gompers had a privileged seat at the bargaining table and publicly positioned the A.F.L. as a legitimate alternative to the I.W.W. in hopes of gaining employer and government support for his organization. It was, however, a great show of real organizing strength on the part of vocal, propagandizing, revolutionary radicals that made the consideration of such unappealing demands necessary. And sabotage—on the part of the I.W.W. and other dissatisfied laborers, as well as their obstinate employers, was arguably the impetus for this flurry of progressive intervention. In the face of on-going battles between labor and capital, the state intervened to support its own military efforts (from which business owners were profiting hand over fist) but also to force business owners towards some reasonable accommodation of labor’s demands.

The labor conditions in lumber camps and sawmills were abominable and if lumber workers themselves were not easily assimilable to a charitable notion of the deserving poor, their living conditions were so wretched that progressive sympathy was a foregone conclusion. Parker, an academic based at the University of Washington, was exemplary of the progressive tendency in Wilsonian America and his theories concerning the causes of labor unrest directly influenced Disque’s approach to stabilizing labor relations. Parker’s success in preventing work stoppages in cantonment construction won him the esteem of government officials and other academics

adjacent to the Wilson administration. In the opinion of James A.B. Scherer, an economist and trusted advisor of Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, Parker was “probably a genius.”³⁵ Scherer was the first to alert Disque to the gravity of the Wobbly threat in the Northwest, and it was largely through him that the soon to be director of the Spruce Production Division was introduced to labor-management relations affecting the lumber industry.³⁶ Scherer held a distinct and extreme anti-union and anti-Wobbly position and relayed to Disque his assessment of the extent of the I.W.W.’s penetration into western logging camps and mills:

By his analysis, a dangerous proportion of the card-carrying I.W.W. members in the Northwest were hardened, devoted missionaries of the gospel of class warfare. Their activities among migratory California farm workers had resulted in bitter strikes only the year before. With the war declaration, Wobblies were responding to their pacifist principles by acts of sabotage in factories and arson in the fields.³⁷

Scherer’s proposed solution to this was the use of federal troops to repress the I.W.W. menace. Even Scherer was distressed by the attitude of lumber operators towards their employees and could clearly see the role that working conditions and low wages played in the disproportionately high number of strikes in that region of the country. Parker took this position even further, antagonizing his superiors with the suggestion that employers and obsolete labor laws were actually at fault for the disruptions. He approached his mediation work from the perspective that employers and employees must cooperate in the service of the public interest—which was paramount and should in no case be undermined by the profit motives and particular interests of either party. This won him the admiration of Gompers and the ire of the Lumberman’s Protective Association. Parker, despite apparent sympathy for the plight of workers in some of the worst

³⁵ Hyman, 53.

³⁶ Hyman, 49.

³⁷ Hyman, 45.

working and living conditions imaginable, was in reality a staunch anti-Wobbly and tepid pro-A.F.L. intellectual whose major concern was an end to class conflict by way of its erasure. The underlying problem, as he saw it, was not exploitation but a failure of individual, humanistic sympathy. The belligerents in the class war simply needed to meet face to face as individuals in order to “emerge from the generalized abstractions of ‘boss’ and ‘worker.’”³⁸

The particular form of Parker’s sympathy, expressed in a hybrid social theory combining popular Freudian analysis and Social Darwinism, is residually apparent in what might be thought of as a nascent but robust welfare scheme for the regularization of labor that resulted in company towns replacing many of the ramshackle temporary camps. Like Loomis, Parker was concerned with workers bodies and the environmental factors that threatened them. The overall project of the Loyal Legion bore the imprint of this philosophy of cooperation and concern with worker well-being. But Parker’s worldview was built on a belief in the pathological nature of revolutionary workers movements and the degenerate psychology that they displayed, rendering the most provisional consideration of their arguments and actions unnecessary. The labor problem, he wrote “is one of character-formation.” In the short term, western labor troubles needed to be solved for the war effort, but “the importance of the western labor problem is that a human, irrational, de-mechanized, dynamite-using labor type rose and functioned.”³⁹ In Parker’s mind, the “startling” labor turnover and the whole range of union organizing activities from the formal demand for a closed shop to unofficial slowdowns, was the expression of subconscious desires that were not so much aggravated by working conditions, but more accessible and apparent because of the primitive nature and condition of the western worker. In other words, the

³⁸ Hyman, 55.

³⁹ Carleton H. Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 7.

‘hobo’ was exempt from the repressive forces of civilization. In his capacity as advocate and functional mediator, Parker emphasized the importance of sanitation and a dignified level of compensation as solutions to the problem of recalcitrant workers. But the intention was not to provide just compensation. It was explicitly aimed at repression, albeit in a Freudian idiom. The so-called “bindle-stiffs” and “timber beasts” tended “by dissociation from social rule” to “[give] some liberty and dominance to the more primitive desires of the sub-conscious.”⁴⁰

The program of education and domestication (in the most ‘successful’ cases the literal emplacement in the domicile) taken up by the Loyal Legion was, in its most sympathetic form, one of containment and discipline. Labor reformers such as Parker saw themselves as part of a civilizing mission that located the problem in the behavior and psychology of the backward, barbarian workers. Labor trouble was not a self-conscious activity. It was “not pursued because of any deep realization of the ethical or strategic significance of the issue, but because it is a means of expressing resentment at the stresses and strains of their position.” Striking and sabotage was no more than “diverted energy” or “a relief activity...tending, *curiously*, to reestablish the unionist’s dignity in his own eyes.” [Emphasis mine.]⁴¹ The concatenation of irrational, de-mechanized, and dynamite-wielding is particularly revealing of a technocratic progressive mindset that was not limited to Parker. Howd found it unexceptional that migratory workers would be those “who lacked the mental ability to make the adjustments necessary for life in our complex social environment.”⁴²

Parker’s evolutionary theories might appear quaint or even bizarre to the contemporary reader, but a residue of this logic characterizes more recent scholarly approaches to lumber

⁴⁰ Parker, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Howd, 51.

workers as well. The overemphasis on bodies in Loomis's otherwise insightful work sits neatly in this teleological narrative of progress from the material to the intellectual. The temporary and unsanitary living quarters certainly compounded worker dissatisfaction, but it is a mistake to assume that radicalism springs from a sort of primitivism. The presence of garbage piles and open latrines says far more about negligence, exploitation, and economic desperation produced under actually existing capitalism than it does about so-called stages of economic development or anti-social psychic states.⁴³ Nor should it be assumed that the material characteristics of this deep woods 'workscape' produced intellectual or ideological isolation. Despite their remote locations, logging camps were tied to urban centers through their dependence on employment bureaus. The bureaus themselves were targets of I.W.W. organizing, and the itinerant and seasonal nature of camp labor meant that workers regularly came into contact with organizers as they passed through or wintered in cities. The free speech fights that were waged in cities along the West Coast laid an indispensable, theoretical groundwork for the 1917 strike.

Parker's diagnosis of pre-capitalist primitivism as a cause for radicalism is at odds with a vast and varied tradition of analysis that treats radicalism as a product of civilization and industrial civilization in particular. Melvyn Dubofsky has argued that Western coal mining cities were ripe for radicalism in part because of the "speed of the transition from a primitive to a more mature economy...from village to city, combined with the great instability of a mining economy." A similar analysis might be applied to lumber—an industry that required intensive capitalization, especially in the form of railroads and large mills, produced booming towns in relatively short periods of time, and therefore offered a similarly distilled and exaggerated instance of capitalist development. These communities were subject to an accelerated shift from

⁴³ Howd, 41-42.

a merely formal integration into circuits of exchange to wholesale changes in the technical means of production that made capitalism's transitions and disruptions more obvious and violent. Still, the conflict did not arise from the confrontation of modernity with pre-modern folkways. Despite a low level of mechanization before 1920, lumber was an industry organized around large fixed investments that encouraged rapid deforestation, regular crises of overproduction, and abnormally severe incentives to keep wages as low as possible.⁴⁴ An itinerant seasonal workforce was not an externality but a necessity. Subject to extreme profit fluctuations and production processes that could be idled for long periods by inclement weather, the ability to hire and fire crews at will was essential to the industry's success. Only with the introduction of overhead yarding technology requiring more organized work by teams, did the lumberman's habit of quitting without notice become extremely bothersome to employers. The convulsive rapidity of extractive social development suggested by Dubofsky is echoed in Robert Tyler's suggestion that the history of the I.W.W. in the Northwest "reveals how a pioneer American society adapted, with some pain and confusion, to rapid social change."⁴⁵

This still implies, however, a progression through a phase of initial social upheaval that is perhaps misleading. And it ignores the role of land in a mundane sense. In his analysis of the Everett situation, Smith astutely links "prolonged struggle" to a process of enclosure:

So long as there was in the United States a large and open frontier to be had for the taking there could be no very prolonged struggle against an owning class...But on coming to what had been the frontier and finding a forest reserve with range riders and guards on its boundaries to prevent trespassing; on looking back and seeing all land and opportunities taken; on turning again to the forest reserve and finding a foreman of the lumber trust within its borders offering wages in lieu of a home, it was inevitable that a conflict should occur.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Jensen, 101.

⁴⁵ Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 1967), 3.

⁴⁶ Smith, 12.

The lumber industry was thus exemplary of an economic and social system subject to recurring crises of overproduction that paradoxically undermines subsistence, constructed on an edifice of primitive accumulation through the enclosure of land. The industry did not suffer these crises so much as it was built on them, even *by* them. In the late nineteenth century, stumpage values were rapidly appreciating. By the 1890s, the Great Lakes region had been cut over and timber magnates “took their methods and their wealth westward.”⁴⁷ By 1915, “Douglass fir in the Northwest which had been obtained from the government at \$2.50 an acre reached a value of \$200.00 an acre.”⁴⁸ The government was selling a square *mile* of timberlands that could produce an estimated capacity of 100 million board feet (approximately \$1.5 million retail value) for a mere \$1600.00.⁴⁹ The sale of Northern Pacific grants to large lumber interests combined with the warning by conservationists (and certainly the recent memory of the Great Lakes region) that the land would soon be entirely depleted, fueled the speculative boom.⁵⁰

After 1910, however, the bubble burst. The industry was in a serious depression in the years leading up to World War I in part because of a turn to different building materials such as concrete. The result “was the building of an excessive fixed investment which became a burden on the operating industry.”⁵¹ Cutting lumber as quickly as possible was the solution, but this led to chronic overproduction.⁵² Lumber was a prime example of the perverse crisis, specific to capitalism, of “too much civilization.”

⁴⁷ Appleman, 193.

⁴⁸ Appleman 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Benjamin G. Rader, “The Montana Lumber Strike of 1917,” *Pacific Historical Review* 36 no. 2 (1967): 191.

⁵¹ Jensen, 101.

⁵² Jensen, 101.

“Don’t Do it Boys!”

According to Philip Foner, it was precisely at the moment of the 1917 strike that the I.W.W. began to distance itself from sabotage and other propagandizing efforts, such as the free speech fight toward organizing around ‘bread and butter’ demands. “From May 1917 advocacy of sabotage ceased in the *Industrial Worker*—and such concepts as ‘right or wrong does not concern us!’ In fact, they insisted that the organization could do with less propaganda and more activity.”⁵³ This is only partly true and it does not mean that sabotage ceased in practice or disappeared from the working lexicon of its membership. Government officials certainly believed that the I.W.W. continued to engage in sabotage. Cloice R. Howd, author of a report on labor relations in the lumber industry, writes that “the I.W.W. practiced sabotage, not merely the ‘conscious withdrawal of efficiency’ but the more destructive kind as well. The files of its papers from 1912 to 1917 are full of praise of sabotage and records of its successful use.”⁵⁴ Even if organizational funds were shifted from the discursive to the economic field, the conviction that employers’ property claims were illegitimate was well entrenched in the organization as was the tradition of direct action on the initiative of individual members. I.W.W. halls had been distributing literature throughout the region for years and 1916, which saw the publication of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s wildly popular pamphlet “Sabotage”, was hardly the distant past. Sabotage, furthermore, was always linked to a simple and militant theory of class that the I.W.W. never disavowed. If the word disappeared, it remains likely that the practice did not. And the basic political economic analysis—that property is a form of theft under capitalism had certainly not been eliminated.

⁵³ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. Vol. 4, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1997), 553.

⁵⁴ Howd, 68.

How ‘educated’ in the political opinions of the organization any given individual member was, is impossible to evaluate, but organizers would surely have had, at the very least, a Little Red Songbook with them. The understanding that the land was ‘stolen’, that clear-cutting was par for the course, and that workers could disrupt material output did not disappear because the word ‘sabotage’ was no longer printed in the *Industrial Worker*.

Correspondence used as evidence for the indictment of Haywood, shows that Gurley Flynn’s pamphlet remained in circulation and was actively promoted by the organization well into 1917. Evidence of sabotage in lumber camps was ample. It consisted largely of pounding foreign objects into logs before they were shipped to mills. These were objects widely available in the camps such as the foot-long spikes used for the construction of flumes or metal wedges used to manipulate the direction of felled trees. The metal objects, not visible on the surface of the log, would break saw blades and entirely disable milling machinery. Logs would also arrive at the mill cut too short for use. One foreman employed by the Panhandle Lumber Company estimated that 35 to 50 percent of the logs were cut short during the latter part of 1917.⁵⁵

Lumber was vulnerable to targeted and very costly acts of sabotage by individuals and small groups—such as cutting boards to the wrong specifications—that were not possible in other industries where worker surveillance might be facilitated by their concentration on a factory floor. Logs came to mills from multiple camps making it impossible to tell where timber was being spiked, let alone who was inserting the spikes.⁵⁶ It was also vulnerable to forms of sabotage that fell squarely within the definition of property destruction, making these actions

⁵⁵ *United States v. Haywood et. al.* “Testimony of G.N. Buffum, George Brown,” June 14, 1918, Industrial Workers of The World Papers, 107, 7: U.S. V. Haywood et al., June 14, 1918, 4011-4077, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁵⁶ *United States v. Haywood et. al.* June 14, 1918, Industrial Workers of The World Papers, 107, 7: U.S. V. Haywood et al., June 14, 1918, 4078-4079, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

more offensive and detectable (even while hiding the culprits), than its more subtle variants such as soldiering. A further indication that sabotage in some form had not ceased to be an important tactic is the strategy encouraged by the leadership late in the strike. By September 1st, afraid that the strike was becoming financially unsustainable and worried that it left their membership open to replacement by scabs, I.W.W. leaders held a referendum, the content of which remains unknown, and directed their membership to return to work and “strike on the job.”⁵⁷

Instead of doing a day’s work they practiced ‘conscientious withdrawal of efficiency,’ shifted frequently from job to job, and in some cases engaged in sabotage. But attempts to run down acts of criminal sabotage on the part of the I.W.W. proved fruitless...There was evidence, however, that individual members did resort to such practices as driving spikes into logs to break saws, wasting materials through careless work.⁵⁸

Idaho’s anti-sabotage statute suggests that these problems were widespread enough in the state. Unlike other state level anti-sabotage and criminal syndicalism laws, largely identical to one another and as general as possible, Idaho passed a law that dealt with lumber specifically:

Any person who willfully, maliciously or mischievously drives or causes to be driven or imbedded any nail, spike or piece of iron, steel or other metallic substance, or any rock or stone, into any log or timber intended to be manufactured into boards, lath, shingles or other lumber, or to be marketed for such purpose, is punishable by imprisonment in the state prison not more than five years or by imprisonment in the county jail not less than six months, or by fine not to exceed \$5000, in the discretion of the court.

This does not mean that business owners were solely concerned with punishing property destruction. Their attitude was preemptive. They were determined to prevent the circulation of ideas put forth by the I.W.W. Benjamin W. Oppenheim, the Boise attorney who drafted the Idaho law, put it this way:

⁵⁷ Jensen, 127.

⁵⁸ Jensen, 127-28.

At that time the I.W.W.s were very active in North Idaho, in addition to distributing literature, they were beginning to commit acts of sabotage. The lumber interests felt it necessary to take protective measures...My clients did not consider the poor dupes who generally committed the acts of sabotage as the real criminals, but the agitators who inspired them to acts as such. At that particular time it was more important to shut up the agitators and keep them off the job than it was to put them in a penitentiary.⁵⁹

Lumbermen also learned from their antagonists. They acknowledged that dangerous ideas continued to circulate among workers and that these ideas needed to be replaced. In a certain sense, employers began to argue with their employees about politics. In addition to actively lobbying for legislation that would criminalize the activities of Wobbly agitators, they began book drives and constructed reading rooms stocked with carefully screened material that would serve as an alternative to I.W.W. halls.⁶⁰

The lumber worker's lifestyle itself facilitated a form of disruption and delay at the point of production. Itinerancy and the abrupt departure from a job that it allowed was not necessarily an irrational response. Nor was it, as one government report speculated, a matter of "nervous disorders."⁶¹ Like other forms of sabotage it was "an ordered, even rational response to a particularly competitive example of industrial capitalism."⁶² While the living conditions in lumber camps were no less than abject, the high rates of labor turnover might productively be read "less as a reflection of loggers individual subordination than a function of the dialectic of control and resistance that characterized the employment relationship."⁶³

⁵⁹ Eldridge F. Dowel, quoted in Robert C. Sims "Idaho's Criminal Syndicalism Act: One State's Response to Radical Labor," *Labor History*, 15 (1974): 512.

⁶⁰ Richard A. Rajala, "Bill and the Boss: Labor Protest, Technological Change, and the Transformation of the West Coast Logging Camp, 1890-1930," *Journal of Forest History*, 33 (1989): 174.

⁶¹ Howd, 51.

⁶² Rajala, "Wobblies," 208.

⁶³ Rajala, "Wobblies," 209.

Labor turnover in lumber was extreme in the early twentieth century. It was estimated at 500 percent annually. Turnover became more of a problem for the lumber industry as logging underwent technological and organizational changes that incorporated aspects of scientific management and acquired some of the characteristics of factory production.⁶⁴ Logging was resistant to technological innovation and subject to seasonal vagaries, but the “overhead harvesting systems that were widespread by 1915 allowed almost continuous year-round operation.” Thus, the lumber strike came at a time when “new technology put a high premium on the ability of a crew to function as an organic production team.”⁶⁵ While the efforts of Parker and Disque bore fruit, camp and mill owners were also inspired to keep workers on the job and reduce the “conscious withdrawal of efficiency,” specifically walking off the job without notice, through their own efforts at reform. This went further than simply tidying up the camps, it required a robust program of socialization that would produce dependable, disciplined workers who could be convinced to consent to the company’s methods of production. What capital needed were workers as disciplined as those provided by the Spruce Production Division in the absence of military obligation.

It has been suggested that the absence of familial, ethnic, and other community obligations that might conflict with political commitments or otherwise encourage a certain parochialism in workers’ worldviews contributed to the timber workers’ radicalism. The footloose, hobo Wobbly, derided by bourgeois commentators for his lack of family and stability, and pitied by progressive reformers as a social misfit and idiot, was indeed a formidable social threat. Housing was not, in this context, a means of simple appeasement through the provision of

⁶⁴ Rajala, “Bill and the Boss,” 171.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

basic animal comforts but a normative project with an economic aim. This ‘lowest type of worker’, the hobo,

present[s] the really dangerous element in the labor problem. They are foot-loose rebels who no longer recognize the ordinary conventions of modern society but challenge the whole industrial system of which the relation of employer and employee forms a part. That challenge may be but the dumb resentment of the failure and outcast against the man who has succeeded, or it may be the very much more dangerous challenge of the I.W.W., which has a very positive philosophy to take the place of laissez faire and respect for private property.⁶⁶

The strategy of sabotage and striking on the job, combined with the overlapping strategy of simply quitting, left the lumbermen frustrated. It was far easier to arrest leaders, deputize vigilantes, and deport pickets than it was to locate the problem within the camp. “As the autumn wore on, the production situation became a matter of grave concern because of the need for spruce for airplane construction,” and out of this emerged the U.S. government’s first major, administrative intervention in industrial relations: The Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (4L).

The Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (4L)

Environmental conditions may have been the cause of anger and dissatisfaction on the part of lumber workers, but radicalism *per se* did not arise from bodily needs. Recall Smith’s assertion that sabotage, practiced by individuals in the absence of political coherence or class consciousness, was not terribly threatening to employers. It was the organized advocacy of sabotage, the linking of practice to theory that was truly ominous. Employers were no longer faced with isolated, dissatisfied individuals who occasionally broke things, but with a mass of men who had—through their intellectual engagement with the I.W.W.—made a conscious decision to interrupt production and profit by any means. Despite the importance of material

⁶⁶ Howd, 53.

conditions and the insistence by progressives such as Parker that this ‘pathology’ was due to an animal condition, the response by the Loyal Legion was robustly theoretical. The establishment of the Loyal Legion was a direct response to the intellectual life of workers. It marked a distinct shift from bodies to minds in the management of labor.

The army as strikebreaker was not unfamiliar, but the Loyal Legion was new and reflected an historically specific convergence of progressive values and the extension of the administrative state. Instead of protecting property and escorting non-union labor past pickets, the Army Corps was sent to work in lumber camps under the auspices of the Spruce Production Division, an agency under the authority of the War Department.

The Loyal Legion was officially approved by the War Department on November 23, 1917. Its official numbers were impressive. By January of 1918, 10,000 members were enrolled and by January 24, there were 300 locals. Each member was required to sign the following pledge:

I, the undersigned, in consideration of my being made a member of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumberman, do hereby solemnly pledge my efforts during the war to the United States of America, and will support and defend this country against enemies both foreign and domestic. I further agree, by these presents, to faithfully perform my duty toward this company by directing my best efforts in every way possible, to the production of logs and lumber for the construction of Army airplanes and ships to be used against our common enemies. That I will stamp out any sedition or acts of hostility against the United States Government which may come within my knowledge, and I will do every act and thing which will in general aid in carrying this war to a successful conclusion.⁶⁷

Originally conceived of as nothing more than a “propaganda agency to counteract the I.W.W.” and enlist workers in the patriotic project of war production, it proved insufficient to countering the I.W.W.’s ongoing practice of striking on the job. It was therefore decided that it

⁶⁷ Howd, 78.

would provide actual workers whose patriotic credentials could be guaranteed—enlisted and conscripted soldiers who were unfit for combat.⁶⁸ The Legion’s directors were commissioned officers, the soldiers were sent to work in uniform, armed and subject to martial discipline.⁶⁹ In this way the Loyal Legion effectively eliminated any union presence in lumber until it was declared illegal under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935.

The basic assumption of progressive reformers, Parker and Disque among them, was that labor conflict was purely a matter of environmental concerns, i.e. housing, sanitation, length of workdays. Workers “became Wobblies out of unbearable environmental indignities and inadequacies,” and it was therefore assumed that the correction of these problems would bring labor peace. But despite the conviction, expressed in its most extreme form by Parker’s Freudian primitivism, that Wobblies were all bodily needs and irrational *id*, the Loyal Legion devoted considerable resources to ideological conversion. Judging by the pages of the *4L Bulletin*, the organization took its membership’s intellectual investments in the labor situation as seriously as the I.W.W. did, encouraging them to read the *Bulletin* as regularly as socialists read *The Call*.⁷⁰ The content also reflected the extent to which socialist, syndicalist and other class-conscious ideologies permeated the community of loggers and mill hands. They ran a regular column detailing the conditions that encouraged animosity towards employers called “They Wonder Why [we are Red].” And they offered their own alternative explanations of labor relations in an appropriately class-conscious idiom, explaining that capital was neither moral nor immoral and cooperation between capitalists and workers was an evolutionary inevitability.⁷¹ “Real Evolution

⁶⁸ Howd, 78.

⁶⁹ Hyman, 2.

⁷⁰ *4L Bulletin*, 2 (May 1920): 28.

⁷¹ “Where should the Profits Go?” *4L Bulletin* 2, no. 2, (Feb. 1920).

is Going on and New Principles are Emerging,” one headline crowed. “Industrial democracy is an accomplished fact in this country. Employers and employees are working together in entire harmony.”⁷² Efficiency in production, the *4L* noted, was not a technical but a social process and it was maximized by this attitude of cooperation for the greater good of maximum productive capacity. Efficiency schemes were bound to fail because they insulted the intelligence of workmen, but efficiency could be maximized by workers who “took an interest in their work.” Men with the proper attitude would take up the slack, report “duplication of men on the job” and instances of “material being poorly cut or inefficiently handled.”⁷³ In short, they would report all instances of sabotage.

Of course, the Loyal Legion did not end violence towards workers. Just as publishing the *Industrial Worker* didn’t provide a substitute for direct action. This war of ideas was not won on an intellectual field. The ideas expressed in the *4L Bulletin* were underwritten by anti-radical violence at every level. In the very creation of the Loyal Legion, the disavowal of class conflict, central to the maintenance of employer power, was enforced by federal police powers.

The progressive call to solve the labor problem by managing the environment of the workers was coupled with another, more insidious form of worker management. The *4L* had origins in a tradition of ‘patriotic’, local, vigilante policing of Wobblies as much as it did in the appropriation of the union form, military expediency, and the writings of Veblenian academics. Patriotic organizations, composed of deputized community members, overlapped with the law in useful and flexible ways and were officially endorsed and organized, even if they could not be effectively controlled, by legitimate political power. In Washington state, for example, Henry

⁷² “How We are Progressing”, *4L Bulletin* 2, no. 3, (March 1920).

⁷³ “Efficiency Scheme Tried” *4L Bulletin* 1, no. 4, (June 1919).

Suzzallo, president of the University of Washington, was appointed by Governor Lister to organize “a state-wide network of patriotic societies as a base for a state secret service system.”⁷⁴ The local cadres of deputies, police, sheriffs, and militia men did not fit conveniently into a centralized administrative apparatus—failing to follow orders or submit useful reports, for example—but the “management” of resident Wobblies by these groups did attenuate camp and mill owners’ anxiety about sabotage, dynamiting, and arson and relieved the state of taking more expensive, official action such as imposing martial law.⁷⁵ Vigilante policing created the condition of possibility for civilized interventions and civilizing measures. At the same time that the military expanded its operations to encompass economic activity through the Spruce Production Division, thus expanding and strengthening a legitimate and rational administrative state, and the Loyal Legion was establishing a model for company unions and later experiments in corporate welfare, vigilante organizations were “[earning] a measure of state legitimacy.”⁷⁶

“You Dared Not Lynch Him in the Light of Day”⁷⁷

Violence against the I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest did not begin with a sudden surge of patriotic feeling and it did not end with the armistice. The number of deaths that resulted from vigilante violence against I.W.W. members is unknowable because it was rarely, if ever, prosecuted. Thus, a handful of well-known martyrs have come to represent the systematic violence against radicals. Some, like songwriter Joe Hill, are remembered because of a certain

⁷⁴ Hyman, 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Michael Cohen, 32.

⁷⁷ Ralph Chaplin, “Wesley Everest” *Industrial Pioneer*, 1921. Reprinted in Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed. *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1972), 275.

measure of fame during their life. Others are notable because of the theatricality and public character of their death. The logger and I.W.W. organizer, Wesley Everest, occupies the latter category. Mythologizing individuals often functions to occlude rather than illuminate historical realities. But Everest's life and death are instructive metonyms for the violence that characterized the Northwest lumber industry. They are also proof, if needed, that the mere provision by the Army of decent bedding and clean clothing was not a sufficient "cure" for radical politics.

Everest was born in 1890 on his family's farm in Oregon. He began working in lumber camps and saw mills in 1907, joined the I.W.W., and became an active organizer. An uncle recalled that he was "an apt scholar and honest, but that...he was so filled up with the I.W.W. teachings that he could talk of little else."⁷⁸

In 1912, he was involved in a strike in the Coos Bay region of Oregon where he was arrested for vagrancy. A 600 person mob retrieved Everest and another organizer, W.J. Edgeworth from jail along with B.K. Leech, a physician and I.W.W. sympathizer, and beat them severely and forced them to kneel and kiss the American flag.⁷⁹ With the onset of WWI, Everest enlisted in the Army and served in Washington and Oregon as part of the Spruce Production Division. He was discharged in March 1919 and settled in Centralia, Washington where he helped to open an I.W.W. hall.⁸⁰

On November 11, an Armistice Day parade would pass directly in front of the new headquarters. Worried that participants would attack the hall, members began planning their defense and, despite a general and principled opposition to guns within the organization, Everest and at least two other men had armed themselves. The hall was attacked and shots were fired.

⁷⁸ Tom Copeland, "Wesley Everest, I.W.W. Martyr," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 77 (1986): 124.

⁷⁹ Foner, vol. 4, 225.

⁸⁰ Copeland, 124.

While attempting escape, Everest was surrounded by a mob and fatally shot Dale Hubbard. He was dragged to jail by a belt around his neck and beaten severely. The mob attempted to hang him immediately but the police intervened. At 7:30 that evening, the lights went out in Centralia for about fifteen minutes during which time Everest was taken from jail in the trunk of a car and hung from the Chehalis River Bridge.⁸¹ His execution required multiple attempts. The first rope proved too short to snap his neck.

⁸¹ Copeland, 125.

Chapter 4: ‘Caused to be Printed’: Civil Liberties, Security of Property, and The Industrial Workers of the World

Of all the miserable, unprofitable, inglorious wars in the world, the worst is the war against words. Let men say what they like. Let them propose to cut every throat and burn every house—if so they like it. We have nothing to do with a man’s words or a man’s thoughts, except to put against them better words and better thoughts, and so to win in the great moral and intellectual duel that is always going on, and on which progress depends.

--From the cover of an anonymous I.W.W. pamphlet, “*Jersey Justice*” at *Work: First Decisions on the Advocacy of Sabotage in the United States Courts*

Reflecting on the government repression and mob violence that characterized the First World War, Zechariah Chafee, Jr. argued that “the First Amendment had no hold on people’s minds, because no live facts or concrete images were then attached to it. Consequently, like an empty box, with beautiful words on it, the Amendment collapsed under the impact of Prussian battalions, and terror of Bolshevik mobs.”¹

The severity and scope of repression that accompanied the U.S. entrance into the war was shocking. It extended far beyond the radical labor agitators of the I.W.W. to ministers, school teachers, business owners, farmers, U.S. Congressman, socialists, pacifists, and anyone who spoke German. Persecution took many forms: fines, imprisonment, public humiliation, community harassment, vandalism, torture, and occasionally, extra-judicial ‘patriotic’ executions. Chafee’s retrospective diagnosis—that this failure of democracy occurred because the First Amendment had no concrete purchase on the American imagination—contained a grain

¹ Zechariah Chafee Jr, *Thirty-Five Years with Freedom of Speech*, (New York: Roger N. Baldwin Civil Liberties Foundation, 1952), 4.

of truth. At least superficially, what we might consider constitutionally protected entitlements did not take a recognizable shape until the 1930s. The First Amendment was not incorporated until 1923 with the Supreme Court's decision in *Gitlow v. New York*.² It was not mentioned once in George Vanderveer's opening statement for the defense in the mass trial of Wobblies under the Espionage Act, even though the grand jury indictment failed to include references to anything but ostensibly seditious utterances.

This chapter argues that restrictions on expressive freedom had almost nothing to do with the lack of a robust free speech doctrine. Rather, the coordinated destruction of the I.W.W., beginning with its founding and culminating in a federal trial, followed by sustained prosecution under post-war criminal syndicalism laws, was inspired by something far less abstract than constitutional rights or expressive freedoms: the protection of private property. This is not to say that the repression of the I.W.W. had nothing to do with speech. On a certain level it had everything to do with what they were saying—particularly what they were saying about property relations. When America entered the war and expressive freedoms were explicitly restricted, repression was easily mapped onto the well-established terrain of ethnic and class divisions. What were economically distributed rights of speech expressed themselves politically through an increasingly organized administrative state capable of both legal repression on a national scale and the production of ideological consensus. In circular fashion, these political and ideological investments functioned to shore up established economic divisions, consolidating substantive rights to free speech for property owners. The disproportionate reaction to the I.W.W. shows that civil liberties are protected only insofar as they pose no viable threat to an established economic

² Marc Lendler, *Gitlow v. New York: Every Idea an Incitement* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012); Paul L. Murphey, *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

order. It also vividly demonstrates the brutality with which the outer limits of free expression are policed. This policing, in turn, demonstrates that speech has its own very material conditions of production and effective prevention of undesirable ideas requires more than mere censorship or control of its consumption. The I.W.W.'s philosophy and organizing strategies, as well as the reaction to them, shows us that discourse is anything but abstract and that ideological control occurs at the point of production even when what is being produced is as apparently immaterial as language. It also demonstrates that production itself is not strictly economic—a matter of inputs, outputs, technical means, and bottom lines. On the contrary, the economic field was actively shaped, even brought into being, by political and social institutions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the I.W.W. simultaneously demanded expansive rights to expressive freedom and control over the means of production. They questioned the very basis of capitalist power—ownership of private property—while organizing real, material threats to that property in the form of strikes and direct action. They also took controversial positions on social and ‘moral’ issues such as race and birth control. Because the I.W.W. devoted as much energy to education and propagandizing as it did to organizing strikes and other forms of economic direct action, its repression by local, state, and federal authorities necessitated systematic censorship as well as physical violence. While many unions organized their activity around obtaining increased access to property for their members, the I.W.W. rejected the very premise of property rights. The relationship between the suppression of political speech and the protection of private property was perhaps never so obvious before or since. At an historical moment marked by incredible violence between capital and labor, the brutality—in both words and actions—reserved for Wobblies was striking. The routinized zeal with which both the literature and the membership of the I.W.W. were attacked suggests that the I.W.W.

provides us with an exemplary instance of the mechanisms of repression and the economic limits of constitutional guarantees of free expression. That the organization was destroyed at the very moment that a discourse of civil liberties was emerging from the legal defense of organized labor suggests that the philosophy espoused by the I.W.W. shaped the boundaries of this new territory in real and lasting ways.

Wobblies themselves understood and made much of the relationship between speech and material control. The kinship of words and deeds was expressed most clearly and forcefully in their popular pamphlets on sabotage. The various actions that might be gathered together under the umbrella of sabotage were not, each author stressed, particularly threatening in and of themselves. Sabotage only became threatening when all of this rebellious activity was given meaning—when it was linked to a revolutionary idea and publicly expressed. And this revolutionary meaning was, in turn, only significant because it had been generated by the instinctive and long practiced activities of the workers themselves.

Anti-I.W.W. efforts culminated in the 1918 trial of 116 of its members and the passage of anti-criminal syndicalism laws in twenty-three states between 1917 and 1920.³ Aimed squarely at the I.W.W. through repetitive references to “sabotage”—a word that was almost exclusive to I.W.W. literature and speech—the criminal syndicalism statutes indicate that the wartime persecution and prosecution of the organization and its members had a particular significance beyond being one instance of repression among many. The language of these statutes—ostensibly aimed at the prevention of physical property destruction—made it quite clear that the point was to silence spoken and written dissent, destroy the I.W.W.’s ability to function, and

³ Eldridge Foster Dowell, *History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939), 23.

eliminate both a set of ideas and the organizational capacity to disseminate and, possibly, implement them.⁴

It is imperative to recognize that the violence that marked these early conflicts was not simply the result of a more repressive era in which ‘free speech’ had not yet been recognized as a basic legal entitlement. The right to public expression and free and open debate had long been central to the American political imagination.⁵ What was different in the early decades of the twentieth century was the economic content of that speech and a definition of expressive activity that extended to agitation, strikes, and boycotts. What would eventually be transformed into a general right of public expression began as an economic demand. It was “class war that made civil liberties the subject of sustained public debate and federal inquiry for the first time.”⁶ Before public speech could be recognized as a constitutionally protected entitlement, it needed to be shorn of much of its class content. The relationship between First Amendment rights and labor agitation eroded over time but sabotage was a special case. Because it necessarily advocated illegal action, it couldn’t be reasonably defended under the most expansive definition of civil liberties.

⁴ Dowell, 14-16. Criminal syndicalism laws were one type of anti-radical legislation passed in the years immediately following the First World War. So called “red flag” laws were passed in 31 states and anarchy and sedition laws in 26 states. Many southern states had insurrection laws in place that could be easily applied to radical organizing. In total, Dowell estimated that some form of anti-radical legislation was active in 42 states by 1939.

⁵ David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13. The general consensus throughout the twentieth century has been, in line with Chafee’s reasoning, that Americans were unconcerned with freedom of speech as such until after World War I. Rabban argues that this is not the case: “In contrast to many other countries and times, Americans consistently have testified to the underlying value of free speech. Judges who denied free speech claims before World War I... often emphasized their own deep commitment to what they deemed proper conceptions of free speech. Even if some of these judges and vigilantes were insincere, their efforts to convince others that they believed in free speech at least indicated their perception of its widespread importance to the American people.”

⁶ Laura M. Weinrib, *The Taming of Free Speech: America’s Civil Liberties Compromise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 15.

Producing Speech

The I.W.W. saw, more clearly than most, the relationship between economic and expressive freedom. They understood that speech, like any material good, requires certain conditions for its production. It requires a speaker and a listener (who are, necessarily, embodied beings with their own material needs); space within which such an encounter can occur or across which words might travel; a common language; something to write on or, perhaps, a printing press. Members of democratic societies organized around a reasonable expectation of free expression tend to perceive threats to this freedom at the level of discourse—as a matter of intellectual content and its perversion or suppression. They therefore tend to be diligent in their opposition to censorship and any restrictions on dissemination and consumption are readily recognized as threats to these natural rights. What a common understanding of censorship—or even speech for that matter—tends to miss is that any effective control of speech must occur at the point of its production. It is a matter of controlling bodies in space and access to material resources as much as it is a matter of the censor's pen. The suppression of I.W.W. speech needs to be understood as a project aimed at something other than speech alone. At the same time, the violent repression of I.W.W. activities and attacks on its members and meeting halls should be understood as part of a larger effort to curtail expressive freedoms and thereby limit the expansion of political possibility.

Property rights and political freedom have been bound up with one another in varying degrees throughout the history of the United States. Property qualifications restricted voting—a quintessential political speech act—for white men until the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, property ownership and suffrage were twinned demands for both women and African Americans. While no federal law has ever explicitly restricted expressive freedoms according to economic

class, the association between a capacity for ownership and a capacity for speech and political participation runs deep. One of the most famous metaphors for the reasonable limitation of free expression—the corn dealer of John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” uses the explanatory image of a hungry mob gathered outside of a corn dealer’s residence.

“No one,” Mill argued, “pretends that actions should be as free as opinions... even opinions lose their immunity when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act.”⁷ This limitation—one that attempted to locate the moment when an utterance might be translated into an act—reemerged at the center of twentieth century debates concerning civil liberty in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s formulation of suppression in the face of a “clear and present danger.”⁸ Indeed, determining the line between speech and action is the manifest content of most twentieth century debates about expressive freedoms. But it is worth considering the possibility that this liminal moment was a sort of false flag. Political speech is always aimed at a material accomplishment. As Holmes himself pointed out, “every idea is an incitement.” The I.W.W. intentionally blurred this line and sabotage, in particular, made the distinction between rhetoric and realization utterly useless. The “propaganda and practice of sabotage” was one and the same. It was conceptually and tactically “the forerunner of the revolution.”⁹ This is why Mill’s illustration of the moment

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 55.

⁸ Mark A. Graber, *Transforming Free Speech: The Ambiguous Legacy of Civil Libertarianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1991), 111. Early twentieth century libertarian defenses of free speech often rested on tenuous distinctions between overt acts and mere speech that are, more or less, a recapitulation of Mill’s arguments. “Nobody could suppose that the surreptitious publishing of a silly leaflet by a unknown man... would present any danger,” wrote Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in his dissent in *New York v. Gitlow*. However, the issue of what might stand a “chance of starting a present conflagration” was left, as it is in Mill, quite hazily defined. The failure—which perhaps resulted from the utter impossibility of such a task—to draw a hard line between speech and action gave the judiciary incredible latitude in its ability to censor certain types of speech and writing.

⁹ Gerald O. Desmond, “The Significance of Sabotage,” *Industrial Worker* 5, June 12, 1913.

when an utterance might tip into the realm of “positive instigation” is so significant, for it speaks to the anxiously guarded limits of expression that, in fact, had little to do with an overdetermined gap between speech and action and everything to do with property.

An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer.

Mill’s argument is certainly not that corn-dealers are not worthy objects of approbation or that property is never theft but that in a functioning democracy these conflicts and contradictions could be metabolized without recourse to arms, an idea that all but defined twentieth century progressive thought.

The point at which speech begins to pose a clear and present danger could be figured in any number of ways—Holmes had a preference for fire metaphors.¹⁰ But Mill’s metaphor is instructive, if anachronistic, because it presents the reasonable restriction of expression under democracy in terms of property ownership and the actual historical occurrence of a working class “instigation to some mischievous act.” It would be a fair summary of the literature produced by the I.W.W. that it was collectively aimed at inverting the metaphor of the angry mob at the corn dealer’s door. An inversion that was accomplished most effectively in its use of the term ‘capitalist sabotage; to refer to work accidents, strike breaking, and other employer activities authorized by the solitary fact of property ownership. Sabotage reconfigured the terms upon which harm was determined along the same lines as Mill but its mirror reflection asked a different set of questions about speech and violence. Is it not violent to deprive people of corn?

¹⁰ Vincent Blasi, “Shouting Fire in a Theater and Vilifying Corn Dealers,” *Capital University Law Review* 39 (2011).

Would not the most vulgar utilitarian calculus determine that the needs of the gathered crowd counted for more than that of a single corn dealer?

The labor movement at large had been the victim of an obvious asymmetry in the application of the law for decades. The I.W.W. provided one of many responses to labor exploitation and the class politics of legislatures and courts, but theirs was the only one to place property at the center of its analysis. “What Sabotage actually does,” declared one anonymous pamphlet “is to bring into evidence the fact that human life, liberty and happiness are in conflict with private property rights.”¹¹

Life, Liberty, and Property

Unions could be maligned by employers precisely because constitutional understandings of liberty were so closely tied to security of property. Liberty of contract emerged in the late nineteenth century as a response to changes in the legal definition of this property. The emergence of the corporation, as well as several decades of conflict between employers and a growing labor movement, had combined to expand the legal meaning of property and to install the contract as the primary mechanism for determining obligation and liability. Rather than securing equitable agreements, the natural right of individuals to enter into contracts rapidly became a device for overturning any legislation that might regulate the terms of employment or create a legal environment amenable to the formation of unions. In a well-known refutation of the doctrine of liberty of contract, Roscoe Pound argued that the concept did not appear in important texts on constitutional law until 1891 when it was given extensive attention in

¹¹ ‘*Jersey Justice*’ at Work: *First Decision on the Advocacy of Sabotage in a United States Court* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1913), 4.

Spencer's *Justice*. This is the first mention of "the right of free contract as a fundamental natural right." Before this one sees "rights of personal security, rights of protection for honor, rights of property, rights of receiving aid in case of need," but no right to a liberty of contract. In fact, one finds arguments for a *restraint* on that very liberty earlier in the century.¹²

The elevation of contract to a privileged position was "the legal expression of free market principles" as well as a response to changes in forms of legally recognized property which had, in turn, their own adverse legal impact on labor's capacity for organized resistance and bargaining.¹³ As the nineteenth century progressed, new forms of property that could not be delimited in space became increasingly important and judges sought ways to redefine property interference as anything that led to a reduction in market value.¹⁴ Thus crimes against property could occur at great distances in space as well as time.

In parallel fashion, this loss of proximity led to a strengthening of the notion of contract as the only reasonable way to conceive of responsibility and liability in a landscape composed of absentee agents and their multitudes of representatives.¹⁵ Liberty of contract was presented by employers' associations as synonymous with independence as such, and functioned as a primary argument against unionization. The abstract right of a person to enter freely into a contract regardless of substantial inequities was used to justify a whole host of policies and practices that favored employers over employees by arguing that regulating the terms of employment, rather than benefitting workers, subverted their natural rights. As a legal doctrine, it gave courts the

¹² Roscoe Pound. "Liberty of Contract," *Yale Law Journal* 18 (1909): 455.

¹³ Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law 1870-1960: The Crisis of Legal Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 33.

¹⁴ Horwitz, 147.

¹⁵ Horwitz, 43.

latitude to interfere with much more than unionization drives. Reviewing the accumulated effect of the perceived “inviolability of liberty of contract,” Pound found that courts had struck down legislation forbidding the imposition of fines; regulating the weighing of coal to fix compensation; forbidding company stores; requiring employers to pay wages in legal currency rather than company scrip; regulating working hours; and prohibiting contracts that would release railroads from liability for personal injury.¹⁶

The legal application of liberty of contract amounted to a series of unacknowledged confiscations of employee property. In cases regarding the weighing of coal and other piece-work or payment in company scrip, this was a rather straightforward matter of wage theft. In other instances where compensation was kept low by a lack of hours and wage regulation, it was a more abstract expropriation of labor-time—a theft, as it were, of a property in one’s person. And then there was the literal loss of life and limb that should, ethically speaking, exceed calculation but certainly could be figured in terms of monetary loss.

Where liberty of contract did not provide sufficient justification for judicial intervention, the constitutional protection against undue property seizure was used to justify overturning protective legislation as well as interfering with all manner of legal agitation—strikes, pickets, boycotts—through the issuing of injunctions. Industrialization brought with it significant, incorporeal forms of property that demanded a redefinition of what, precisely, property interference could legally mean. In order to protect property in a complex and financialized economy, interference with property rights was defined as anything that would decrease a property’s market value. Abstract property made distinctions such as direct and consequential damages and remote and proximal liability far less useful. By the turn of the century, it was clear

¹⁶ Pound, 481-482.

that the definition of a “taking” needed to extend beyond physical incursions or the appropriation of titles. While clearly a legal necessity in the face of evolving material realities, this shift in legal approaches to property and the definition of takings “came to stand for the increasingly prevalent proposition that all restrictions on the use of property that diminished its market value were takings in the constitutional sense.” Given the future orientation of market value, the constitutional protection of property was nearly unbounded. By the end of the nineteenth century, courts were regularly operating under such an expansive definition of property interference that any activity threatening future income could be construed as a ‘taking’.¹⁷

Organized labor understood that their power was located precisely in their ability to decrease the value of their employers’ property by withdrawing their labor—the one form of property that was not accommodated by the ever-expanding definition of constitutional property protections. Given that every job action consciously threatened a loss of profits in order to gain some leverage in bargaining, the expansive notion of property as potential profits effectively sidelined constitutional protection of rights that came into conflict with these capacious definitions of property entitlement. Protection of speech and association was not conceptually underdeveloped, it was simply subjugated to property protection. Printed material such as the AFL’s “we don’t patronize” list was construed as interference with property rights and strikes and pickets were obviously anathema.

Because the definition of property was so broad, and market value impossible to locate and fix, the imagined consequences of any act or utterance, rather than its immediate consequences, made it subject to injunction. The defense of a constitutional right to free speech followed on decades of legal and extra-legal conflict between workers and employers that

¹⁷ Horwitz, 148.

occurred at the intersection of property rights, legislative reform, and expressive freedom. The containment of workers' expressive rights within the mushrooming field of property protections did, however, make the class interests of the judiciary more visible. The apparent immunity of property from conflicting rights claims became increasingly obvious to many observers. During his testimony to the Commission on Industrial Relations, lawyer and founder of the Free Speech League, Theodore Schroeder remarked that "there is an utter incapacity on the part of the courts, except when dealing with problems of property, to understand what law and the due process of law clause of the Federal and State Constitutions means."¹⁸

At the same time, the contradictions that had to some extent remained hidden by physical, bounded property were becoming more apparent. If property had always been implicated in all other legal and social arrangements, its abstraction made these entanglements more visible. The very strengthening of property rights and liberty of contract made private property more susceptible to criticism by progressive legal scholars.¹⁹ The abstraction of legal definitions had "threatened to 'propertize' the entire world of legal relations" while at the same time encouraging "the earliest efforts to undermine and subvert the extreme conceptualism of orthodox legal thought."²⁰ Property relations—both their substantial effects and their abstract legal status—were therefore central to early twentieth century thinking about liberty more generally. ACLU founder Roger Baldwin suggested that the country's history might be viewed

¹⁸ Theodore Schroeder, *The Commission on Industrial Relations*, 10841.

¹⁹ Horwitz, 145.

²⁰ Horwitz, 151.

as “a conflict between the civil liberties of a political democracy and the economic power of property ownership.”²¹

It was this conflict, most explicitly expressed in the contest between organized labor and employers, that shaped early civil liberties advocacy. An individual’s right to express their opinions was certainly a concern but, as Laura Weinrib has carefully shown, figures such as Baldwin and Clarence Darrow and the people they defended “declined to distinguish labor activity from other exercises of expression... They rejected the principle that picketing and boycotts were ‘verbal acts’ susceptible of injunction when they unlawfully restrained commerce or caused irreparable damage to employer interests.”²² In other words, freedom of speech was initially defined as the right to contest property claims.

Civic Investment

Early twentieth century progressives, no matter how sympathetic to the plight of workers, were obsessed with the prevention of conflict and organized nearly all of their reform efforts, as well as their thought, around ameliorating the causes of disorder, disorganization, and conflict.²³ While their diagnosis of social problems and their answers to ‘the labor question’ were frequently indistinguishable from union demands—eight hour days, sanitary working conditions, regulation of industry, and social welfare programs—their efforts were aimed at rooting out the environmental causes of conflict between capital and labor which they imagined to be finite and correctable through interclass cooperation. Hull House founder Jane Addams, for example,

²¹ Roger N. Baldwin and Clarence Randal, *Civil Liberties and Industrial Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 6.

²² Weinrib, 6.

²³ Jacob Kramer, *The New Freedom and the Radicals: Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Views of Radicalism, and the Origins of Repressive Tolerance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 6.

imagined that class conflict could be resolved by the recognition that “the dependence of classes on one another is reciprocal.”²⁴ When pressed by John Dewey on the question of unavoidable antagonisms, she responded that “the antagonism of institutions was always unreal.”²⁵ Organizations such as the I.W.W., or even strike activity more broadly, was part of the problem. Most Progressives blamed excessive individualism for a lack of social harmony and offered a limited class-inflected analysis that supported redistributive policies but, with rare exceptions, progressive reformers were decidedly middle class. The politics of anti-radicalism were often closely linked to those of reform which aimed to alleviate suffering but also to reconcile business interests with reformist, labor politics.²⁶ The notion that one needed to have a stake in society—which usually meant a property interest of some sort—in order to be trusted with its reform was common. Certain groups were simply not equipped to responsibly utilize their constitutional liberties for the greater good and while political legitimacy was not often explicitly linked to property ownership, the connection between the two was just barely repressed. Following the I.W.W. led textile strike in Paterson, NJ, one contributor to the *Survey* worried that “instead of playing the game respectably or...breaking out into lawless riot which we know well enough how to deal with”, workers were being led astray by “an anarchistic philosophy which challenges the fundamental ideal of law and order” and encourages “strange doctrines” such as “direct

²⁴ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House, with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 76.

²⁵ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2001), 313.

²⁶ Ahmed A. White, “The Crime of Economic Radicalism: Criminal Syndicalism Laws and the Industrial Workers of the World, 1917-1927.” *Oregon Law Review* 85, no. 3 (2006): 702.

action [and] sabotage.” Should such a philosophy take hold, they feared that “our whole current morality as to the sacredness of property and even of life” would be threatened.²⁷

In the progressive mind, expressive freedom was necessary for the robust public debate requisite to a smoothly functioning democracy. It was a way of advancing knowledge, bestowing legitimacy on the state and, presumably, it was an automatic consequence of a well-organized society in which liberty was equally distributed among properly socialized Americans. It was imagined that given the proper environment, problems would be rationally worked out through civilized debate. In many ways, the progressive movement simply could not see the violent apparatus necessary for the enforcement of civilized, rational, acceptable debate. Indeed, the regulatory bent of progressive reform required some willful ignorance of the character of the state power that it invoked for the implementation of its agenda. When the First Amendment was eviscerated for the purpose of wartime consensus, Progressives expressed outrage and a certain amount of surprise at what they reasonably perceived as a betrayal. For example, Chaffee wrote of Holmes’s decision in *Schenck v. United States*, which held that there were no valid First Amendment claims to be made by socialists protesting the draft, that it “came as a great shock to forward looking men and women.”²⁸ Wilson had been elected on a progressive platform.²⁹ That the state might itself be a violent, capitalist apparatus was unthinkable. Randolph Bourne’s observation that “war is the health of the state” was a rare exception to progressive faith in its

²⁷ “After the Battle,” *Survey XXVIII*, April 6 1912 quoted in Paul L Murphy, “Sources and Nature of Intolerance in the 1920s,” *Journal of American History* 51, 2 (1964): 62.

²⁸ Graber, 106-107.

²⁹ Graber, 79. “As many scholars have noted, progressive efforts to ‘discipline American society’ and the progressive ‘appetite for national unity’ were responsible for the restrictions placed on political debate during the second decade of the twentieth century... Progressive members of the Wilson administration wrote, proposed and enforced the Espionage and Sedition Acts. The most notorious red-baiter of the postwar era, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer was a nationally known political reformer in the pre-war years.

constitutional benevolence. The I.W.W. understood that violence was continuous with violence and that the legal repression of unappealing ideas was its logical conclusion—patriotic, progressive, or otherwise.

Clear and Present Danger

In 1912, the *San Diego Tribune* made the colorful and somewhat incoherent declaration that “hanging is none too good for [the I.W.W.]. They would be much better dead, for they are absolutely useless in the human economy; they are the waste material of creation and should be drained off into the sewer of oblivion there to rot in cold obstruction like any other excrement.”³⁰

Between 1907 and 1916, the I.W.W. organized around thirty free speech fights in the Western United States.³¹ The San Diego free speech campaign was one of the longest—lasting over six months—as well as the most brutal. The apoplectic tone of the *Tribune’s* editorial was not exceptional. Calls for citizens to follow an “unwritten law” and other thinly veiled appeals to vigilante violence were common and did not go unheeded. Wobblies were beaten by police and held in overcrowded cells. At least one man died in a hospital after being repeatedly kicked by officers while in custody.³² Emma Goldman reported that after vigilantes raided an I.W.W. hall and arrested everyone present, they brought them “to Sorrento to a place where a flagpole had been erected. There the I.W.W.s were forced to kneel, kiss the flag, and sing the national anthem. As the incentive to quicker action, one of the vigilantes would slap them on the back which was

³⁰ Joyce L Kornbluh, ed. *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968); Paul Frederick Brissenden. *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism*. Edited by the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University (New York: Columbia University, 1920); Philip S. Foner, “The I.W.W. and the Black Worker.” *Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 1 (1970) This quotation has been repeated in many places for obvious reasons.

³¹ Kornbluh, 94.

³² Foner, 196-97.

a signal for a general beating.” The vigilantes then transported the Wobblies to a cattle pen on the county line where they were kept without food or water before they were forced to run a gauntlet, repeat the gruesome flag ceremony, and released. Thus expelled, they travelled to Los Angeles on foot.³³

This sort of ritualized violence was standard. Goldman’s own manager, Benjamin Reitman, was tarred and tortured with a lit cigar by San Diego citizens. Hatred of the I.W.W. was not specific to San Diego residents. The atrocities visited upon the free-speech advocates—particularly those that involved forced acts of patriotism such as singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” and kissing the American flag—were reported in newspapers across the country in tones ranging from unsurprised to gleeful. Violence against radicals was widely considered acceptable, if not necessary, and the status of extra-legal ‘policing’ was ambiguous. It was not, therefore, surprising to find press coverage that minimized what were objectively horrific crimes. In an article entitled “Spirit of San Diegans Still Remains Militant,” Louisville’s *Courier-Journal* reported that Reitman “had not been treated so badly as reported.”³⁴ These expressive liberties had very real consequences.

While eventually 113 members of the organization were given the privilege of a federal hearing, prominent members of the I.W.W. were also extrajudicially murdered. In a near admission to the role that vigilantes played in the enforcement of the state’s anti-radicalism, the vehemently antiwar I.W.W. member Frank Little was lynched in Butte, Montana and then tried along with his comrades postmortem. While sporadic and inconsistent accounts of workers arrested in a formal manner are legion, the total number of workers killed in confrontations with

³³ Kornbluh, 97.

³⁴ "Spirit of San Diegans Still Remains Militant: Industrial Workers’ Methods May Cause Trouble Banker Says People Ready to Shoulder Muskets Made Reitman Kiss Flag" *Courier-Journal* May 24, 1912.

police, company guards, and hastily deputized citizens is impossible to calculate. Itinerant, bureaucratically anonymous workers would leave few traces dead or alive. However, because non-fatal violence was so acceptable, we have an incredible record of physical assault and elaborate, often public, torture.

The ‘clear and present danger’ of the written and spoken word was repeatedly demonstrated by the forces of so-called public order. The ritualization of repression—flag kissing, forced singing of patriotic songs and the occasional public display of dead bodies—coupled with these literary performances of dehumanization demonstrate the imbrication of real and symbolic anti-radical violence. The thinnest of membranes separated the figuration of radicals as excrement in print and the actual covering of their bodies in sticky, black tar. The slippage between violent declarations and actual violence by the opponents of the I.W.W. goes some way to explaining the pathological obsession with eliminating politically threatening rhetoric. When Walker Smith declared that capitalists did not want to utter the word ‘sabotage’ for fear that the working class would learn its meaning, he was not being hyperbolic. The mutually reinforcing use of physical force and polemic on the part of vigilance committees and patriotic organizations and local newspapers provided living proof of the threat posed by the continued circulation of I.W.W. counter-narratives. There was plenty of evidence that radical ideas were being realized in the form of strikes and sabotage and the opponents of the I.W.W. understood, perhaps better than some of its champions, that its ideas were as dangerous as its actions. But it was the anti-radical press and the quasi-official enforcers of its positions that provided the best argument for the power of language to slip into the realm of material reality.

Political speech never occurs in an abstract realm of pure discourse. It requires certain conditions for production, reproduction, and dissemination and is, in this sense, indistinguishable

from the physical goods and tangible services created by labor. Likewise, as the I.W.W. itself repeatedly asserted, the abstract legal rights of workers, including the right to free expression, cannot be considered separately from the economic interests that such speech necessarily expressed. The repression of I.W.W. speech was, like strikebreaking, an assertion of economic power that was crucial to the maintenance of the status quo. Written threats to property, such as the advocacy of sabotage, were just as ‘real’ as a pitchfork in a thresher.

Free speech fights were never about the abstract and individual rights of expression associated with the term civil liberty. At the time, ‘civil liberties’ were most often invoked in defense of the liberty of contract and signaled the rights of employers to interfere with union organizing. Wobblies did strategically invoke the Constitution. For example, they invited “footloose rebels,” to Missoula, Montana to “defend the Bill of Rights” in 1909.³⁵ The fights though, were strategic campaigns intended to spread the message of the organization, increase agitation on job sites, and disseminate information about working conditions. In addition to functioning as recruitment drives and a method of revolutionary education, they specifically targeted employment agencies or ‘job sharks’. The free speech fights spread any number of ideas including those contained in the Bill of Rights. They were not necessarily specific to regional organizing drives or particular strikes. But they could not have been staged just anywhere. Organizing workers is a speech act but it requires access to the spaces where workers live and labor for its realization. Street speaking in cities in between job sites was crucial to organizing an itinerant workforce that often labored in remote locations.

Street speaking was also, arguably, a form of sabotage at the point of production. But in the case of migratory workers, what was being produced was migratory labor itself. As Matthew

³⁵ Kornbluh, 94.

May has argued, the “exploitation of migratory workers was increasingly accomplished through the regulation of mobility...[by] an apparatus or system of relations through which seasonal migratory labor power circulated from regional production facilities and employment agencies.”³⁶ The circulation of workers between employment agencies and job sites was a way of producing the “reserve army of labor” necessary to sustain these industries. Street speaking, May argues, interrupted this “circuit through which labor power was converted over and over into capital.”³⁷ By understanding the machinery of itinerant labor, I.W.W. speakers were able to transform this circuit into a site of resistance. The free speech fights were not only occasional about sabotage, they were themselves a way of throwing a wrench into the machine.

Civil Liberties and Uncivil Clients

Progressive reformers as well as founding members of the ACLU such as Baldwin were well aware that the Bill of Rights had been used by courts to protect property at the expense of other liberties and that property protective interpretations of the Constitution actively harmed non-owners. Until the twentieth century, liberty was almost exclusively conceived of as freedom from property seizure. It would be misleading to suggest that the I.W.W. was the only organization fighting for the rights of workers to assemble and speak and to assign them an outsized role in shaping the ideological, legal, and strategic investments of a nascent civil liberties tradition. However, no other labor organization so loudly and explicitly made the connection between an individual and collective right to free and open discourse and the economic and social empowerment of workers. Nothing written at the time made so clearly connected the suppression of workers’ speech to property ownership as sabotage literature.

³⁶ Matthew May, *Soapbox Rebellion : The Hobo Orator Union and the Free Speech Fights of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1909-1916* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2013), 30.

³⁷ May, 31.

Sabotage literature was unique in its assertion that ideas had an impact on the power of the tactics they described. It thus enshrined the notion of free expression as an essential adjunct to economic activity and agitation. “Sabotage is new only in name, and in the fact that for the first time it is being advocated openly as a class weapon to be used by all workers when they fail to secure their demands by strike and boycott. In the past it was a... thing done but not talked of. Its open advocacy involves its open use.”³⁸ Furthermore, the Wobbly press argued that what could and could not be said was a direct product of property relationships. Property produced economic inequality and it produced morality as well. This recognition of the moral implications of property linked Wobblies to the older tradition of libertarian free speech defense and suggests a relationship between the moral policing of the Comstock Act and the maintenance of class bound property rights. The judicial preference for property protections and the obsessive maintenance of public morality may have been merely coincidental, but even if these two distinct uses of the law developed independently of one another, the imbrication of property and morality that runs through I.W.W. writings, and its explicit connection in the pages of sabotage pamphlets, suggests a structural relationship between the two. The I.W.W. brought issues of ‘morality’ that were excluded from progressive reform agendas back into conversations about power, control, and class oppression. Birth control, for example, was a regular feature in the heterodox pages of the *Industrial Worker*. And not just as a matter of hygiene and good planning. The right to speak about it publicly was a primary concern and its detractors’ bourgeois performances of familial ideals satirized. Sexual relations were also, according to the I.W.W., a matter of property relations—something lost by the apparent division between libertarian free love advocates and civil libertarian labor defenses and progressive agendas.

³⁸ *Jersey Justice*, 4.

What type of expression should and should not be tolerated during war or times of peace was widely contested by a range of academics, public intellectuals, politicians, and policy makers across the political spectrum. Sabotage though—a practice that threatened material property and a theory that suggested the illegitimacy of the abstract rights that brought it into being—was the definition of intolerable. It undermined both the ideological and material foundations of the economic status quo. The I.W.W. advocated political and industrial change, not the just expression of unpopular personal opinions. However, its many unpopular and unsavory opinions were a product of its economic critique. The logical response to such a complete rejection of the social and economic order could be nothing less than the complete elimination of the organization. This was not the fate of other labor unions—even unions that had been found guilty of extensive dynamite campaigns and organized slugging. Clearly, what the I.W.W. was saying as well as what it was doing was seen as a formidable threat. After years of disorganized attacks by local governments, vigilantes, and quasi-official law enforcement agencies, the I.W.W. became the subject of systematic, official persecution. The law, essentially, absorbed the disorganized violence of the mob. This happened in two phases. First, the mass trial of I.W.W. members under the Espionage Act for seditious utterances, materially bankrupted the organization and placed many of its leaders in jail. Second, the passing of anti-criminal syndicalism laws in twenty-three states made use of the word ‘sabotage’ or any remote affiliation with the idea illegal.

United States v. Haywood

On September 5, 1917, the Bureau of Investigation simultaneously executed forty-eight search warrants at I.W.W. offices across the country. It was a massive undertaking for what was, in today’s terms, a disorganized and skeletal network of law enforcement agents. Various local and

state officials, as well as business owners had been lobbying for federal action against the I.W.W. for some time. I.W.W. members and meeting places had been subject to steady harassment and violence at the local level for years. But it was not until 1917, with the passage of the Espionage Act, that a coordinated federal effort to destroy the entire organization could get underway. This may sound hyperbolic and polemical but it is simply a fact. The United States Attorney General for Philadelphia publicly acknowledged that the raids were meant to “put the I.W.W. out of business.”³⁹

The Espionage Act empowered the postmaster general to deny second class mailing privileges to anyone in violation of the Act and given that it made attempts to encourage disloyalty as illegal, this mandate was broad enough to deny postage to newspapers and nearly all other materials including, importantly, solicitations for I.W.W. defense funds. The Espionage Act also significantly altered the terms of search warrants. Until its passage, the Fourth Amendment was generally interpreted to prevent the seizure of any property that could not be strictly shown to be evidence. This prevented the seizure of private papers that might be useful to the prosecution but were not materially involved in the commission of a crime. The Espionage Act opened a loophole in the ‘mere evidence’ rule and this allowed for the seizure of all I.W.W. papers and property.⁴⁰ The legal scope of these searches was zealously embraced by local officials.

The records of the coordinated searches and seizures vary. Some are illegible scrawls on single sheets of paper; others are detailed, typed inventories. In Butte, Montana, Bureau of

³⁹ Philip S. Foner, “Notes and Documents: United States vs WM. Haywood, et. al. The I.W.W. Indictment,” *Labor History* 11 no. 4 (1970): 501.

⁴⁰ Dean A. Strang *Keep the Wretches in Order: America’s Biggest Mass Trial, the Rise of the Justice Department, and the Fall of the I.W.W.* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 61-62.

Investigation officers seized: three bundles of the newspaper “Solidarity,” an I.W.W. membership book, a propaganda league record book, boxes containing 400 songbooks, 3000 photographs of Frank Little, 500 I.W.W. constitutions in different languages, one Remington typewriter no. 10, and one box of miscellaneous papers among other things.⁴¹ The Chicago headquarters of the I.W.W., which functioned as its publishing bureau, was emptied of all literature and what plates could be found for the printing of pamphlets and illustrations. Agents also took subscription lists, account books, and typewriters.⁴² The searches looked more like evictions than evidence gathering. The fifteen-page inventory of items seized in Omaha, Nebraska includes boxes of empty envelopes and a Victor phonograph.⁴³ Material seized from the Chicago office alone amounted to five tons of papers and equipment. The raids were certainly meant to gather evidence for an indictment but they were also explicitly intended to deprive the organization of the material means of existence. This was the claim made by the defense as it began its opening statement. The case was only nominally about the actions of named individuals. In reality, it was “a case against an organization” and its intention was “to utterly shatter and destroy the ideal of which [the] organization stands.”⁴⁴ This was achieved in the courts but also by the organized seizure of the means of communicative production. The Espionage Act enabled a widespread, state-sponsored expropriation of I.W.W. property in the service of suppressing speech that threatened property.

⁴¹ Industrial Workers of The World Papers, 99, 2: Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

⁴² Industrial Workers of The World Papers 99, 3.

⁴³ Industrial Workers of The World Papers 99, 11.

⁴⁴ George F. Vanderveer, *Opening Statement of George F. Vanderveer, Counsel for the Defense of One Hundred and One Members of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1918), 1.

One hundred and sixty-six members of the I.W.W. were initially indicted on five counts of conspiracy and 113 were brought to trial in 1918. The Chicago trial was not the only trial of I.W.W. officers and members during and following the war—significant hearings took place across the country with notable cases in California, Kansas, and Nebraska—but it was the largest civilian trial in history. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn had encouraged members to have their cases severed. Individual trials would have made it difficult to prove guilt by association and would certainly have exonerated many members who had little to do with the correspondence and propaganda activity on which the prosecution’s case rested. Flynn, along with Carlo Tresca, Arturo Giovannitti and Joe Ettor were the only members to petition for severance.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, there seems to have been a general consensus that strength would be found in solidarity even though, legally, this made no sense. In the end, ninety-seven defendants, William “Big Bill” Haywood among them, stood trial.⁴⁶

The defense was led by a lawyer from the Pacific Northwest, George Vanderveer with Fred Moore, Caroline Lowe, Otto Chistensen, and William B. Cleary.⁴⁷ Vanderveer had assisted the defense, led by Fred Moore, of the Wobblies accused of murder during the infamous Everett incident and the defendants had been acquitted.⁴⁸ The prosecution was led by Frank Nebeker along with Claude Porter, U.S. District Attorney Charles Clyne and Bureau of Investigation Agent George Murdock.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Strang, 82.

⁴⁶ Strang, 80. One member died while awaiting trial and several others were simply never located.

⁴⁷ It is not clear why Clarence Darrow was not enlisted as lead counsel. The unexpected zeal with which he supported US entry into the war, labor’s anger and disappointment at the guilty plea entered on behalf of the McNamara brothers, and the jury tampering charges that followed this case were all likely explanations.

⁴⁸ Strang, 103.

⁴⁹ Strang, 110.

The honorable Kenesaw Mountain Landis presided over the Chicago trial. Landis was a former State Department employee who had established his progressive credentials by imposing a stunningly large fine on Standard Oil for antitrust violations. He wore a suit in court instead of a robe and was known for his informality in court proceedings. But a progressive antitrust position and a relaxed ‘of the people’ demeanor did not make him an ally of radicals. Landis like the many progressives scattered throughout the Wilson government, held virulently anti-radical views. Earlier in 1917, he had sentenced 121 ‘slackers,’ who he referred to as “whining, belly-aching puppies,” to hard labor for failing to register for the draft. He later oversaw socialist congressman Victor Berger’s trial under the Espionage Act. Landis not only sent Berger to prison for two decades, he later announced to an American Legion convention that “it was my great disappointment to give Berger only 20 years in Leavenworth...I believe the law should have enabled me to have him lined up against the wall and shot.”⁵⁰

The grand jury’s indictment doesn’t mention a single completed crime. The conspiracy charges were, in the nature of unrealized conspiracies, flexible and broad. Instead, its language was such that nearly all I.W.W. activity could be construed as a violation of the law and it is difficult to read the charges a century later without some condescension. Some of the evidence seemed aimed at proving the absurdity, rather than the legitimacy, of the charges’ logic. One of the “overt acts” in relation to the first count (conspiracy to overthrow the present industrial system by force and violence) was a letter written on behalf of evicted miners in Bisbee, Arizona. That it was put in evidence against a group charged with, among other things, “depriving citizens of the United States, or rather threatening, injuring and oppressing citizens of

⁵⁰ Strang, 104, 107.

the United States in the exercise of privileges and rights secured to them by the Constitution,” is nothing less than astounding.⁵¹

July 13th, 1917

President Wilson,
Washington, D.C.

More than two thousand men who were dragged from their homes and forcibly deported from Bisbee, Arizona, are adrift on the desert at Hermana, New Mexico. These men are miners, useful citizens, residents of Bisbee, Arizona. The United States can ill afford to permit these Russianized methods to go unchecked. We demand that these men be cared for and restored to their homes and families.

Wm. D. Haywood
General Secretary-Treasurer Industrial Workers of the World.⁵²

The document is full of letters like this one—no one requests for minimal restitution or statements that are critical only to the extent that they draw attention to inequity. Other documents are more damning. The second count, charging that the defendants interfered with the rights of citizens to fulfill contracts with the Government and the fifth count which charges the I.W.W. with using the mails to defraud citizens through the distribution of literature criticizing capitalism and the US government could be backed up by mountains of evidence.

It is easy to read the trial as an overreaction—the symptom of a hysterical, reactionary moment in American history—but it is far more productive to take the charges seriously as a measure of the threat that was posed by the so-called dangerous classes. The grand jurors describe the I.W.W. as “two hundred thousand persons being almost exclusively laborers in the many branches of industry *necessary to the existence and welfare of the people of the United*

⁵¹ Industrial Workers of The World Papers, 103, 6: U.S. V. Haywood et al., May 2, 1918, p. 27, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁵² Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 522.

States and of their government.”⁵³ [Emphasis mine.] It is an argument made repeatedly by the I.W.W. itself. A circular printed on June 22, 1917 implores workers to “stop furnishing the master the material of which the war structures are made of.”⁵⁴ What the trial made clear is that guilt or innocence did not rest on conflicting interpretations of what was or was not done or said, but conflicting class interests. This was not a conflict that could be meaningfully resolved within the terms set by a criminal trial, yet that was what was being attempted. *U.S. v Haywood* was confronting incompatible notions of justice and right through a mechanistic legal procedure unfolding within a framework established by a federal law designed to sanctify the moral authority of a wartime state. Should this statement have been written as a question—is it moral and just that labor should own everything?—the Espionage and Sedition Acts would have answered “no.” As Pouget wrote, “from the radical difference, the persistence of which we have noted, between the working class and the capitalist class, there is naturally derived a different morality.”⁵⁵ In his introduction, Giovannitti similarly declared that “the proletariat has a special mentality and hence a special morality of its own.”⁵⁶ Incapable of reconciling two incompatible moral registers the trial, in a sense, failed to fulfill its function of discovery and deliberation. But while its conclusion was inevitably identical to its starting point, it was something other than empty, cynical ritual even if it amounted to the same thing. It was, above all, a failure of translation: a doomed effort to represent and resolve class struggle in a legal register of guilt and innocence utterly unequipped to account for the terms of the actual dispute. Nebeker, in an

⁵³ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 509-510.

⁵⁴ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 521.

⁵⁵ Emile Pouget. *Sabotage*. Translated by Arturo Giovannitti. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 31.

⁵⁶ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 515.

attempt to prevent Vanderveer from summarizing the findings of the Commission on Industrial Relations argued that “general industrial conditions in this country are not involved in this case at all. That whatever those industrial conditions are, are based upon law,” and are, in circular fashion, therefore right.⁵⁷

Sabotage, on the contrary, claimed that “if private property rights are in conflict with human happiness, then private property rights come second. If we must choose between injuring profits and property, or undergoing growing degradation and starvation, then we will injure profits and property.”⁵⁸ The centrality of sabotage to the indictment cannot be overstated. That sabotage would have provided a form of speech that seemed to promise destructive actions is certainly key to this emphasis. The way in which this term crystalized the anxieties of both state power and the public at large made it a useful metonym for a whole host of perceived threats to national security and stability. That it was disavowed by the Socialist Party and placed outside of the acceptable discourse and tactics of the left itself made it practically indefensible. But the length at which Pouget’s pamphlet is quoted, combined with the preoccupations of the document as a whole, indicates that the state was concerned with more than a reduced and restricted definition of sabotage as mere property destruction and foreign interference with the war effort. The jurors, it seems, were interested in what sabotage meant. The state took the theory of sabotage seriously. Too much of Pouget’s pamphlet was quoted to be reproduced in full here, but it is worth noting that the list of recommendations for actual ‘overt acts’ of sabotage that are included in the pamphlet—such as temporarily disabling bread ovens and sprinkling emery

⁵⁷ Opening Statement of George F. Vanderveer, Council for the Defense of One Hundred and One Members of the Industrial Workers of the World, in the Case of U.S.A. vs. Wm. D. Haywood, et al. (Chicago: I.W.W. Publishing Bureau, 1918), 6.

⁵⁸ *Jersey Justice*, 4.

powder in machine gears—is truncated here and takes up very little space in comparison to the long passages quoted from Giovannitti’s more abstract introduction. The selections begin, strangely, with a passage that might describe precisely what the Grand Jury was in the process of doing:

Of all the words of a more or less esoteric taste which have been purposely denaturalized and twisted by the capitalist press in order to terrify and mystify a gullible public, ‘direct action’ and ‘sabotage’ rank easily next to anarchy, Nihilism, Free Love, Neo-Malthusianism, etc. in the hierarchy of infernal inventions.⁵⁹

The indictment goes on to quote the following two paragraphs where we find the explanation for this misrepresentation. It is an indictment of the indictment—a document aimed at defining sabotage as a criminal conspiracy. It is in the “vital interest” of the capitalist class, wrote Giovannitti, to throw suspicion on such terms “as soon as they begin to appear” precisely because they know exactly what they mean and the power that they hold. The “twisting” of these terms is expressly for the purpose of checking “the growth of their propaganda.” This obsession with semantics is, according to Giovannitti, characteristic of the capitalist class. In addition to controlling the means of production, the capitalist class exerts control over narratives: seizing on words the moment that they appear and “before they are understood,” manipulating meanings and disseminating a calculated definition that effectively directs the threat away from itself. These pamphlets were “not written for capitalists nor for the upholders of the capitalist system” because capitalists already knew full well what sabotage meant. The work to be done by the I.W.W. was one of clarification for the working classes. The writings were a reclamation of meaning and one might characterize the whole of I.W.W. propaganda as a narrative intervention in the common sense of free market ideology.

⁵⁹ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 514.

Vanderveer's opening statement was a similar intervention. Perhaps understanding that an evidentiary approach was a lost cause, he turned the opening gambit of the defense into an attack on the industrial system. It was, in some sense, an attempt to organize the jury—to convince them of the justice, rather than the legality, of the I.W.W.'s actions. To make his case against industrial capitalism, he discussed the findings of the Commission on Industrial Relations at length. It was a text that the I.W.W. also cited regularly. Portions were reprinted and discussed in the pages of the *Industrial Worker* and its findings were popular with soap boxers. Vanderveer cannily referred to it as “the bible of the I.W.W.” in an attempt to argue that their positions were nothing more than reflections of conclusions drawn by an impartial, government sanctioned authority. What the I.W.W. was doing, Vanderveer went on to argue, was not in the least political: “it is not aimed at the government, or governmental functions, [it] is purely social and industrial, and aims to break up this thing which is sapping our national industrial and economic life.”⁶⁰

Haywood “caused to be printed” many articles, letters, and other material that mentioned sabotage as well as the stoppage of work in the service of interrupting an immoral war at odds with the interests of the working class. Sabotage slipped easily into a military context without losing its original meaning because job action was a way of enacting pacifist beliefs. It could “paralyze the machinery of murder and make it impossible for the ignorant man-killers... to gather their toll of the life blood of foreign slaves.”⁶¹ Not only was the I.W.W. vocally anti-war, it *was* actively and openly sabotaging the war effort with economic action.

⁶⁰ Vanderveer, Opening Statement, 7.

⁶¹ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 520.

The ‘overt acts’ listed by the jurors begin with the entirety of the Preamble to the I.W.W. Constitution which the defendants also “caused to be printed.” The second overt act is a letter showing that Haywood suggested that Pouget’s sabotage be translated into Finnish. The letter indicates that the Workers Socialist Publishing Bureau of Duluth, Minnesota had asked for recommendations for literature to distribute to its membership during a general strike of iron miners. “I trust that the work of translation will be carried out, as it is a necessary and valuable work, and must be done sooner or later.”⁶² The phrase, “caused to be printed” was the only reasonably verifiable ‘act’ that could be assigned to this assortment of writing, but nearly every piece of evidence suggests the entanglement of writing and actual organizing, and the selection of evidence produced by the grand jury from the many tons of material seized seems alert to this closeness. “I think,” wrote Haywood on September 5, 1917, “for a while we ought to carry on an educational campaign thru [sic] our literature on the Range, and spread all kinds of leaflets and pamphlets amongst the miners in all languages...then they will be easier to organize.”⁶³

What is on display here is more than the expansive definition of speech that Weinrib attributes to Progressive Era civil libertarians. When Vanderveer made his opening statement, it was clear that he was doing something other than defending civil liberties—no matter how broadly defined. He understood that the case represented a fundamental ideological disagreement that was only superficially concerned with legality. While there was some room for defending the I.W.W. against accusations of actually participating in the “unlawful, tortious and forcible means and methods, involving threats, assaults, injuries, intimidations and murders upon the persons and the injury and destruction...of the property of such other classes, the forcible

⁶² Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 513.

⁶³ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 522.

resistance to the execution of all laws, and finally the forcible revolutionary overthrow of all existing governmental authority,” it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to show that they hadn’t openly advocated for all but murders and personal injury.⁶⁴ Most of the evidence gathered and presented consisted of confiscated print material that encouraged any number of ideas and activities that were explicitly aimed at accomplishing a revolutionary reorganization of society. Of course, one could quibble about the exact meaning of property destruction and argue that “forming the structure of a new society within the shell of the old” through economic action wasn’t precisely the same as overthrowing a sitting government but the notion that the organization saw itself, as Nebeker put it, as a “government within a government” was just as objectionable.⁶⁵ Whatever the case may have been in regards to the overthrow of government authority, the I.W.W. was hardly innocent according to the terms of an indictment that defined illegality as a conspiracy of verbal criticism of capitalism, government, and the war. And uncomfortable as it may be for those who want to defend the I.W.W. within the terms set by the law, a good faith denial that this criticism ever escaped the realm of the purely speculative is simply not possible.

Their guilt was particularly apparent in the charge that they had interfered with government procurement of materials necessary for prosecuting the war. This is perhaps the closest the charges come to an actual crime, in the sense that the I.W.W. did materially, and very intentionally, interfere with production rather than simply advocating such interference. This was particularly true in the lumber industry, where I.W.W. organizing strength was arguably at its peak in 1917. Their actions, not just their speech, were in direct violation of several

⁶⁴ Foner, *United States vs WM. Haywood*, 510.

⁶⁵ *Industrial Workers of The World Papers*, 103, 6: U.S. V. Haywood et al., May 2, 1918, p. 22, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

congressional acts enabling procurement of both labor and supplies for various branches of the military and appropriations for the construction and maintenance of aircraft. The industries in which I.W.W. members worked provided the raw materials needed for fuel, aircraft, and cantonment construction as well as basic subsistence. Even though, as Nebeker himself suggested, the organization's actual reach may have been exaggerated by the indictment, the concentration of this "perambulating population of wage workers" in agriculture, lumber, and metal and coal mining made them disproportionately obnoxious to the federal government.⁶⁶ Wartime needs thus transformed legally ambiguous activity, such as striking and picketing, into unambiguously unlawful behavior. None of these activities could be reasonably separated from 'mere' speech acts because organizing workers, as Haywood's letter to the ironworkers demonstrated, consisted of disseminating ideas. The interference with the war effort was not accidental. The relationship between labor and preparedness, the grand jury's assertion that I.W.W. members and other workers were essential to the execution of the war, was recognized and the withdrawal of worker efficiency—sometimes referred to as sabotage—was suggested as a means of ending the war. As one headline from May of 1916 declared "General Strike Can End War: Down with Wars and Military Preparedness! Let Us Prepare to Make an End of Them!"⁶⁷

These ideas often forged a strong link between anti-war activity and strike activity. Not only did the *Industrial Worker* declare that striking workers could end the war, patriotism was reframed as disloyalty to the working class. Fighting in Europe meant that you were not fighting the class war. Just before his death, Frank Little addressed a crowd of striking miners in Butte, Montana. Recounting a conversation he had with the Governor of Arizona, Little said, "I don't

⁶⁶ Industrial Workers of The World Papers, 103, 6: U.S. V. Haywood et al., May 2, 1918, p. 13-14, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁶⁷ *Industrial Worker*, May 13, 1916.

give a damn what your country is fighting for; I am fighting for the solidarity of labor.”⁶⁸ He then went on to threaten paralyzing strikes—40,000 men in agriculture would join the 50,000 lumber workers that were already out. “We will keep the troops of the United States Government so busy they won’t be able to go to France,” he concluded.⁶⁹ On the one hand, these were separate wars to be fought in separate theaters. On the other, the conflation of the military with other enemies of labor was evident in the material entanglement of industrial production and the needs of the state and this, in turn, was reflected everywhere in the organization’s attitude and language. Little, for example, was in the habit, unexceptional among I.W.W. members, of referring to members of the military as “army thugs” and “uniformed scabs.”

Criminal Syndicalism

The Espionage Act enabled the coordinated prosecution of the I.W.W. for general conspiracies at the federal level. The importance of the Chicago trial cannot be underestimated but it was not the only, or even the most significant, legal mechanism for the prosecution of I.W.W. members. Just before the 1917 raids, individual states began to pass criminal syndicalism laws that were explicitly aimed at diminishing the power of the I.W.W. Idaho was the first to pass such a law. Minnesota quickly followed suit, and over the next decade, twenty-three states passed criminal syndicalism laws. What distinguished anti-criminal syndicalism legislation from other repressive measures was the specificity of its target, its obsession with the word ‘sabotage,’ and its distinctly economic nature. Unlike broader conspiracy doctrines, criminal syndicalism laws were not couched in the airy language of state security. They explicitly outlawed the advocacy of “political and economic change.” They were also as often the result of the direct

⁶⁸ White, 690.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

influence of prominent industries in the state as they were the result of lobbying by patriotic groups such as the American Legion.⁷⁰ They were mostly passed in states where the I.W.W.'s influence was significant and they dropped out of use when its strength was flagging.⁷¹ Idaho's prototype, for example, was drafted by a Boise attorney employed by the lumber industry who was perfectly straightforward when explaining the purpose of the laws:

At that time the I.W.W.s were very active in North Idaho, in addition to distributing literature, they were beginning to commit acts of sabotage. The lumber interests felt it necessary to take protective measures...My clients did not consider the poor dupes who generally committed the acts of sabotage as the real criminals, but the agitators who inspired them to acts as such. At that particular time it was more important to shut up the agitators and keep them off the job than it was to put them in a penitentiary.⁷²

In respect to implementation, the laws were incredibly broad. Like other conspiracy laws, they criminalized language and association and allowed for widespread, specious, and politically or economically motivated criminal prosecution. Unlike their federal cousins, however, the language they concerned themselves with was specific to I.W.W. literature and the word sabotage was key. The broadest and most severe of these statutes was passed by the state of Montana in 1918. The language of the Montana act was typical (with slight variations, most were copies of the Idaho statute) but significant because of its severity and because it served as a model for the 1918 amendment to the Espionage Act commonly known as the Sedition Act.⁷³ It is worth quoting at length:

Any person who, by word of mouth or writing, advocates, suggests, or

⁷⁰ Dowell, 53.

⁷¹ White, 654.

⁷² Eldridge F. Dowell, quoted in Robert C. Sims "Idaho's Criminal Syndicalism Act: One State's Response to Radical Labor" *Labor History* 15 no. 4 (1974): 512.

⁷³ Dowell, 63.

teaches...crime, criminal syndicalism, or sabotage, or who shall advocate or suggest...any act of violence, the destruction of or damage to any property, the bodily injury to any person or persons, or the commission of any crime or unlawful act, as a means of accomplishing...any industrial or political ends, change, or revolution, or who prints, publishes, edits, issues, or knowingly circulates, sells, distributes, or publicly displays any books, pamphlets, paper, handbill, poster, document, or written or printed matter in any form whatsoever, containing, advocating, advising, suggesting, or teaching crime, criminal syndicalism, sabotage, the doing of any act of violence, the destruction of or damage to any property, the injury to any person, or the commission of any crime or unlawful act, as a means of...bringing about any industrial or political ends, or change...or who shall openly, or at all, attempt to justify, by word of mouth or writing, the commission or the attempt to commit sabotage....or who organizes, or helps to organize, or become a member of, or voluntarily assembles with, any society or assemblage of persons formed to teach or advocate, or which teaches, advocates, or suggests the doctrine of criminal syndicalism, sabotage, or...any act of violence... is guilty of a felony.⁷⁴

The laws speak for themselves and reiterate the logic of Oppenheim's explanation. What they are concerned with is less the prosecution of criminal acts of property destruction than the spreading of a doctrine. They were meant to "shut up the agitators." But they were effective because the word 'sabotage' allowed them to appear as if they were preventing acts of physical property destruction when, in fact, they were protecting the property rights of a specific class in a much more fundamental manner. The connection between these two registers—the critique of property in the abstract and definite acts against individual pieces of property—was precisely the function of sabotage. It was what gave it its distinctly threatening power. But it was clearly this latter threat, the one located in a discursive register, that motivated the "better class of citizens of the northern part of [Idaho]" to pass "legislation that would give protection to parties investing their money in business enterprise," against the I.W.W.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Isaac Watts Choate. *The Revised Codes of Montana of 1921* (San Francisco: Bancroft-Whitney, 1921).

⁷⁵ Robert C. Sims, "Idaho's Criminal Syndicalism Act: One State's Response to Radical Labor," *Labor History* 15, no. 4 (1974): 512.

The I.W.W. used the word ‘sabotage’ to denote a set of job actions aimed at leveraging lost profits for bargaining power. But it also used the word to elaborate a radical critique of the capitalist property relations that not only made illegitimate claims on wealth and property produced by workers, but generated a perverse morality in defense of what was, in effect, legalized theft. The function of sabotage was, therefore, not only to reduce profits through direct action, but also to name and enumerate the various mechanisms of exploitation on which this property regime was constructed.

Crucially, naming both capitalist morality cum property regimes, as well as the varied acts of sabotage itself was integral to the success of this so-called ‘guerilla warfare of the working class’. Sabotage was not mere speech, nor was it simply a set of actions. It was both and this makes it nearly impossible to defend the I.W.W. on legal terms without diminishing their economic, political and dare we say, moral importance. The dog whistle function of ‘sabotage’ as a means of prosecuting Wobblies and their allies was effective because almost no one else advocated a program of political and economic change that included sabotage as a philosophy and a tactic. There was no other organization that encouraged its members to consider the morality of property and act on the thinly veiled injustice that it both represented and produced.

Criminal syndicalism laws are a horrific artifact of legal repression and perhaps the most dramatic instance of the failure of civil liberties to date. But to read them as anomalous or anachronistic both assumes an otherwise triumphal history of free expression and ignores their real significance. There was, “contrary to any progressivist reading of the development of the law in [the area of civil liberties] that would explain these decisions by the immaturity of civil libertarian doctrine,” plenty of jurisprudence that would have supported the limitation of these

laws on constitutional or other grounds.⁷⁶ Appeals following criminal syndicalism convictions included just such constitutional claims that the laws violated guaranteed rights of association and speech and that they were “an impermissible form of class legislation.”⁷⁷ Perhaps the most famous of these cases, the trial of Anita Whitney, made its way to the Supreme Court. Her argument that the statute violated the equal protection clause because there was no equivalent criminalization of similar words in defense of the status quo, was dismissed. A state might make such distinctions, the court concluded, as long as they are ‘rational’. The free speech and association claims were also dismissed with Holmes and Brandeis concurring that Whitney had engaged in speech that presented an imminent danger to public safety and state security.⁷⁸

What criminal syndicalism laws showed was precisely what the I.W.W. had always argued: that the state and the courts were inseparable from capitalist class interests. It was no surprise to them that legislatures as well as the judiciary would be willing to censor specific ideas when those ideas pose fundamental threats to capitalism. By ignoring “what is perhaps the most, explicit, straightforward, and altogether remarkable effort in modern America to use the power of the state, backed by law, to stamp out a radical organization”, we fail to discern the actual limits of liberty.⁷⁹

A century removed from the widespread class violence of the Progressive Era, it is worth remarking that the I.W.W. and its ideas were taken very seriously. This is not only apparent in the extreme legal and extra-legal reaction to the organization as whole, but it is also reflected in

⁷⁶ White, 752.

⁷⁷ White, 741.

⁷⁸ White, 750-751.

⁷⁹ White, 652.

the language of the laws themselves, which were precise inversions of I.W.W. pamphlets on the subject. The way that they were written underscored the I.W.W.'s argument that threats to distinct units of property occurred by way of action, but a threat to property in general was accomplished in language; that sabotage as it was formulated by its proponents was not mere material destruction but a threat to the very notion of property; and that property itself was not simply material, but a legal construct shored up by morality. This morality extended far beyond a belief in the sanctity of property. It was expressed through the institution of marriage, hygiene, living arrangements, the impropriety of racial mixing, and attitudes towards foreign customs and languages. Whitney had not been arrested for giving a speech in support of sabotage or even advocating the regulation of labor. She was arrested for a giving a speech on "The Negro Problem" that "advocated civil rights and condemned the lynching of blacks."⁸⁰ This, of course, reflected the dragnet character of such laws, but it also indicates the complexity and breadth of the social customs and practices that were necessary for the perpetuation of economic control. The I.W.W., with its ethnically diverse membership, multilingual literature, disdain for traditional living arrangements, articles condemning anti-black racism, support for birth control, critiques of marriage, economic explanations of prostitution, and hatred of nationalism was, even in the absence of its organizing strength, an abomination from the perspective of capital. The I.W.W.'s real crime was pointing out that behind all of these bourgeois pretensions and reactionary positions was the singular goal of maintaining a system of property rights dependent on the exploitation of labor and supported by legislatures and courts. And they had a plan for ending the racism and sexual exploitation that kept the wheels of this machine well-greased: it

⁸⁰ White, 717-718.

could be put out of order with a little bit of emery dust, a bruised bushel of apples, and some lumber cut to the wrong length.

Chapter 5: Veblen's Soviet

How dear to my heart are those chimes in the morning,
That yank me from bed with melodious thrill;
How sweet is the sound of the regular warning
That yells that it's time that I hike to the mill.
Without it I'd sleep till the sun had arisen
Be late to the job that my boss lets me use;
Get canned, perhaps steal, Maybe land in a prison
If the chimes didn't hustle me out of my snooze.
What a blessing it was when the thing was invented
It beats the slave-driver who came with his stick;
It rests on the shelf in that shack that I rented
It never gets hungry; it never gets sick.

--"The Dollar Alarm Clock" The Little Red Song Book (1919)

Sabotage literature did not develop in a vacuum. Unique in its call for a direct attack on property and its assumption of the intelligence and agency of the so-called 'unskilled' workers it addressed, it was also one of many the theories put forth to explain the particular political economy of the early twentieth century United States. At the time, socialism had real political purchase. Henry George's wildly popular single tax schemes attempted to eliminate unearned increments while maintaining private property. Institutional economists and legal scholars such as Robert Hale were turning their attention to coercion and property rights in an attempt to disassemble the fiction of laissez-faire economics. Of the many interventions in the reigning

ideology of free markets, only sabotage proposed to restrict production and destroy employer property on the basis of its absolute illegitimacy. It was also one of the only critiques of property rights that developed from the observation of workers' methods for exerting control at the point of production. Sabotage was a practice before it was a theory and its value was inferred from its ongoing use. "When men do something instinctively, continually, year after year," wrote Gurley Flynn, "it means that that weapon has some value."¹

Sabotage was anathema to even the most strident progressive indictments of inequality. It implicitly rejected the authority of experts, derived its power from interference rather than efficiency, and precluded the possibility of cooperation between classes. By 1920, sabotage was well on its way to disappearing from the political landscape as a result of systematic repression. Throughout 1919, Thorstein Veblen wrote a series of articles for *The Dial* that dealt with the problem of 'capitalist sabotage'. Compiled and reprinted as *The Engineers and the Price System* in 1921, the essays took aim at the "conscientious withdrawal of efficiency" that he viewed as endemic to normal business practice. This was the last substantial appearance of the theory of sabotage. *The Engineers* was Veblen's most controversial and widely read book.² Veblen was clearly excited by the argumentative utility of the I.W.W.'s division of sabotage into its capitalist and workerist variants and, while hardly calling for the overthrow of capitalism by the working class, he recognized the theory of sabotage as a useful diagnostic tool that supported his own arguments about the wasteful nature of capitalism.

Far from proving the residual influence of the I.W.W.'s theory of sabotage on American thought, or a synthesis of syndicalism and progressive reformism or institutionalist economics,

¹ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage* (Chicago: IWW Publishing Bureau, 1915), 23.

² Eric Schatzberg, "Technik Comes to America: Changing Meanings of Technology before 1930," *Technology and Culture* 47, no. 3 (2006): 506.

Veblen's handling of sabotage demonstrated the hegemonic effect of over a decade of state repression. In Veblen's version, we see the last traces of the word's syndicalist origins while also witnessing its transformation into a term so general that it would eventually be used to refer to one's failure to adhere to a diet and/or meet deadlines. Sabotage lends a radical aura to Veblen's thought, but detached from its significance as a method of asserting worker control over the means of production, it means nothing more than an impediment to efficiency and productive potential. Veblen's version of sabotage bears a much closer resemblance to the theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor, who also saw rationalized industry as a net social benefit that would transcend class, than it does to its Wobbly origins. *The Engineers* is a critical text to the extent that Veblen's sympathies remained with those who were deprived of wealth, but it also represents an emerging consensus around efficiency, managerial control of production and the natural and inevitable progress of machines themselves. Veblen's text, read alongside Taylor and against I.W.W. writing on sabotage and efficiency, suggests that the ideology of efficiency that emerged from the Progressive Era—a habit of thought cultivated by progressives sympathetic to radicalism as well as anti-labor managers—is perhaps the most effective vehicle for policing the boundaries of political thought.

The suggestion that efficiency was the answer to inequality is as old as capitalism. Since the development of mass production, the potential for a universal satisfaction of needs by industrial technology has been a central component of utopian thinking. This faith in technological solutions to social problems is regularly renewed from every imaginable angle with politicians promising increased employment in developing economic sectors and intellectuals speculating about the possibility of fully automated luxury communism. The basic arguments on both sides have remained strikingly consistent over time and can be fairly

summarized as follows: having overcome natural limits with technological innovation, poverty and want should no longer exist. Scarcity, so the logic goes, may have been an unfortunate reality at an earlier time when human want was constrained by seasons, plagues, floods and droughts, but by the nineteenth century at the latest, we had learned how to harness nature and transform it into productive power. We had, to borrow a phrase from Peter Kropotkin, conquered bread. Industrial progress was not a matter of machinery alone. It was always also a production process that had, at its core, the division of labor. Celebrated by Adam Smith for giving the lowliest of European peasants more wealth than an African king, and loathed by Marx for playing a significant role in our estrangement from our ‘species being’, the division of labor and its relationship to mechanical ingenuity is a perennial preoccupation. Edward Bellamy made a similar argument for the irrationality of poverty in his wildly popular novel *Looking Backwards*, which described a utopian future in which a combination of technology and efficient state management had solved the problem of inequality and overwork. Given a properly managed system of distribution and some pneumatic tubes, the poverty and want that allegedly drove the violent conflicts of the Progressive Era would disappear. Published in 1888, the novel anticipated important aspects of twentieth century progressive reform movements. Specifically, the book imagined a lack of conflict and a generalization of the middle class brought about by a benevolent state that had rationalized production and consumption. The faith that a well-managed society would produce rational, unselfish, socially responsible people was one of Bellamy’s most important didactic claims. That all of this was ‘rational’, and that selfishness and self-interest were the irrational products of an irrational society, made the novel paradigmatically progressive.³

³ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* (Eternal Sun Books, 2016)

Veblen was a great fan of Bellamy's novel and his political sympathies were with "those who have urgent use for more than they own" rather than the "absentee owners of much property" whose material interests constituted the overriding concern of the state.⁴ His disdain for the idle classes was hardly hidden and he had a clear understanding of the role that the state played in maintaining economic privilege. Like Bellamy, Veblen's view of industry itself was cornucopian. And like Bellamy, he organized much of his thought around the irrationality of scarcity, self-interest, and the conflict that it created. The increase in productive capacity brought about by mechanical advances was, despite its misuse, a boon to society. The United States was not providing for its population because 'vested interests' were preventing this industry from running at full capacity. Maldistribution was a management problem, not a class problem. Veblen does not cite the widely circulating pamphlets on sabotage but this is likely due to the general lack of direct citation that was conventional at the time, rather than an indication that he arrived at the idea independently. Veblen had written about the I.W.W.'s use of sabotage in a strikingly sympathetic report on "Farm Labor and the I.W.W." undertaken for the Food Administration's Statistical Division in 1918. Given the chronology of I.W.W. publications (Giovannitti's translation of Pouget (1912), Smith (1913) and Gurley Flynn (1915)), we can safely assume that these texts served as his sources for framing inefficiency along lines of worker and capitalist sabotage.

Sabotage gave Veblen a way to emphasize the waste inherent in financial capitalism, but the waste that inhered in capitalist production was only one aspect of the I.W.W.'s theory. Furthermore, sabotage was not just a theory—it was a tactic and as a tactic, could not be

⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), 9; Rick Tilman, "Thorstein Veblen: Incrementalist and Utopian," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 32, no. 2 (1973): 155.

divorced from class conflict and destruction of property. Intentional waste of the products of capitalism by workers was an indispensable aspect of sabotage. Worker sabotage proposed waste as a solution—as a necessary component of achieving economic equality.⁵ When the *Industrial Worker* complained that “carloads of potatoes were destroyed in Illinois recently; cotton was burned in the Southern states; coffee was destroyed by the Brazilian planters; barge loads of onions were dumped overboard in California.... all to raise prices,” they were speaking Veblen’s language.⁶ When Wobblies practiced sabotage by throwing pitchforks, scrap metal and bunches of burlap into the cylinders of threshing machines, Veblen could only understand them as an unfortunate symptom.

In noting the inefficiency of capitalist sabotage, Veblen casts the profit motive as irrational, when it is, in its own terms, highly rational. He realizes, that to survive in competitive markets, capitalists needed a return on investment: they must, that is, make more money than they originally invested into production. The extent to which they also produced commodities in this process can vary but the imperative to accumulate and expand was constant and enforced by the dynamics of interfirm competition. If the production of fewer or shoddier commodities translated into more money, then the logic, or rationale, of capitalist accumulation was satisfied. Veblen was aware that businessmen were subject to these structural economic demands, what he did not acknowledge was that the way that machinery produced relative surplus value was itself constrained by these demands. The social relations crystalized in large scale industry were of a particular kind that made no sense within a social context freed of the need for surplus value

⁵ One of Veblen’s critiques of socialism is that it ignores status emulation and envy. The realm of consumption is far more significant for him than the realm of production. Thorstein Veblen, “Some Neglected Points in the Theory of Socialism,” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1891): 2.

⁶ “Sabotage, Part IV,” *Industrial Worker*, February 18, 1913.

production. These factories, in turn, made their own demands on the organization of production. The excess of shoddy, machine goods that drove down the price of all commodities in the same category and therefore required the artificial constriction of production or prolongation of the working day and depression of wages was a problem specific to industrial capitalism. This abundance was as much a feature of capitalism as its artificial restriction. Continuous production processes—the very processes that Veblen sought to perfect—were a feature of financial capitalism. They were not the product of an independent technical evolution that had somehow outpaced social relations. Furthermore, the machinery of financialized capitalism and the system of absentee ownership that Veblen so vehemently opposed was just that—machinery. The same machines simply would not produce in the same manner under different economic conditions. The same machines would not exist. Making them work better was no solution at all.

Veblen essentially recast a moral critique of economic exploitation—which can't actually be accommodated by even the most well-meaning call to efficiency—as a technocratic concern. Veblen's notions of resource distribution were naively normative and demonstrated an outsized faith in instrumental rationality, planning, and technology. By turning sabotage into a mere threat to efficiency, Veblen reified the abundance that 'naturally' issued from capitalist modes of production. According to him, class conflict, a term he almost never uses, is largely the product of industrial change outpacing legal and economic institutions and the cultural conventions they created. Like many of his peers, he took theories of evolution for granted and his contribution to the field of institutional economics bore traces of this evolutionary thinking.⁷

⁷ Devin Penner, "The Limits of Radical Institutionalism: A Marxian Critique of Thorstein Veblen's Political Economy," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 43 no. 2 (2010): 155-56.

Veblen, like the I.W.W., saw sabotage as endemic to capitalism and argued that it had “a large share in the ordinary conduct of business.” Business and commerce would not be able to function, he wrote “without some salutary restraint in the way of sabotage on the productive use of the available industrial plant and workmen [because] it is altogether unlikely that prices could be maintained at a reasonably profitable figure for any appreciable time.”⁸ Industry, according to Veblen, had reached a level of sophistication and productivity that made it impossible to produce at full capacity without flooding the market and depressing prices. The use of sabotage by “vested interests” to the detriment of “the community” was thus the undesirable and unintended consequence of industrial evolution outpacing the social and economic apparatus under which it was organized.

Capitalist sabotage—or the elite production of unnecessary scarcity—provided Veblen with an explanation for a situation that he found baffling and frustrating: that industry could reach such an advanced stage and still manage to leave those “who have come through the war and made the world safe for the business of the vested interests” deprived of “a supply of the necessaries of life.”⁹ The enrichment of the business class to the detriment of the community was, though, not a matter of exploitation or naked avarice but a social failure of the “price system.” Businessmen were the “creatures and agents” of a system that was likely to eject them if they were to “allow the community’s needs to unduly influence their management style” because they were beholden to profit margins.¹⁰ Without some sabotage, the businessman would

⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (Kitchener, Ontario: Kitchener Books, 2001), 5.

⁹ Veblen, 12.

¹⁰ Veblen, 11.

surely face insolvency and to avoid such an outcome he was compelled to interfere with a potentially perfect system of production.

The mechanical complexity of industry, and the interlocking nature of production over geographic space that necessitated the widespread coordination of sabotage, led Veblen to argue that sabotage required the intervention of the state. “Even a reasonable amount of collusion among the interested business concerns,” he wrote, “will not by itself suffice to carry on that comprehensive moving equilibrium of sabotage.”¹¹ It follows therefore, that the state “will have some share in administering that necessary modicum of sabotage that must always go into the daily work of carrying on industry by business methods for business purposes.” The protective tariff is the “great standing illustration of sabotage administered by the government” but, having recently withdrawn from military conflict, the state’s specific interest in sabotage—the “withdrawal of efficiency from work that does not fall in with the purposes of the administration”—was also readily apparent at the moment of writing. Wartime production occasionally resulted in “half concerted measures...in the interest of the nation at large” but these were exceptional. The result, as he saw it, was that “civilized people are suffering privation” because the “industrial system is deliberately handicapped with dissension, misdirection, and unemployment of material resources, equipment, and man power, at every turn where the statesmen or the captains of finance can touch its mechanism.”¹²

The commercial interests of “one-eyed management” was interfering with the optimal efficiency of a technically advanced mode of production. By contrast to its syndicalist usage, sabotage was, for Veblen a purely material and mechanical problem with a technical solution

¹¹ Veblen, 14.

¹² Veblen, 35.

that “begins and ends in the domain of tangible performance.”¹³ It was simply the most serious symptom of the interference of financial interests in technical operations. That which threatens efficiency is necessarily bad, so while we might sympathize more with worker sabotage than capitalist sabotage, *any* conscientious withdrawal of efficiency threatened the common good.

Veblen’s solution to this appropriated analysis—one also drawn from the radical handbook—is a brief general strike by the only group in society that is not engaged in some form of ‘salutary’ sabotage in the service of their own interests—the “technological specialists.”¹⁴ Because it is this group that is “in possession of the requisite technological information and experience”, and are therefore an “indispensable factor in the everyday work of carrying on the country’s productive industry...any question of a revolutionary overturn in America” hinges on “what the guild of technicians will do.”¹⁵ Veblen’s solution to class conflict is to imagine a class of people with no vested interests. That is, to suggest that there is the possibility of existing wholly outside of the class structure. If the businessmen are the accidental product of a profit-seeking system, the engineers were the product of industry—the human expression of machine efficiency. They were not members of an interested class. Their actions were not motivated by wealth accumulation. Rather their allegiance was to efficiency itself. Machinery itself had no interests outside of its tendency to increase material production through technical advancement. As the human expression of mechanical mandates, it follows that the “material welfare of all the

¹³ Veblen, 47.

¹⁴ Veblen, 51.

¹⁵ Veblen, 82.

advanced industrial peoples rests in the hands of these technicians.”¹⁶ In Veblen’s imagination, the social machine was malfunctioning because industrial machines were malfunctioning.

Sabotage was not something that could be eliminated by engineers and their religious adherence to maximum efficiency because sabotage was “born of class struggle—of man’s inhumanity to man... [its history] shows the irreconcilable antagonism between capitalist and laborer—master and slave.”¹⁷ Sabotage was proposed as a way for those without property to seize the means of production and it was used by property owners to maintain control of their wealth.

The notion that industry, like the class of engineers, was evolving independently of capitalism was antithetical to the way that the I.W.W. conceived of industrial technology. Rather than being an impediment to industrial progress, the preamble to the I.W.W. Constitution asserted that “social relations and groupings only reflect mechanical and industrial conditions.” In other words, technological change shaped society rather than having advanced independently of it. Food and wages were galvanizing issues, but in articulating a form of revolutionary violence aimed at property rather than people, the I.W.W. was not merely lodging dramatized complaints about a lack of bread. They were also elaborating a crucial distinction between inanimate material and living beings and reasserting a hierarchy of values that privileged living over dead labor. The rational organization of labor desired by Veblen’s engineers, and embodied in machine production, were implicit targets.

While simple tools, as well as machines, could become the objects of worker sabotage, Veblen’s unintended misuse of the I.W.W.’s theory reveals the critique of technology embedded

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Sabotage II,” *Industrial Worker*, January 30, 1913.

in actual worker sabotage. Veblen was convinced that technology served an ideological, socializing function. Through exposure to rational, machine processes workers would themselves, he believed, become more rational. Writing of the Arts and Crafts movement, he suggested that its proponents were sentimental and mistaken—not because of a romantic attachment to beauty but because a creative reorganization of work along nonindustrial lines was precluded by a naturalized notion of technological advancement and the increasingly technologized mind that it produced. The inevitability of technology subtends the whole of Veblen’s thought. If, he writes of the Arts and Crafts movement, “art and labor is to go into effect under modern circumstances, it will have to mean the association of art with the machine process...Modern industry is machine industry.”¹⁸ Proponents of Arts and Crafts, such as William Morris (who, incidentally, did not like Bellamy’s novel), were concerned with more than beautiful objects. Objects, they suggested, were beautiful when produced “on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully” in an environment that organized around “pleasures, bodily and mental, scientific and artistic, social and individual.”¹⁹ Veblen finds the notion of recovering a sense of pleasure in unmechanized labor absurd.

The machine process has come, not so much to stay merely, but to go forward and root out of the workmen’s scheme of thought whatever elements are alien to its own technological requirements and discipline. It ubiquitously and unremittingly disciplines the workmen into its way of doing, and therefore into its way of apprehending and appreciating things. ‘Industrial art’ therefore, which does not work through and in the spirit of the machine technology is, at the best, an

¹⁸ Thorstein Veblen, “Arts and Crafts,” *Essays in Our Changing Order*, Edited by Leon Ardzrooni (New York: Sentry Press, 1934), 196.

¹⁹ William Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* ed. Clive Wilmer (New York: Penguin, 2004), 299; “‘Looking Backward’: a review of *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy,” *News from Nowhere*, 351.

exotic...It has no chance of life beyond the hothouse shelter of decadent aestheticism.²⁰

Taylorism, Sabotage, and the Machine Question

In the introduction to *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Frederick Winslow Taylor wrote that “what we are all looking for... is the readymade, competent man; the man whom someone else has trained. It is only when we fully realize that our duty, as well as our opportunity, lies in systematically cooperating to train and to make this competent man...that we shall be on the road to national efficiency.”²¹ Taylor lacked Veblen’s awareness of the larger political economic field in which industry operated. No critique of the economic advantages afforded to ‘substantial citizens’ will be found in his *Principles*, but the logic of efficiency is stubbornly narrow and Taylor’s managers are almost indistinguishable from Veblen’s engineers. Now associated with brutal, profit driven speedups, Taylor’s first chapter opens with a promise of equity: “The principle object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee.”²²

Mike Davis has suggested that sabotage was a response to the imposition of the Taylor system and other efficiency movements—an organizational reaction to imposed speedups and the introduction of mass assembly technologies. The prominence of sabotage in I.W.W. literature between 1910 and 1913, he argues, coincided with I.W.W. led strikes in industries that had imposed the Taylor system or some other form of speedup.²³ This may overstate the case. The

²⁰ Veblen, 197.

²¹ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, (Greenwood, WI: Suzeteo Enterprises, 1911), xii.

²² Taylor, 1.

²³ Mike Davis, “The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World,” *Radical America* 9, 1975.

precipitating event for strikes in Paterson, New Jersey and Lawrence, Kansas were wage reductions and neither sabotage nor I.W.W. influence was limited to Taylorized industries. Furthermore, the organization had broad appeal for itinerant workers in industries such as lumber that might best be described as irrationalized. But however the actual practice of sabotage distributed itself across industry, its theorization was a response to the real relocation of job control in the hands of management. The most concrete manifestation of this power struggle was large-scale machinery, which was not a symbolic stand-in for management but, as workers knew, a realization of employer control over production methods derived from the division and appropriation of their labor.

The modern, rationalized factory of the 1900s was, on the whole, cleaner, better lit, and safer than its nineteenth century counterpart.²⁴ And there is no way to know to what degree Taylor's management techniques were implemented. Like sabotage, scientific management is difficult to locate and measure. What we do know is that factories and, by extension, the number of people employed in large scale manufacturing, were growing dramatically and the very size and complexity of their operations demanded, as Veblen would have certainly pointed out, expert management and standardization.

Sabotage could be employed against a fruit tree or an assembly line. But modern machinery was the clearest material and symbolic manifestation of the system under which laborers were exploited. The increasing importance of machine production was central to the logic of industrial unionism: "Trade lines have been swallowed up by the common servitude of all workers to the machines that they tend." In this respect as well, the role of machinery differed

²⁴ Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880-1920*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 7, 26.

greatly for the I.W.W. It had a causal role and an impact on the organization of social and economic relations. It did not trundle along in parallel fashion waiting to be made more efficient. It created classes, required the development of management systems and constituted the means by which a worker's skill and knowledge could be appropriated, standardized, and represented as physical property—as the 'natural' evolution of industrial production rather than the conscious skill of the workers themselves. In the words of I.W.W. poet Covington Hall, "capitalist society is theft and piracy organized and brought to a science."²⁵

If possession is indeed nine tenths of the law, then the machine-breaking saboteur, in effect, possessed through destruction and thereby expropriated machinery from its legal owner—if only in a rough fashion and for a short time. Sabotage was an act of reappropriation—the taking back of an object that was produced by labor and therefore rightly belonged to it. But this property contest did not limit itself to physical objects. It extended, perhaps more importantly, to the ownership of knowledge. Sabotage was an assault on intellectual property that was, in the early twentieth century, being systematically expropriated through management systems and mechanization. Taylor was obsessed with knowledge appropriation and he conceived of this knowledge as the property of a class, not an individual. Most work methods had been "almost unconsciously learned," and the "ingenuity and experience of each generation" passed down to the next as a "mass of rule of thumb or traditional knowledge." Efficiency is clearly shown here to be inseparable from class power. The 'ingenuity' that workers demonstrated, in the twin tasks of slowing down and hiding their knowledge of production from management, raised important questions about the relationship between the laboring and the owning classes. It also raised questions about the role of machinery and efficiency in that relationship. Sabotage, "the

²⁵ Covington Hall, "Scientific Management," *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 16, 1911.

chloroforming of the ogres of production,” asked whether the domination and exploitation inherent in capitalist property relations could ever be effectively separated from the machinery that capital owned and managed.

One definition of sabotage offered by Pouget was “any skillful operation on the machinery of production intended not to destroy it...but only to temporarily disable it and to put it out of running condition in order to make impossible the work of scabs.” Explicitly linking worker control to disruption and destruction produced a workerist narrative that was antithetical to the very idea of technological progress. This was, importantly, a ‘skillful’ operation not “clumsy and stupid destruction.” It required that the worker “know thoroughly the anatomy of the machine which he is going to vivisect.”²⁶ Sabotage was a powerful and concrete realization of specialized knowledge in spite of encroaching managerial control. This could, of course, be said of any well-organized work stoppage or job action, but in addition to demonstrating workers’ power, sabotage underscored the fragility of an industrial system of production. What becomes clear in Pouget’s litany of possible forms that sabotage could take, are the number of ways that an industrial system of production could break down—its vulnerability increased in direct proportion to its potential efficiency. Constant capital was subject to all the disadvantages of visibility and symbolic, political action. Machines were the most legible sites of revolt. This was one of sabotage’s most salient insights and the point of departure for developing and demonstrating a new locus of worker knowledge.

Sabotage, by encouraging direct physical intervention in industrial progress, was incompatible with the reification of efficiency inserted into the concept by Veblen. Contrary to progressive notions of socially beneficial and well-managed industry, it suggested a need to

²⁶ Emile Pouget, *Sabotage*, Translated by Arturo Giovannitti, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1913), 15.

revisit a real debate about the actual effects of industrial machinery—not its idealized, future form but its actual impact in the present. Veblen’s effective removal of the working class from his analysis made it impossible for him to recognize crucial forms of social failure that could not be corrected by efficiency. Barring total and perfect automation, machines in perfect working order still worked against their operators. The I.W.W. did not espouse a romantic, pre-mechanical worldview, but they were decidedly not convinced that machines or advances in machinery could solve class problems. The logic of worker sabotage was, in part, that it saved workers from some of “the ‘lost’ and ‘unnecessary motions’ made necessary by the very existence of capitalist society.”²⁷ Like every other word, ‘sabotage’ included, ‘efficiency’ meant something substantially different depending on the class employing it.

Perhaps this attitude toward efficiency would have been different under entirely different economic conditions, but such counterfactuals are moot. During the early twentieth century, machines were logical objects of hatred and important sites of contestation and control. Capitalist progress was understood as a series of “wonderful leaps in the way of extracting a greater day’s work from those who toil.” Efficiency was thus understood as extending the interests of capital rather than being an uninterested and merely mechanical possibility. Because progress *was* exploitation, and efficiency only a means of extending this relation, sabotage could be figured as a form of efficiency whereby workers, like their capitalist counterparts, got the most out of their working day. “We must be so efficient,” announced the *Industrial Worker*, that we will not allow ourselves to be ‘speeded up’ and we must knock down every scheme of the master to get more out of [us].”²⁸

²⁷ Hall, page missing

²⁸ Covington Hall, “Efficiency,” *Industrial Worker*, date unknown.

Efficiency and mechanization were at the center of the I.W.W.'s philosophy. To assert, wrote Hall, "that 'machines do not make morals' is to assert that which is denied by the whole history of the race, written and legendary."²⁹ The "proletariat of the twentieth-century [is] a machine proletariat," and "the modern trust is...clearly the child of the machine."³⁰ The Manifesto of the I.W.W. begins by locating primary social divisions in industrial machinery. "The *great facts* of present industry are the displacement of human skill by machines and the increase of capitalist power through concentration in the possession of the tools with which wealth is produced and distributed."³¹ This assertion was not, in some ways, significantly different than the claims made in the *Communist Manifesto*. Capitalism creates the conditions for its own destruction—impregnating itself with a revolutionary proletariat through the establishment of a factory system. But the image here was not one of spatial concentration of bodies into the common space of a factory. The great facts of industry in 1905 were the machines themselves—their existential and active role in the consolidation and reproduction of the capitalist power to exploit.

Well before the I.W.W. had been established, sabotage was used against Taylor himself. When Taylor became a foreman at Midvale Steel, he attempted to increase output in a number of ways. He fired intransigent workers who refused to bust the piece rate and then trained new workers to run lathes at a faster pace with the promise of higher wages if they could resist social pressure to maintain the established rate. In response, the workers intentionally broke their machines:

²⁹ Covington Hall, "Machinery and Morals," *Industrial Worker*, Feb. 1, 1912.

³⁰ Albert Brilliant, "Modern Machine Proletariat," *Industrial Worker*, Feb. 22, 1912; Hall, "Machinery and Morals," Feb. 1, 1912.

³¹ Industrial Union Manifesto, See Appendix B.

Every time I broke a rate or forced one of the new men whom I had trained to work at a reasonable and proper speed, some one of the machinists would deliberately break some part of his machine as a an object lesson to demonstrate to the management that a fool foreman was driving the men to overload their machines until they broke. Almost every day ingenious accidents were planned, and these happened to machines in different parts of the shop and were, of course, always laid to the fool foreman who was driving the men and the machines beyond their proper limit.³²

To remedy the situation, Taylor imposed a system of fines even though “they could always show every time an accident happened that is was not their fault and that it was an impossible thing for them not to break their machine under the circumstances.” It took, he recounted “three years of hard fighting” before they were able to become “friends.”³³

“Sabotage,” wrote Smith in 1913 “offers the best method to combat the evil known as ‘speeding-up.’”³⁴ It not only offered a response to deskilling and speedup, but also focused analytical and tactical attention on the material expression of capitalist power. And while, depending on the industry, this could be anything from food to a lathe, the preoccupation with industrial machinery that appears in the Preamble, inflects the calls to sabotage that followed five years later. These fixed capital investments, what Marx would call “dead labor” are here figured as an active, determining force in the conditions of workers lives and the maintenance of a social organization along class lines. The Preamble’s establishment of machines as the great facts of present industry, rather than the concentration of workers in factory settings, signals a different attitude to the role of fixed capital in the maintenance of class power. At a moment when the knowledge “under the workman’s cap”, as Haywood put it, was being concentrated in the hands

³² Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management Hearings before Special Committee of the House of Representatives to Investigate the Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management under Authority of H. Res. 90.*, 62nd Congress, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1912), 1413-1414.

³³ Taylor, testimony on *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management* ,1414.

³⁴ “Sabotage III,” *Industrial worker*, Feb. 11, 1913.

of management or crystalized in capital intensive machinery, sabotage presented another type of knowledge and a rerouting of skill into destructive—or at least disruptive—rather than productive processes. Conjuring the power of this collective repurposing of the skills of the “unskilled,” the *Industrial Worker* offered the following provocation: “Imagine [if] thousands of workers in every field of production, instead of using their brains and strength to make profits for the bosses, would use it against them by sabotaging [sic] at every opportunity.”³⁵

While proponents of scientific management could study production, analyze the component parts of a skilled operation, and thereby divide, rearrange or mechanize that task, the set of skills held by the saboteur could not be similarly transferred. In fact, the increase of management control through “the displacement of human skill by machines” would have created an environment where everyday forms of resistance might thrive. The dispersal of production processes into a series of simple tasks by ‘unskilled’ and presumably unorganized workers would obviate worker control over the production process as a whole. As Davis noted in his discussion of Taylorism and the I.W.W., the goal of these management principles was that “the interdependency of workers—previously expressed through their teamwork of conscious cooperation—would be replaced by a set of detailed task instructions...without requiring any initiative from the bottom up.”³⁶ But it was precisely this environment that provided all the advantages of tacit resistance. No longer could management locate the source of disruption in a coherent body of craftsmen. Instead, one of the machines just broke. “If only,” Pouget sarcastically remarked, “workers were as compliant as steel.”³⁷ But workers never have been

³⁵ Gustave Moreau, “The Weapon Which Wins,” *Industrial Worker*, Feb. 23, 1911.

³⁶ Davis, page?

³⁷ Pouget, 43.

particularly compliant and worker complaints against machinery—against particular machines as well as the social transformation brought about by technological progress—were not new. Machine wrecking had a long history that is bound up with the establishment and evolution of capitalist production.³⁸

One possible reason for the retrospective dismissal of sabotage (or the I.W.W.’s positions more generally) may be its imbrication with a critique of machine technology. In a society where technological progress is conflated with progress itself, criticizing technological rationality almost automatically appears naïve or even, as Herbert Marcuse has suggested, “neurotic.”³⁹ The return to the machine question embedded in a program of sabotage might actually be read as a revival, conscious or not, of an old debate about the role of technology in unemployment and impoverishment—an issue raised repeatedly by the workers ejected from industry by progress—that has always, and continues to be, dismissed as shortsighted and unsophisticated. Decoupling progress from technology is counterintuitive because the notion of efficiency is so thoroughly embedded in the cultural logic of capitalism.

³⁸ The most famous incidence of machine breaking as a form of negotiation or “collective bargaining by riot,” was the Luddite uprisings of 1811-1817. Luddism reached its height between 1811 and 1817 in three principal regions in the north of England. In Nottingham, framework knitters or stockings protested the introduction of wide stocking frames that produced inferior products. In Yorkshire, croppers or cloth finishers continued their efforts to prevent the use of gig mills (an invention dating back to the 16th century) and shearing frames. In Lancashire, the cotton weavers found their employment threatened by automated looms.³⁸ While Luddites had no revolutionary pretensions, their activity coincided with a period of transition from artisanal craft economies to capitalist wage labor that was bound up with rapid technological change and their hostility to machinery—the crystallization of capitalist profits and control in fixed capital—is not dissimilar to the logic of sabotage nearly a century later. Luddites demonstrated the same knowledge revealed by the advocates of sabotage and emphasized in the I.W.W.’s Manifesto. Namely, that large capital investments were both an expression and extension of employer power as well as their greatest vulnerability. Marx dismissed the Luddites as an immature phase in the labor movement, citing their confusion of literal machinery with the political machinery of class power.³⁸ Repeating this argument, Haywood referred obliquely to a time when “machines were first invented” and “foolish” workers destroyed them.³⁸ But this moralizing on the part of industrial progress seems to be a rarity if not totally anomalous and Marx’s attitude towards technology and its role in determining economic and social organization was far more complex than his dismissal of Luddites implied.

³⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 9.

Taylor began his experiments with scientific management in the late 19th century but did not publish *The Principles* until 1911. It would be a mistake to imagine that Taylorism was suddenly and unilaterally imposed on industry, but Taylorism remains an important corollary to sabotage. As Taylor's testimony about his time at Midvale Steel reveals, his management theories were as much a response to sabotage as sabotage was a reaction to Taylorism. In fact, Taylor saw scientific management as the inverse of sabotage; not simply a matter of increased efficiency as such, but as a means of appropriating and converting modes of shop floor resistance into productive capacity. The goal of a well-managed shop, according to Taylor's congressional testimony, was to get workers to use "their ingenuity to see how they can turn out as much work as possible, instead of using their ingenuity, as they ordinarily do, to convince their employers that they are working hard and yet not work enough."⁴⁰ Taylor's attempt to convince the U.S. House of Representatives of the revolutionary outcome that could be expected of fully implemented scientific management was not dissimilar from the elaboration of sabotage as a philosophy. Both were acutely aware of the power and knowledge that workers possessed.

In the final report, the Special Committee noted several reasons that the imposition of an entirely new system of production was not practical. Most tellingly though, Taylorism was rejected for its tendency to dehumanize workers by conceiving of them as machines themselves, indicating a general uneasiness with the very idea of efficiency and perhaps with the progressive impulse towards social engineering more generally. Echoing the complaints of workers that machinery was dehumanizing, the report concluded that:

...a margin exists between the work performed by a loafer and the maximum task for a man, and in that margin lies a proper day's work. What constitutes a reasonable day's work can only be determined by practical experience and

⁴⁰ *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management Hearings*, 1392.

intelligent observation....the time study of the operations of any machine can be made with a reasonable degree of accuracy, because all of the elements can be taken into consideration in making the computation. A machine is an inanimate thing—it has no life, no brain, no sentiment and no place in the social order.⁴¹

Taylor saw his project in utopian terms. Scientific management did not aspire to absolute efficiency for the purpose of increasing profits, but for the production of abundance that would be shared more equitably between workers, managers, and owners. Higher rates of production could only help the poor by giving them “a higher standard of living [making] the luxuries of one generation the necessities of the next.” Furthermore, Taylor did not see himself as an ally of the capitalist class any more than he saw himself as an interested member of the working class. “The most important fact of this whole subject,” he told Congress, “is that any association...any men who deliberately restrict the output in any industry are robbing the people.”⁴² Taylor never used the word sabotage during his testimony, but he reiterated and dramatized his point by accusing those who would “prevent wealth from coming into the world” of “robbing the working people.” Whether it is at the behest of workmen or the manufacturer, “to restrict the world’s output...is mere robbery.”⁴³ Like sabotage, scientific management sought to remedy unjust confiscation. But the doctrine of efficiency, convinced as it was of its extra-economic position could not name, let alone locate, either the thief or its victim.

Taylor must have thought that Congress had missed his point entirely—stopwatches and machine speeds were simply not the issue, even less so the relationship between human workers and the machines that they tended. The technocratic worldview held by Taylor and Veblen did

⁴¹ *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management*, 3.

⁴² *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management*, 1383.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

not accommodate outmoded, republican definitions of manhood and humanity. This was, in part, because neither Taylor nor Veblen, for all of their obsessive attention to factory organization, paid any attention to the qualitative experience of human workers at work. Veblen's *Engineers* focuses almost entirely on capitalist sabotage. This appears to be a politically sympathetic move—a correction to the years of negative attention paid to worker sabotage. This may have been Veblen's intention, but the effect is the total disappearance of workers, and any agency they may have had, from the text. Taylor, like many present day, techno-socialists, even suggested that the working day might be dramatically shortened if scientific management were perfectly realized, but even this laudable goal implies that the workplace and the place of the worker in it is negligible. For both men, it seems, living occurred outside of work and one's quality of life was therefore defined by consumption and would be improved by increased wages. And because social relations were established and regulated in the realm of consumption and exchange, cooperation between classes was possible if only they would stop arguing for long enough to produce more stuff at lower prices and efficiently enough to spend more on workers' wages. That mechanization required fewer workers and depressed wages by deskilling and adding to the population of job seekers, was a reality that utopian efficiency could not accommodate. In 1906, Veblen wrote a competent, and sympathetic review of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* in which he made two telling mistakes. The first, that the class struggle is only material in a “metaphorical” sense and the second is that the “industrial reserve army” implies population growth rather than what we would now refer to as ‘technological unemployment’.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Thorstein Veblen, “The Socialist Economics of Karl Marx and His Followers,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 20, (1906).

It was not through time studies, Taylor argued, but through cooperation that abundance would be achieved. Despite the obvious contradictions with his own management practices and the recommendations made in his writings, efficiency was not something to be imposed on workers but would organically arise as a byproduct of class harmony. “Scientific management,” Taylor explained, “is not any efficiency device, not a device of any kind for securing efficiency; nor is it any such group of efficiency devices.... It is not holding a stopwatch on a man writing things down about him; it is not a time study; it is not a motion study.” Rather it was a “complete mental revolution” on the part of both workers and managers.⁴⁵ When “the great revolution...takes place under scientific management,” both workers and managers will “take their eyes off the division of surplus as the all important matter and together turn their attention toward increasing the size of the surplus until this surplus becomes so large that it is unnecessary to quarrel over how it shall be divided.”⁴⁶

The technologized value system that underwrites Veblen’s call for revolutionary engineers—wherein the preponderance of rational technological processes organically brings about a superior, rational, and secular society—fails, in some sense, to take machinery seriously enough. It does not recognize the fact of mechanization, which is a literal appropriation of workers’ bodily movements. If sabotage was an educational tool that offered a critique of private ownership, it also articulated the claim that workers, as both individuals and a class, had on industrial processes and focused rebellion on the refusal to work like a machine. The use of sabotage was, in its most grandiose formulation, the ‘guerrilla warfare of the working class,’ but it was often a good way to take a break when the weather made it miserable to harvest. This

⁴⁵ *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management*, 1387.

⁴⁶ *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management*, 1388.

latter, more prosaic function was, vis-à-vis machine logics, radical, in and of itself, as it asserted one's right to control their own movement. And worker's movements were central to the transition from simple tools to complex machines. Marx, while writing at a much earlier phase in industrial development, is useful here for his attention to the relationship of workers to machines. The automatic system of machinery is the means of production "adequate to fixed capital and to capital as such." As the only system of production adequate to capital, its "distinguishing characteristic" is to place workers in such a relation to it, that their activity is no longer transmitted to an object but to the "machine's own action." The industrial potential that Veblen and Taylor see so clearly is, at its most efficient, a "machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, it itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own," in relation to which the living laborer can only be cast "as its conscious linkages." The workers activity is "determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery." All of this mechanical movement issues from the workers' movements, whose labor must be divided into specific tasks and recombined into the automatic machine systems which are then represented to the worker as "the character of the production process itself." This "transformation of the means of labor [means of production] into machinery" is not a mechanical and apolitical scientific evolution but a reflection of the necessary tendency of capital to increase the productive force of labor while decreasing necessary labor in order to realize profit. Machine production and therefore machines themselves originate from the appropriation of workers' bodies and the needs of capital:

The development of the means of labor into machinery is not an accidental moment of capital, but is rather the historical reshaping of the traditional, inherited means of labour into a form adequate to capital. The accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus

absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital, and more specifically, of *fixed capital*.⁴⁷

The very idea that machine efficiency might provide a solution to social conflict is a product of the capitalist mode of production. The reification of machinery enables capitalism to present itself as a scientific or natural process rather than a labor process. The presence of machinery has, like sabotage, a practical as well as a propagandistic function: “fixed capital appears as a machine within the production process, opposite labour: and the entire production process appears as not subsumed under the direct skillfulness of the worker, but rather as the technological application of science.”⁴⁸ In other words, the crystallization of labor in technology serves multiple functions. In addition to deskilling and control, it plays an important part in obfuscating the role of workers in production at large. Production as a purely technological application is tantamount to the removal of workers from production at the level of the social imagination. Thus, the very existence of the worker is elided in even the most sympathetic and socialistic visions of technocracy.

This process of knowledge appropriation was ongoing. Taylor recognized that the working class owned something valuable and took the idea of knowledge hidden under the workman’s cap very seriously. Furthermore, he recognized it as a collective form of ownership. “The workmen,” he noted, “had their knowledge handed down to them by word of mouth, through the many years in which their trade has been developed from the primitive condition.” It has been the “ingenuity of each generation [that] has developed quicker and better methods for

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, “Fragment on Machines,” From *The Grundrisse*. (Moscow: Marx-Engels Institute, 1939), 694 <http://thenewobjectivity.com/pdf/marx.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Marx, 699.

doing...work in every trade.”⁴⁹ Scientific management needed, first and foremost, to expropriate this collective knowledge, which was “the principle asset or possession of every tradesman.”⁵⁰ The working class as the collective owner of productive knowledge was the main obstacle to be overcome before his frictionless, capitalist utopia could be realized. The class needed, therefore, to be decomposed into individuals: “In dealing with workmen under this type of management, it is an inflexible rule to talk to and deal with only one man at a time.”⁵¹ And, in turn, those individuals needed to be decomposed into limbs and bodily movements. This is something that Marx recognized long before the Taylor system was introduced and it was something that was necessary, not simply for the ordering of workers within a continuous manufacturing process, but for the invention of machinery itself.

Machines are categorically alienating in their representation of workers movements to the workers who tend them. Capitalist alienation is “erected on the foundation of machinery.”⁵² Mechanization is, in itself, an expression of domination and control. Even Samuel Gompers, certainly no radical proponent of sabotage, was concerned that if this “Taylor system is put into operation, as we see it and as we understand it, it will mean great production in goods and things, but in so far as man is concerned, it means destruction.”⁵³

As David Noble has carefully shown, decisions concerning machine design often have less to do with short-term, economic consideration than they do with management control of

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Principles*, 15.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Principles*, 16.

⁵¹ Taylor, 23.

⁵² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1. (New York: Penguin Books in association with the New Left Review, 1990). See esp. chap. 7, “The Labor Process and the Valorization Process,” and chap. 15, “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry,” 548-49.

⁵³ *Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management Hearings*, 27.

workers in the long-term.⁵⁴ But in order to understand the existential threat posed by the suggestion of sabotage as a strategy of worker control, it is crucial to recognize the role that increasingly large investments in fixed capital played in the maintenance and reproduction of class power. Sabotage, by way of its refusal of progress, recognized the position of the worker within the industrial apparatus at an individual, material level, as well the role of workers collectively in this social “machine.” And in placing the mode of disruption in the hands of a machine operator, it threatened the very basis of its functioning. Sabotage crystalized the revolutionary potential of the proletariat who “only since the introduction of machinery...fought against the instrument of labor itself, capital’s material mode of existence.”⁵⁵

Noble suggests that the technology question cannot be separated from questions of shop-floor control. “Denying steadfastly that they were against technology, union leaders strove to avoid media charges of Luddism and either conceded the futility of opposition and yielded or endorsed the notion that technological changes were the surest route to prosperity.”⁵⁶ Union leadership throughout the 1970s and 1980s regularly conceded to advances in automation because “to be taken seriously, to be listened to...one had to demonstrate allegiance to technological progress”, and in demonstrating such allegiance, unions effectively sold workers down the river. In a self-reinforcing fashion, ignoring the machinery question ignores the experience of workers at the point of production and further consolidates the decision-making authority of union management, which proceeds to make decisions that ignore the experience of

⁵⁴ David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Marx, 554.

⁵⁶ David Noble, *Progress Without People: In Defense of Luddism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1993), 20.

workers. Once “the issue was removed from the point of production to executive offices and research centers, where it was fitted into ideological and political agendas of future progress. The result was a loss not just of an understanding of the reality confronting workers but of a strategy for dealing with it—in the present.”⁵⁷ Or, as Pouget wrote:

Up to now the workers have confirmed their revolutionary attitude, but most of the time they have remained on purely theoretical ground. They have worked for the diffusion of the idea of emancipation and elaborated a plan of future society from which human exploitation is eliminated....Our meetings always adjourn with the cry of “Long live the Social Revolution” a cry that is very far from materializing in any way whatever...This committee believes that there are other means besides the strike whereby we can checkmate the capitalists.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Noble, 19.

⁵⁸ Pouget, 22-23.

Conclusion: Afterlives

The word ‘sabotage’ is common enough today. You can sabotage, it seems, pretty much anything: healthcare, military operations, your romantic relationship, America’s image abroad, or a political campaign. Since its disappearance from the language of labor struggle, it has reemerged as a synonym for resistance, interruption, and failure in general. It’s meaning is so inclusive and its context so flexible that it has lost any of the specificity that once gave it significance. While sabotage has always included many different activities, its solid connection to working class power—the intention of the saboteur—gave it a shape whose edges become indistinct in the absence of certain actors.

There is, however, one contemporary use of the term that seems worthy of consideration because it retains a residue of the workplace where sabotage was brought into being: ‘self-sabotage’. I would not have thought much about this term had it not, by tedious repetition, been forced into my consciousness in the form of a joke about dissertation writing. It wasn’t a very clever joke, but jokes, as Freud pointed out, should be taken seriously. And the notion that one might sabotage their *self* is, upon consideration, a strange proposition. That sabotage has become a very popular way to describe personal failure is equally curious. If we consider what the word meant for its early twentieth century advocates, “the conscious withdrawal of worker efficiency,” the term seems symptomatic of a shift towards an increasingly monadic and precarious gig economy where I conceive of myself simultaneously as proprietor, worker, and machine. Wendy Brown has suggested, rightly I think, that the neoliberal subject is not the worker but ‘human capital’—a self in which we invest in hopes of reaping some future profit from it. Self-sabotage is something to be fixed in therapy. Rather than a source of worker

power it is a major liability for the subject as investment opportunity. There is a tricky confusion of agency here. On the one hand, a ‘conscious withdrawal of efficiency’ has become the symptom of an unconscious rebellion—an uncontrollable expression of the desire to stop working in a world that has transformed everything, even social ties, into a form of work and source of profit. Social interaction doubles as a networking opportunity and intimacy is cultivated in the course of producing intellectual property for internet moguls. Another formulation might be self-sabotage as the return of the repressed “right to be lazy” asserted by the French anarchist Paul Lafargue. On the other hand, the unconscious operations that are so vexing in our conscious lives are necessarily conceived as intentional because a culture defined by the very individualism that accommodates a concept such as self-sabotage forecloses on the possibility the one might not be full in control of one’s ‘assets’. The clunky term used to refer to the transference of authority from institutions to individuals, “responsibilization,” comes to mind. The only possibility we seem to have for conceptualizing these lapses in our working order is to medicalize them through the ever-expanding scope of disability studies.

Self-sabotage does interesting work on work itself. It implies that work and resistance to work are no longer social relations but an anti-social relation. Sabotage has reemerged in the arena of labor as solipsism—one more reason to fix that broken machine of the self. In a market where I am the one responsible for converting my labor power into capital, I absorb the managerial function and when I discover that the ‘ready-made man’ of Taylor’s fantasy is nowhere to be found, I have only myself to blame as well as any number of options for tracking my own efficiency in different areas of self-hood: Fitbits, journaling, calorie counting, budgeting apps.... Nevertheless, I cannot

organize my way out of undermining myself by recognizing my class position and building power through solidarity.

Sabotage though, has not shed all of its associations with rebellion. Self-sabotage is at once a particularly cruel formulation of individual responsibility and a helpful clue. Like any symptom, it has a diagnostic function. Rather than indicating pathology (and we might recall here that plenty of people saw radicals as pathological), it might also indicate a problem with work itself. It may suggest that I do not wholeheartedly believe that my failure actually indicates a problem with myself. It is telling that we are not simply procrastinating, shirking, or being lazy. We are engaging in sabotage and as such, there is room in that word to begin to conceive of this widespread pathology as a form of real, political resistance.

Sabotage, as in breaking things, is also still with us. The place where sabotage, as conceived by the I.W.W., has reappeared with the most force is not in the workplace, but the radical branches of the environmental movement. The press office of the Earth Liberation Front still proudly announces acts of sabotage. The sabotage of pipelines in the U.S. is more common than one might think. In yet another fulfillment of Walker Smith's proclamation that sabotage is too dangerous to be openly discussed, pipeline sabotage gets such little news coverage that two Catholic Workers, Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya, who had been engaging in regular acts of sabotage against the Iowa portion of the Dakota Access Pipeline, publicly confessed to draw attention to their actions. The public confession also failed to garner much media attention.

The imperative to accumulate and expand is fundamental to capitalism. No

version of a system organized around constantly expanding frontiers is compatible with sustaining life on earth. The need to revisit political theories that look beyond the horizon of what seems possible is now a matter of life and death. Reforming consumerism and greening oil companies is not an option.

The employment of sabotage in the environmental movement involves similar claims about the legitimacy of private ownership. We have, for example, a legitimate collective claim on clean water. Sabotaging natural gas pipelines in order to prevent the almost inevitable poisoning of groundwater is illegal, but it is also morally sound. Groundwater does not belong to an oil conglomerate.

Pipeline accidents are also a perfect example of what Pouget and others meant by “capitalist sabotage” and pipeline sabotage by workers and citizens is an admirable example of how sabotage, when done for the right reasons, not only causes no harm but protects consumers and workers. Reform and regulation of industry are necessary and important things to work towards. But sabotage draws our attention to a reality that is incompatible with capitalism: extractive industries, as they are currently configured, simply have no right to exist. Their property represents ill-gotten gains and the rightful owners of that property are simply exercising their prerogative by preventing the activities of trespassers.

The reactions to effective and collective activism have been met with similar forms of state intervention and repression at the behest of capitalists. During the 1990’s, members of E.L.F. were tried for terrorism in federal court, the late twentieth century’s answer to the Espionage trials of I.W.W. members. And there are now “criminal infrastructure sabotage” bills under consideration in several states in reaction to the

Dakota Access Pipeline protests that resemble, in their language and logic, the anti-criminal syndicalism laws passed to eliminate I.W.W. organizing. The relationship between property protection and the restriction of political speech thus has a new importance and the state has responded with an old answer. Given this landscape, we might once again consider what a politics of property destruction might offer. At the very least, taking sabotage seriously seems a promising way to begin disentangling narratives of social progress from the twin mandates of ecologically devastating infrastructure projects and economic growth.

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Preamble to the I.W.W. Constitution

1905

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organise as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.

We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The 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 defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organisation formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all.

Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system."

It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organised, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organising industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.

Industrial Union Manifesto

Issued by Conference of Industrial Unionists at Chicago, January 2, 3 and 4, 1905

Social relations and groupings only reflect mechanical and industrial conditions. The great facts of present industry are the displacement of human skill by machines and the increase of capitalist power through concentration in the possession of the tools with which wealth is produced and distributed.

Because of these facts trade divisions among laborers and competition among capitalists are alike disappearing. Class divisions grow ever more fixed and class antagonisms more sharp. Trade lines have been swallowed up in a common servitude of all workers to the machines which they tend. New machines, ever replacing less productive ones, wipe out whole trades and plunge new bodies of workers into the ever-growing army of trade-less, hopeless unemployed. As human beings and human skill are displaced by mechanical progress, the capitalists need use the workers only during that brief period when muscles and nerve respond most intensely. The moment the laborer no longer yields the maximum of profits he is thrown upon the scrap pile, to starve alongside the discarded machine. A dead line has been drawn, and an age limit established, to cross which, in this world of monopolized opportunities, means condemnation to industrial death.

The worker, wholly separated from the land and the tools, with his skill of craftsmanship rendered useless, is sunk in the uniform mass of wage slaves. He sees his power of resistance broken by class divisions, perpetuated from outgrown industrial stages. His wages constantly grow less as his hours grow longer and monopolized prices grow higher. Shifted hither and thither by the demands of profit-takers, the laborer's home no longer exists. In this helpless condition he is forced to accept whatever humiliating conditions his master may impose. He is submitted to a physical and intellectual examination more searching than was the chattel slave when sold from the auction block. Laborers are no longer classified by difference in trade skill, but the employer assigns them according to the machines to which they are attached. These divisions, far from representing differences in skill or interests among the laborers, are imposed by the employer that workers may be pitted against one another and spurred to greater exertion in the shop, and that all resistance to capitalist tyranny may be weakened by artificial distinctions.

While encouraging these outgrown divisions among the workers the capitalists carefully adjust themselves to the new conditions. They wipe out all differences among themselves and present a united front in their war upon labor. Through employers' associations, they seek to crush, with brutal force, by the injunctions of the judiciary and the use of military power, all efforts at resistance. Or when the other policy seems more profitable, they conceal their daggers beneath the Civic Federation and hoodwink and betray those whom they would rule and exploit. Both methods depend for success upon the blindness and internal dissensions of the working class. The employers' line of battle and methods of warfare correspond to the solidarity of the mechanical and industrial concentration, while laborers still form their fighting organizations on lines of long-gone trade divisions. The

battles of the past emphasize this lesson. The textile workers of Lowell, Philadelphia and Fall River; the butchers of Chicago, weakened by the disintegrating effects of trade divisions; the machinists on the Santa Fe, unsupported by their fellow-workers subject to the same masters; the long-struggling miners of Colorado, hampered by lack of unity and solidarity upon the industrial battlefield, all bear witness to the helplessness and impotency of labor as at present organized.

This worn-out and corrupt system offers no promise of improvement and adaptation. There is no silver lining to the clouds of darkness and despair settling down upon the world of labor.

This system offers only a perpetual struggle for slight relief from wage slavery. It is blind to the possibility of establishing an industrial democracy, wherein there shall be no wage slavery, but where the workers will own the tools which they operate, and the product of which they alone should enjoy.

It shatters the ranks of the workers into fragments, rendering them helpless and impotent on the industrial battlefield.

Separation of craft from craft renders industrial and financial solidarity impossible.

Union men scab upon union men; hatred of worker for worker is engendered, and the workers are delivered helpless and disintegrated into the hands of the capitalists.

Craft jealousy leads to the attempt to create trade monopolies.

Prohibitive initiation fees are established that force men to become scabs against their will. Men whom manliness or circumstances have driven from one trade are thereby fined when they seek to transfer membership to the union of a new craft.

Craft divisions foster political ignorance among the workers, thus dividing their class at the ballot box, as well as in the shop, mine and factory.

Craft unions may be and have been used to assist employers in the establishment of monopolies and the raising of prices. One set of workers are thus used to make harder the conditions of life of another body of laborers.

Craft divisions hinder the growth of class consciousness of the workers, foster the idea of harmony of interests between employing exploiter and employed slave. They permit the association of the misleaders of the workers with the capitalists in the Civic Federation, where plans are made for the perpetuation of capitalism, and the permanent enslavement of the workers through the wage system.

Previous efforts for the betterment of the working class have proven abortive because limited in scope and disconnected in action.

Universal economic evils afflicting the working class can be eradicated only by a universal working class movement. Such a movement of the working class is impossible while separate craft and wage agreements are made favoring the employer against other crafts in the same industry, and while energies are wasted in fruitless jurisdiction struggles which serve only to further the personal aggrandizement of union officials.

A movement to fulfill these conditions must consist of one great industrial union embracing all industries--providing for craft autonomy locally, industrial autonomy internationally, and working class unity generally.

It must be founded on the class struggle, and its general administration must be conducted in harmony with the recognition of the irrepressible conflict between the capitalist class and the working class.

It should be established as the economic organization of the working class, without affiliation with any political party.

All power should rest in a collective membership.

Local, national and general administration, including union labels, buttons, badges, transfer cards, initiation fees and per capita tax should be uniform throughout.

All members must hold membership in the local, national or international union covering the industry in which they are employed, but transfers of membership between unions, local, national or international, should be universal.

Workingmen bringing union cards from industrial unions in foreign countries should be freely admitted into the organization.

The general administration should issue a publication representing the entire union and its principles which should reach all members in every industry at regular intervals.

A central defense fund, to which all members contribute equally, should be established and maintained.

All workers, therefore, who agree with the principles herein set forth, will meet in convention at Chicago the 27th day of June, 1905, for the purpose of forming an economic organization of the working class along the lines marked out in this manifesto.