

Building workers' power in the United Kingdom - New Syndicalist



A column by New Syndicalist describing the recent growth of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the UK.

A few months ago New Syndicalist (a group of Wobblies from the United Kingdom writing about worker-led, anti-capitalist theory and strategy) was approached by the Workers' Power column with a request to write a reflective piece on the recent growth of the IWW in the United Kingdom. People who have been following our online media presence will know that the U.K. IWW hit an important milestone this year—exceeding 1,000 members. This was celebrated recently at our annual conference in Bradford, England. An older member recalled attending the 2005 conference in the same city that had just seven members in attendance. In 2015 most branch delegations were larger.

We have seen fantastic growth over the past decade, particularly in the case of some of our larger branches that now have between 100 to 300 members. What is it like to have branches of this size and how did they get built? These were the key questions posed to us. These are obviously very big questions and have by no means simple answers, particularly in terms of attempting to represent the dedicated and patient work of IWW organizers across the United Kingdom over the past 10 years. Nonetheless, we did put our heads together at New Syndicalist and decided to focus on what we thought were the five most important factors in helping to grow our branches in the North (where we are based), some of which have doubled in size over the last year.

The list is by no means exhaustive, and some more experienced Wobs may feel we may be trying to teach them to “suck eggs” here as they will recognize many fundamental concepts within our existing organizer training program. We nonetheless present them in the hope of solidarity, shared dialogue and spirited debate.

Training

Monitoring the quality of your membership is as important as (if not more than) keeping tabs on the quantity of red cards being taken out; in an ideal world, paper membership would make up a very small portion of overall membership! Regular training allows us to turn every red card holder into an active, participating member. Participation is a difficult thing to track—aside from clear-cut measures like attendance at branch meetings and rate of reply to emails, we’re often left relying on gut feelings about how connected to the union our membership is feeling. There are, however, things we can do to keep our union connected.

Running regular trainings is a really good way of keeping union culture healthy. Formal training like the IWW’s Organizer Training 101 and union representative training allow members to collaborate in a way that branch meetings don’t. It gives people practical skills that, when applied, reinforce the sense of connection to the IWW and to our broader struggle.

Informal training, like teaching people about the IWW, current campaigns, and the nuts and bolts of running a union, is just as important. Whether members are encouraged to take minutes, understand motions, chair meetings, or just share knowledge, contributing to the culture of the union is what gives our branches strength. In the Sheffield IWW we’ve started running a mentoring scheme (see below) for new members, pairing them up with experienced Wobs who work in their industry. By taking this lower intensity, longitudinal approach to training, we bump up our paper membership into fully fledged Wobblies.

Growing your branch internally means that the die-hard Wobs can step aside and avoid burning out, knowing full well that they’ll be replaced by someone competent. It also means that people are more likely to take on roles if they know there are other people around to help if things get tough. We’ve all seen bottlenecks and we know that they’re not healthy.

In sum, pushing internal growth with training is essential for diversifying, decentralizing, and steadily building union culture.

Striking a balance

Advocates of solidarity or direct action unionism frequently contrast the organizing methods and tactics that build confidence and solidarity on the shop floor with the legalistic, top-down

approaches allowed through labor law. It is true that such a division exists in organizing, and our preference as Wobblies is always to push campaigns into militancy and through means that collectively empower the workforce. Nonetheless we have found a certain degree of flexibility in our organizing approaches that do not necessarily cast the above as a simple either/or route for growing campaigns. This is particularly the case where we have built campaigns in response to workplace grievances and unfair dismissals.

Taking an employer to tribunal is both costly and incredibly risky in the United Kingdom. Fees can range from £300 to over £1,000 (GPB) (or approximately \$467 to \$1,556 [USD])—a pro-business measure introduced by the recent government due to the growing success of workers winning compensation through this route—and success rates are slim. As a result, when it comes to the opening stages of any grievance, much case work effectively relies on bluffing employers when they first meet with a union rep, playing on their fears of litigation, and, occasionally, their lack of confidence with employment law. A healthy threat of direct action gives you a bit more to bring to the table and allows a divergence from that legalistic path should it reach unsatisfactory limits.

This legal shell also allows us to build credibility with employers when and if we need it. Employers will sit down and negotiate with accredited union reps and branch officers—even though these distinctions in the IWW are largely functional—while refusing to talk to picketers and protesters. An impromptu phone call from the union’s national secretary has likewise proved an important tactic in ramping up the pressure on an uncooperative boss in this strange game of smoke and mirrors.

Ultimately, is it going to win the war? No. Is it really our preferred tactic? No. But it does help secure a few battles along the way, and with a solid base of social mapping and committee building it can help secure victories for some of the toughest campaigns.

Mentoring

As previously mentioned, the Sheffield IWW runs a mentoring program where all new members are paired up with a more experienced fellow worker, ideally one who works in the same industry.

The purpose of the mentor is to provide a source of organizing advice to new members and to help them familiarize themselves with the workings of the IWW. The mentor keeps the new Wob informed of upcoming union events and is meant to encourage them to gradually take on a more active role in the union by moving up a checklist of activities (called “The Wobbly Ladder”).

The principle is that this develops new organizers in the spirit of replacing ourselves, and reduces membership turnover. It also encourages more communication and cooperation between Wobs in the same industry, contributing to the formation of industrial organizing committees and workplace-specific campaigns.

So is it working? It’s a bit early to say, but in the six months since the program was created, we haven’t had any mentored members drop out, and we now have former mentees mentoring new members. Two new members and mentees are also now active members of a newly-founded education workers’ organizing committee, something that was facilitated by the connections established through the scheme (note: feel free to contact the Sheffield IWW

for more info about mentoring and to see the graphic designs of the mentor and new member packs).

Outreach

In the last year we have been trying to expand our branch outreach. In the past a lot of our outreach activities have been focused on the city center—for example, holding stalls on the weekend, attending protests and rallies, or distributing our literature in central venues. However, due to this, we have missed out on a lot of recruitment opportunities in communities and industries where workers live and work outside the commercial centers.

We initiated our new outreach project by physically mapping out the whole of our potential recruitment area in Sheffield. Having understood the scale of the potential activity that could go on in this space, we then divided our map into manageable chunks to be assigned to individuals or committees of organizers. These areas are typically based on geographical features, such as residences forming their own distinct neighborhoods, major industries, or pre-existing homogeneous communities.

Organizers or committees then carry out further research into their assigned areas to understand the economic activity, social life, and other features of these communities. This is done with the aim of tailoring appropriate outreach activities to the needs of these particular areas. Typically, organizers are drawn from the neighborhoods they live in, so aspects of these will already be known.

Volunteers are provided with a support handbook that helps guide their outreach activities. This begins with preliminary research into “passive” outreach activities, such as leafleting and touching base in social hubs, and building toward our goal of active and visible outreach in the form of public meetings and training sessions in those neighborhoods.

Part of the drive behind this project was a desire to encourage diversity in our branch membership. It was also informed by the growing realization that many of the largest industries in the North, including so-called “pinchpoint” targets, draw their workforces largely from local neighborhoods outside the commercial centers. Our conversations with members from the Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (SAC, the syndicalist union in Sweden) on their “travelling organizer” model also provided many useful ideas and approaches. A recent book from AK Press, however, on the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) Defence Committees in 1930s Barcelona, proved a particularly inspirational example of how geographical and community-based outreach has the potential to assist mass mobilization of industrial unions.

Media

We’re lucky enough to have some very technically-skilled fellow workers in the Sheffield branch. We’ve had high-quality video coverage of our main public campaigns this year. These videos have really helped provide a concise, accessible introduction to the IWW and our current campaigns for members of the public who find us on Facebook or bump into us on the street. When we’ve run fundraisers or stalls we always have one of the videos playing. They have become part of the union culture very quickly, and serve as proud reminders of all the good work we’ve done.

We don't use social media in any unique way, but it is worth noting that our online support has been growing very steadily for the last year. We use social media to publish every public event and every bit of branch news, as well as links to other groups in the United Kingdom who share our vision for a better society. It means that even when it feels like things aren't particularly busy (like when we don't have an active public campaign), we're letting everyone know that we're still working away on IWW projects, such as New Syndicalist.

During our last public campaign we had a press officer tasked with interacting with local radio and television, national newspapers and other major media outlets. It paid off brilliantly. We ended up getting coverage in *The Telegraph*, *Pink News* and a load of other newspapers that we frankly didn't expect to be interested in such a small union in a small city like Sheffield.

New Syndicalist is a group of Wobblies from the UK writing about worker-led, anti-capitalist theory and strategy. They keep a blog at <http://newsyndicalist.org>

Originally appeared in Industrial Worker (July/August 2015)