

You Are the Union - Membership in the IWW

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This is an introduction if you are considering membership in or have already joined the IWW. The IWW is different from many unions, and it is important to know the strengths of these differences. The IWW is also a small union in comparison to many of the AFL-CIO unions. Many will argue that while the IWW is indeed a small union, our strength is ten fold, because our power comes from the membership. This strength depends on the will of those workers involved in any union.

This is just the basics to get you familiar with the IWW, and you are encouraged to read as much as you can, and ask questions as you like. Sometimes you might feel intimidated by someone who knows the union lingo, or has organized before. This does not mean you have less of a right in any matter union related; all have equal voice and equal vote. If you don't hire and fire other workers, you are a welcome member of this organization and a fellow worker, sister or brother. As you get familiar with the organization, you will understand more about how the IWW is different from many mainstream unions. So here are the basics.

What the IWW Provides

Membership in the IWW is different from many unions, in that we are an organizing union. This means that when you join, you may have to organize for representation on the job. When we have many organized shops, then there will be a time when you take out an IWW card, you get an IWW union job with it. Since we are in the early stages of rebuilding our union, this will take some work.

Bringing and building the union at your job requires all kinds of support, from organizational to the legal. But the most power lies in what you and your co-workers are willing to put into organizing. There are some risks, which is why the IWW is committed to providing the following:

- Organizing training and workshops
- Other members to help you organize
- Facilities to hold meetings
- Access to information on labor law, organizing, and staying organized
- Sample contracts or contracts designed for your work situation
- Funding of organizing activities
- Legal backing from a reputable labor law firm

Intangible benefits are a sense of pride, self respect for standing up on the job, and a community of people that have similar values as your own, when it comes to working. In some branches a paid up membership also entitles you to the benefits of a Tenants Union, should you have problems at home with an obstinate landlord, as well as a boss at work.

What About the Union?

The IWW is described as a "rank and file run union". This means that we have eliminated the need of bosses inside our own union. In other words, you will not have a paid "organizer"

or "business agent" telling you what to do, but rather the experience and advice of all the other workers in the union backing you up, who may fill some of the job duties of the high pay positions in other unions.

We have officers in our union, but they are only allowed to carry out what the membership will allow. If a union officer oversteps those bounds, there is a process for recall and replacement, without having to wait for the next election cycle. All union wide policies are decided by voting, and the administration of the international office is run by a General Executive Board and a General Secretary/Treasurer, who are elected every year. Even the union newspaper editor is elected. All officers in your own local industrial union are elected, and not appointed from above. The same is true for all General Membership Branches in areas where industrial union branches have not been established.

No one in the union is allowed to negotiate with your boss without your consent, and so all terms of the contract come from all the workers that it will affect. You may even want all negotiations to come from you and your co-workers, which is the best possible situation; this way all of your issues are discussed. With all of this comes a responsibility; as a member, it is important to stay informed of the union as a whole, so that you will have a well reasoned voice in changing something that you think is wrong.

The IWW has no perfect "party line", because the needs and desires of us as members are always in flux. This means reading the bulletins and showing up to meetings when you can, and staying involved with the union outside your job, as well as inside.

Sometimes members don't have time to do everything, which is why we have a delegate system so that someone can attend a meeting on your behalf while you work, take care of kids, or tend to other pressing obligations.

Your Rights on the Job

In 1934, the government (in theory) recognized the right to join a labor organization of one's choosing. The National Labor Relations Act also addresses the right of workers who are in unions that are not recognized by the employer, and even gives concessions to workers that are in no union at all. Also, the employer is barred from using threats to disrupt organizing. Your rights on the job include:

- The right to join or assist in organizing any labor organization on the job;
- The right to "engage in concerted activity", or act in a group of two or more, to protect your right to organize and win demands;
- The right to talk union, and to hand out union literature in non working areas off the clock;
- The right to not discuss any of these activities with your employer.

Your boss, supervisor, or manager may not:

- Spy on you for organizing
- Promise more pay or better conditions in exchange for not organizing or joining a union

- Interrogate you on your union activities or sympathies
- Threaten you because you support organizing or because you engage in "concerted activity" to protect your rights on the job.

The National Labor Relations Board is the government entity that is required to enforce these laws, and the process is slanted in favor of the employer. So the law by itself will not get your demands, but will provide at least a small avenue in some cases for more collective power. The law will not keep the boss from engaging in these actions mentioned above, but will offer a deterrent to some employers. Many labor laws are designed to limit your power, and it is wise to be at least familiar with the basics of the law when you organize, as a simple mistake may haunt you later. NEVER take legal advice from a National Labor Relations Board agent.

State laws may entitle you to damages for safety and injuries. Problems with discrimination because of race, sex, and many other things may also be remedied through state law. A union will minimize employer discrimination, especially if these issues are spelled out in a contract and enforced by collective action on the job. (The IWW also has an internal grievance procedure, if you feel that discrimination goes on inside the union.)

Other protections come from laws regarding health and safety. OSHA, the federal administrative body that deals with workplace safety, may be used in certain situations to deal with safety issues; the knowledge that this may be used is often enough to make an employer realize that a safer workplace is the way to go. Your IWW delegate should be able to tell you how to get access to materials needed to deal with these issues and file complaints. It is illegal for employers to fire you for reporting safety violations.

Having "Dual" Unions

Many people join the IWW because it is a way to bring a union into a work place, when their "other union" isn't doing the job. Many officials in these organizations have stripped out all of the things that make a union useful to workers, such as shop committees, "stewards" that handle grievances, and other support that the union is supposed to provide. At the same time, these "unions" expect dues payments and initiation fees, and will often even work to discourage collective action on the job in cooperation with the employer, even if the purpose is to enforce a union contract. Some union leaders and officials subscribe to the principle of "industrial harmony" to the point where it only benefits themselves and the employers, while leaving workers out of the loop. If the "other union" is only on paper, it lacks the things that make it possible for workers to secure all the benefits of working in a union shop, such as the freedom of those in a shop to determine the direction in dealing with the employer.

Having an organization at work that will fill this hole helps keep a job a decent place to work, and keeps the decision making in the hands of the workers. It is possible to even build an IWW shop when another union isn't doing the job at all, especially when that union has no internal channels to work through. Some organize with the IWW to push for more democracy in their other union.

This is what many IWW members are referring to when someone is a "dual carder"; they are in an organized shop with one union as a legal bargaining agent, and they are also a member of the IWW.

Being Active in the Union

Being active in the union is the key to utilizing the full resources of the I.W.W. to back you up at work. Most IWW branches have one or two meetings per month. At least one is a "business meeting" which is for determining fund allocations, elections, and other internal business. Sometimes these meetings are not very exciting, but are necessary to keeping the general organization together locally. Some branches also hold a meeting of the "Organizing Committee". This is where the planning of practical work "in the field", setting up committees, and organizing the backing for you and your co-workers takes place. Sometimes specific committees are set up for specific industries or shops, which will meet more often at times.

Some branches also hold informal get-togethers (often called "chin-wags") where members brainstorm organizing ideas.

Dues are important to maintaining and running the IWW. It is important to pay your dues each month. If you have a little extra, it may be easier to pay a few months at a time. Dues can be paid to any delegate, but it is best to pay through a delegate you work with when possible. The IWW does not have a "dues check off" where it is deducted from your paycheck in an organized shop. Paying dues directly to the union insures that there is always a union on the job site, with or without a contract.

Like any democratic organization, there is always a difference of opinion on various issues, and healthy debate. This is a necessary thing, in order for the union to progress and grow. Some are uncomfortable with debate, and often view it as "in fighting". Participation in internal debate is not for everyone. However, as long as mutual respect is maintained, we encourage debate on all issues in the union, as the IWW has a legacy of always supporting the right of free speech.

Ethics on the Job Site

A union works best when there is a code of ethics at work. Sometimes in periods of difficulties, we don't always get along with a fellow worker, but it is important to at least hold things together as a union on the job. Union members should:

- Always remember the power is in unity.
- Never "rat" to the boss on another co-worker for any reason (disputes between workers can be settled with your shop-steward or through the union's grievance procedure.)
- Never degrade other workers because of their race, sex, sexual preference, or religion, even if those workers are not in the union.
- Make the job easier by working together, so that the job is more efficient and less stressful.
- Never, *EVER*, discuss internal union business in front of a boss.
- Always defend a fellow worker in front of the employer, and deal with differences later.
- Never bad mouth a fellow worker to the boss.

These are ethics that have saved many workers from losing their jobs, and if you follow them, others will often return the favor. This builds trust with your co-workers, the key to solidarity, and building a strong union. This will greatly increase your power when building the union, on up to deciding on a job action, such as a walkout, a work "to rule" and any number of on the job direct action tactics. The employer will discourage these ethics, since these ideas interfere with a manager's ability to control you, and both will try everything to divide and conquer the work force. That is why trust between co-workers is so important.

What are the long term goals of the IWW?

The IWW, unlike many other organizations, works and organizes for meat and potatoes for the here and now, as well as for the future. Everyone knows that fancy ideas or the correct political line will not pay the bills. This is why we have to organize for the day to day hassles such as getting bawled out by the boss, or even low pay. We all know that chances are good that we will have to deal with the same boss tomorrow.

We are alive for quite awhile, and more often than not our kids will inherit the world that we leave behind. We work for most of our lives, and have little to show for it. That is why IWW members want to see the day when workers can take the skills and talents they have developed in running their own unions, and apply that knowledge and wisdom to making decisions about their own workplace and the larger economy. In the larger scheme, there are a few big bosses that own and control most everything, and there is so many of us, who work and have little control. If we are the ones with the skills to make all of the things that feed, clothe, and entertain us, shouldn't we also enjoy the wealth we have produced?

Many like to talk about how we have to have democracy in order for things to be fair. But many do not think this applies to the economy, which is a mistake. If the way we live is dependent on what we produce, and if we have no control over how that is organized and distributed, then the bosses always have control over our lives. It is a growing form of tyranny, which we have the tools to stop, if we organize right. Imagine if the world was run like your workplace. In many places it's actually much worse.

Every time we act as a union on the job, we are one step closer to making the concept of a boss outdated, and we also get a little bit more to take care of our needs in the meantime. Critics and academics have many names for this: communism, socialism, anarchism, and others. What a world without bosses really means is INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY, and such can be made real, if we work hard enough for it.

Welcome to the IWW

Now you know the basics of what the I.W.W. is about, and now you have the tools to begin to define on your own what it means to be a member. Clearly, union members need to agree on basic things, but we also have to recognize our differences on all levels, even politically. Our organization lives today because of the hard struggles of our fellow workers many years ago, and because of the dedicated few that kept the IWW alive during the lean years after the 1950's, when many thought the IWW was gone. Now our union is growing again. Building it strong depends on all of us, and it helps all of us.

The strength of the union lies in the institution you have built in the workplace. Many unions exist only on paper as a contract, with paid people to run offices. To a degree we need people to run an office or deal with maintaining a contract, but that in itself is not a union. A union is a group of workers making decisions and working collectively on the job to win demands and ultimately make decisions on how the work should be organized and who should benefit. This can only be built by us, the ones that do the work.

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