



# Introduction to “The Crime of Radical Industrial Unionism”

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While the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), established in Chicago in 1905, achieved its apex of strength in the United States from approximately 1910 through 1920, this radical industrial union still exists at the start of the twenty-first century’s third decade. Although the IWW has engaged in several organizing drives in the last 10 to 15 years such as at New York City and Chicago-area Starbucks coffeehouses and Jimmy John restaurants in Minneapolis, for example, and does provide representation to small groups of workers in industries that have often been neglected by more traditional unions, today’s IWW is a pale shadow of its former self compared to when the union was in its heyday approximately one century ago. This article provides historical context for understanding the state’s role in undermining this once vibrant, democratic and multiracial union in the twentieth century’s early decades.

In this well-written and interesting “Perspectives” Section article, Ahmed White, the Nicholas Rosenbaum Professor of Law at the University of Colorado in Boulder where he teaches and writes about labor law, labor history, and criminal justice, provides an historical analysis of repression against US radical trade unionists in the first half of the twentieth century. Specifically, White investigates the utilization of “state-level sedition laws” against the IWW and the US Communist Party-led unions while discussing how progressive politicians and jurists supported the implementation of these restrictive laws along with more conservative government forces. Although White does not claim that the prosecution of radical trade unionists under these laws was the major reason for the destruction of US radical industrial unionism by the mid-twentieth century, he does argue that this legislation negatively impacted the development of this type of unionism and is crucial for understanding the state’s role in shaping worker organizations.

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