"Don't Mourn—Organize": Martyrdom, Collectivism, and the Religious Impulse in the Industrial Workers of the World

Abstract

Begun in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was an industrial unionism dedicated to helping the plight of the proletariat and eradicating capitalism. In order to convince members to join and stay in such a radical organization, the IWW crafted a mythos of martyrdom that would inspire its members and serve as a call to action. However, this mythos also grounded the organization in a base of collective negativity that alienated them from the greater public and invoked a wave of violent heroics. In this paper, I chronologically outline the rise and fall of martyrdom within the organization, while explaining how their use of martyrdom as a recruiting and inspiring tactic led to a religious impulse that would shape the organization’s future. After mapping these out, I show how these tactics led to their eventual decline. I use the figures and events that the IWW singled out, including the defeat of the Western Federation of Miners—whose members would become a core group of initial members in the IWW—and the execution of Joe Hill, famed IWW songwriter, while also paying attention to William “Big Bill” Haywood, whose leadership both helped and hurt the organization, and whose eventual move to the USSR would show the organization’s larger difficulty of sticking to its radical ideals. The IWW’s negative collective identity proved unsuccessful in both recruiting and inspiring in the World War I era, as the country’s patriotic tendencies steered would-be members away from the organization, while catching the government’s eye. While imprisoned, the IWW’s leadership would fail to live up to the standards they created, which would prove their downfall.