

City in 1909, another strike of 60,000 workers in New York City in 1910, a 1910–1911 strike of 40,000 workers in Chicago, and the movement for unionization and reform after the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York in March 1911 (Figure 3). Together these actions reinvigorated the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and created the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. In one of the most dramatic moments in U.S. labor history, the young immigrant garment worker Clara Lemlich took the stage from AFL leader Samuel Gompers, who had refused to call a strike. Speaking in Yiddish, she called her fellow garment workers to action. Within two days, approximately 20,000 workers from 500 factories were on strike. By the 1920s, the tens of thousands of members of the ACWA and the ILGWU had won the closed shop, higher wages, shorter working hours, and better working conditions. These events also revealed the politicization of immigrant women in the industry and showed that immigrant workers could be organized, contrary to much AFL commentary. Along with the United Mineworkers, the garment workers forged a new model of unionism, demonstrating that a pragmatic industrial unionism could succeed as well as the more hidebound craft unionism of the AFL. In this, the new unions were important exceptions to the rule of non-socialist craft organizing of the era.¹¹



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Figure 3. “Photograph of Police Officers, Civilians and Victims on the Sidewalk during the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” March 25, 1911.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Photographs, 1870–2004, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (#6040083).

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) created another key, if short-lived, bastion of American labor radicalism. Founded in Chicago in 1904, the IWW took inspiration from a group from the Western Federation of Miners who had been radicalized during a series of violent strikes in Idaho, Montana, and Colorado. Rallying around their shared distaste for the AFL's conservatism and exclusionary practices, the IWW sought to create “One Big Union” of all workers regardless of skill level, race, ethnicity, or gender. Emphasizing the necessity of direct action and workers' control of the workplace, they called for an end of the wage system and workers' ownership of the means of production. The “Wobblies,” as the members came to be known, tapped into and inflamed the radical spirit of many of the most marginalized workers. The IWW thus backed its demands for the fulfillment of workers' needs, the bread of daily life, with the threat of a radical sensibility at least rhetorically committed to revolution. (see Figure 4).