

The preamble to the IWW’s 1908 constitution declared, “A struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.”¹² The IWW’s revolutionary vision inspired many miners, loggers, and migrant agricultural workers in the West, as well as unorganized industrial workers in the East. Together, they built a lively workers’ culture with hundreds of songs collected in the *Little Red Songbook*. IWW membership peaked at 600,000 in 1916, riding a wave of important victories and broader socialist sentiment. Most famously, in the 1912 “Bread and Roses Strike” in Lawrence, Massachusetts, IWW leaders joined with local workers to strike against wage cuts and many years of low wages, long hours, dangerous working conditions, and terrible living conditions in the communities surrounding the factory. The IWW sustained a thread of American radicalism that otherwise might have been lost. The Wobblies’ radical critique of capitalism, their at least rhetorical support for direct action tactics such as sabotage, and their unswerving commitment to interracial organizing among all men and women carried these principles on through the relatively conservative first three decades of the century. The IWW also sustained the idea of industrial unionism, which was a minority strain the AFL’s organizing efforts, emphasizing that workers ought to be organized across all skill levels in a given industry.



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Figure 4. “I.W.W. Hat Card.” Bain News Service, New York, NY, April 11, 1914.

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Obstacles to Organizing in the Progressive Era

During the Progressive Era, the American Federation of Labor claimed to speak for all American workers. Still, with few exceptions, the AFL consisted largely of skilled, white, male workers, and focused its strikes, lawsuits, and limited political activity on maintaining those workers’ craft privileges.¹³ Its leaders also discouraged any organizing efforts not under the banner of the AFL, treating them as “dual unions,” or as enemies seeking to undermine the AFL. Furthermore, the federation’s leaders refused to engage in the broad political work that would have allowed them to challenge the anti-labor decisions of the courts or the narrowness of Progressive Era reforms.¹⁴ Such a closed, jealous, and litigious world of labor was hardly a beacon for the growing ranks of new immigrant and American migrant workers entering the deskilled factories of the North.