

1914-2000: The Australian IWW and 'Direct Action'



A history of the once highly-influential Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union and its publication Direct Action in Australia.

Direct Action, later a monthly magazine, was first published by the [US-founded Industrial Workers of the World union](#) in Sydney in January 1914. They borrowed some dough from a member and bought themselves an archaic printing press so that all restraints upon expression of 'clear cut revolutionary principles' were removed. In a statement of principles it set itself

as being: "For the first time in the history of the working class movement in Australia, a paper which stands for straight-out direct-actionist principles, unhampered by the plausible theories of the parliamentarians, whether revolutionary or otherwise." With the new paper, they declared: "Every contributor, every supporter, is a member of the wage-earning class, who is conscious of his slave status in modern society, who is imbued, therefore, with motives stronger than mere sympathy or sentiment in voicing the aspirations of his fellows."

Success came quickly for their efforts under the initial editorships of Tom Glynn, J. B. King and [Tom Barker](#). The paper was cheaply priced (1 penny) and full of short, humorous, irreverent and stinging comments upon events of the day. In 1915 the paper had moved from a monthly to a fortnightly by May and to a weekly by October. It quickly became an important organising tool for the group. Its sale, together with cheap pamphlets, became an important source of finance for both the locals and the central organisation as dues were often "very light." A regular weekly circulation of 8,000 copies made it by far the most impressive revolutionary paper in Australia to that date. And of course radicals in those days tended to pass their papers along when they had finished with them so a single paper often counted for many more than one reader...

Their militancy and anti-war sentiment quickly brought them into conflict with the state and large sections of the community misled by the current war hysteria. Generally, the paper did not conceal the dim view it took of developments and, in the middle of 1915, its editor was arrested for producing a poster advising the Australian working class to "Let those who own Australia do the fighting - Put the wealthiest in the front ranks; the middle class next; follow these with politicians, lawyers, sky pilots and judges. Answer the declaration of war with the call for a General Strike ... Don't go to Hell in order to give the plutocratic parasites a bigger slice of Heaven. - Workers of the World, Unite! Don't become Hired Murderers! Don't Join the Army or Navy!" - which put this attitude rather well.

During September and October of 1916 twelve leading militants within the organisation were arrested and charged with treason - a hanging offence. Many of them had links with Direct Action. John Hamilton, a miner, had put up the original cash to buy the press while Glynn was editor and J. B. King a former editor. The charges, later changed to conspiracy to commit arson, were a police frame-up. The most dramatic case in a broad suppression, the twelve were brought before a right wing judge already famed for the viciousness of sentences he imposed upon working class activists. Upon a technicality the press Direct Action was printed upon was confiscated.

Sentences imposed upon the Sydney fellow workers by Justice Pring (three varieties - five, ten and fifteen years of hard labour) tended to put most other things into shadow for a while. Direct Action, however, refused to be suppressed just yet although it had to be put out to a commercial printer.

Late in 1916 Australia's Prime Minister pushed through the first Unlawful Associations Act designed to banish IWWism once and for all. "This organisation", he said, talking about us, "holds a dagger at the heart of our society, and we should be recreant to the social order if we do not accept the challenge it holds out to us. As it seeks to destroy us, we must in self defence destroy it."

However, we proved more difficult than expected to destroy and in the first three months of 1917 seemed to be, if anything, expanding. May saw Direct Action prohibited from being sent through the post. Tom Barker remembers that: "We had to seal and stamp every one of them separately, then the men would go out all over the place and put them through the post boxes. As a matter of fact, it's said that the paper was better delivered in the time when it was illegal than it was before, because people took a pride in getting it and a pride in posting it,

and the postmen were largely on our side. A good deal of our stuff went to places like Goulburn by train or by boat to Western Australia, so it didn't come into the postal system. We just made them up into rail parcels to go that way..."

In the winter of 1917, again with the support of the labour Party the original Unlawful Associations Bill was strengthened and its loopholes effectively plugged. All members of the IWW not cutting ties with the group were condemned to six months imprisonment with it left pretty much up to the individual to prove that s/he was not a member. The last edition of this first series of Direct Action, dated August 18, was stolen by the state when police made their final raid the IWW Hall in Sussex Street on 27 July 1917. The union responded variously to the repression with many adopting the civil disobedience tactic of proclaiming themselves true to their ideals and taking the consequences. So was this first incarnation of the IWW in Australia suppressed. [In Chile the IWW was repressed](#), but much more savagely.

Direct Action re-emerged briefly in 1921 as the organ of the Industrial Union Propaganda League a grouping that consisted of several leading Wobs leading a tortured relationship in and out of the Communist Party. Different styles of action between the Wobblies (always trying to stir the rank and file) and the political sects that coalesced to form the Communist Party of Australia (out to capture structures) formed stumbling blocks to this co-operation.

With the end of the war came the end of the repressive legislation with which the ruling classes had silenced the IWW. It was reformed in Australia although it never regained the strength or vivacity of the earlier period but maintaining itself as a thorn in the side of Labour politicians, corrupt and complacent craft union officials and the master class in most states from this time, through the depression years, until the second world war.

Direct Action re-appeared again as our mouthpiece a couple of times in the late 'twenties. Printed then in Adelaide it was not without its effect. Tony McGillick remembers that "in those times, the IWW was most active. Its newspaper Direct Action was sold on the job, at Employment Centres, and in the Botanic Park on Sunday afternoons." This series had less resources to draw upon than its predecessor and was terminated by legal proceedings against one of its editors.

The good name of Direct Action was sullied between 1970 and 1990. The Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyist grouping took up our title although it did not promote direct action at all. At best it only proposed action mediated by the party and at worst tried to mislead the workers to do ridiculous things such as "vote for a Labour Party pledged to socialist policies" without bothering to explain much how such an (in any case pointless) exercise could be accomplished or even where such a strange creature could be found. IWW members during this period were therefore forced to adopt the title Rebel Worker for their publication. The fellow workers concerned, feeling that their aims could better be promoted through an Anarcho Syndicalist Federation cut their ties with the IWW though continued to produce Rebel Worker. The SWP changed the title of their paper to the more trendy moniker of Left Greens or something similar.

So we are back and, the working class willing, here to stay until the toilers get their dues - everything.

By Mike

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