

Industrial Unionism Defined

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The term industrial unionism is used to express a modern form of labor organization whose jurisdiction is not confined to any particular trade or craft, but is coextensive with the industrial development, and embraces the entire working class. Industrial unionism is the outgrowth of trade unionism and expresses the highest form of industrial organization the working class has yet attained. As its name implies, this form of unionism contemplates the organization of industries in their entirety, uniting all employees within the same economic body, subdivided into a number of departments equal to and corresponding with the several trades or general occupations in which they are engaged.

In organizing the workers along the lines of their general industrial interests rather than their particular craft interests, it is claimed that the friction due to overlapping craft jurisdictions is obviated, and that a higher degree of solidarity and efficiency is thus secured in the interest of all.

The industrial union in its present form came but recently into existence, the trade union having preceded it, the latter dating back to a time near the beginning of industrial life in Great Britain, about the middle of the eighteenth century.

The earlier unions were confined principally to the skilled trades, and hence were called trade unions. These unions were built up on the basis of the skilled use of the tools used in the several trades during the period of handicraft in industry, and late on were loosely joined together in a federation of trades, without, however, abridging their autonomy or invading their separate jurisdictions.

Organized upon this basis each craft was left free to negotiate its own wage scale, and enter into agreement with the employer upon terms most advantageous to itself, regardless of other crafts that might be employed in the same industry. The results that followed in the way of disastrous strikes resorted to by one or more crafts because of having failed to obtain a satisfactory agreement, while others employed in the same industry, perhaps in the identical factory, remained at their tasks, in cooperation with the non-union element which had displaced their own fellow workers, paved the way for industrial organization.

The trade union rose with the modern trade and flourished with it, the foundation of both being the skilled use of certain tools in the making of certain commodities for market use. This stage of industrial development prevailed for many years, but has now been largely superseded and is rapidly declining before the march of industrial evolution, made manifest in the concentration of capital, the displacement of the small shop by the great factory, the handicraft tools by steam-driven machinery, the segregated trade by associated industry, and competitive effort by cooperative labor. Along the same line the trade union of the past is now expressing itself more and more in industrial unionism.

Industrial unionism, having evolved from the lower primal forms of trade unionism through the successive stages of the industrial development, and adapting itself to present industrial conditions and their tendencies, has encountered serious opposition on the part of trade unionists as well as the employing class, the former tenaciously adhering to the craft form of organization and resisting all attempts to materially change it, and the latter opposing it on account of its aggressive and revolutionary character; but, notwithstanding this, the new unionism has made rapid advance during the past two or three years, and its principles have now come to be generally recognized by the progressive elements of the labor movement.¹

Greatly as the industrial union differs from the trade union structurally, the difference in their tendencies and ultimate objects is still more radical and far reaching. Whereas the trade union occupied itself mainly with establishing and maintaining satisfactory wage scales, hours of labor, and working class conditions, industrial unionism, based upon the mutual economic interests of all workers and the solidarity arising therefrom, aims not only at the amelioration of the industrial conditions of the workers, but at the ultimate abolition of the existing productive system, and the total extinction of wage servitude.

It is in this fundamental principle that industrial unionism is most radical and revolutionary in contrast with the earlier trade union forms of industrial organization.

The concentration of capital and the highly complex productive mode of the present day, grouping in vast industrial establishments thousands of workers engaged in scores of different trades, and forcing them into closer and closer cooperation, based upon the minutest division of labor, have tended to obscure, or perhaps totally obliterate, the lines that once so sharply defined the skilled trades, and in this interweaving of the trades

the jurisdictions of the several unions based upon them have overlapped each other, and this has been the prolific source of the increasing friction between many of the larger unions which have approximately reached their maximum of growth and are jealous of maintaining the prestige of an expanding membership regardless of the effect upon a rival union which may lay claim to jurisdiction over the same craft or devision thereof. Following the lines of least resistance, the tendency of these unions, so far as external forms are concerned, is toward industrial unionism, and this is undoubtedly the form that will ultimately supersede the trade union of the present and past.

Not only in the matter of organic form and fundamental aim does industrial unionism differ from trade unionism, but also in the matter of tactics and methods. Quite as revolutionary as the ultimate end of industrial unionism are the tactics its adherents have adopted for its realization.

The trade unions of the present and past have with rare exceptions eschewed political action in any independent capacity as an organized body; have accepted, in the aggregate, the prevailing industrial system as a finality, subject only to such modification as might be effected through the power of organized effort in the amelioration of conditions, and have uniformly affirmed, in express terms and by clear implication, an identity of economic interests between the employing and employed classes.

In contradistinction to this conciliatory and non-political attitude of the trade unions toward the existing wage system and the capitalist class, it is the declared principle of industrial unionism that the wage workers have no interests in common with capitalists; that, in fact, their material interests are in conflict, and it is its declared purpose to abolish the wage system and supplant it by a system of industrial cooperation in which the workers themselves shall have full control fro their own benefit, and to this end they recognize the necessity of organizing the political as well as the economic power of the working class, and of the harmonious exercise of both by such means as will make industrial unionism the medium of attaining industrial democracy.

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¹ The *Industrial Union Bulletin* was the official organ of the majority faction of the IWW. Editor A.S. Edwards inserts the following argumentative footnote here: “The writer should also have said, in behalf of historical accuracy, that the movement for industrial unionism, i.e. the Industrial Workers of the World, has met with bitter opposition from Socialist Party leaders, who, for the sake of winning votes, flirt with those who now uphold ‘the lower primal forms of trade unionism.’”