In the late afternoon of May 18, 1922, a man named Joseph Neil stepped up to a “portly built gentleman” on a street in Hutchinson, Kansas, and asked if he might spare twenty-five cents. Thirty-two years old and with a wistful and slightly melancholy look about him, Neil had sailed many seas and traveled all over North America and Europe. He had worked a great number of jobs, roaming around like this. And he had come to Hutchinson for the wheat harvest, one of many thousands of workers making their way through the region that summer, hiring out on one farm after another as they followed the ripening grain northward. The wheat around Hutchinson was not ready to be cut, though, and Neil, who had arrived that morning, was “dead broke,” without “a red copper,” and needed something to tide him over. But rather than reaching into his change pocket, the portly built gentlemen alerted the police.

This encounter put Neil behind bars for six years, although not for soliciting the bestowment. As Neil told an organization trying to secure his release, “Every job I ever had, I worked too hard.” This life of wandering about and working too hard had led him to join the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He enrolled to “better my own conditions” and to see that “other working men might know the principles of better working conditions.” But if Neil’s membership in the IWW, which police discovered after they arrested him for vagrancy, had bettered his conditions, it also got him imprisoned for violating Kansas’s “criminal syndicalism” law, which forbade advocacy of “political or
industrial change” by means of “sabotage,” “terrorism,” or other criminal acts and barred membership in organizations that promoted change by these means.

Over a three-year period that began just before America’s entry into the First World War, twenty states, two territories, and a number of cities enacted criminal syndicalism laws. The aim was to destroy the IWW and punish its members, and the laws were put to these purposes. Between 1917 and 1925, police arrested and jailed roughly 2,000 “Wobblies,” as everyone called the IWW’s members, on some type of criminal syndicalism charge, and state prosecutors and judges imprisoned over three hundred for the crime. Federal authorities also joined in this drive. In the late summer and fall of 1917, federal agents and military personnel began raiding IWW offices and gatherings throughout the country, arresting hundreds of Wobblies and detaining hundreds more. Along with private detectives and state agents, they infiltrated the IWW, seized its mail, and confiscated tons of union records. The following year, federal prosecutors conducted the first of several large show trials of Wobblies. These prosecutions, which resulted in the imprisonment of almost all of the IWW’s leadership on conspiracy charges, rested mainly on provisions of the Espionage Act that had been devised with the destruction of the IWW in mind. The statute proscribed interference with the war effort. But as with the criminal syndicalism laws, the ultimate basis of guilt when Wobblies were prosecuted was their membership in the union.

In the course of this campaign, many thousands of Wobblies were also arrested and prosecuted on relatively minor charges, particularly vagrancy. The inherent vagueness of this crime and the slender procedures required to enforce it made vagrancy ideal for harassing these men—running them out of town; disrupting their meetings, organizing efforts, and picket lines; forcing them to work; or, as Neil’s case reveals, holding them until more serious charges could be lodged. Vagrancy was also well suited for preemptively punishing them, as it provided grounds for locking them up for days, weeks, even months, in municipal and county jails that were, as a rule, degrading and dangerous. Nevertheless, in their eagerness to criminalize Wobblies, some jurisdictions went even further by rewriting their vagrancy laws to expressly criminalize the IWW, while others made it an act of criminal contempt merely to belong to the organization.

There was considerable lawlessness in this campaign of legal repression. Not only were all these laws conceived and enforced in haphazard
and corrupt ways, but also the union’s lawyers were harassed and threatened, its defense efforts disrupted, and its witnesses prosecuted. In some cases, too, Wobblies were simply framed on murder charges. And the legal repression the union experienced also converged with outright vigilantism. Everywhere the IWW was active in the late 1910s and early 1920s, its members were victims of what one scholar calls “bourgeois vigilantism,” rooted not so much in popular sovereignty as in the prerogatives of class. With shocking regularity, Wobblies were beaten, run through gauntlets, tarred and feathered, chased out of town or across state lines, or simply murdered by businessmen and professionals, self-described patriots, local toughs, college students, soldiers, and police.

Such treatment of Wobblies was consistently justified by charges that the IWW was a criminal organization, composed of men bent on sedition, wanton disorder, and, especially, sabotage. Contrary to what some of the union’s defenders have argued, these accusations were not entirely untrue, at least with respect to sabotage. For years, Wobblies reveled in the concept of sabotage. For them, sabotage usually meant working slowly or inefficiently or otherwise “striking on the job.” But not always: more than a few saw in the practice of damaging employers’ property not only another way of striking on the job but also a means of vindicating the union’s philosophy of class consciousness and turning back upon capital the kind of violence and destruction that capital inflicted upon them.

This is not to say that such destruction was especially common or, as a rule, particularly serious, or that it justifies or truly explains what was done to the union and its members. Wobblies were more inclined to talk about sabotage than to engage in it. They were not nearly as destructive as they were reputed to be. And they were generally much less violent than those who tormented them. But these facts did little to change the way that sabotage was used, together with broader charges of union criminality, to justify the Wobblies’ persecution and to conceal the fact that the main reason these men faced such extraordinary depredations was that they hoped to better their immediate conditions and, in the process, to change the world.

The Wobblies believed capitalism irredeemable and illegitimate and thought that it was the destiny of workers themselves to rule. They aimed to educate and organize the entire working class into “one big union,” to relentlessly pressure the capitalists, and finally to topple capitalism with a
massive general strike and build in its place a workers’ commonwealth. For a decade after it was born in the first years of the new century, the IWW struggled to build itself into a functional organization and to move any distance toward realizing this revolutionary vision. But during the war its fortunes changed. On the strength of favorable economic conditions and the union’s remarkable success in organizing, especially among migratory workers and in industries like agriculture, lumber, and mining, membership surged. Enrollment is difficult to calculate, but by 1917 it may have reached 150,000 or more, and the union’s influence extended over several times this number of workers. Among radical leftist organizations in American history, it attained a prominence rivaled only by the Socialist and, later, Communist parties, and built upon its leadership of hundreds of strikes.

The organizing gains that underlay the union’s growth were concentrated in the western two-thirds of the country, on the rapidly industrializing frontiers of American capitalism, where relentless exploitation had sown the seeds of bitter class conflict. Although the IWW never came close to achieving its revolution, the union’s surge positioned it to threaten the interests and social visions of powerful capitalists and politicians in that region. More than anything, this surge is what inspired the enactment of criminal syndicalism laws and the Espionage Act, propelled enforcement of these laws as well as vagrancy statutes, and underlay the increase in lawless repression that members endured.
during this period. In this way, it is also, ironically, a principal reason why, by the time Joe Neil was released in 1928, the union had been effectively destroyed.

As historians of the IWW have long understood, many factors contributed to its demise. Among these were rapid changes in technology, social structure, and the nature of work that eroded the ranks of the migratory, largely unskilled workers from which the IWW came to draw most of its members and reduced the effectiveness of its organizing methods. The IWW also had to contend with far-reaching and well-cultivated opposition to its radical ideas, which were probably more appealing than generally thought and yet never overwhelmingly popular. It had to deal, too, with the rise of communism, which emerged as a competing ideology and confounding political movement at a crucial time in the union’s history. And it was likewise ravaged by deep and long-festering conflicts between rival factions within the organization, which by 1924 had left the union thoroughly divided against itself.

As nearly everyone who has studied the IWW also recognizes, repression was a crucial factor in the union’s demise, one that saddled it with crippling expenses, disrupted its organizing efforts, incapacitated its leadership, and widened the fractures within its ranks. But repression’s role in destroying the IWW has yet to be fully documented or adequately appreciated. For all their attention to the issue, historians have looked at repression too narrowly, focusing on local or regional events, on the Espionage Act cases, on sensational episodes of vigilantism, or on the fate of the union’s more prominent leaders without ever reckoning with repression’s cumulative effects or giving sufficient attention to the experience of everyday Wobblies like Neil. And compounding this is a tendency not to adequately consider the more intimate means by which repression accomplished its purposes.

Famous for his obsessions with historical memory, political subjugation, and matters of human endurance and suffering, the writer Eduardo Galeano once observed that “hunger looks like the man hunger is killing.” So it is with the repression that the Wobblies endured: its consequences are impossible to comprehend without considering what it did to the men on whom it was inflicted. And yet it is exactly this aspect of the story that has been least well examined in studies of repression and the IWW, aside from some scattered reflections here and there and a handful of biographies of prominent Wobblies, where the complicated truth of the matter is often obscured by an understandable but one-sided emphasis on the remarkable resolve these men showed.
To understand what repression did to the IWW one must not forget what it did to men like Joe Neil, whose only prominence came from his imprisonment. While in prison in Kansas, he received a visit from a fairly famous woman named Marcet Haldeman-Julius, a stage artist, writer, banker, and leftist who was also Jane Addams’s niece. Meeting Neil “in the insane ward,” where he spent four years, Haldeman-Julius discovered a man of “quiet nobility” and great resolve, with “a restless, eager mind that has sought somewhat blunderingly, but no less passionately” than the likes of Bertrand Russell and Oscar Wilde, “after the truth.” The IWW was a “religion” to Neil, she marveled; the “conditions of his class are his chief concern.”

Such devotion and resolve were common and often explicitly based in the principles of solidarity and class struggle that defined the IWW, as the experience of Neil’s fellow Wobbly, Howard Welton, underscores. In late 1921, Welton wrote from California’s San Quentin State Prison to the trial judge in his case, declining the judge’s offer to help secure either a pardon or parole. Arrested earlier that year for chairing a meeting that featured a leftist preacher—and a government spy—Welton had been convicted of criminal syndicalism. Now, in a lengthy letter to the judge, he rejected the offer of assistance. For Welton, “accepting a pardon implies, to my mind, that one has committed some crime. I have not.” In his view, “Our ‘crime,’” consisted only of “advocating a social change by peaceful, orderly, efficient methods.” Moreover, Welton said, he found himself incarcerated with other Wobblies who were “no more guilty of any crime than I am. If I should be released, they should be released.”

Hundreds of Wobblies followed Welton’s course, disdaining the clemency of governors, prosecutors, judges, and even U.S. Presidents, sometimes celebrating their convictions and often demanding they be prosecuted and punished in lieu of or alongside their fellow Wobblies. From witness stands and jail and prison cells, they met degradation with a surpassing courage and an astonishing dignity that should long ago have made legends of them all. Among themselves, they fashioned persecution as its own victory over a system that was in their minds utterly unacceptable. This was Joe Neil’s perspective. In a letter written just after his release, he told fellow Wobblies that “one who goes to prison for the I.W.W. should be proud of his sacrifice for the principle of industrial unionism, and I am justly proud of mine.” But this is not all that Neil said. In this same letter he spoke frankly of the “extreme brutality” he endured. And when Haldeman-Julius met him there in the prison, she recognized all the ways that Neil had been battered by his
time in custody and found herself, “face to face,” she said, with both courage and tragedy.11

Countless thousands of Wobblies languished in foul, dangerous, and overcrowded jails for weeks or months, convicted of vagrancy or awaiting trial on more serious charges. Thousands were injured, sometimes severely, and occasionally killed, by police, jailers, or vigilantes. For the hundreds who were sent to prison, the crushing loneliness, the draining fears, and the stupefying controls of life behind bars were compounded by frequent beatings, arduous labor, and the likelihood that they would be held, sometimes for weeks or even months, in solitary confinement or, worse, in hellish places variously known as the “dark hole,” the “dungeon,” or the “slaughter house.” And unlike Neil, whose “lunacy,” according to the prison doctor, was expressed in the fact that he “speaks of being persecuted,” more than a few were driven insane by what was done to them.12 Several committed suicide and perhaps a dozen died of natural causes while incarcerated, coming, by these dark roads, to the same end as those whose association with the union got them murdered. Untold others, either members or potential members, witnessed this suffering and drew from it undeniable conclusions about what affiliation with the union held in store for them, as well.

To understand what became of the IWW requires that one confront repression on these terms, appreciate its vast scale and comprehensive reach, and see how in wrecking lives it also wrecked the union. The IWW had offices and finances, publications and reputation, and leaders; what happened to these is part of the story too. But the union’s strength and vitality depended on both the well-being of the people who comprised it, including the thousands whose only notoriety, like Neil’s, came with this persecution, and the willingness of everyone who might associate with the organization to risk persecution as a condition of membership. For all their resolution, these men—and the victims of the kind of repression this book is concerned with were virtually all men13—were not invulnerable. If the arrests, prison terms, and assaults could break or come close to breaking them, and if knowledge of such practices could create enough general apprehension and uncertainty, then the persecution could accomplish its intended role of destroying the IWW. And that is exactly what occurred.

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While his clients suffered, the union’s leading lawyer, George Vanderveer, tried to get a fellow lawyer to appreciate what was being done to
them. No decent person, he told the man, would stand to see racial minorities treated the way these IWWs were. Yet “decent” people not only tolerated the mistreatment of the Wobblies, they were responsible for it. Yet again, these decent people often knew what the IWW was and what the union’s members endured, even if they approved of the persecution. Nowadays, when histories of the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements flourish, the story of the IWW is all but forgotten. Outside of leftist and labor circles, most people know little about the union. And they know even less about the people who formed its ranks, about America’s own heroes of unwritten story, in whose struggles and sufferings can be found no better record of what this country was and what it is likely to remain.

Almost as regrettable as rank ignorance about the Wobblies is that when their history has been written, it has often been to serve a narrative about the advancement of civil liberties in this country. This is common among liberals, whose faith in the legal system usually overrides their interests in radical industrial unionism. It is also, to be sure, somewhat understandable, given that the persecution of the Wobblies did indeed present the country’s political and legal elite with essential questions about the rights of free speech and association and the state’s pre-
rogative to repress radicals. But what happened to the Wobblies shows how little footing civil liberties have when honoring them requires impingement on the interests and values of the truly powerful. So it was that complicity in the campaign to destroy the union was widespread not only among ignorant and overexcited locals, greedy businessmen, and intolerant reactionaries but also among Progressives of the highest standing. Among these were President Woodrow Wilson, who oversaw the federal assault on the IWW, as well as U.S. Supreme Court Justices Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis, who, in fashioning the “clear and present danger test,” devised a way of reconciling the persecution of Wobblies and other radicals with a veneration of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Indeed, precisely because they wish to preserve the notion that the values of freedom of speech and association endured even as the Wobblies and their ideals foundered, many liberal historians, if they reckon with the IWW at all, dismiss what was done to the union as aberrant products of the First World War and the “Red Scare” that followed. As they tell it, these were times when irrational impulses briefly triumphed over law and reason. And there are some grounds to believe this reading of the history. The IWW was the most prominent among several radical groups targeted with repression during these periods. Moreover, the Espionage Act was enacted in wartime and the majority of criminal syndicalism laws were adopted either during the war or the Red Scare. It was also during these periods, which were indeed marked by surging militarism and xenophobia and elements of hysteria, that arrests, prosecutions, and vigilantism were at their worst.

Much about the union’s experience contradicts this narrative, however. The repression that the IWW endured began to escalate well before America entered the war and persisted until the union was broken, which in many places meant long after the Red Scare had ended. Moreover, repression of the IWW was at least as much a function of the union’s strength and the threats it posed to powerful people as of any broader shifts in the country’s politics or mood. And what happened to the union was, in the end, much more a matter of class conflict than most liberals have been inclined to believe—or, for that matter, can reconcile with their ultimate faith in the social order that these Wobblies so vehemently rejected.

In fact, an honest telling of what happened to the IWW not only casts great doubt on traditional liberal narratives. It also is destined to
disappoint those leftists and unionists who have found in the Wobblies’ experience a hopeful augury of a revival of today’s labor movement and the working class’s eventual triumph, expressed in the audacity and fortitude that these men showed in the face of overwhelming opposition. Instead, what this story really does is confirm the Wobblies’ own, darker anticipations as to the nature of capitalist rule, which align with the dismal fate of the labor movement and the radical left since the IWW’s decline, as well as the prophecies of the Wobblies’ most famous champion, the writer Jack London.

London is a recurrent figure in this book because, more than any other writer or intellectual, he at once enthralled the Wobblies and helped them to understand their world. He studied them, learned from them, and then offered through some of the very works that so captivated them important insights about who they were, about the world they inhabited, and about how they understood that world. London knew, as did the Wobblies themselves, that reformism presented its own perils, some ultimately greater than those of revolutionary activism, and he understood, as they did, the essential truth that the capitalists and their allies would inevitably reckon ruthlessly with those who really dared to defy their reign.

London related this most effectively in his 1908 novel *The Iron Heel*. An immensely popular text among Wobblies, the book unfolds his political philosophy by recounting, from a vantage seven hundred years in the future, a failed fictional revolution in the early twentieth century, crushed by powerful capitalists allied with reformist forces. The novel thus anticipates the Wobblies’ own fate. “Power will be the arbiter,” portends London, “as it always has been the arbiter.” Armed with such power, “the Oligarchy,” or the “Iron Heel,” vows to rule, to grind down the revolutionists and walk upon their faces.15 So did the real-world oligarchs, crushing the IWW while teaching a lesson about the kind of power that their class really wields and about the ways that law lends legitimacy to that power and to the violence of which it must ultimately consist.

To their everlasting credit, the Wobblies, more than London, adhered doggedly and fatalistically to their revolutionary hopes, notwithstanding this dim judgment about the world. But their experiences give reason to believe that the judgment was by no means wrong. Like the Christian martyrs to whom they have been likened, the Wobblies were left to find confirmation and redemption mainly in their own destruction. The chapters that follow are a record of this defeat, a history
written “in drops of blood,” as a union pamphlet put it. Heroic at times and often tragic, the history told in these chapters is largely unmoderated by talk of triumph, unless by this one means the way these dreamers and rebels suffered and what they, in their suffering, revealed about how power arbitrates and how capital, in a capitalist world, is bound to rule.