

What is the Preamble?

The IWW Preamble is the union's statement of its core principles and basic political philosophy.

Our vision is simply stated: we want to organize the working class into a powerful, unstoppable labor movement that helps us build a new world. The Preamble has rarely been amended, and most of its current language dates back to the IWW's first constitution ratified in 1905. But it is also a product of its time: the language may seem unfamiliar or awkward. There are many terms which need explanation. Our goal is to put the Preamble into its historical context so that it can be more widely understood. This text is intended for new members of the IWW, workers who are considering joining, and those who are not familiar with concepts like class struggle, capitalism, and revolutionary unionism.

“The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.”

The working class is made of people who have to work so we can have food, shelter, healthcare, and other necessities. We don't own the factories, the banks, the schools, or the corporations, so most of us sell hours of our lives for a wage, or we do labor in the home for our families. We are also the class that creates all wealth: we build the computers, we stock the shelves, we drive the buses, we are the ones who allow society to function. The IWW is the One Big Union for All Workers, and our goal is to unionize all workers together in one organization with shared principles, tactics, and goals.

Our interests are opposed to the employing class: the CEOs, politicians, and bosses who buy our labor. They are capitalists. We want to live better lives and provide for our families, but they want to pay the lowest possible wage because that's how they keep their profits high. Our bosses want to keep complete control over our jobs so they can make us work as hard as possible for their benefit. The work we do makes money for them. They are like dictators: they are not elected, they are not accountable to us, and they can hire and fire us whenever they choose. They want to make as much money as they can, and they want to maintain control over the economy, even if that hurts the workers. But they need us to work—to use their machines or run their stores or program their apps—because they can't do it all themselves. Imagine if Bill Gates had to write all the code that makes up Microsoft software, or if Jeff Bezos had to deliver every product sold on Amazon. They need us, because without us, they would never get rich.

“There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.”

Countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and those of Western Europe are some of the wealthiest places on Earth. But even so, millions of people are impoverished, homeless, and desperate for work. We live paycheck-to-paycheck. We can't afford healthcare or decent housing. Even those of us who make good money are still dissatisfied with the work we are

forced to do. At the same time, there are a few people who are super-rich, and they can buy whatever they want. They make more money per month than most of us will make in our entire lifetimes.

We suffer because they hoard that wealth. We skip meals so we can pay rent or buy medicine for our kids. We work bad jobs for bad pay because otherwise we would starve.

“There can be no peace” because we can’t allow the rich to continue to decide our standard of living. We believe that if we successfully organize enough workers who are striving toward a common goal that we can change the entire economic structure so that it benefits everyone in our society.

“Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class,”

Because our interests are in conflict, we are locked in a struggle with the employing class. In the short term, we want to help our fellow workers win better wages, better working conditions, and the respect they deserve from their bosses. We are building a union to bring workers together to fight for those things. When we act together to demand what we want, our bosses have to listen. When the workers in one workplace organize together, we can improve our wages and working conditions. When all the workers in an industry get organized, we can win higher standards for everyone in that industry. In the medium term, we want to build a labor movement that empowers workers to fight for better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities. When all the workers across every industry work together, we have the power to demand a new system: an economic democracy instead of the dictatorship of the employing class. We want to empower workers to end the capitalist system so they can take democratic control over their work. If we successfully organize labor today, we are building a better world for the future.

“take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system,”

The wage system is the basis of capitalism. Your boss pays you a wage in exchange for your labor, but you are never paid the full value of what you create. You are paid less than you’re worth because that’s how bosses make a profit. They will never pay you that actual value of your labor because that leaves no money left over for them.

They have the power to pay you less than you’re worth because they own the places where we work and the tools we use to create things: raw materials, machines, factories, companies, offices, banks, tools, land, equipment—that’s what we mean by “means of production.” And because they own all these things, they get to claim all the profits. But if we had control of the means of production, then we would get the full value of what we produce because we’d take away the bosses’ ability to exploit us —we are the people who use the means of production, we have a direct relationship with the means of production, so we should control the means of production. We want to give workers the ability to collect the full value of their work.

“and live in harmony with the Earth.”

This clause is the most recent addition to the Preamble. The employing class has little interest in an environmentally sustainable economy because they want to maximize their profits as quickly as possible. They trade environmental destruction and climate change for unconscionable sums of money. The employing class depends on destroying the Earth and workers' bodies for the sake of their profits, but we depend on a flourishing Earth for our food, water, and health.

Climate change, wildlife extinction, deforestation, soil exhaustion—we cannot stop these things while the employing class rules because their economic interests depend on causing environmental harm. Workers in these industries suffer some of the worst violence, exploitation, injuries, and exposure to toxic pollution. If the workers controlled the economy, we could produce what we need sustainably. Our interests should incorporate protection of the Earth because we rely on it to live and it provides the basis for all of the things we love and care for.

“We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars.”

The IWW was founded because the existing trade union movement failed to significantly alter the balance of power between workers and employers. The employing class had been busy buying up industries until a small number of men owned most businesses in the US. These industrial monopolies give the employing class immense economic and social power.

When we organize only at one workplace in an industry, we are put in competition with unorganized workers in the same industry or workers in a different union. Our bosses keep us opposed so they can keep wages and benefits low. But if we organize at many companies across an industry, we are no longer competing with one another and can raise standards for all workers. That's why we believe in industrial unionism: organizing all workers in the same industry into the same union.

Capitalism only really “works” for the employing class, anyway—why is our economy organized today so that there are millions of people doing unproductive, meaningless, tedious jobs while not everyone has shelter or medical care? Why do some people have three houses while others don't have one? The answer is that a small number of people who control the economy do so for their own benefit, and the small, fractured, and disjointed unions who stick up for the workers haven't succeeded in fighting back.

“Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.”

We call most other unions “business unions” because they treat unionism as a business. For example, there are unions that typically try to make deals with bosses to prevent conflict between workers and employers. Their goal is to win better conditions for workers by

collaborating with the employing class, so they use the existing labor law to win recognition from bosses and to negotiate contracts. They allow lawyers and negotiators to bargain on behalf of workers so they can sell their members' labor at the best price. A President of the American Federation of Labor has said that workers, unions, and management must work together "to improve production.... That is the future we must unite around. Business, labor and government working together. Only then can we build a nation that truly lives up to its greatest ideals." You can see that the AFL does not want to challenge the current system and in fact defends the current position of labor under capitalism. Business unions lack the will and the imagination to push for a new and better world, relying instead on cutting deals and selling out workers to keep their businesses running.

We can't rely on these legal frameworks to help us organize. As an example, the US National Labor Relations Act begins, "The denial by some employers of the right of employees to organize and the refusal by some employers to accept the procedure of collective bargaining lead to strikes and other forms of industrial strife or unrest, which have the intent or the necessary effect of burdening or obstructing commerce." Other countries have similar laws on their books. Because governments and businesses want commerce to continue without unions interfering through strikes or other disruptions, governments set up a legal system that keeps workers working while professional union representatives negotiate on their behalf. Business union leaders openly advocate maintaining "labor peace," the concept that unions and companies work together to prevent disruptions. But disrupting commerce is how workers win recognition and respect, so business unionism actually undermines union members' abilities to win better lives for themselves.

"These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all."

In the IWW, we use a strategy called "industrial unionism," so all workers of an industry belong to the same union. For example, the teachers, paraeducators, counselors, cafeteria workers, and janitors at a school all have different professions ("trades" or "crafts"), but they are in the education industry and so should belong to the same union. This allows them to work together to fight for better working conditions. Other unions use "trade unionism" or "craft unionism," which divides workers into smaller and smaller groups based on their job type and prevents them from working together to win their demands. By bringing together all the members of an industry, we can launch more effective actions.

Craft unions also typically try to prevent conflict between workers and bosses. Part of maintaining labor peace is by signing "no strike" agreements and mandatory "grievance procedures" as part of contracts with employers. By locking their workers into long-term contracts, business unions prevent workers from striking together. These agreements also prevent workers from taking action to improve their working conditions. Instead, they have to rely on lawyers, negotiators, and arbitrators to settle matters for them. We believe our strength comes from the ability to decide when we work and when we don't work. Our industrial power to

strike together, with the other workers in our industry at different job sites, is what forces the bosses to give in to our demands. The IWW International Guiding Principles and Rules forbid no-strike agreements because workers going on strike across a whole industry is the most powerful action we can take, and we need to have that weapon available when our fellow workers ask us to use it.

The kind of unionism we practice in the IWW is solidarity unionism, which is built on direct democracy, direct action, and mutual support. The workers themselves decide what actions they want to take to win gains on the job, they take those actions themselves, and they support each other during the struggle. Solidarity unionism doesn't rely on recognition from the government or the bosses, it is built by the workers who decide what kind of union they want. In most cases, solidarity unionism is not compatible with the practices of business unions.

“Instead of the conservative motto, ‘A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,’ we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, ‘Abolition of the wage system.’”

"A fair day's wage for a fair day's work" is the motto of the American Federation of Labor. Under the wage system, workers can never get the full value of our labor, so we don't want a "fair" wage. We want something better: the full value of what we produce as determined by the working class, not our parasitic bosses who take a cut of everything we make.

“It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.”

We have the power to create a new society that benefits everyone. The employing class is tiny compared to the working class. If we choose to take action together to create something better, then we can't be stopped. Our movement can embody the concepts of justice, fairness, equality, and democracy and do away with the capitalist system based on exploitation, corruption, and cruelty.

“The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown.”

It can be hard to imagine how the world could go on without capitalism. How would we make sure to manufacture enough of the things we need to live, and how would those things get to the people who need them? By taking control of our workplaces today, we can demonstrate how to run things ourselves, and we can do it better! During the Seattle General Strike of 1919, workers organized vital public services themselves and distributed thousands of meals to each other so no one would go hungry.

We want industrial democracy to be implemented by the workers themselves. Industries should be run by the people who work in them. This is what we call "bottom-up" worker management, where workers democratically decide how to run their workplaces for their own good. We have every reason to be fair and caring to ourselves and our fellow workers. For centuries, capitalism has used bigotry, racism, nationalism, and other ways to divide us so that we fight each other rather than against capitalism. But our natural state is cooperation: that's how workers built society from the ground up. We want an economic system that works for everyone, and that

means we'll be building the system that takes hold after capitalism, a system based on democracy and fairness instead of profits.

“By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

Today, we are trying to build the structures we want to see in the future. We want a world where workers manage our own labor, so we should arm ourselves with the tools, skills, and organization necessary to do that on a smaller scale now. Once we achieve a bunch of small wins across the economy, we can use that momentum to help us bring down capitalism. Then we'll already have industrial democracy and worker self-management established as the basis of our new society.

Lindsay M-H. and Tegan M. are IWW organizers in the Pacific Northwest. Lindsay works in education and has served on the Seattle GMB's Campaigns Committee and as Branch Secretary. Tegan works in the tech industry and has served on the Seattle Campaigns Committee. As IWW Delegates, both have spent a lot of time educating new and prospective members about the union. This document was written in October 2019. Thank you to Fellow Workers Hannah H. and Bob K. for their contributions.

Recommended Reading

- “One Big Union: The Principles and Goals of the Industrial Workers of the World.” <https://iww.org/assets/One-Big-Union.pdf>
- “Think It Over” by Tim Acott. https://archive.iww.org/about/official/think_it_over/
- “When and Why Did Unions Start Signing Contracts?” by Robin J. Cartwright. *Organizing Work*, October 11, 2018. <http://organizing.work/2018/10/when-and-why-did-unions-start-signing-contracts/>
- *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer: Building Solidarity While Staying Clear of the Law* by Staughton Lynd and Daniel Gross. <http://libcom.org/library/labor-law-rank-filer-building-solidarity-while-staying-clear-law>
- “The Kids Annotated Preamble” by FW Sasha. <https://libcom.org/library/kids-annotated-preamble>
- *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* by Staughton Lynd.
- “Boom Without Bust: Solidarity Unionism for the Long Term” by MK Lees. *Organizing Work*, September 10, 2018. <http://organizing.work/2018/09/boom-without-bust-solidarity-unionism-for-the-long-term/>
- “Weakening the Dam” by the Twin Cities IWW. <https://libcom.org/library/weakening-dam-twin-cities-iww>