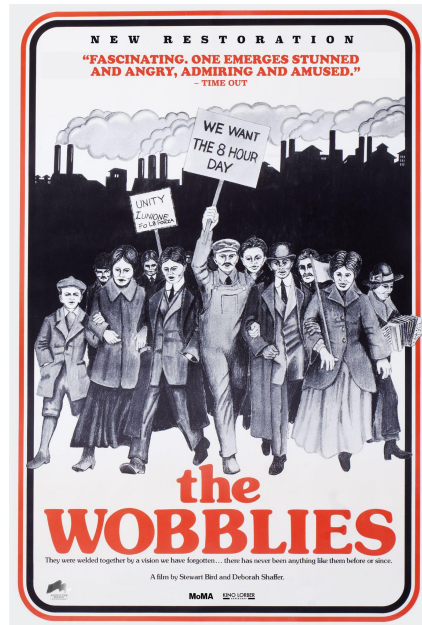


# KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

*Presents*



## The Wobblies

*A Film by Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer*

**2021 Library of Congress National Film Registry Inductee  
4K Restoration by the Museum of Modern Art**

**Official Selection – New York Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival,  
Berlin International Film Festival**

**USA | 1979 | 89 mins | Color | English**

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“A fascinating and often moving compilation of newsreel, photographs, and those amazing songs. One emerges stunned and angry, admiring and amused.” – *Time Out*

“*The Wobblies* is a history of the IWW, researched lovingly and corroborated by the reminiscences of some of the union’s former members, who are now in their 80’s and 90’s. When the facts are presented as fully as they have been here, the feelings that accompanied them aren’t difficult to imagine. – *The New York Times*

“A vivid look into America’s radical past. Its heroes and heroines are filled with vitality—a rare attribute these days.” – Studs Terkel

“The film’s influence on contemporary documentary form—especially the historical documentary—cannot be underestimated.” – Jeffrey Skoller, UC Berkeley

“Although the IWW was a vital and significant early twentieth-century labor organization, its radical labor (and labor more broadly) focus was largely invisible in history texts. In 90 minutes, *The Wobblies* brings that history vividly to light.” – Daniel J. Walkowitz, New York University

“Harmonizing and hell-raising, rhythm and rebellion, poetry and politics, singing and striking. The Industrial Workers of the World—the shock troops of the early-20th-century labor movement—virtually invented the protest song for the modern age. The goal of the Industrial Workers of the World—or Wobblies, as members were widely known—was revolution, not just winning strikes. Unlike other unions of the time, it accepted all workers as members: Black people, women, unskilled laborers, sex workers, immigrants of every race and creed. It sought to forge ‘one big union’ of the entire global working class and used direct action, sabotage and the power of song in class war against the ruling class. Its reputation as a kick-ass union fueled by kick-ass songs remains the stuff of legend.” – Tom Morello (Rage Against the Machine), *The New York Times*

### **From the people who lived it:**

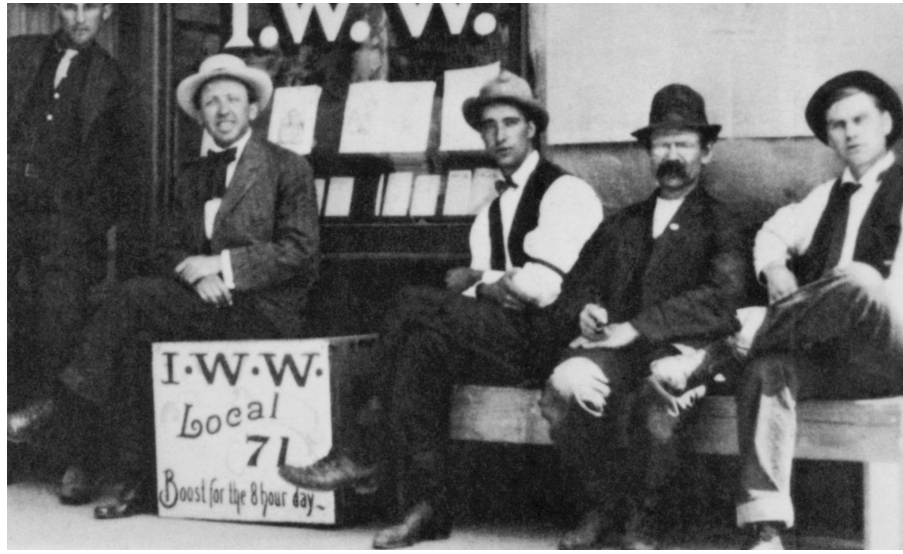
“The strike on the job was the best tactic that ever came out of the IWW because the workers stayed on the job and got their pay but they slowed production down sometimes 50%. And that brought the bosses to their knees quicker than anything else.”

– Tom Scribner, “timber beast” and union organizer

“I don’t know how many they shot. Nobody knows. Lots of them went overboard, some jumped, some fell. It was terrible. One man swimming towards shore. We ran down the beach for a boat to try and help him, but they got him. Bullets were flying all around him—those bullets came my way too. There wasn’t anything we could do. And he sank, his hat left floating in the water. They claim they dragged the bottom for bodies and never found any...Oh man, what they wouldn’t do.

I’ll never forget it as long as I live.”

– Nels Peterson, Everett Massacre witness



## About the Film

From “The Wobblies Secures Its Place in the National Film Registry” on [New York Women in Film & Television](#)

On December 14th, the **Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden** announced the 2021 selection of 25 influential motion pictures to be inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. The Registry champions American films and this year the seminal documentary, ***The Wobblies*** (1979), which was awarded a **NYWIFT Women’s Film Preservation Fund** grant in 2003, has been honored with inclusion to the list. ***The Wobblies*** (1979) by Deborah Shaffer and Stewart Bird is in outstanding company with others named to the Registry such as Sylvia Morales’ *Chicana*, Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña.

***The Wobblies*** is an iconic film of the labor movement and an early innovative narrative that incorporates oral histories, archival media, including animation, and other forms of propaganda. “Solidarity! All for One and One for All!” With that slogan, the Industrial Workers of the World, aka the Wobblies, took to organizing unskilled workers into One Big Union, changing the course of history. Along the way to winning an eight-hour workday and fair wages in the early 20th century, the IWW was the first union to be racially and sexually integrated, and was often met with imprisonment, violence, and the privations of long strikes. This award-winning film captures a provocative look at the forgotten American history of this most radical of unions, in the unforgettable and still fiery voices of Wobbly members – lumberjacks, migratory workers, and silk weavers – already in their 70’s, 80’s and 90’s when they were recorded in the late 1970’s.

Eerily echoing current times, ***The Wobblies*** boldly investigates a nation torn by naked corporate greed and the red-hot rift between the industrial masters and the rabble-rousing workers in the fields and factories. Replete with gorgeous archival footage, the film pays tribute to American

workers who took the ideals of equality and free speech seriously enough to put their lives on the line for them.

At a Women's Film Preservation Fund screening of ***The Wobblies*** at UnionDocs, Center for Documentary Arts a few years ago, audiences were stunned to be reminded of how relevant the film still is today – in its depiction of the struggles over working conditions, racism, migrant workers, forced deportations of immigrants, and the Chicago trial of 101 IWW in 1921 that presaged the Chicago 7 conspiracy trial of 1970. The IWW was the first union to actively recruit Black members, refusing to bow to segregationist laws, and promoting the active participation of women in leadership and in the rank and file. They led ground-breaking struggles for the right to free speech across the country. Their organizing and philosophy laid the groundwork and provided many of the organizers for what would become the CIO in 1935.

Filmically, ***The Wobblies*** is a joyous chronicle of interviews with former members of the Industrial Workers of the World, combined with rare newsreel footage, cartoons, posters, artwork and songs from the period to lovingly evoke the passion, energy and commitment of the Wobblies. While those elements are ubiquitous in today's documentaries, 40 years ago they were innovative, as was the use of actors reading the words of deceased IWW leaders in voice-over. The Wobblies were unique in using the voices of rank and file women and men; voices that are preserved today only in the film. The Wobblies were among the first in what became a flood of creative historical documentaries released in the 1980's.

Premiering at the New York Film Festival in 1979, ***The Wobblies*** enjoyed worldwide attention through festivals, theatrical runs and semi-theatrical screenings – Rotterdam Film Festival; Berlin Film Festival; American Film Festival (Red Ribbon); Valladolid Film Festival; Figuera da Foz Film Festival; Filmex, and Denver Film Festival. Its theatrical run included New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Northampton, Norwalk, Lawrence, Lincoln, New Haven, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Labor Union semi-theatrical sponsored screenings were hosted by ACTWU (Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, ACLU, TWU (Transport Workers Union), UAW International, UAW Local 659, 1199 (National Healthcare Workers Union).

Directed by Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer, ***The Wobblies*** is a rare and challenging invitation to rethink both past and present through the eyes of an organization largely obliterated from memory, but which still speaks to us today.

Following its film preservation by the **Women's Film Preservation Fund**, ***The Wobblies*** enjoyed its preservation premiere at Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, and went on to screen at UnionDocs, Center for Documentary Art in New York, and other venues. Most recently, the **Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)** has just completed a gorgeous 4K restoration of the original film.

**Kino Lorber is proud to return *The Wobblies* to theaters in time for May Day 2022 to commemorate the historic struggles and gains made by workers and the labor movement.**

## About Producer-Director Deborah Shaffer

Academy Award®-winning filmmaker Deborah Shaffer began making social issue documentaries as a member of the Newsreel Collective in the '70's. She co-founded Pandora Films, one of the first women's film companies, which produced several shorts. Her first feature documentary, *The Wobblies*, premiered at the prestigious New York Film Festival in 1979. During the 80's Shaffer focused on human rights in Central America and Latin America, directing many films including *Witness to War: Dr. Charlie Clements*, which won the Academy Award® for Short Documentary in 1985, and *Fire from the Mountain* and *Dance of Hope*, which both played at the Sundance Film Festival. Shaffer directed one of the first post-September 11 films, *From the Ashes: 10 Artists* followed by *From the Ashes: Epilogue*, which premiered at the Sundance and Tribeca Film Festivals. She is also the Executive Producer of the Academy Award®-nominated short *Asylum*, and has directed numerous acclaimed public television programs on women and the arts. She directed and produced *To Be Heard*, which won awards at numerous festivals and aired nationwide on PBS. Her most recent film, *Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack* premiered at DOC NYC and won the Audience Award at the Hamptons Documentary Film Festival. She has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Irene Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award by the Human Rights Watch Film Festival.

## About Producer-Director Stewart Bird

Stewart Bird is a Bronx-born writer and filmmaker. *Murder at the Yeshiva* is his first novel and he is presently writing his second NYPD homicide detective novel with Detective Mo Shuman. He wrote *Solidarity Forever*, an oral history of the I.W.W. (University of Minnesota Press) with Dan Georgakas and Deborah Shaffer. He also co-authored the play "*The Wobblies: The U.S. vs. Wm. D. Haywood et. al.*," (with Peter Robilotta), which was performed at the Hudson Guild Theatre in New York and published by Smyrna Press. Bird wrote a one-hour story for PBS entitled "*The Mighty Pawns*" about a black inner city chess team, which was shown nationally on Wonderworks and distributed nationally by Disney. As a writer/producer for Fox television's *Current Affair*, produced various segments: "Alan Berg," "Elvis Presley," "A Cycle of Justice," and "The Night Natalie Died." He worked as a writer/producer for CBS News' *48 Hours* and produced segments like "Another America," "Underground," "Stuck on Welfare," and "Earth Wars." Bird has produced numerous feature-length documentaries including "*Finally Got the News*," about black auto workers in Detroit; "*Retratos*," on the Puerto Rican community in New York; "*Coming Home*," on Vietnam Veterans; and *The Wobblies* (with Deborah Shaffer) focusing on the Industrial Workers of the World, a turn-of-the-century labor union.

## Interview with the Filmmakers

Excerpted from "The Wobblies: The Making of a Historical Documentary" by Dan Georgakas  
*Cinéaste Magazine*, Spring 1980 (used with permission)

The American documentary has been enjoying a renaissance during the last few years, and among its most skilled exponents are filmmakers with political roots in the 1960's. The high level of radical filmmaking was demonstrated most recently with the world premiere of *The Wobblies*, a feature-length documentary co-directed by Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer, at the 17th New York Film Festival.

From its first screenings, *The Wobblies* has generated considerable enthusiasm and controversy. Like *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and *Union Maids*, films with which it is frequently compares, *The Wobblies* is unabashedly partisan, its premise being that the Industrial Workers of the World, an organization now largely unknown or forgotten by most Americans, deserves a hallowed place in our history. In this respect, the film's title can be somewhat misleading. *The Wobblies* is not a formal history of the I.W.W., but an introduction to its broad social vision and the people who were its rank and file supporters.

The film is structured around, but not limited to, the experiences of a dozen individuals, most of whom are now in their 80's or 90's. Their oral histories individualize specific events, such as historic strikes and demonstrations, or controversies such as the debate over the role and nature of sabotage. The filmmakers have also used extensive contemporaneous visual material to flesh out their stories. Among the more unusual examples are three propagandistic animated cartoons found in historical archives. One aims at arousing the American farmer against vicious I.W.W. "rats," while another deals with a hen strike led by "Little Red Henski" at Alice's Egg Factory.

Governmental persecution of the I.W.W. receives prominent coverage in the film. The deportation of twelve hundred Wobbly miners at Bisbee, the murder of Wobblies during the Everett incident, and the Chicago mass trial of one hundred and one Wobblies, are among the events covered. The overall mood of the film, however, is upbeat. Numerous representative struggles are highlighted to illustrate the I.W.W.'s geographic and organizational breadth. Also discussed is the role women played in the I.W.W. and the organization of black and white workers into the "One Big Union" whose general strike, it was hoped, would make the Second American Revolution. Music is used extensively to develop the film's various themes, a technique most appropriate for an organization famous for its *Little Red Song Book* and composers such as Joe Hill.

The interview was conducted in January, 1980.

-D.G.

**Q:** *Why did you decide to make a film about the I.W.W. at this particular time?*

**DS:** Both Stu and I had been working separately on Wobbly projects for almost ten years. If we were ever going to do an oral history, the time was running out; the people we needed to interview were getting very old.

**SB:** As the activism of the 1960's receded, we felt there was a need to look at the roots of American radicalism. There has been a lot of interest in the 1930's and the Communist Party, but few people have considered the radicalism at the turn of the century when the Socialist Party and the I.W.W. were significant mass movements. In spite of a lot of academic attention, there has been very little done on the popular level.

**Q:** *That's a natural lead-in to what you see as the difference between a popular cinematic treatment of a movement and a scholarly historical analysis of the same subject.*

**DS:** I think that people with a political or academic perspective want films to be somewhat bookish. Wall-to-wall narration and lectures make them feel more confident that the subject is being adequately addressed. But a film is much more emotional than the written word. One of our goals was to depict the spirit of the Wobblies, their sense of commitment, their energy. Something happens when you hear people talk and sing that cannot be gotten from reading the look in people's eyes, the accents, the smiles, the unsaid—that's what a film gives that a book can't. Now, I'm a big fan of books. In a book you can get a lot more hard data. You get a stream of complex facts, figures, interpretations. We were frustrated when editing the film because the people we interviewed said what they wanted to say, which wasn't necessarily what we would have preferred them to talk about.

**SB:** One example of that—which, as it turned out, was instructive—is that people had a lot of difficulty talking about the decline of the I.W.W. from making a revolution, but most of the Wobblies couldn't articulate that. They had been overwhelmed by the process. They talked vaguely about centralization versus decentralization and about the impact of the Russian revolution, but it was clear they didn't know what had happened to their movement. I think that's as important as having the A, B, C, D analysis.

**DS:** And our major purpose was not to find out why the I.W.W. failed but to make its accomplishments known to a wider audience.

**SB:** We began to see exactly what that meant when we had different groups look at earlier cuts of the film as it was in progress. The political and labor activists wanted to have more facts. The general audience, on the other hand, was overwhelmed by how much we had already put in. They had never heard any of this before. We felt it would be a tremendous accomplishment if we could help people understand what this mass movement had stood for. If people wanted to know even more after seeing the film, that would be a fantastic accomplishment.

**Q:** *How do you respond to the criticism that you did not attempt to tie in the I.W.W. with*

*today's problems and movements?*

**DS:** We refuse to believe that the people who will see this film are so stupid that they cannot see that the I.W.W. was opposed to everything the contemporary trade union bureaucracy now takes for granted. We're very clear about showing the roles blacks and women played in various I.W.W. struggles. People are able to draw their own conclusions. You don't have to be heavy-handed.

**Q:** *You didn't point out that the anarcho-syndicalism of the I.W.W. differed from the position of the Socialist Party of that time, or later from that of the Communist Party.*

**DS:** That's a legitimate concern. We wrestled with how much to put in about that. It was one of the topics that people found extremely difficult to talk about. It was true for those who eventually joined the Communist Party as well as for those who utterly rejected it. One of the people we interviewed said, "Well, I don't want to go into that. I won't name names." A blanket would fall down whenever that kind of subject came up, which caused us a lot of frustration.



**Q:** *Could you have added bridging material to fill in what the interviewees would not get into?*

**SB:** We began with the illusion that we could thoroughly cover all the major topics, but, once we began to edit, we saw that cinematically it wasn't possible. If you begin to have interviews running upwards of ten minutes each, you begin to lose the audience. We also had a particular combination of people we were working with, and we had to deal with their concerns. For instance, Angelo Rocco, who was involved in the Lawrence strike, just couldn't deal with the role women played in that struggle. We asked him a dozen times and he just couldn't talk about it. We didn't let Angelo's limitations skewer our presentation of that strike, but, most of the time, it was difficult to get vivid bridging materials.

**DS:** We wanted to put in an entire section on the organizing of black and white timber workers in the South. Remember, we are talking about 1907-1912, when Jim Crow was at its peak. We just couldn't find enough visuals to make it work and we couldn't locate any participants. Not being able to deal with that aspect of the I.W.W. upset me more than not dealing in depth with the ideological differences with other radical groups.

**Q:** *What sort of research did you do for the film?*



**DS:** Luckily, Stu had done a tremendous amount of research for a play he and Peter Robilotta had written about the sedition trial of one hundred and one Wobblies during World War I. So he had stacks and stacks of primary material and he had already contacted lots of people. Another woman and I had wanted to do a film on the Lawrence strike, which was never funded, so I had done a fair amount of research on that. After we decided to do the film, though, we didn't do a whole lot more research into written material. We realized, early on, that our main problem was going to be getting good visuals. So we concentrated on three kinds of research—stills, film, and people—which we did sort of simultaneously the whole two years we were working on the film. For stills, we wrote to virtually every historical society in the country and we also had people go to the commercial archives—Brown Brothers, the Bettmann Archive, Underwood and Underwood, Wide World, Photo World, all those places. There are a limited number of places where you can go for footage—the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and maybe nine or ten commercial archives—and we went to all of them. Working with the archives, however, you soon find out the people nominally in charge of them often don't know what they have. There are no neat little files waiting for you. You have to dig. The cartoon about Alice's Egg Factory was in the Library of Congress, for instance, but you had to know what it was about. You need a specialist who knows the area... We were also very limited in sources for footage. There's almost no newsreel film shot before 1914, before the First World War, and at least 75% to 90% of that is boxing matches or famous people, kings, queens, and presidents. There were many frustrations. I was researching the Pathe collection at Sherman Grinberg in Los Angeles and I'd pull out a card and ask to see something and they'd go in the back and then come out and say, "I'm sorry, that can has disappeared." You see, if the footage starts to hypo, to deteriorate, they just throw it out and never bother to write on the card that they've thrown it out. But then sometimes you get lucky. I had found almost nothing there until I hit a file labeled "Miscellaneous: 1906-1921" and there was the colonel who had led the repression of the Wobblies in the Northwest. That was a fluke.

**Q:** *How did you locate the people you interviewed for the film?*

**DS:** We wrote a lot of letters to people who worked with magazines or organizations all over the country. We contacted scholars, activists, oral history projects, senior citizen homes, you name it. We put an ad in the I.W.W. paper asking old Wobblies to get in touch with us. We ran an author's query in the *New York Times* and that produced the weirdest results. I'll never do that again. One of the big frustrations of the film is that there were things we would love to have included, but we either couldn't find the visuals or we couldn't find anybody alive who could talk about it. Mining was an area that was a problem, for instance. Most of the miners, as a rule, just died younger, probably due to the nature of their occupation. We had a hard time finding a miner and in the Midwest that was a big thing. Actually, one of our big successes was finding James Fair. We thought it was essential to have a black (man) who had been in the I.W.W. as one of the major figures in the film. A number of specialists like Phil Foner... who had been very helpful to us in many ways thought that would be impossible. He had not been able to locate any living black members from the South. We had a friend who had been active in the Communist Party who was very interested in our project. He went down to the Philadelphia docks with a leaflet that read, "Was your grandfather a Wobbly?" He aroused so much interest that he got onto local television programs. The search took eight months but we finally found James Fair who could talk firsthand about how the I.W.W. organized black and white dock workers in Philadelphia in the early years of this century.

**SB:** Then we had a different kind of problem. We located a man in Bisbee, Arizona, who said he knew all about the deportation. Well, he got us all wrong. He thought we were a big

Hollywood outfit and that we wanted to recreate the deportation. He went around getting actors to be in the film. When we arrived, we were taken to a local politician's office and shown contracts that had been drawn up. As it turned out, this old guy wasn't a Wobbly at all. He'd worked as a baker's assistant and had seen the deportation through the bakery window. We forgot about him and set up in Bisbee's only hotel, the Copper Queen, and sent out word about what we were really up to. Eventually we got the right people. Another amazing thing was that when the Bisbee Council on the Arts and Humanities received our original letter of inquiry, they had an emergency meeting to discuss whether or not we were subversives. We found that it was as if the Drive, as the deportation is called out there, had just happened. People were still defined by which side they had taken. Another factor was that a lot of alternate culture people had moved into the area, doing arts and crafts, and there was one element in town that was ready to deal with them in the way they had dealt with the Wobblies.

**Q:** *You seem to have avoided putting emphasis on the I.W.W. leadership.*

**DS:** That was partly choice and partly what we had to work with. If Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were still alive, we certainly would have interviewed her. But the point of the film was to let the rank and file speak.

**SB:** As it was, we have a fair amount of footage on Big Bill Haywood, but, as Deborah says, we wanted to show history as seen from the ranks. How did the people involved in the struggle perceive events? Checking their accounts against other sources, we found them to be amazingly accurate about historical details.

**Q:** *You did not deal with what your interviewees are doing today and, in some cases, you were sketchy about their exact roles in the events described.*

**SB:** We tried to present the individual's relationship to the particular struggle. I think it's very important to know how a woman in the Paterson strike responded to a cop who wanted to date her. That tells us a lot more about what was going on between cops and strikers than some litany about what this woman did on the picket line every day.

**DS:** If people would sit through a five to six hour film, we could put all that in. But most people won't. Certainly the general audience won't. We thought a lot about how to begin and end the film. At one point, we considered having a photo of each person with what they had done from that time until now.

**SB:** Some people got into the more traditional trade unions. Some went into the Communist Party. Others dropped out of formal politics. In the film you see one couple wearing Senior Power buttons. But what it all comes down to is that these people remained committed to a radical social vision. That's what this film wants to bring out and what we want the audience to identify with. No matter what the individuals have done in the intervening years, it was clear they had not changed their basic perspective. They had not abandoned the dreams of their youth. They were committed to a finer world. In that respect, they had not been beaten.

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## **About the Restoration**

*The Wobblies* was digitally scanned by the DuArt Digitization Center in full 4K resolution using the DFT Scanity. For the ultimate equality, the original cut ABC&D rolls of negative were the source for scanning and conforming into 4K 16-bit DPX files. The DPX media represents the new “digital negative” and was subsequently color graded and restored to create the archival and distribution masters. The new archival master is stored in MoMA’s Film Preservation Center.