Episode 2-“Where the River Flows”

Appendix 1- Historical Background Reading on the IWW

Background Reading:

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary industrial union organized in Chicago in 1905. The aim of the IWW was to unite into one big union (OBU) all skilled and unskilled workers, regardless of sex and race, for the purpose of replacing capitalism and rebuilding society on a cooperative socialist basis. The methods were: direct action, workers control, education, the boycott, strike and the General Strike. By 1910, the IWW was a major force in the labour movement especially in the Pacific Northwest. Members were called, among other nicknames, Wobblies. Prior to the IWW, union organizing was dominated by all white craft unions that ignored workers that did not have a highly skilled trade. These early craft unions often organized against Asian workers. The Wobblies organized all workers: immigrants, loggers, city labourers, miners, longshoremen, railway, construction, Black, First Nations, and Asian workers. The capitalist class viewed the IWW as a major threat to their power and launched a campaign to ‘silence’ the IWW. Wobblies were jailed, beaten, blacklisted, deported and murdered. The Wobblies were active in a variety of social justice causes from free speech fights, anti-war activities, to improving the economic conditions for all workers. IWW influence and membership grew rapidly between 1906-1914. Their slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all,” inspired workers to join this new labour movement in the hope of improving social and economic conditions. It was going to take a major international crisis to silence the IWW. The crisis came in 1914(in the USA 1917) with the outbreak of World War One. The war divided the labour movement, some workers supported the war, and others like the IWW denounced the war as a clash between the ruling classes of the capitalist/imperialist powers. The IWW urged workers to resist and not allow themselves to be used as pawns for the profits of the capitalist class. Needless to say, the capitalist class was not divided and looked forward to the enormous profits to be made through war production. The jingoism that surrounded the war allowed the government to repress the labour and the anti war movements. The IWW, and other socialist organizations were banned and their property confiscated. Peace activists, socialists, and the Wobblies were arrested, and many were deported. The IWW, never fully recovered from this repression. In the USA, not only was World War One a major blow to the IWW, it was also the end of a viable socialist alternative to the American two party capitalist system. Nevertheless, the IWW continued and has been an inspiration to the labour movement , especially in their democratic values, direct action, militancy, and songs that are still sung today.