



WRITE FOR THE INDUSTRIAL WORKER!

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-FW Hannah, IW Editor
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ILLUSTRATION BY FITZ

THE INVISIBLE HAND OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE MYTH OF SPONTANEITY

March 6, 2024 | Jean-Carl Elliott

There was a recent walkout at the restaurant where I work. I was off that day and got a text message from my coworker: “Holy shit! I was in the back cleaning when everyone just walked out an hour before closing time!”

Damn, what happened?!” I asked. “I don’t know,” she replied. “Everything seemed normal, but all of a sudden they just all clocked out and left.”

I picked up my phone and started

contacting everyone who was on shift that night.¹ We work at a small restaurant, so it didn’t take too long to make the rounds. Things at work had been really tense as they were, but on that particular night everyone got particularly pissed off at the way they were being treated by the boss, and decided enough was enough. It wasn’t a strike, they didn’t quit, but they did walk off the job for the night without notice or permission. It was more of a “collective f*ck you” as one coworker put it.

Small actions like this can seem spontaneous and unprompted to a casual observer, but I've been working at this place on and off for ten years now and I can tell you this was anything but that. In fact, concerted activity is a pretty regular part of everyday work life if we can train ourselves to be on the lookout for it.² A small walkout like this one is a more obvious example, but working class self-activity manifests itself across pretty much every workplace out there.

What is a Union?

Simply put, unions are groups of workers who come together to advance their interests on the job. They address workers' grievances, practice certain forms of democracy, and seek to reshape the workplace into something better for their members.

This can take place in all sorts of formations,³ but the federal government has a pretty narrow model that they sanction through certified union elections, certified bargaining units and collective bargaining through contract negotiations. The state provides certain legal protections to workers for this particular model of unionism as a carrot and they provide certain protections for employers (and prohibitions against workers) as the stick. At the heyday of this model, union density peaked around 30 percent and today that number sits below 10 percent. Many labor liberals will cite these numbers as evidence that the labor conservatism of the AFL-CIO has better captured the hearts and minds of workers than the IWW's model of solidarity unionism. But I think that's nonsense and I'll go on to say why.

HOW DO WORKERS SELF-ORGANIZE?

Let's contrast this with another model of organization: the informal work group. Employers don't like this model of organization and so therefore it only follows that the federal government doesn't either. That's because it's a truly autonomous model of organization which forms itself independent of sanctioning from both the employing class and the government. And because of this, the government has no way of tracking its density. But I would be willing to

bet my bottom dollar that they exist at 100 percent of workplaces (or at least somewhere very close to that number).

Informal work groups have many of the same attributes as those of labor unions. Their members meet up at work and outside of work to discuss workplace issues. You might find a group of workers smoking together in the parking lot, rolling silverware together, doing prep at the same station, and going to the same bars after work. And in many cases, they are talking about work, their issues with the workplace, coworkers, managers and owners, and sometimes plotting to change the shit they don't like. What may look like a small work clique sharing some beers after work can often serve the double role of an informal grievance meeting.

THE MYTH OF SPONTANEITY

This walkout at my job was anything but spontaneous. The workers who walked off that night have all been working there for several years. They carpool together, make food for each other at work, chit chat when business is slow, and text about work when they are off the job. This informal work group shares many of the attributes mentioned above. One member of this group was an employee of the company when we had an active IWW committee a few years back⁴. He spoke at a march on the boss in which we won back his stolen overtime wages.⁵ Another worker in this group would decide that she didn't want to mop at the end of the night, so she'd go to other workers and say "I'm not mopping tonight and neither are you." In other words, she had organized several low-key work refusals.

Informal work groups take all sorts of small steps to reimagine and reorganize the workplace.⁶ The workplace is already organized by the boss in order to create maximum efficiency, productivity and profit by dividing us into shifts, departments and stations in which we are only supposed to communicate and coordinate with other workers for the purpose of completing the tasks relevant to our jobs. So when workers start communicating outside of these formal arrangements, either at work or outside of work, we are undermining the boss'

defendant Merrill Rogers leapt up to salute the flag. Young found the prosecutor's antics ridiculous saying he "held up the offending cartoons with a gesture of horror as if he were displaying the pistol with which Booth shot Abraham Lincoln." In fact, Young thought so little of the trial that he actually napped throughout. *The Liberator*, a successor to the late *Masses*, ran a self portrait of Young during the trial.⁷ He was fast asleep; the caption read "Art Young: On Trial For His Life."

The jury was unable to reach a verdict. Young's autobiography claims there were two votes against conviction while other sources say there was only one holdout or as many as three. Undeterred, prosecutors proceeded with a new trial. In September, Young, Eastman, et al. appeared in court, this time joined by John Reed, freshly returned from the Soviet Union.

Young showed as much respect for this trial as he did for the previous one. The prosecutor brought up a soldier killed in battle and argued, "He not only died for his country, but he died for Max Eastman, he died for Floyd Dell, he died for John Reed, he died for Merrill Rogers." In mock offense, Young stage-whispered to Reed: "Who was this hero who didn't die for *me*?" As a recess was called, Reed told Young "Cheer up, Art, Jesus died for you." In another episode, the prosecutor asked him if he believed in the class struggle. "If you've got the measles, Mr. Barnes," Young replied, "it doesn't necessarily mean that you believe in them."

Max Eastman took the trial much more seriously. His closing argument was an eloquent defense of socialism and free speech. He declared "I am not afraid to spend the better part of my life in a penitentiary, if my principles have brought me to it." Fortunately for him, his principles didn't require it. Once again, the trial ended in a hung jury. This time, eight jurors were for acquittal, with only four wanting to convict. Recognizing the folly of trying the socialists again, prosecutors threw in the towel.

Art Young continued with his cartooning

after escaping the clutches of Uncle Sam. His cartoons were seen in the *Liberator*, *the New Masses*, *the Nation*, *the New Yorker*, and more until his death in 1943. Although he never carried a red card, Young provided numerous cartoons

for I.W.W. publications like *Solidarity* and *the Industrial Worker*. Unquestionably, his magnum opus was, and remains, *Art Young's Inferno*,⁹ his satirical look at Hell after the capitalists have taken over. Even eternal damnation is no escape from the profit motive. If you want a good one-book collection of Young's cartoons, Fantagraphics' *To Laugh That We May Not Weep: The Times & Life of Art Young* is a fine choice. Many of the cartoons, dealing with war, poverty,

exploitation, even child labor, remain sadly relevant. Fortunately, we have Young's cartoons to help us find humor as we battle these social evils. We'll need it.



ART YOUNG, "ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE," *THE LIBERATOR*. JUNE 4TH, 1918

NOTES

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- 8) *Max Eastman's Address to the Jury in the Second Masses Trial*. (n.d.). *The Liberator*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/culture/pubs/liberator/pamphlets/Eastmans-adr-2-jury-masses%20trial-1918.pdf>
- 9) *Art Young's Inferno*. (1934). Delphic Studios. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/cartoons-drawings/young/Art-Youngs-Inferno_1934.pdf



Poisoned At The Source

ART YOUNG, *THE MASSES*, 26TH JULY 1913

records. *The Masses* claimed the AP dropped the suit because the records would be damaging to their reputation. Years later, famed muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair substantiated those charges in his book *The Brass Check*.⁴ Looking back at the incident in his 1939 memoir *Art Young, His Life and Times*,⁵ Young remarked “the AP was in the position of the hunter who had a bear by the tail and didn’t know how to let go of it.”

After Congress’s declaration of war, the federal government launched a two-pronged effort to build up support for the effort. Howard Zinn in *A People’s History of the United States* wrote that “George Creel, a veteran newspaperman, became the government’s official propagandist for the war; he set up a Committee on Public Information to persuade Americans the war was right. It sponsored 75,000 speakers, who gave 750,000 four-minute speeches in five thousand American cities and towns.” Creel’s propaganda offensive was the first prong. The second was the use of the Sedition and Espionage Acts to repress anti-war activists. *The Masses* was a victim of this repression. After Max Eastman published an editorial in the July 1917 issue asking “For what specific purposes are you shipping our bodies, and the bodies of our sons, to Europe?”⁶ For my part, I do not recognize the right of a government to draft me to a war whose purposes I do not believe in,” *the Masses* was banned from the mail, along with other socialist publications, and quickly went under. Worse came soon after.

After being indicted in 1917, in April, 1918, Art Young again stood trial with fellow contributors to *the Masses* Floyd Dell, Max

Eastman, and others. The charges under the Espionage Act were “conspiracy to obstruct the recruiting and enlistment service of the U.S” and publishing “seditious articles, cartoons, and poems.” Which cartoon was so horrible as to charge Young under these laws? “Having Their Fling,” showing an editor, a capitalist, a politician, and a minister dancing to a tune conducted by Satan. Young claimed that this was an attempt to illustrate General Sherman’s famous dictum “War is Hell.”

The trial was the site of several bizarre incidents. A patriotic band set up outside the courthouse in order to sell Liberty Bonds. Every time they played “the Star Spangled Banner”



ART YOUNG, “HAVING THEIR FLING,” *THE MASSES*, SEPTEMBER 1917

organization and creating our own. As we become more comfortable communicating on our own terms, we start to break more molds by setting the pace of work on our own terms and even deciding which rules we will and will not follow.

These not-so-spontaneous actions happen at larger scales as well. A few years back, there was a walkout across three restaurants in the surrounding area. These restaurants were part of a mini-empire in which the managing partner had a reputation for sexually harassing women who bartended for the company. The workers organized a collective response,⁷ demanding that he be fired from the company. The restaurants had no choice but to shut down until the issue was resolved, which included capitulating to this demand.⁸ This again may have seemed like a spontaneous action, but the local restaurant scene is pretty tight-knit and the workers who participated in the actions had much stronger bonds than simply being coworkers. Perhaps this action wasn’t part of a longer-term strategy, but it was able to be pulled off successfully due to the muscle memory that exists from workers forming bonds with each other, discussing issues at work and sharing ideas about how to change their conditions.

IS AN INFORMAL WORK GROUP THE SAME THING AS SOLIDARITY UNIONISM?

No. As IWW members, we want to build a labor movement that has the power to overthrow capitalism and abolish the wage system. Informal work groups show us that workers of all stripes are willing to organize on the job to reshape the workplace in their favor without the intervention of government technocrats, but they are limited by a lack of long-term vision and strategy. It is our duty as solidarity unionists to build a more structured model on the job and throughout our industries which can learn from the lessons of the past and build our capacity to take on bigger demands and targets.

HOW IS SOLIDARITY UNIONISM DIFFERENT?

Similar to an informal work group, Solidarity Unionism operates independently of the state,

but it has structure and vision: the structure is composed of committees and branches and the vision is to build towards the overthrow of capitalism. A committee is made up of IWW members who have signed red cards, pay dues, and who have demonstrated their commitment to the union by taking on organizing tasks and delivering on them. Committees practice democratic decision making, they collect dues and self-manage their collective resources, and they plan collective actions to build power on the job and to win concessions from the boss. Rather than receiving recognition from the employer, they receive recognition from the IWW by certifying as a job branch. As job branches form within a particular industry, they may eventually form an industrial union branch, manage resources at a broader level, and coordinate larger actions.

When people say “unionize” in mainstream discourse, they are often referring to a process by which worker self-activity is supplanted by courts, union bureaucracy and government intervention. As syndicalists we believe that worker self-activity must be the driving force behind a revolutionary movement. So we aren’t looking to replace the autonomy and worker-driven parts of informal work groups, only to give them more form, structure and long term vision. By giving the reins to the aforementioned third-parties, workers lose the muscle memory of class struggle, collective resource management and strategic planning and thus go backwards in their revolutionary development. Through solidarity unionism, we are developing these skills and experiences amongst rank and file workers, who will then take that knowledge and experience to future workplaces and industries.

Solidarity unions also prefigure the economy after capitalism, or “build the new world in the shell of the old.” We aren’t waiting until the revolution to build a cooperative economy. We are building towards it in the process of organizing. The economy is currently organized by the employing class, but as we build our own networks on the job and across our industries, we are undermining the boss’ organization and building one that serves our interests. As we make collective decisions in our

committees and in our branches, we are teaching ourselves how to practice direct democracy. As we collect dues and budget our resources, we are learning how to practice self-managed economics. And as we plan each small scale action on the job and across our industries, we are building up the muscle memory to execute larger actions with larger groups of workers with the goal of executing general strikes that will topple the capitalist system.



WHY WE NEED A DEMOCRATIC AND MILITANT UNION

February 6, 2024 | by Igor Anez

NOTES

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BRUSSELS, BE — Defending worker-led, democratic, and militant unionism in Belgium is certainly no easy task in a labor union landscape dominated by two bureaucratic behemoths, the socialist FGTB and the Christian-Democrat CSC.

For several decades, radical unionists have been trying to change traditional unions from within, or developing para-union initiatives to “pull them to the left.” However, these strategies have proved incapable of reversing the pacification of traditional unions trapped in a corporatist, service-oriented spiral.

However, in a climate of neo-liberal assault on social benefits won by previous generations and increasingly precarious working conditions, the working class needs a democratic and militant unionism able to win immediate victories more than ever, without abandoning the aim of radically transforming society.

ANTI-DEMOCRATIC UNION LEADERSHIP

Certainly, unions are still the main (if not the only) mass working-class organizations in Belgium. Despite good access to services (unemployment, legal support, etc.), many workers turn to unions to defend their rights. For many of us, unions provide opportunities to build solidarity among the exploited and to be stronger against the class violence we suffer on a daily basis.

This fact should not, however, lead us to romanticize traditional unions by convincing ourselves that it is the rank-and-file workers who run them. On the contrary, anyone who has been a union member (in the FGTB or the CSC) has witnessed how traditional unions are entirely dominated by a bureaucratic class



ART YOUNG, *THE MASSES*, DECEMBER 1915

ART YOUNG'S DANGEROUS CARTOONS

June 6, 2024 | by Hank Kennedy

After President Woodrow “He Kept Us Out of the War” Wilson, recently the subject of a fawning piece in the *Atlantic* by David Frum,¹ brought the U.S. into World War I, dissenters became targets. The passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts gave prosecutors broad powers to charge anyone opposed to the war. Socialist Party Presidential candidate Eugene Debs was memorably sent to prison for a speech he gave in Canton,² Ohio opposing the war. Another target was socialist cartoonist Art Young.

Art Young, born in 1866, traveled a long and winding road to socialism and anarchism. At first, he was a mainstream Republican and his cartoons reflected that viewpoint for newspapers like the *New York Evening Journal* and the *New York American*. Hearing a speech by Debs jarred Young from his complacency. He wrote in his memoirs that speeches for socialism helped him realize he “was living in a world morally and spiritually diseased, and [he] was learning some of the reasons why.” In 1910 Young joined the Socialist Party of America and

in 1911 he began contributing illustrations to the socialist magazine, *the Masses*. Yet he was no party sectarian. Although he never carried a red card, Young also provided numerous cartoons for IWW publications like *Solidarity* and *Industrial Worker*.

Even before World War I, Young's cartoons landed him in court. Young's first round of legal trouble was due to an unlikely adversary: *the Associated Press*. Today the AP wire service is considered an exemplary source of unbiased, factual journalism. Their current slogan on their website is even “Advancing the Power of Facts,” furthering that reputation. But during a particularly bloody period in America's class struggle, they suppressed inconvenient truths and contributed to what we would now call “fake news.”

In April 1912, coal miners organized with the United Mine Workers went on strike in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The workers demanded union recognition and an end to both company stores and the blacklisting of union members. The strike was bloody. At least fifty miners were killed; dozens were arrested. The violence was so great that the governor declared martial law in an attempt to impose order.

The Masses ran a cartoon by Young addressing the strike showing the president of the Associated Press slipping poison into a well labeled “the News.”³ *Masses* editor Max Eastman accompanied the cartoon with an editorial labeling the AP “The Worst Monopoly” and accusing the AP of preventing the truth of strike from being known. Eastman wrote “For some secret reason West Virginia has hardly leaked a drop of news for the past sixth months. And that secret reason is the Associated Press.” Eastman revealed that AP's representative in West Virginia (Cal Young) served on the military tribunal trying strikers, showing a clear conflict of interest. Eastman concluded “It shows the one thing which all tribes and nations have held sacred—the body of the Truth—is for sale to organized capital in the United States.”

Understandably, AP was unhappy with Young's drawing and Eastman's editorial and filed two counts of criminal libel against them. These lawsuits were dismissed though, when Eastman and Young subpoenaed AP for their

to know people one at a time, until you have built a strong social structure in the workplace and made friends. Having an ally is one of the best things you can do.

“I’m reliant on my boss” e.g. as an intern, a student, or employed by relatives.

Make damn sure you have a union rep on call, or ideally, one in the workplace to protect you from retaliation. ‘Dig in’ by collecting massive amounts of evidence of health and safety and discrimination in the workplace. If you get fired, you can use this as a threat to keep your job, especially in a precarious or high-turnover workplace. Vulnerable workers often fight back harder. If you’re an African worker in the UK, get in touch with the Pan African Workers Association for help and advice as well as the IWW.

“My shifts are very long and I don’t have much energy left, or I am working multiple jobs, I am disabled.”

Try to do as much union work as you can “on the clock” rather than at home. Make sure to do it privately, of course, and do not let your boss get any of your notebooks, but if you can use that dead time for something you might as well. Be smart about how you use your energy. Take care of yourself first, and slowly make progress on organizing. Remember, no one person should be the leader of a union – it MUST be democratic and decentralized. If you are doing all the work, then it’s not a union, it is just you. Delegate some of that workload.

SUGGESTED READING

Beyond Fk You (1) & (2)**

by Colt Thundercat

Articles on how to confront and gradually organize with homophobic coworkers.

1) <https://libcom.org/article/beyond-fck-you-organizers-approach-confronting-hateful-language-work>

2) <https://libcom.org/article/beyond-fck-you-2-workplace-organizing-against-oppressive-language-and-behavior>

The Stopwatch And The Wooden Shoe

by Mike Davis

An article about the invention of ‘scientific management’ and how the bosses intentionally designed workplaces to break your spirit in this way.

<https://libcom.org/article/stopwatch-and-wooden-shoe-scientific-management-and-industrial-workers-world>

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<https://iww.org.uk/>



whose salaries and working conditions disconnect it from the workers it pretends to defend.

This bureaucratic class functions through reproduction (career officials recruiting other officials to take up positions within the structure) and cooptation (union committees, mandates, etc.).

The democracy on display is in fact a sham. The overwhelming majority of decisions are taken without ever being put to the vote of union members, and most of the time without even “consulting the rank-and-file.” As for the committees that bring representatives together, their purpose is generally to ratify decisions already made at the very top. In reality, the mandates of union leaders are neither limited by time, nor subject to any democratic control. As a result, most union leaders behave like tyrants with total power over “their” officers and “their” delegates. They call the shots in “their” union, not hesitating to use the worst management methods when it comes to suppressing internal dissent.

BETWEEN CHANGE FROM WITHIN AND PARA-UNIONISM

Although it may seem shocking, this fact is well known. Most radical unionists are aware of it and try to work around the authoritarian nature of traditional unions. They try to animate the few union spaces abandoned by the bureaucracy, exploit internal opposition or develop alliances with “left-wing bureaucrats.”

One of the classic examples of these alliances between radical unionists and left-wing bureaucrats is what we might call “para-union” initiatives. The idea is always the same: To evade the bureaucracy’s control over the workers’ struggle and give it a more militant character. They’ll create “committees, platforms, and/or alliances” to mobilize against anti-social-welfare measures alongside sectoral or company battles. Often bolstered by political activists, the aim is to build up pressure on union leaders in order to pull them to the left. However, in reality, none of these initiatives succeed in achieving this objective. There are many reasons for this, but at least three are worth mentioning.

On the one hand, these initiatives generally

fail to attract rank-and-file workers, and therefore struggle to bring people together beyond militant networks. They often boil down to activism (external and abstract actions) or broad mobilizations (aimed at getting people out on the streets), without involving a process of collective organization in relation to a problem that affects our material conditions.

On the other hand, they generally have no influence on the strategies (whether based on mobilization or advocacy) put in place by union management. Their existence depends on the union leadership’s plans and will to act. As a result, they disappear as soon as the leaders blow the whistle on mobilization.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these initiatives serve primarily as a stopgap measure. Their aim is to mobilize workers in the heat of the moment, except that these workers are dispossessed of their struggles for the rest of the time, and are therefore not trained to manage their own struggles directly, due to a lack of empowering union practices.

The only ones who stand to gain from this are left-wing bureaucrats, who gain individual legitimacy and a reputation as “good staffers.” Regardless if, at the same time, the whole bureaucracy is strengthened, since it leads to placing one’s hopes in supposedly better bureaucrats.

CO-MANAGEMENT OR DIRECT ACTION?

As we’ve said, traditional unions are entirely dominated by a bureaucratic class that ultimately defends its own interests.

Unions as we know them today are the result of a long social history in Belgium. The creation of social security in 1944 and the practice of social advocacy led to the institutionalization of unions (which are, for example, responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits). At the helm is a ruling class whose historic function is the co-management of capitalism. This explains the collusion between the labor-union apparatuses and “sister” political parties, whether socialist or Christian-Democrat.

This vision of a co-management (or even service) unionism is now dominant within the

union bureaucracy. All union activities are geared towards the appeasement of labor at every level: from the company, to the industrial, to the national. A tendency for union leadership to call for a “general strike” should not be seen as a break with the co-management credo, but rather as continuity. Strikes, mobilizations, days of action, etc. are essentially aimed at strengthening the position of the bureaucrats at the bargaining table with employers or the government.

This means that most of the time, union action bypasses the workers, since it is set according to an agenda that serves the plans of the union leadership. These same leaders set the union's priorities, rarely the workers themselves. The leadership does not hesitate to go against workers' demands, or even to manipulate their collective strength in order to strengthen its own power.

This situation is obviously causing discontent among workers, and particularly among the most militant unionists, who are constantly waiting for action plans that never come. It's also causing more and more disinterest among the rank and file, who no longer understand leadership action or remember the many betrayals of the past (such as the December 2014 general strike).

It also means that all union activities are geared towards the goal of labor peace. This is the purpose for which workers are recruited as representatives. All the potential of workers, all our collective strength as a class, is therefore directed towards coordination and bargaining. Our power is delegated to joint committees, permanent officers and union leaders, and even to political parties. Collective action by workers is always seen as secondary, or as an extra to coordination.

The logical consequence of this co-management credo is that members are no longer trained to practice union democracy and collective direct action. How do you set up a workplace committee? How do you get your colleagues involved? How do you take direct action to improve working conditions when dealing with your boss? In traditional trade unions, we no longer learn how to trade unionize, but how to “get things done for

employees through social bargaining.” In most cases, union training is limited to the functioning of coordination committees. Union democracy is limited to consulting or informing workers, never to collectively building mandates or organizing democratic committees. This horizontal approach to trade unionism obviously contradicts the bureaucracy's authoritarian approach and its claim to take the place of workers in their struggles.

SEARCHING FOR THE TRADE UNION LEFT

This does not mean, however, that the bureaucracy is a homogeneous class. Power battles are played out within it, and can sometimes be extremely violent. Between reds (socialists) and greens (Christian-Democrats), between Flemish (north) and French-speaking (south) bureaucracies, and between socialists and the new left. But these internal struggles are generally fights between interests that have little to do with union principles.

In fact, the opposition between a co-management wing and a “class struggle” wing is now an old memory. It has to be said that the trade union apparatuses have gradually purged the most democratic and combative components.

Of course, there are still many militant unionists, but they are often atomized, lacking any common strategy, and their vision of unionism is tarnished by the co-management model instilled by the Apparatus.

Why does the trade union left struggle to exist? Once again, there are many reasons, but let us try to explain three of them.

Firstly, because part of the left-wing protest movement is now being absorbed by the Belgian Workers' Party (new Left). It's no secret that the BWP's influence is growing within the union ranks. More and more workers see it as a credible electoral alternative to the Socialist Party's betrayals. On the other hand, the BWP has long been engaged in a “long march” within the union bureaucracy. This strategy of seizing power is gradually beginning to bear fruit, and the BWP now has a growing number of “fellow travelers” within the various layers of the bureaucracy (though not yet a majority). Even if

organizing – as long as you do not use too many anarchist buzzwords! Organizing with these people may encourage you to form close relationships in order to slowly challenge their preconceptions rather than outright dismiss them due to them. When the campaign gets going, you may find yourself significantly improving people's opinion on collective action. The Daily Mail isn't going to show up and debate you, so if you have several people on board, you can often get past propaganda. Check the Suggested Reading at the end for some good articles on how to do this by Fellow Worker Colt Thundercat from the USA.

“My workplace has a very high turnover. People do not stay long enough to organize.”

Often high turnover can be a result of a feeling of disempowerment, a primarily younger workforce or a workplace which simply chews people up and spits them out. If you want to avoid setbacks to an organizing campaign, really hammer into organizers and other workers to dig their heels into the workplace. High turnover means a loss of continuity and history in the workplace, so workers who have stayed in the same one for some time (or in the case of temporary workplaces such as festival jobs, worked for the company multiple times) have a large advantage to organizing: They are the ones who can train other workers and tell them how things used to be better. High turnover also facilitates dirty tactics. If you are always on the razor's edge, well, any action is as dangerous as any other, so you might as well not pull punches.

“My workplace has many immigrant workers. There are language barriers and the boss may pull visas.”

Workers are made of clay, not glass, and assuming that immigrant workers will not organize because they may get their visa pulled is a fallacy. Time and time again, we've seen that vulnerable people like these are often the most willing to organize, because their visa could be pulled for any reason anyway. An example of this is the Pan-African Workers Association in the care industry, who organize African immigrant workers. They will often use a good union rep is

necessary in these cases, as someone with a good handle on the law can help spot modern slavery and discrimination cases that can be used to threaten the boss. Immigrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation, and should always be reached out to early in an organizing campaign to ensure their grievances are heard.

It is important to bridge language barriers when they happen, because they prevent the union from becoming democratic. If there are no bilingual workers in a workplace who can communicate between different cadres of workers, you may have to learn or reach out to the wider union to try to ‘salt’ the workplace with a member who speaks both languages. One benefit of this is that you may find you have a ‘secret language.’ If the managers do not speak the same language as many staff, you can organize in plain sight without them knowing!

“We are working in a separate location to my Fellow Workers. It's hard to even meet them.”

Are you sure that they aren't already meeting? Distant workers such as couriers, truckers and remote TEFL teachers very often set up self-organized and non-company-approved forms of communication outwith the boss' control, as a practical necessity of the job. These can be a good way to get in contact outside of the workplace. You can also do some sleuthing to find folks contact details or get a chance to chat in private. If you never meet them, keep an eye out for forums, chat rooms or mailing lists online where workers may chat. You may even think about starting your own: A ‘Deliveroo Drivers Edinburgh’ Facebook group or subreddit may attract some of your colleagues and give you a chance to privately talk to them.

“My co-workers don't like me.”

Getting your co-workers to like you may be tough, especially if you are marginalized. Some tips are to make sure to arrive on time and help out when they need it, proactively ask questions and get to know them, listen to their problems. You know, friendship. Try to make at least ONE friend in the workplace and get them on board in the organizing campaign – once there is two of you, you can co-ordinate to work on getting

It reminds me of my own history of depression. When I was depressed, friends would offer me advice and I found that I would systematically conjure reasons why the advice would not work as a kind of self-harming learned helplessness.

One technique I have used in an attempt to overcome this is to re-frame a workplace's idiosyncrasies as factors that could also help a campaign. Recently, I was talking to an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) who was bemoaning the conditions at work. They brought up, almost word for word, both of the lines of reasoning above. This worker's assessment was that staff at their workplace were either upstart university graduates eager to move on and start a career and only likely to stay for enough experience to go into the private health services, or older and more seasoned EMTs who fundamentally didn't want to shake the boat.

*Organizing in this workplace was
"uniquely impossible!"*

My response to this was to try to show the ways that these two groups in fact complimented one another and both could be good organizers. Medical graduates may have contacts in local activist scenes. They may be interested in creating a career for themselves and have a fire and energy that older staff may need more effort to ignite. Conversely, the more experienced staff have a very good reason to want to improve the workplace and have a continuity and history that makes them extremely suited for training new members. Plus, they remember 'before it became shit.'

This form of re-framing is quite similar to psychological techniques for dealing with depression and other forms of disordered thinking. That is no coincidence! The workplace, via its structures and bosses, **intentionally seeks to instill compliance via a sense of fear and an illusion of powerlessness.** It is structured like a dictatorial hierarchy where the boss has an enormous control over your life and exerts that control via your direct manager. You are always watched via CCTV. Your efficiency is monitored via performance goals. You are timed by a punch clock. You are constantly surrounded by the workplace's marketing and brand. You

may wear a uniform.

All of this instills a sense that the company has power and that you do not. Other workplaces are more distant, and this form of psychological propaganda does not register as much when you are not spending a large portion of your waking life under someone's command in that place. So when another workplace organizes, it may be quite easy to write it off as a situation where they obviously had it much easier than you. They did not have to deal with the same unique challenges that you would have to if you tried to start a union. This emotional distance mystifies other workplaces and creates the impression that union campaigns or organizers are 'special.' It is not something anyone can do. Or, it is something that can only be done in a mythologized 'easy' workplace or perfect circumstance.

To overcome this terror, we have to compare the material reality of the workplace with our ideas about it and confront the way it has trained us to perceive it differently. Perhaps this can be done with conversations with an external friend as above, or a discussion with another worker in the workplace. Perhaps it can be done on your own. This re-framing does not necessarily mean turning negatives into positives, but rather, thinking about how a workplace's unique traits change how you can operate. What methods will be effective, and what might not be. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' to a union campaign.

Either way, though, every workplace will have its challenges. Those will be unlike those of other workplaces. That is not something to be afraid of; it just forces you to be inventive.

EXAMPLES

Below is a list of some clichéd reasons why workplaces are 'uniquely bad'. They do not represent any specific workplaces, but they serve as examples of how organizing tactics may change depending on the material conditions of the place.

**"My coworkers are conservative
and will not want to organize."**

Often, even people who identify as conservative politically can and will still be interested in

this growing influence of the BWP goes some way to reviving "class struggle" internally, it actually weakens a potential trade union left. Firstly, because it diverts the most militant elements towards political action rather than union action. Secondly, because the BWP's aim is to essentially replace the Socialist Party, they have absolutely no intention of democratizing trade union organizations.

Secondly, because the trade union left remains deeply convinced that the battle must be waged within the traditional trade unions, in order to democratize them and make them more militant. Yet, for at least 20 years, this strategy has been incapable of transforming traditional trade union organizations. It has in no way led to the organization and structuring of a trade union left (on the contrary, it is in the process of disappearing), and has done even less to give impetus to a democratic dynamic among workers. In spite of this, the trade-union left dismisses out of hand the possibility of building an alternative, that of a self-organized, direct-action trade-union organization.

Finally, let us not forget that traditional union organizations are not democracies. The apparatus takes it upon itself to repress any internal dissent eventually when it fails to control it. How many combative comrades have we seen banned from the union, deprived of their mandates, or even expelled individually or collectively? Should we recall the hostility of some union leaders when workers dare to organize without waiting for their approval? Today, some comrades might believe that their strategy of taking control of the apparatus is working, but past experiences proves that, at the very least, they will either be swallowed up by the structure, or spat out like pariahs.

DON'T MOURN, ORGANIZE!

Transformation of bureaucratic, management friendly unions from within has proved a failed strategy. Likewise, it is illusory to hope for a so-called split in the traditional unions that is supposed to lead to union revival (it is hard to say on what basis this will take place). In reality, democratic and militant trade unionism will only happen if we put it into practice now, by organizing with our colleagues,

in our workplaces, in our sectors and across sectors. It will only exist if we develop an experience of union democracy that can only grow with time. It will only exist if we train ourselves in direct action to become aware of our collective strength and win victories. Finally, it will only exist if it takes the form of a strong, long-lasting and experienced organizing campaign.

Advocating direct-action unionism in no way means adopting fantastical or radical leftist stances. The organizing methods promoted by the IWW are in fact very concrete and pragmatic. They push us to organize from our workplaces, to use an educational approach to discuss the struggles with our colleagues, and move away from a model based on representation and top-down campaigns.

Nor does it mean condemning ourselves to marginality. The trade unionism promoted by the IWW emphasizes relations between colleagues as the driving force behind union action, and the solidarity we need to build in our workplace and within our class. Every IWW member is trained to become an organizer and to encourage collective action among workers. Traditional trade unions may have large numbers of members, but all the collective strength and capacity for action of workers is annihilated by a bureaucratic class.

Far from claiming any specific ideological influence, the IWW defends the principles of union independence and the dual purpose of improving today's working conditions and paving the way for tomorrow's emancipation. These principles serve as a compass for militant unionists, and can only be achieved within a democratically-built union.

Our class needs a democratic and militant unionism. Not "later" or "in a few years," but right now. And because we're in a hurry, let's build it slowly... but surely!

This article was originally published on IWW Brussels' website and has been translated into English and published here with permission.





OT101: TWO DAYS IN THE IWW CENTRIFUGE

May 10, 2023 | by X423828

I took the IWW's Organizer Training 101: Build the Committee course in January when the opportunity to take it in person at my local GMB presented itself. I wasn't sure what to expect, but had a vague sense of wanting to "do more" or at least learn more when it came to labor organizing and aligning myself with the values and operations of my fellow workers, not just at the IWW but in society in general. This has been a larger pursuit for me for the last decade or so, and I find myself, increasingly so the older I get, constantly searching for lenses through which to focus this desire to help things get better. When I joined the IWW I was hoping I was signing on to a cause that could take this impulse to the next level, so naturally Organizer Training seemed like a foundational building block.

I'm not exactly sure that I'm the ideal candidate for Organizer Training. I am self-employed, a contractor who works from home and never sees fellow workers, someone who files his 1040-SR every three months (uh, roughly) and can't take sick days, has no health care, and enjoys zero job protection and exists

entirely at the whim of some faceless middle manager in accounting. Well, wait, maybe I am the ideal candidate for Organizer Training. I may not be able to directly affect my own work environment, but I can certainly help others articulate and define their own needs and concerns, and learn to advocate for them effectively even if I'm not actively changing my own material conditions. And that was the attitude I took with me to Detroit's Rhizome House in January.

I have spent a lifetime enduring forced retreats and dry, corporate "learning sessions" or "retreats" where the primary lessons learned



"UNIQUELY BAD"- A KIND OF DISORDERED THINKING THAT EVERY ORGANIZER WILL ENCOUNTER

February 22, 2024 | by Matilda Dow

Every workplace is different, but that does not mean you cannot form a union there. Fellow Worker Matilda explains that many of us avoid organizing in our workplaces by rationalizing that our workplace is "uniquely bad" to organize in. But this is a product of fear and helplessness. When we recognize this and get support from other organizers, each of can break through the wall, no matter where we work.

One of the things I have often contended with when reaching out to other members of the IWW, or other workers, friends or acquaintances to encourage workplace organizing is a sort of 'exceptionalism' for their own workplace.

"My workplace" people often say, "is uniquely impossible to organize." Folks will then point to several features of the workplace, such as conservative co-workers, temporary contracts, high turnover, or a 'lack of interest' from colleagues as evidence. These features, the logic goes, make this workplace fundamentally unlike any other more organizable workplace where there is the potential for a campaign.

"There is just no hope here!"

But of course anyone in any workplace can find reasons why their particular job is 'uniquely bad.' Sometimes, different people's reasons may contradict one another. For instance, in a conversation I had with two friends in different workplaces, one said:

"There's no hope in my place. Turnover is too high, and no one wants to stay on for a career."

However, another said:

"There's no place for a union in my workplace. Staff have been there for years and accept the status quo."

What would be the hypothetical ideal for these workers to organize? A workplace with turnover, but not too much turnover? Well, the fact is that there is no ideal workplace that does not have something making it "uniquely bad" because this is not a rational argument. It is a fear and trauma response. These workers are identifying unique challenges in their workplace, but this is paralyzing information as they already do not think that a union campaign is possible.



1923 IWW MEMBERS WITH ENRIQUE FLORES MAGON AND FAMILY IN CIUDAD JUAREZ, MEXICO

procedures up front. Many people may discover that they already are building relationships like these with coworkers and may be excited to hear that they're laying an important foundation for further organizing. Others may think that this approach doesn't really sound so intimidating after all.

The idea that organizing is all about relationships may seem obvious, but that doesn't change the fact that far too many organizers neglect this early on. Once you've built a social foundation like this it becomes so much easier to slide into organizing mode, like using AEIOU in 1-on-1 organizing conversations³ and moving towards direct action to solve workplace problems, when the situation arises.

Photos courtesy of the IWW Preservation Project.

Roger Williams is an IWW member who writes about organizing at firewithfire.blog. This piece was originally published on firewithfire.blog on 8/28/2021 and has been reprinted here with permission from the author.

Editor's Note: We discussed in an organizer training previously on the subject of gathering contact info that many people will say "it's for a holiday card!" or something similar. Just make sure you actually follow through and send the holiday card if you do that. Many people love snail mail and getting a handwritten card can be a great way to connect with coworkers and build relationships!



NOTES

- 1) An Introduction to 1-on-1 Organizing Conversations. <https://firewithfire.blog/2020/04/19/an-introduction-to-1-on-1-organizing-conversations/>
- 2) How to socialize the workplace. <https://firewithfire.blog/2019/06/08/how-to-socialize-the-workplace/>
- 3) An Introduction to 1-on-1 Organizing Conversations. <https://firewithfire.blog/2020/04/19/an-introduction-to-1-on-1-organizing-conversations/>

involved crafting a plausible excuse for not attending; I have also been to weird raves in the desert involving flamethrowers and a head full of peyote. I wasn't sure which way this one was going to lean but I was hoping I wouldn't have to inveigle a revolt this early in my IWW tenure.

Thankfully the Fellow Workers from Detroit were competent, professional and dedicated to keeping the operation on rails. Right from the start I sensed that these marathon sessions, 14 hours over two days, were going to zoom by. Starting with the basic assumption that "You are a worker, and as a worker you are a person who deserves rights, and that begins with the right to organize," we plunged into the work of building a committee at your own workplace, starting with yourself and slowly expanding outward.

The trainers worked together nicely, building points off of each other respectfully, and always allowing comments or differing interpretations from attendees. Frankly it was a lot of information to get through, but at each stage where a new concept was introduced, we were broken into small groups (or more often simply



asked to turn to the person sitting next to us) and asked to roleplay the situation that had just been examined by the instructors. And from both sides of the conversation. So not only were we absorbing this information by actually acting it out, we were usually being tasked with seeing the opposite viewpoint, so we could empathize better with people who might not want to hear the message. Usually these roleplay sessions involved recruiting people at your workplace to discuss issues involving that office or shop without coming off as a heavy-handed labor goon, or just as importantly, without tipping off management that an attempt to organize was

underway and setting off their alarms too early in the process. We learned the delicacies of introducing what should be normal but still and too often in this country reads as "radical," this idea that all workers deserve protection and dignity, into a capitalist ecosystem that, as always, defines value purely on the basis of profits and ignores that profits are created by people.

Anyway, I now know that you can foment a workplace revolution in a Subway sandwich shop thanks to our trainers. I am fairly confident after this training that I could convince a crypto tech bro to demand better material conditions.

Continuing on from the one-on-one sessions, we later broke out into larger groups, including one where we staged a walkout on an unsuspecting boss who had just eliminated workplace breaks. That was wildly cathartic and I thank one trainer for allowing me to focus decades of suppressed boss rage on a fellow worker by proxy for a few minutes.

The team-building is real, by the way. Take OT101 and you'll swiftly reach a point where you're ready to fall on a grenade for these people you just met 27 hours ago. I would have walked past you on the street yesterday and today we're the crew of the "IWSS Intersectional, on a five-year mission to organize all the things." [That's a Star Trek reference – Ed.]

The pacing, again, was perfect, the segue from one section to the next presented in a logical, comprehensive way, and weirdly super orderly for prima facie anarchists. Like watching a fish walk, but maybe that's a skill we'll all need to teach ourselves to get through these strange times.

Thanks again to our Fellow Workers for guiding us through the basic building blocks of organizing principles, thanks to the FWs at Northeast Ohio IWW GMB for setting it up, and thanks to the workers that make up the IWW most of all.

This article was originally published on NE Ohio's website with permission from the author.

www.neoiww.org



A REALITY CHECK

August 16, 2023 | by X382292

I am a UPS Teamster and a Red Card Holder. I say this to let you know where I am coming from, though I do not speak on behalf of either union. The Teamsters have reached a Tentative Agreement with UPS, so a strike may not happen. Still, I have seen many people in IWW-affiliated spaces asking “what can we do to help the strike?” To speak bluntly: nothing. Nothing the IWW is currently capable of can make any meaningful difference if the IBT calls a strike at UPS. This is because the IWW does not have the power to make a difference on that scale. If you do not believe me, let me go through a few of the ways that you might think the IWW can help.

MONEY

Many members of the IWW look at what NARA or their branches have and say, “That’s so much money!” and for an individual, it is. My branch’s bank account currently has more than half the amount of money I earn in a year. However, that seems like a lot because I am looking at the scale of an individual.

In order to receive our strike benefits, UPS Teamsters need to show up for picket lines. Let’s assume that all of my IBT union siblings do so. There are 340,000 UPS Teamsters. At a minimum strike payment of \$200 per week, that would drain \$68,000,000 from the strike fund every week. My branch’s entire bank account would last about 4 minutes at that rate. The entire NARA budget and bank account would be

gone in less than 4 hours covering a strike at that scale.

PEOPLE

What about bringing people to the strike lines? Showing up is important because it helps keep up morale – the most important thing in a strike. However, let’s talk about my hub.

I am not sure about the number of shifts. However, I know that I would need to be at the hub 5 hours a day, and the expectation is that there would be 24-hour picketing. So let’s assume 5 shifts. If everyone shows up so they get their benefits, there would be more people on the strike line at any given time than there are in the largest IWW branch in the country (with some variation for Fridays and Saturdays). There are 34 times as many UPS Teamsters as there are members of the IWW. There are 120 times as many members of the IBT as there are members of the IWW.

EXPERTISE

A common refrain among left-aligned groups when looking at labor struggles is that they know how to make the struggle work better. As a leftist who has been a peripheral part of higher-profile labor struggles, the arrogance is infuriating.

Are there issues with business unions? Yes. I believe that solidarity unionism is a more effective model. However, at the moment of a strike, the success of the action relies on unity.

organizing because gradually growing the number of organizers at your job is crucial to having a sustainable and powerful presence that can change the balance of power between workers and bosses. But trying to be friends with everyone and trying to turn everyone into a committed organizer is not what organizing is about and I don’t aim for either of these things early on when getting to know coworkers.



1910 MEMBERS OF THE IWW IN MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Rather, organizing early on is mainly about relating to people as people and being able to trust each other, which are the important prerequisites from which all other good organizing things follow.

“NONE OF MY COWORKERS ARE RADICAL”

This is a frustrating realization to a lot of people, and understandably so. However, organizing is never just about finding the radical people and then doing radical stuff with them. Rather, organizing is about building relationships with people, finding out what you want your workplace to be like (including small and big changes), and figuring out what to do about it. Many, and sometimes most, “non-radical” people will find they want to make things better at work when you talk through it with them, let them draw their own conclusions about why there’s problems at work, and give them the chance to make things better. And that’s where organizing starts, just finding out what people want to change and how to do it together.

People have the opportunity to get radicalized *through* organizing when workplace dynamics are made clear in the context of a struggle between workers and bosses. Trying to

radicalize people first and then do organizing after will almost always fail because these processes need to be tied together.

Not everyone gets radicalized through organizing, but that’s not the worst thing either. Some people will get radicalized through action, and even those that don’t are still down to take action to win demands for workers, which materially is a more radical thing than some self-identified radicals are willing to do. As with any project, you work with what you’ve got and you build on it.

What this means for building relationships with your coworkers is that you shouldn’t just find the coworkers you agree with politically and have coffee with them while not making any effort to build relationships with people you don’t already agree with. This will lead you to be isolated from most of your coworkers. Instead, build with the coworkers you have because that’s where the potential for organizing lies.

“IT SOUNDS EXHAUSTING TO BE 1-ON-1ING EVERYONE ALL THE TIME.”

Yes and no. Certainly some people get revved up about organizing stuff and dive in head first, but I think it’s more sustainable, practical, and even effective in the long-term to just go at the pace that feels right for you when starting to build these kinds of relationships with coworkers. Just getting coffee with a different coworker once every month or two or three builds a lot of mini-relationships over time and won’t flood your schedule. If you’re new at your workplace it can take you longer to get to know people to be able to ask them to meet up, but it also might be easier to ask another new person.

Of course when agitation is high and people want to take action to fix a problem at work, then the time you need to commit to pull it off might go way up, but by having put in all the relationship-building work in ahead of time it’ll be smoother, less stressful, and more likely to succeed.

CONCLUSION

Another major benefit to this approach to organizing is that it doesn’t require new organizers to master any technical organizing

inherently bound up in each other because humans are naturally social and naturally political.

SETTING UP CASUAL 1-ON-1S

An organizer friend of mine is really good at easing into and building relationships with coworkers. He regularly and casually sets up 1-on-1 coffee dates with coworkers, and most of the times he meets with them the conversation doesn't go into "organizing" mode where you proceed through the parts of an organizing conversation.¹ Watching him and other organizers, I've tried to get better at this myself.

When done right, this kind of relationship-based organizing can feel really comfortable and natural, but for someone who's new to this kind of organizing it might feel forced or stressful at first. If there's no one at work who you feel comfortable asking out to coffee, first spend time getting to know people more on the job and then that will make it easier to ask them to meet up off the job (I write more in this previous post about ways to build relationships with coworkers as an intermediary step before to asking them to a 1-on-1).

When you do get the opportunity to talk with someone outside of work for the first time, there's obviously no script to getting to know people over a casual conversation. Because the main thing you have in common with a coworker is the fact that you both work at the same place, the conversation will probably naturally veer towards talking about work. I have a few go-to topics and questions when the conversation isn't flowing on its own: "What did you do for work before X?" "How did you get into this industry/company/job?" "What's your favorite part of the job?" If you discover mutual interests unrelated to work that can give the relationship more depth. If the conversation naturally veers more into workplace problems, that's fine, but when first meeting up with someone casually, I rarely try to get deep into those problems by using union organizing techniques.

Is this even organizing or is it just being a normal person? Well both, the point being that to be a good organizer you have to be able to build relationships with people organically, and

if that's called being a "normal person", so be it.

What makes this approach to organizing more than just being a "normal person" is when grievances start to bubble up and people start to get more agitated, then you already have a connection with people from which to think collectively about what to do about the problem. Rather than trying to piece together an action plan with people who you've never spoken to outside of work, now it's really easy to ask someone to talk with you after work and easier for you to trust each other. Chances are you've talked with people about work in general, and thus have some kind of shared understanding even if earlier conversations never were explicitly about grievances or organizing. All of these things make a world of difference when trying to address a workplace problem for the first (or second or twentieth) time.

"DO I HAVE TO BE FRIENDS WITH ALL MY COWORKERS?"

No, you can't be friends with everyone and neither is that the goal. The kind of workplace relationship I aim for with people in these casual 1-on-1s is to make it more than just a professional acquaintance but not as intimate as a "friendship" in the full sense.

I try to build a relationship where we know some things about each other outside of work and can genuinely relate to each other and talk without necessarily being close, and one where we are able to talk openly about both the good and bad stuff that comes up at work. Most people have 2 or 3 things that they care most about in their life, like their kids or an intense hobby or a political issue, and knowing what those things are for people makes it easier to relate to them and makes for smooth but meaningful small talk that accompanies so much of the in-between moments you have with coworkers on the job. If you and your coworkers can talk freely and can share what's on your mind, that makes it natural for either one of you to bring up a workplace issue when one arises.

Of course, occasionally when you get to know a coworker it will evolve into friendship, which is great. And hopefully some of your coworkers who you develop a relationship with also develop a specific interest in workplace

Sowing division and using the opportunity to draw people into your particular way of viewing the world can only cause damage.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

So where does this leave the IWW? If the union is unable to make a meaningful impact on this strike, we certainly are not doing well at our goal of "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." But I am not preaching doom, merely saying that we cannot get to our destination without first knowing where we are.

So what should you do to support UPS workers?

COMMUNICATE WITH LOCALS

It is still worthwhile to show up and support strikes. Do not pretend that you know what is going on at the rank-and-file level. You do not. So, communicate with other unions' locals. See what they need.

At the same time, realize that no branch of the IWW can do more than what a well-meaning church group could do.

HAVE A PLAN

Capitalism sucks. It grinds us down and makes us feel helpless. We often seek something we can do to feel like we actually have power. I am no exception to this. I have organizer delusions of grandeur. Someone (I don't recall who) once said to me that many Wobbly organizers think of themselves as protagonists in a John Steinbeck novel. So I understand the impulse to want to do something big.

However, no individual can do something big. At the scale of businesses like UPS, the entire IWW might as well be one person. So take that desire to do something big, and think about what it actually requires. Take the first step towards that – which is usually finding someone who wants to take the next step with you. Do something today that actually makes our class able to do more tomorrow.

ORGANIZE

If you have not been to an OT101, your first priority should be that. Read *Weakening the Dam*¹ in the meantime. Take steps towards

organizing your own workplace. Make sure that they are the actual steps, and you don't try to jump the gun and claim organization you do not have. If you don't have a contact list or social map, start building one no later than tomorrow. Build worker militancy so that we will one day have the actual power to overthrow capitalism.

If you have read this, understand my points, and think, "but I want to act in solidarity," I want to ask you – are you wanting to act in solidarity or are you trying to feel good? Genuine solidarity requires helping in the long run, which means building your ability to help. Solidarity is not moral self-gratification.

NOTES

- 1) Twin Cities GMB. (2011). *Weakening the Dam*. https://archive.iww.org/history/library/branches/TwinCitiesGMB/weakening_the_dam/



MONTRÉAL-BASED WOBBLY BAND UNION THUGS ON THEIR FIRST EUROPEAN TOUR AND MORE

September 28, 2023 | by Douglas P. Marsh

UNION SONGS MAKE US STRONG, NO. 1

USMUS is an IW column dedicated to the intersection of music and worker struggle.

DPM: What should readers know about you and your band? Who are you? When/Where are you performing and what are the best ways to keep up with your recordings and performances?

Union Thugs: The band started out in 2017 following discussions around forming a union band with Montréal General Membership Branch members. Almost all six of us had experience with previous bands but it never been nothing close to a career—with the Union Thugs we always considered ourselves to be workers first and foremost, who just happen to play music on the side. So yeah, we pretty much all take part in the Montréal punk scene in one way or another, since the early 2000s.

But with the Union Thugs project, we wanted to bring back the old tradition of a syndicalist music act that would speak to laborers everywhere. We kinda grew tired of singing revolutionary punk songs to an already convinced revolutionary punk crowd. We wanted to bring what we had to say about the system and how it can be changed a step further. It's Joe Hill who said: "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over." And we think that does make a lot of sense!

So after almost seven years and close to 200 shows either in bars, squats, demos or picket lines all across Quebec and Ontario provinces, we're actually about to embark on our first ever European tour that's going to take place from the 17th of August until the 11th of September. Éric Sédition, our singer and main booker, has prepared 21 dates for us that will



PHOTO BY CÉDRIC MARTIN AT UNION THUGS' OLD JAMMING SPACE IN CENTRE-SUD, MONTRÉAL

lead us from Germany to France with a few nights in the Czech Republic, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy and more importantly will connect us with the members and organizers of the German IWW (GLAMROC), the Free Workers' Union (FAU) and the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) amongst other things!

For the longest time we've been touring around the provinces of Quebec and Ontario which (don't get us wrong here!) we really enjoyed doing all those years. Just in the last few months this gave us the opportunity to play with bands such as Brigada Flores Magon, les Ramoneurs de Menhirs and the Dreadnoughts, but the time has come to visit the old countries and meet with workers from around the world!

The best way to stay up to date with our whereabouts would be to subscribe to our Facebook or Instagram accounts. In the U.S. all our music is available through PM Press and although there's nothing like a real show, you can also catch us on all the major streaming platforms and if you feel like supporting us, we also have a Patreon page; that way you can help us replace broken strings and put gas in the car!

DPM: Who are the people in your community making it happen? Who/What inspires you?

playing favorites to make workers compete with each other and reward pro-boss behavior, gaslighting people by telling them that what they think is a problem isn't really a problem, subtly ostracizing those who don't go along with the program, emphasizing that the boss is the hardest worker of all, and pontificating about the virtues of a positive attitude.

To be able to think independently about our job and what's good and bad about it, we need to inquire about why the boss is saying certain things and why we're discouraged from asking certain questions. To have any chance of making things better at work, we have to be able to talk with those around us at work who are in similar conditions and might come to similar conclusions about what needs to change. The barriers we feel to being able to get to know coworkers are part of the social structure of the workplace as it reflects the economic interests of the bosses and owners.

ORGANIZING IS NOT A "PUSH THIS BUTTON IN CASE OF EMERGENCY"

It's an understandable mistake for some. A worker sees the conditions of their workplace deteriorating and coworkers getting fed up, so they decide now's the time to do something and stand up to the boss and try to get all the workers to take some kind of action, like a strike or a union vote. It's a principled and courageous thing to do. Unfortunately, it's rarely destined to succeed because the organizing started too late in the game, like trying to keep the water from rushing out as the dam is breaking open. But most people don't know much about unions or organizing, so it's not their fault.

Even leftists who know about unions and organizing and have been to trainings too often make this mistake. They wait for working conditions to go from bad to worse before the "organizing light" turns on in their head, and by then it's a lot harder to really build a foundation that's necessary to take action from a position of strength and solidarity among coworkers.

Most union trainings frame the start of organizing as being about identifying the grievances that you are going to organize around, or some other technical details like

collecting contact info or social mapping the workplace. These are all very important things, but the more experience I accumulate from my own organizing and from talking with others, the more I think these should be step 2 or 3 instead of step 1.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE MAKE LIFE BETTER

Building coworker relationships does not have to be onerous, is an absolutely essential part of building worker power, and has actually turned into the most rewarding part of my organizing.

While it may seem obvious, it's worth emphasizing how much better our lives are when we can relate to those around us and support each other. Such sociality means people naturally look out for each other, support each other through tough times, and cooperate better on work projects. It fulfills a general need for connection that is altogether absent from many



1918, FELLOW WORKER HELEN KELLER WITH CHARLIE CHAPLIN, ACTOR

workplaces, but the extra effort necessary to push through workplaces inhibitions and build these connections is worth it. That workplace relationships are valuable in themselves and valuable for organizing is not a tension between your identities as a "normal person" and as an "organizer", but rather these things are



IWW COWORKERS ON STRIKE IN 1912 IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, CA

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COWORKERS IS THE PRECONDITION TO ALL GOOD ORGANIZING

December 14, 2023 | by Roger Williams

There's one main mistake people make when they start organizing their workplaces that's responsible for more stumbles, setbacks, and losses than any other: they don't really get to know people before they try to take direct action with them.

If people don't know each other, how can they be expected to take risks together, especially when breaches of trust can put everyone in danger? Some coworkers get cold feet, those who are on the fence never really get involved, and those who appear most committed fall off or burn out.

Of course, sometimes life drops a dump truck worth of lemons on your head, circumstances force you to organize quickly in less-than-ideal circumstances, and you do what you can with coworkers whether you know them or not. But this should be the exception instead of the rule.

This blog post is about why so many people don't have relationships with their coworkers, why building relationships first before you tackle grievances is so important, and how to do it.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE WORKPLACE

As workers we often compartmentalize our work-lives from the rest of our lives as a coping mechanism for work stress or to maintain work-life balance. But when we take a closer look, we can see how it's not just our natural social inclinations that keep us apart from our coworkers but rather there are deeper social pressures at play.

When humans spend a lot of time around each other it's natural for them to bond and build relationships, but workplaces often feel stilted or anti-social. Rather than seeing the isolation we feel at work as our own individual social failings, social boundaries in the workplace are often part of capitalism's conditioning. If we don't do exactly what the boss tells us to do because we've started talking with our coworkers about what's fair and unfair at work, then they've got a problem on their hands.

So bosses regulate our workplace relationships in all sorts of big and small ways, including encouraging people to see the workplace as "family", having conversations in private with workers who raise grievances, telling people that it can't be any other way,

UT: Well the most inspiring thing for us is all these workers that resist and fight back against the abuse of the bosses. We've taken up a habit of stopping by to visit striking workers, chatting with them, playing a few songs. It's always a very rich moment of exchange and we learn a lot.

Another thing that's inspiring would be the movement for housing rights in Montréal right now. People are organizing against their landlords raising their rent and evicting them in a lot of traditionally working-class neighborhoods. People are fed up with being displaced and it shows.

One such fight was brilliantly led by the tenants of the Mont-Carmel retirement home who fought against an eviction notice to 200 tenants in 2023. There is also the resurgence in the fight for paid internships for students which is mostly led by women in care-centered programs.

And how can we forget about our very own Union, the Montréal branch of the IWW, which survived the pandemic and in addition to a few organizing campaigns always going on under the radar, just recently dumped a pick-up truck full of manure on the steps of Quebec's Employers Council and is currently fighting a 20K wage theft campaign against a café owner. That list is obviously not everything that's going on this year, that is just from the top of our heads!

DPM: A recent split release, including your contributions "J'avance" and a Woody Guthrie

cover, "All You Fascists," is a collaboration with Brooklyn-based Out of System (OOST). What inspired your contributions to the release and what kinds of solidarity and creative exchange are happening between Brooklyn and Montréal?

UT: Since the beginning of the band, we've mostly been doing covers of old union folk songs with a pinch of punk-rock or classic punk tunes that we folked on the way. This split recording was the first to feature an original song alongside a Woody Guthrie classic we've been performing since day one.

OOST and the Union Thugs had shared the stage a few times before this collaboration and Wawa (our now ex-drummer) and Derek (our current drummer) were friends with them before joining the band. OOST were also an obvious choice for us because of our shared views on politics and the duo is just great and really fun to be around!

Brooklyn and Montréal also have their share of similarities such as a strong working-class history in the heart of big city as well as rampant gentrification problems. It just really made sense for us to be featured on the same release as them.

Because of our cultural love for folk music and our political affiliation with the IWW, we have always felt very close with the American working class, but due to the particularly authoritarian nature of the U.S. border and some problem with the justice on our side, we haven't succeeded yet in crossing the border, but



ON THE PICKET LINE OF THE WINDSOR SALT MINE WORKERS IN SOUTHERN ONTARIO

we feel that this collaboration with OOST and PM Press, who helped us with the release, strengthen that link even if physically meeting is still pretty hard.

DPM: How are art and music related to worker struggle in your experience?

UT: Workers have a longstanding tradition of sharing their struggles and daily lives through art and music. For us, our shows are all about saying "You are not alone to live like this! Others who are in your situation succeed in changing things and if you look around you just right now, you will realize that everyone wants to change things. You can do it too!"

Music specifically is a great and accessible way to reach people and to open discussions about what actions can be taken to improve our living conditions. It can also be a means to support workers' struggle.

For example, a picket line can be pretty boring if nothing is going on. They are usually held on roads where there is not much visibility; hours are long; it's often really hot or really freezing. In that case, having a band visit can be really invigorating for the workers on those picket lines. In our experience, it really felt like people were happy to have this little change of pace in the day. It also felt like we were able to communicate our solidarity to them and that it was appreciated.

DPM: From your first release in 2018, Union Thugs' songs have been consistently worker-centered and multilingual. In your wildest fantasy, how are your recordings being used?

UT: Being invited to play when workers are on strike and being able to go on a 21-date European tour is already beyond our wildest dream, but if we dare to dream even further, it would also be neat someday to play in demonstrations outside of Montréal and Quebec and (why not?) become the soundtrack of some revolutionary worker-led movement! But hey, if we can just happen to be in someone's playlist at work and spark the idea of organizing their workplace, that would make the whole trip completely worth it!

DPM: How do you balance art, family, and work?

UT: That's pretty chaotic! From the start, as any organizer will tell you, keeping six persons on a tight schedule for an extended period of time is a challenge in itself. It's a shame that there are only 24 hours in a day because we are pretty hyperactive both as a band and as individuals!

We usually play at least 20 shows a year, sometimes over 30. Some of us are pretty active in the IWW, others run a label, an underground venue and some have other bands. At work we are all in fairly different industries. In the band we've got a building painter who does seasonal work in the cinema industry, a high school teacher, a day laborer, a harm reduction worker, a journalist and bartender and to add to that puzzle our singer, Eric, just had his first child a few months back. But we always kind of make it work!

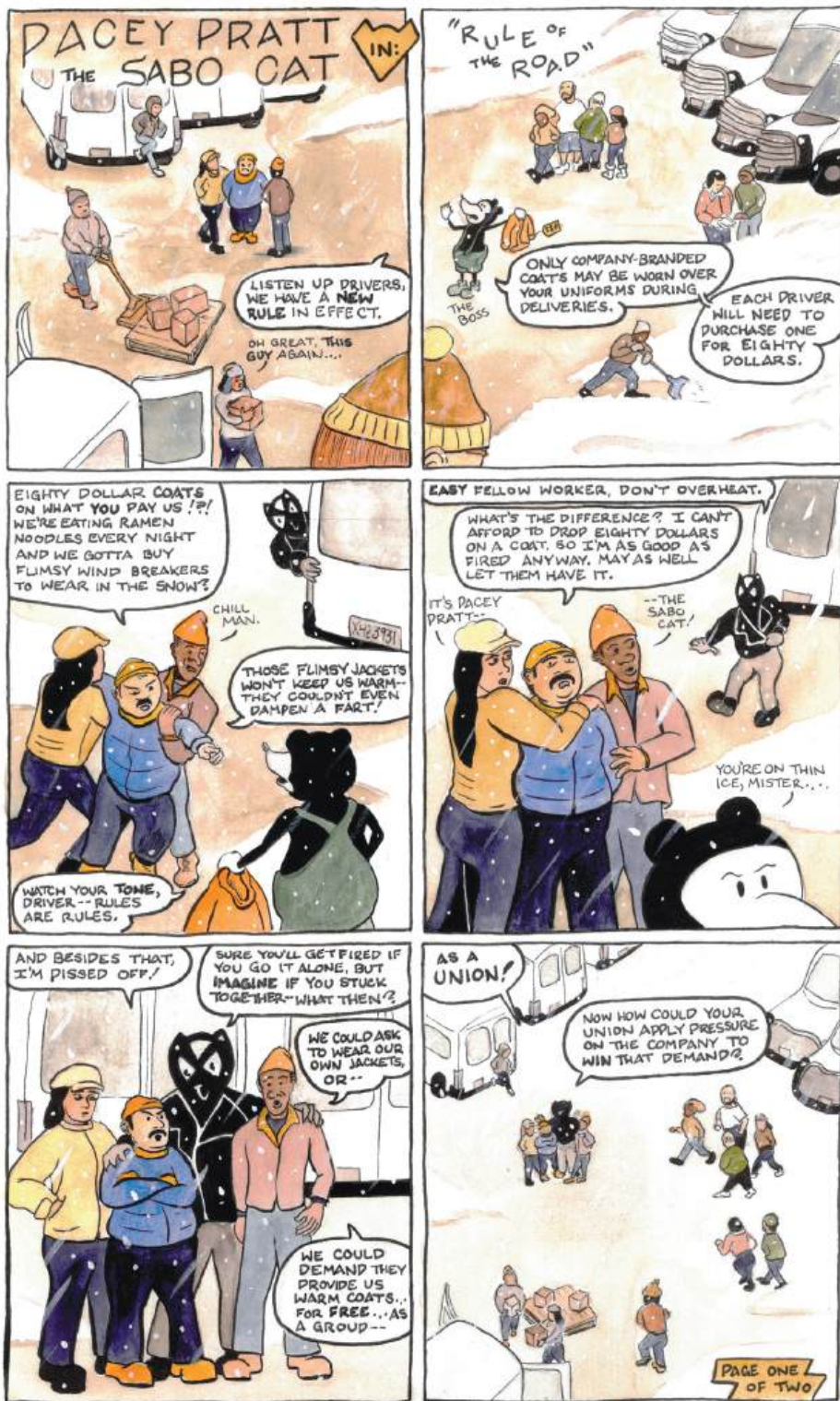
However, playing music, dreaming of a working class revolution, meeting with workers who are fighting the good fight and helping the labor movement to grow are things that we wouldn't exchange for nothing in the world. For the last 10 to 20 years, we all have been actively militant against the Capitalist system and, to be honest, we wouldn't even know what else to do.

Solidarity,

Fellow workers Noel, Sansan & Stakh for the Union Thugs

Editor's Note: Interview was edited for clarity.





MORE JUICE?

October 19, 2023 | by X364181

IS THAT ALL LABOR NEEDS?

Ever since the sharp decline of unions in the latter half of the 1900s people have been scrambling to “revive” the labor movement. The call to action gained momentum recently during the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hopes were rekindled with new Amazon and Starbucks organizing attempts. People shout for more unions, more certification elections, more contracts, more workers organizing, more oomph –We mean it this time, dammit!

The sense of urgency is definitely on point, but the problem with the revival discussion (with a few exceptions) is that it suggests we only need to add more energy to the movement. No doubt

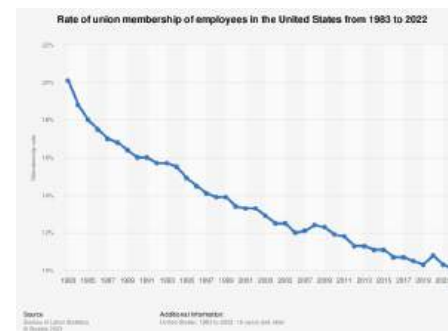
it would be great to have more labor activity, but there is much less discussion about what form a new labor movement should take. There are different kinds of union practices underneath the labor umbrella and not all of them should be revived.

The danger with this mindless urgency is that it doesn't account for how business unionism (the dominant form of labor organizing) was complicit in the decline and suppression of class struggle. If we simply step on the gas and apply the old labor habits our tires are going to spin in the mud. The problems will not be resolved, they'll repeat with more intensity. Needing more labor activity is vobvious, but all the important decisions are about the form this movement should take.

Here are two aspects of the labor movement that definitely shouldn't be revived: Bureaucratic Leadership and Workplace Contractualism.

BUREAUCRATIC LEADERSHIP

Bureaucracy refers to the top-down, staff-led form of unions that dominates the labor movement. Rather than shop floor committees, today's unions are like separate agencies that provide a service for workers. You pay your dues



and the union reps handle the logistics. This has resulted in the rank & file being divided away from controlling the union's direction. The union also diverges from the real needs of workers.

Some business unionists have recognized that rank & file disinvolvement is part of labor's decline, so they attempt to activate more workers. But this has amounted to little more than token involvement in the same old business union practices.

Why is bureaucracy so problematic? As an economic rule, business unions must provide better conditions for workers compared to having no union at all – this is a bare minimum they must do in order to exist as organizations. However, these businesses are bound to an economic logic of minimizing their costs, cutting corners, and seeking the quickest compromise with the boss. The weakening of the labor movement is a reflection of unions driving down their costs and producing agreements in the cheapest way possible, always hovering around a minimal effort. They're not called business unions for nothing.

Secondly, bureaucracy generated a class collaborationist labor movement that led to a decline in worker militancy. That kind of structure has its own institutional characteristics that are different from rank & file committees. Union officials are not interested in waging a class war, but in mediating peace between classes. It is the bureaucrat's role to collaborate with the employer, broker a settlement, and put workers back to work. I stress this problem is not a matter of individual personality, but the bureaucratic structure which shapes individuals into their role. Even the most militant rank & filer elected to leadership will develop these characteristics after spending time in union officialdom.

Is it any wonder then why the labor movement is so inactive? Who are these clowns at labor's helm who cry out for labor's revival when their own form of organization has been suffocating rank and file militancy for decades? The bureaucratic aspect of the labor movement needs to be abolished, not rejuvenated.

Further, since business unionism has

declined to the point of organizing 10 percent of the workforce, and only 6 percent of the private sector, it doesn't make sense to 'bore from within' and breathe more life into business unionism. Let these dinosaurs die.

WORKPLACE CONTRACTUALISM

Workplace contractualism is another major factor that contributed to labor's decline. This clunky term refers to how today's unions are entirely built around negotiating a contract. In the US, this practice was officially endorsed by the government's National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which sought to substitute labor's disruptive potential with an "orderly" election and contract negotiation procedure.² The ultimate purpose of the NLRA was to subdue the class war rather than accelerate it.

Through the NLRA, workplace contractualism became the standard practice of unions. The rank & file was reduced to the role of politely voting for union representation, and then voting to ratify the contract prepared in the backroom. In effect, the self-activity of workers on the shop floor – the real threat labor poses to capitalism with its strikes and other disruptions – was displaced by union staffers, legal experts, and other porkchoppers required to facilitate the contract process.³

Workplace contractualism is a class collaborationist form of unionism that seeks to establish "industrial peace," a situation where strikes and other disruptions are minimized. Unions get some minor wins but are also locked down by no-strike clauses. If there is a complaint, workers have to go through a bureaucratic grievance procedure that is far removed from the shop floor. Unions most often forfeit the ability to control work by agreeing to management rights clauses in the contract. These are all huge victories for the employer that solidify the class system and guarantee the continuity of wage slavery.

Through workplace contractualism, workers lost their strike-readiness and the leverage that comes from the ability to disrupt work. If revival takes that form again the result will be more of the same. Do not resuscitate!





VICIOUS CIRCLE OF DEFEAT

These two problems with the movement aggravated each other and drove labor's decline. The more workplace contractualism was practiced, the more bureaucratic expertise was required to run unions. Likewise, the more bureaucracy commanded the labor movement, the more entrenched workplace contractualism became since that practice is what suits the comfy staffers and union officials.

MORE ENERGY, DIFFERENT MOVEMENT

We do need more labor activity – a bigger, faster, more dedicated movement – but to get there we need to break the mold of unionism set by the US government and its lackeys in the labor movement. It is the form of business unionism that limits the amount of labor activity. Rather than the bureaucratic / staff led structure, our organization needs to be grounded in self-managed committees. We must reclaim day-to-day control of work and all the leverage that comes with direct action. If we hastily revive the aspects of labor that tamed class struggle in the first place, we have no reason to expect a big new labor movement. By repeating the same old habits, we only reproduce our own defeat.

NOTES

- 1) Russell, B. *On Boring From Within*. <https://libcom.org/article/boring-within-bert-russell>
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IWW METHODS SCORE MAJOR VICTORY FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS

December 27, 2023
by Max V., IWW Brussels Member

BRUSSELS, BE—For over two years now, IWW Brussels in Belgium has been organizing in the healthcare sector. Workers are uniting and fighting to improve their working conditions and wages.

The methods of the IWW have enabled a small group of nurses to grow to more than thirty caregivers who have organized themselves to face the difficulties caused by shortages, lack of resources, and work overload.

After a number of modest wins, which helped them to get out of the doldrums by reducing their workload, the group of workers recently achieved a major victory! After several actions, 200 nurses won a wage increase of up to €600!

This victory was achieved amidst a severe shortage of nursing staff, which gives organized nurses considerable strength! However, they won't win automatically. To do so, we need to fight in a coordinated manner and, we are convinced, with technique.

This technique is that of solidarity and collective direct action, as taught during the training courses given by the IWW Brussels. So, methodically, we tried to apply the tools we had learned. We started out as a trio, discreetly training each other, gathering information, mapping our workplace and socializing more widely with our colleagues. Then we started going one-on-one, to expand our knowledge, our connections and recruit for the committee. After a year, there were ten of us on the committee, and we all went back to train with the IWW Brussels. We then drew up demands and a crescendo action plan based on the agitation of our colleagues. We started to mobilize our colleagues more widely, organizing a march on the boss, etc. etc.



PHOTO BY M.S./ACTUSOINS, FROM THE 2020 HEALTHCARE SECTOR STRIKE IN MARSEILLE

It was a long-term, behind-the-scenes, patient and disciplined effort. For the rest, unfortunately, few details can be given as to the context, actions, and locations in order to guarantee the safety of the workers who organized. Please know that the balance of power was created by grassroots organizing without intermediaries, and without professional negotiators (union officials, etc.), and enabled us to put collective pressure directly on the hospital's managers and directors. We wanted this pressure to be constant and growing, so as not to give our hierarchy any breathing space. We also kept in mind the need to bring together a majority of the colleagues concerned in the action campaign. Finally, and in tandem with everything else, the workers' committee worked to develop social ties and solidarity within the work teams, through more informal moments that strengthened the bonds uniting the workers among themselves. In short, it's this unity of solidarity and action that is our weapon, and it's a formidable one!

Far from the media, megaphones and large-scale mobilizations, this was a discreet struggle, in keeping with IWW unionism. There's no point in mobilizing beyond our workplaces if we can't organize within them. That's what we did, and we won.

This victory is the result of a year's effort, with doubts and setbacks. Indeed, management's first answer was repression and intimidation. They will be against you, scorn you, sabotage you, until one day, without you even realizing it, they will accede to your

request. So hang in there! It's your determination, and the wear-and-tear it causes in your hierarchy, that will make you strong.

Today, we have all emerged from this battle unscathed and, better still, strengthened in our determination to build our power as workers and help others to do the same. It's true that, despite the shortage of personnel, the sector remains undervalued. The years of Covid-19 have not changed this; on the contrary, there has been a marked increase in budgetary austerity. So, this first success brings hope and is already inspiring others who are starting to organize elsewhere in the health sector.

Soon, we hope, we'll be in a position to open a health sector branch at the IWW Brussels, and thereby improve coordination of the various committees organized in the sector, strengthen training, develop interprofessional cooperation and much more.

This article was originally published on IWW Brussels' website and has been translated into English and published here with permission.

www.iwwbxl.org/2023/12/13/premiere-victoire-importante-dans-le-secteur-de-la-sante-grace-aux-methodes-iww/



WHEN YOU CAN'T ORGANIZE WIDELY, ORGANIZE FAST

January 25, 2024 | by x370051

Recently we had a difficult lead in our branch. A fellow worker was at a small retail store and part of a large national chain. The store itself only had a few workers, typically between 3-5 on staff at any time, so they were trying to reach out broadly and get to know the other workers at nearby stores in the chain. But the turnover was constant, workers were moving between stores too often, and anyone who had been there more than a few weeks was given manager titles (but not really any power or support). This was a difficult campaign.

One day while going through some old email lists from past organizers, I saw some advice I thought might help. "With high turnover and a lot of instability, it's better to go fast than to go wide." This sounded like good advice, so I texted the lead. "Ok" was the response. A few hours later, a second response: "Ok, I took your advice and me and two other workers talked and we got the boss to rehire somebody. Fast enough?"

That was pretty fast. What happened was another worker had to quit because the job was just too stressful, the role they were in had certain metrics and reporting requirements that were triggering their anxiety. The shop needed the extra help, and that worker needed the hours, so the lead and their committee pressured the boss to not only rehire the worker, but to change the role so that it didn't involve any of the reporting that was an anxiety trigger.

Instead of trying to keep up with a broad, wide set of contacts and map out relations across several stores in the district, they went for fast, significant agitation and direct action. Not bad for a few hours' work.

So what about the campaign itself? It was never going to be a long term job for the lead, or for any of their coworkers, but in just a few months the agitation kept up and the workers put together a number of direct actions. Issues like scheduling, hours, and the normal things retail workers have to struggle with were ample sources for agitation. Like too many low level district managers, theirs was often of the mindset "if you have time to lean, you have time to clean," and so there were no chairs in the store. No one could sit and rest, ever. In a very defiant moment of workplace conditioning, they brought in chairs and all took their breaks, when needed, on the shop floor in clear sight of the store's cameras and their live feed to the district manager.

But what did this short, fast campaign really accomplish? For one thing, it made these individual workers really feel their own power and reclaim some of their dignity. In this kind of everyday struggle with capitalists the lead and the workers get a taste of what it means to agitate and act as a class. The lead worker told us afterwards that "[i]n a good organizing drive people learn to lift their heads up. They start to feel their worth and stop begging, start demanding."

I don't think the struggle to sit down for breaks at Store #1312 of Generic Retail Chain will become the stuff of legends in Wobbly lore, but for these workers it was a real experience of the power a little organizing can bring and an appetizer for what it tastes like when "we are forming the structure of the new society in the shell of the old."

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