

For our first installment, we'd like to deal with the general question of what the libertarian left's relationship to unions should be. Then we'll focus specifically on proposal number 4 of Sam Dolgoff's NOTES FOR A DISCUSSION ON THE REGENERATION OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT.

The article goes to great lengths to show the class collaborationist character of the existing unions. On this point, it is fundamentally correct. However, when the article considers the libertarian left's relationship to the unions, it confuses tactics and principle. For us, the question of libertarians working in or with unions is a tactical one. In other words, our relationship to unions should be determined by a number of factors, such as the specific goals we wish to accomplish, the specific and overall strategic context we're working in, the possible benefits and liabilities we could incur by organizing or working with a union, etc. The libertarian left shouldn't let a blanket condemnation of unions in general restrict its flexibility in workplace organizing.

The types of activities that libertarians engage in while organizing must be related to where the other workers are at. If there is a lot of activity around unions at our workplace, we should be there. The role of the revolutionary is to help raise consciousness as to the class nature of present society, and offer alternatives. This is best done when workers are involved in direct action, and therefore means that in some situations libertarians should participate in union struggles, and in other situations they shouldn't. It just depends on where the other workers are at.

With this general preface, we'd like to deal specifically with proposal number 4 on page 6. This proposal deals specifically with our activities in Des Moines, as most of us work in unorganized workplaces, and since one of our current actions involves participating in an organizing drive at one of the local hospitals.

The proposal states, in general, that libertarians working in unorganized shops should favor independent unions in each workplace. If this isn't possible, they should, at any rate, oppose or remain neutral in any AFL-CIO (or any other business union) organizing drive.

As with any other union, we feel that libertarians' support for independent unions should be situational. If the workers want an independent union, then we should support them. However, we shouldn't look upon independent unions as the answer to all our problems. In spite of the advantage of being less bureaucratic, they still have the same pitfalls that the other unions have. That is, they narrow revolutionary development because, 1) they accept the right of the capitalists to ownership of the means of production, services, and distribution, 2) they serve group interests (their members) and not class solidarity, and 3) they are easily cooptable, as is any reform.

In reference to the second part of the proposal, as we stated at the beginning of the article, we feel that it would be a mistake to categorically oppose (or remain neutral to) any and every AFL-CIO organizing drive. In addition to the reasons already stated, this kind of stance would make it appear that we aren't concerned about better wages and working conditions. That is, that we don't care about the immediate concerns of most workers, the types of concerns that trade unions can generally deliver on, but we can't.

This isn't to say that we should tag along after the union bureaucrats.



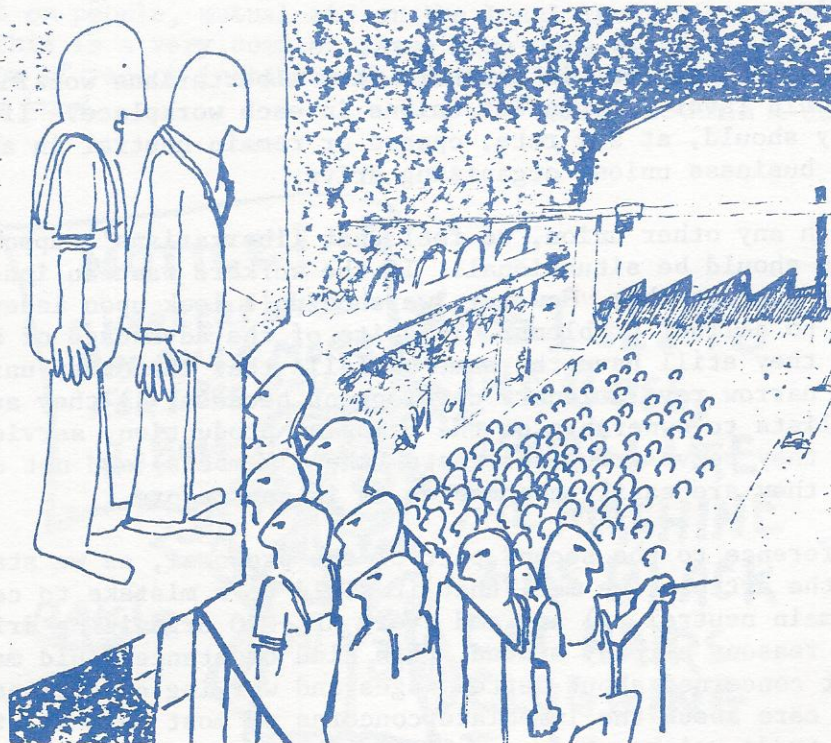
Here in Des Moines, for example, while helping to organize a union, we're also attempting to show other workers that a union isn't enough, that workers need an independent organization outside the union (and therefore not hampered by the limitations of trade unionism) to fight for things besides strictly economic benefits. (see leaflet)

We're using the organizing drive to obtain what benefits we can (i.e. better wages and working conditions, experience in collective struggle, increased number of contacts among other workers in the hospital, greater awareness of how the hospital bureaucracy works, greater awareness of who the most militant workers are, etc.), and then using our increased knowledge and skills to build an independent and militant rank-and-file organization.

In conclusion, we feel that libertarian leftists shouldn't make a principle out of anti-unionism, but rather should deal with the question of relating to unions as a tactical question. The important thing is to be involved in issues that the workers see as important. Consequently, instead of haggling over the question of independent unions or not (which the workers should decide), libertarians should discuss when and how to relate to trade union struggles. This is something we'd like to discuss in more detail in future issues of this newsletter.

Gary Larsen  
Mary Svien

October 1976



"They all have the strange idea that the plant belongs to them!"



# A UNION IS NOT ENOUGH...

## UNIONS TRY TO TELL US WE RUN THE SHOW

The way workers at ILH got sold out by the leaders at AFSCME headquarters is an example of how much we really run the show---not at all. Unions make most important decisions top down like the government and like our place of work.

## THE PRIORITY FOR THE UNION WAS ECONOMICS

The decision AFSCME made is not uncommon. It didn't matter how strong we were or how strong our needs were. The thing that mattered most to the union was organizing where they could win with least time in court and less money put out for legal work. Because the law favors management and because laws in health care organizing are more tough, the union backed off.

## WHY DON'T WE RUN THE SHOW?

Workers interests are in conflict with management. For us to try to have a say in running our jobs would take power away from management. Workers make the money and the wealth for the bosses. The bosses take most of the wealth and give us a small part of it back in wages. The bosses run the show and keep most of the wealth we make.

## HOW DOES A UNION FIT INTO THIS?

1) Unions defend workers to get them better wages and working conditions. This is a threat to the management but not a very big one.

2) Unions try to get a little more for the workers but they do not challenge managements' control even when the workers ask them to.

3) The system we live in lets unions bargain for improvements as long as they don't rock the boat. The system also expects unions to keep their workers in line. That is why most unions only support strikes when they are planned and the bosses know about them. They rarely back up a strike workers call themselves.

4) Unions act within the law. The law favors management. Unions could win more for workers if they helped them struggle face to face with the bosses and did not worry so much about the law.

## WORKERS NEED TO STICK TOGETHER TO FIGHT FOR MORE THAN JUST A UNION!

We need to build our own organization outside unions to fight for control of our work and to own the wealth we make. These organizations must fight for a united working class. Workers can only be united if we overcome divisions among us. The biggest of these divisions are race and sex prejudice. To build a new society in which workers own the wealth, workers organizations must fight for social equality of women and non-whites. Building a new society that works for equality is what we call socialism.

## WE STILL NEED A UNION

A union can help our wages and working conditions and we need this. But unions can't give us all we want and need. We need to fight for ourselves inside as well as outside the union.



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Feb. 18, '77

Fellow Wage-slaves,

I think that the members of the Solidarity Collective deserve a lot of credit for their efforts in getting out the first issue of this newsletter. The first issue raised some important questions. Eventually I, or other members of the group, will try to comment on all of these but space limitations prohibit me from answering all of them at this time.

It seems that a central controversy which is developing thus far with the "Notes" is the question of our attitude towards existing unions. In Gary Larsen's and Mary Svien's letter, they argue that the "Notes"... "confuses tactics and principle." They claim that "the question of libertarians working in or with unions is a tactical one", depending on "the specific and overall strategic context." Apparently they do not understand that principle and tactics, ends and means, are inseparable. If our tactics are inconsistent with our principles, then it must mean that we don't really believe in our principles. The specific and strategic goal which we wish to accomplish is the creation of self-management, human self-determination in all areas of life. All our tactics, all our activity must be consistent with this goal. Everything that we try to accomplish in our workplaces must somehow enlarge the self-determination of our fellow workers and ourselves. In this way we are never side-tracked (never co-opted) and are always striving to move forward. It is in this light that the "Notes" looks at the existing unions, and makes tactical suggestions which are consistent with that end. So the question upon which we must base our answer is: to what extent does working in or with existing unions bring us any closer to self-management? In short: what is the character of the existing unions?

Bruce Allen, although tentatively supporting the "Notes" analysis, argues that the existing unions are not completely bureaucratic and class-collaborationist, since "it is possible to force these unions into taking on a militant stance, at times". Therefore he feels it is necessary to work within existing unions since if we don't we will make "it easier for the class collaborationist bureaucrats to gain complete control". Well, unfortunately the class collaborationist bureaucrats are already in complete control of the union apparatus. The occasional "militant stance" of these unions is exactly that: a stance, a bit of theatrical posturing. We must keep in mind that the ability of these unions to do business with the capitalist management depends on their ability to keep the rank-and-file under their control. The bosses simply aren't going to dish out the money to unions that can't "deliver". During periods of rank-and-file rebellion, union officials are forced to make rhetorical concessions to rank-and-file demands. In order to keep some sort of psychological hold on these members, union bureaucrats will rant and rave about the employer and sometimes even make allusions to the class war. But this is all part of a calculated plan to contain the struggle (or else to get themselves re-elected). The union leaders are never really serious about pushing such demands, since to do so might "jeopardize the company's ability to compete with foreign industry". In short they can not push these demands to the limit because this would endanger the "common interests of business and labor." Once the rank-and-file cools off and things get back to normal, these unions go back to "business as usual".

There is no such thing as democracy in these unions and there never will be. This is because, 1) these unions are built on an assumption of common interests with employers, thus rank-and-file demands must be watered down for the "good of the membership", 2) union affairs are regulated by the state, which enforces long-term contracts, leaving union members open to prosecution if they don't go along with the bureaucrats, 3) there is a general absence of local autonomy so that union members can settle their own affairs on the spot, and the presence of the dues check-off, both allowing union officials to ignore local grievances until



some spontaneous action occurs (eg. a wildcat strike), 4) the existence of union managed welfare programs which make members financially dependent on the union. These are the realities of the existing unions and to suggest that the rank-and-file could gain control of such unions is ridiculous. The only weapon which has had any effect on the bureaucrats has been legislation and government prosecution. These activities, however, only invite more government control over the unions instead of more rank-and-file control.

Gary and Mary seem to have more doubts about unions than Bruce. On the one hand they criticize the "Notes" for an alleged "blanket condemnation of unions" yet they go on to say that all unions inevitably "narrow revolutionary development because, 1) they accept the right of the capitalists to ownership of the means of production, services, distribution, 2) they serve group interests (their members) and not class solidarity, and 3) they are easily cooptable as is any reform." Ironically, Gary and Mary are more anti-union than the "Notes", since they feel that unions can never be revolutionary but we should support them because they defend the wages of the workers and that's where the other workers are at. The "Notes", however, rejects the idea that class-collaborationist unions were inevitable. The present character of the unions was not the mere product of the fact that they sought immediate gains, but because they were willing to sacrifice their principles and any hope of eventual liberation, for these gains. Over a period of time these small gains and the means for getting them became ends in themselves. It was this internal development within the unions as well as external influences that shaped the present unions. The "Notes" would favor unions which are not solely "defensive" organizations, but which are offensive revolutionary organizations having self-management as their ultimate aim. The "Notes", simply recognizes that no such unions exist at present. Therefore independent unions under the control of the membership offer a much better chance for further development. The idea that a syndicalist form of unionism could develop from (and not in opposition to) the AFL-CIO is absurd.

Taking into consideration the class-collaborationist character of the existing unions and their opposition to self-management, how do we approach the struggle in unorganized shops? Gary and Mary suggest that we should always support the other workers and whatever they want is what we should do. Yet this is to **abandon**, not only our principles, but all responsibility to our fellow workers and to ourselves. Knowing what we do about the AFL-CIO, to just go along with AFL-CIO organizing drives or to actively encourage them is to make ourselves accomplices to class-collaborationism. As Gary and Mary point out, an independent union is no solution to all our problems. At least an independent union, however, would enable the workers to conduct their own struggle (self-managed unionism), whereas the AFL would insist on running the whole show from the top down. Not only does support for the AFL-CIO entail abandonment of responsibility to our fellow workers but it is also an abandonment of responsibility to ourselves. Since we work under the same conditions as everyone else in our shop, we will suffer the exact same consequences should we fall into the hands of the existing unions.

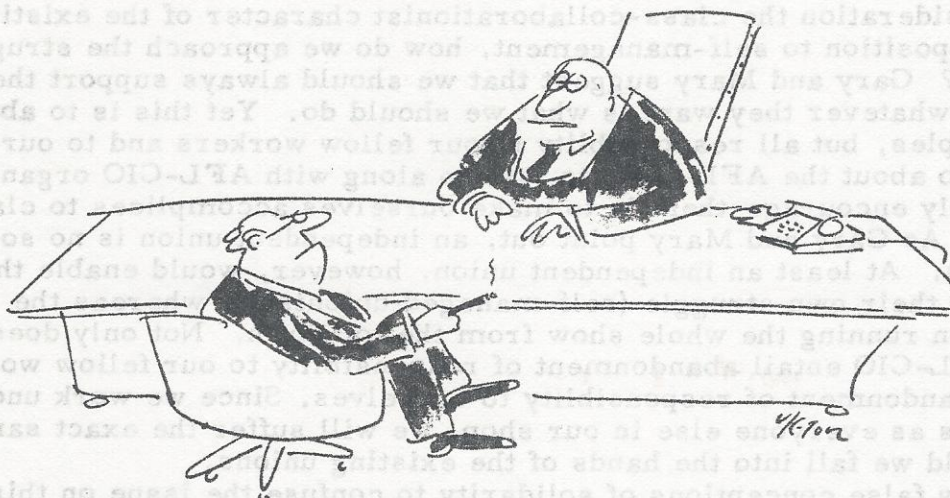
We can not allow false conceptions of solidarity to confuse the issue on this point. Solidarity does not mean we support other workers in everything they do just because they are "workers". Solidarity develops because of common interests, common goals. When two groups do not have these common interests, there can exist no real solidarity between them. A bond between them can only mean that one group will force its will upon the other. When some workers (out of ignorance or otherwise) wish to place themselves under an external authority for the sake of perceived material benefits, this is of course their own choice. Yet such an action is in opposition to the goal of self-management and we do not have any obligation to support such an action. Remaining neutral, however, should not be misinterpreted to mean that we will stop struggling against the employer. We will continue the struggle regardless of who the NLRB recognizes as our bargaining agent.



In disagreement with Bruce, I feel that a policy of working with these unions is doomed to failure. It is a policy of sacrificing our long term real goals for short term illusory gains. For those who are unconvinced by the example given in the "Notes" about the Cleveland IWW, there is the example of the CIO in the 30's and 40's. The left jumped onto the CIO bandwagon in the 30's, only to be purged when the CIO entered the AFL. Labor bureaucrats, opportunists that they are, are always willing to accept the services of radicals (as long as the radicals are willing to follow orders). Yet when they have no further use for the leftists, they are only too happy to get rid of them.

The orientation of the "Notes" which rejects the organization or reorganization of business union locals, in favor of autonomous workplace organization, is one which offers far greater potential. The current rebellions of workers are essentially anti-authoritarian in nature. They have the potential of going much further than the traditional trade union struggles. We have the option of either standing by our libertarian principles and thus help this new movement in its development, or we can take a backseat to aspiring union bureaucrats. It is time that we took a page from the CNT's notebook. After almost 40 years of bare survival in the underground, the CNT is once again active in their shops. Are they then organizing for the more numerous Workers' Commissions (which are dominated by the CP)? No, they are organizing for themselves. Perhaps it is time we learned this basic lesson.

For the Social Revolution,  
Jeff Stein



"Before God made profits, he made production and before production he made capital. So be it."