

Building the One Big Union: the organizing campaign



An article by Alex Erickson on IWW organizing campaigns on how they are what will build the IWW.

In “[Building the One Big Union: A Strategy for a Strategy](#),” I laid out a roadmap for building a union of 10,000 Wobblies- 100 branches of 100 members. We have several branches of 100 members currently, so it should be possible to reverse-engineer and replicate these successes in all of our local groups. Sounds great, right? With thousands of members, we would theoretically be able to take on more ambitious campaigns, deploy more powerful tactics, and add more strength to the workers’ movement. But of course, quality is more important and quantity when it comes to building workers power. 10,000 paper members who don’t show up to meetings aren’t a threat to the bosses. The promise of growth of our union is only meaningful if we build the union in a particular kind of way, in a way that organizes workers to engage concretely and directly in the class struggle. In the IWW, we do this primarily in what we call “organizing campaigns.” Organizing campaigns are the focus of our organization.

Other unions also run organizing campaigns. IWW organizing campaigns are unique. Our organizing campaigns have specific short-term goals, each tied to a specific long-term goal of our union:

1) *Build Wobblies.* We wage organizing campaigns in order to develop the class consciousness and militancy of our coworkers. Once they are ready to commit to being part of the global class struggle for the long-term, we ask them to join the IWW. This means that they will participate in other union projects and bring the union with them to their next job. Increasing the number of members of our union ready to organizing on the job, wherever they work, builds the capacity of our union to fight the bosses, moving us closer to our goal of the revolutionary general strike.

2) *Raise the profile of the IWW.* When we struggle, workers who are ready to fight back hear about it and are drawn to the union. We help them take steps to start new organizing

campaigns, which starts the cycle again. Gradually, the rise in workplace struggle changes the cultural climate, creating a new level of militancy in the working class. For example, in the Twin Cities, the Starbucks campaign went public in 2008, inspiring many workers that it was possible to organize on the job. The Jimmy John's campaign, going public a few years later, built on the shift in consciousness. Probably for the first time since the 1930s, in Minneapolis it's cool to organize a union.

3) *Establish the seeds of dual-power in the workplace.* Our long-term revolutionary goal is to take over the workplace and establish industrial democracy, then transform the production system to serve human needs in harmony with the earth (or maybe we should say universe, since some of us may be working in space by the time we get there...). Our organizing committees aren't just interested in bread-and-butter improvements, they are seeds of the new world in the shell of the old. The organizing committee is a direct democratic collective of workers- a workers' council- where all workers decide together how to fight the boss. The organizing committee is sovereign in two respects. No body in the union can overrule a decision made by an organizing committee, as long as it does not go against the principle of revolutionary, global working class solidarity. And more fundamentally, the organizing committee does not accept the limits that the capitalist state puts on class struggle, and is prepared to break the law to defy and destroy the illegitimate authority of the employers. By running our campaigns in a direct-democratic way, by asserting job control in the shop, and by refusing to accept the illegitimate authority of the boss and state, we are preparing ourselves to seize the means of production when the time is right.

It should be clear that not just any old kind of organizing campaign will bring us closer to these goals. The business unions also wage organizing campaigns, but with different methods and goals. Their organizing is driven by paid staff which convinces workers to take part in a plan decided by the bureaucracy. Tactics are typically aligned with the goal of media exposure to satisfy the egos of foundation funders or union leaders. In most cases, they plan culminates in a union contract that will secure a steady flow of dues. The bureaucrats may let workers' (or more likely, staffers and "community supporters") off the leash to use militant tactics in order to put pressure on the boss to sign on the dotted line, but as soon as the contract is in place, the bureaucracy tells workers to get back to work and participation in the union dwindles. Little is left over in terms of class consciousness and shopfloor organization.

So how do we structure our campaigns to build Wobblies, raise the profile of the union, and sow the seeds of dual power on the shop floor?

Our campaigns follow a deliberate strategy to achieve these goals:

- 1) First, *a branch chooses an organizing target.*** The choice of target depends on several factors, but the main concern is that it be a place where IWW members currently work, or could get hired in to. We call the practice of getting a job to organize inside "industrial concentration," "salting," or "seeding." The target may be one shop, multiple shops, or an entire industry.
- 2) As the campaign begins, *organizers do research and begin building an organizing committee*** through confidential meetings with coworkers.
- 3) *The committee begins meeting as a minority within the workplace.*** Through direct actions, they begin shifting the balance of power and recruit additional members by demonstrating the effectiveness of organizing.
- 4) *When nothing more is to be gained by remaining nameless and underground, the campaign goes public*** and reaches out to other workers in the company, industry, and the broader working class community. Our goal is to build the broadest possible solidarity in the

working class, turning every workplace struggle into a general confrontation between the working class and employing class, on a practical as well as symbolic level.

5) Escalation. We ‘swarm’ bosses with an attack from all angles in increasing intensity. We bring as many workers as possible into the struggle, building up our forces in process, so we can bring more organized power to the next fight.

In this way, IWW workplace struggles become community struggles, which build a social movement rooted in workplaces and working class communities for revolutionary change.

Of course, workers also organize outside the IWW, in other unions, outside all unions, or around issues outside the workplace. The IWW has a role to play in these struggles as well. In the next essay of this series, I will examine the role of the IWW organizers in other unions and mass movements.

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