

Fellow Union Members: Can we take union democracy for granted?

Your right to vote on local contracts,
Your right to engage in local strikes,
Your right to attend local union meetings,
Your right to elect new local officers,
Your right to a voice in your working conditions,
Your right to respect other workers' picket lines—

These and other rights will remain yours only if you act to protect them.

Don't take for granted the right to vote on local contracts. There was talk recently of taking from members of building trades unions the right to vote on their own contracts. Some members of the Laborers Union have already been deprived of that right by a provision that their district executive board has final say in ratifying their contracts.

Don't take for granted the right to vote for and engage in a perfectly legal strike that meets all the requirements of the labor laws. The Steelworkers agreement, signed over the protests of its members, outlaws all such strikes. Other unions may do the same thing.

Don't take for granted that there will be a local union meeting to attend, should you decide it is time to change the way the local is being run and elect new officers. Merged locals spreading over hundreds of miles and numbering many thousands of workers are increasing. For instance, ONE LOCAL of skilled construction workers has 35,000 members covering several states and the islands of the Pacific. The elected business manager appoints all the rest of the paid employees, including all local business representatives and dispatchers. Just try to get a union meeting to ask a simple question about the business manager's report, or to vote on how your dues money should be spent. Just try to nominate and elect a new business manager if you don't like the way the incumbent is running your business. In practice, the members of these huge merged locals have as little voice in their local unions as they do in their international unions—and that is no voice at all.

Even the Machinists Union, with its liberal pretensions, is going from a local to a district form of organization, consolidating several locals, including shop and automotive, in a single district office. Now where are those local union meetings?

Don't take for granted that your local will continue to have some voice in deciding the working conditions on your job. The trend is all the other way. Several big battles have been fought nationwide over 'management rights'. Locally, at the prodding of the Industrial Conference Board (the open-shop, right-to-work employers' organization), employers are continually pushing for inclusion of 'management rights' clauses in every contract. Even local school boards are confronting the unions of their custodial employees with such clauses. At best, these clauses can snarl up the unions in endless and costly arbitration and contract interpretations. At worst, they can give management sole control over production line speed, overturn seniority and bid systems, work rules, and long recognized employees' rights.

Will our unions honor picket lines?

Don't take for granted that your local will continue to honor picket lines, even if you may do so without violating any laws or injunctions. Some union officers are running scared, and they will try to save their bargaining position at the expense of other union people. Consider this:

For years we have heard about the Associated Building Contractors (ABC), the open-shop contractors' association formed to break the building trades unions. It originated in the Middle West, and it has not seemed a threat in many well organized areas, such as the Pacific Coast. An ABC charter was installed recently in Los Angeles County, and union contractors (organized in the Associated General Contractors) met with representatives of the open-shop organization.

Shortly after, when the Los Angeles carpenters struck, the construction local of the Operating Engineers (heavy equipment operators) refused to honor their picket lines, contending their demands were excessive and would result in the union contractors' going open-shop. In a conference of representatives of the union contractors and the Operating Engineers, the contractors threatened to go non-union or 'double-breasted' (set up separate companies to be run open shop) if building trades unions continued to make 'excessive demands'. The Engineers have made clear that they will side with the contractors against their fellow unionists when they deem it expedient.

In the past we could expect to negotiate reasonable wage increases that the employers would agree to without much resistance. Now, with the economic system increasingly dislocated, we may anticipate more employers will try to split us up with open-shop threats. Unless we can control them, we may expect more union officials to fold under these threats.

Why tolerate poor unionism?

About twenty million of us—men and women—belong to unions. We belong voluntarily because in the past, for all their faults, the unions have been useful to gain better wages and some concessions on the job. For years we have recognized and taken for granted their faults and inefficiency.

We know that at the international level most unions are top heavy with bureaucrats drawing salaries comparable to those of corporate executives. We know that these officials will agree, in our names, to government programs such as the wage freeze that make us bear the whole burden of inflation. We know the internationals are run by monolithic machines having absolute power and no semblance of democracy. We have learned to expect little from the internationals themselves.

We expect somewhat more from our local unions. Most of our dues money stays there, and in most industries we have depended on local negotiations for our contracts. We recognize that the local is run by a clique of paid officers and their supporters. They take care of our business just well enough to prevent our switching to another union, but no better. Under pressure at contract negotiations, if we attend meetings and say 'no' a few times, they may get us a good agreement. But after the contract is signed, the less they hear from the average union member, the better. They ignore grievances or process them reluctantly. They lecture dissatisfied members on what good conditions we have. They run the local and spend our money pretty much as they see fit. It is said of many locals that they could meet in a telephone booth. Too many of us would rather stay home and watch TV than go to a meeting where we assume all the decisions have been made in advance.

We have tolerated these inefficient local unions and excused our own apathy with the comforting assurance that we can always get tough in contract negotiations if we have to—that we can always get together and replace our local officers if they get too far out of line. But can we?

Our second rate unionism has run out of time. Either we clean up our unions now and regain control of them, or they will soon become completely useless. We all know what to do: take control of our unions on the job—regain control of our unions in the meeting hall.

We need tough, democratic unions...

This article is put out by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). What have we to do with other unions that we are competing with to organize jobs?

Many of us belong to Unions through which we bargain collectively AND the IWW. We see the IWW as the only strong, consistent advocate of the kind of tough, democratic unionism that will protect our working conditions and wages, no matter what label it happens to bear.

But why do we need to belong to the IWW to work for good unionism, wherever we are? In many industries—auto, steel, rubber, maritime, lumber, and others—the hard fought battles of the 1930's laid the foundation for today's collective bargaining. Great numbers of those union activists were sympathetic to the IWW and tried to build their unions along IWW lines. But working alone they felt helpless, got disgusted and gave up when the bureaucrats or communists seized control of their unions. As a result, we have to begin all over to rebuild our unions into tough, democratic organizations that will fit our needs. Had more of those militants of the 1930's belonged to an organization through which they could communicate, maybe they would not have given up so easily.

In the long view, we see that the capitalist free-enterprise economic system will not be able to continue to function in its present form. We see three options: fascism, state socialism(communism) in its various forms, or an economic system owned and run democratically by the people who produce the goods and services. We see this third option as the only one that will insure our survival and a world fit to bequeath to our grandchildren. Alone among the advocates of social reform and change, the IWW is working for this third option. Maybe it is a long shot, but considering the consequences to us all of either fascism or communism, we believe it is worth working for.

. . . AND the IWW

We belong to the IWW because it is the only union that tells the truth about our economic system. Other unions say that Labor and Capital are partners in the free-enterprise system, and that we must work together with our employers to preserve it. The IWW says:

'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common....Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.....'

Our own work experience tells us the IWW is right. If our interests were identical with our employers we would not need to join unions and pay dues to bargain collectively. Neither would you.

We think the other unions, when they say that our interests are the same as our employers', are fostering a dangerous illusion. We can act intelligently only if our basic evaluation of a situation is founded on reality. We want to support the only union that states realistically our true relationship with our employers.

Moreover, we do not enjoy the ceaseless contention with our employers over wages and working conditions, nor the occasional strike that goes with it. We think the best way to end this contention is to change the economic system, as the IWW advocates.

We belong to the IWW because we want to help publish material like this. We want to communicate with like-minded members of other unions in our localities. Belonging to the IWW does not change the kind of unionism we advocate day by day on our jobs and in our union meetings. But it does help us spread this kind of unionism beyond the reach of our individual voices. It encourages other militant unionists to continue to speak out because they know they are not alone.

We are not trying to capture or control our other unions. We don't want to substitute one clique for another. We are trying to make those unions democratic —controlled by no clique —because we believe firmly that the union members themselves are best able to take care of their own interests.

Won't you join us?

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or the local representative listed below:



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