

CONTRACTS ARE NOT CLASS STRUGGLE

October 17, 2024 | Jay Bettencourt

At first glance, public interest in labor unions appears to have grown exponentially over the past few years. This has been a welcome development; however, despite the constant exhortations of the progressive media and some notable wins on the part of large established unions, rates of union membership and activity continue to stagnate or decline. Simultaneously, working, living, and economic conditions have steadily worsened – especially in the lower ends of the wage scale. How is it that workers’ supposed increased support for unions has not

translated to either a stronger labor movement or improved conditions? Why are rates of union membership and economic inequality worse than those of the Gilded Age? Why has no mass labor movement emerged out of the tumultuous economic and social conditions of the 2010s and early 2020s to challenge this?

Many make the superficial assumption that rank-and-file North American workers are irredeemably racist, too demure, or otherwise conservative. Some argue that the

labor movement needs stronger leadership of the correct leanings toward socialism or communism. Even others argue that unions are obsolete and could never deliver on widespread social transformation without connection to an external political party that leads them.

Some of these cynical arguments may hold grains of truth; however, none offer good answers as to why workers' struggles and union activity – from small confrontations with the boss to large strikes – have fallen to such low levels. To answer this question more fully, we have to examine the fundamental basis of most unions today – namely, labor law. At its very basic level, almost all legal acts by the capitalist state exist to suppress grievances that could disrupt business-as-usual. These include the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, also known as the Wagner Act of 1935), the Railroad Labor Act, and others.

These laws explicitly lay out their purposes and goals in the opening clauses. For example, the NLRA, which forms the legal basis for most union organizing today, is officially titled,

“An act to diminish the causes of labor disputes burdening or obstructing interstate and foreign commerce, to create a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and for other purposes.”

The title clearly states the interests of capital and its clients in the government: to reduce labor conflicts that impact commerce. In other words, to use bureaucratic and legal methods to keep the class struggle and workers activity from boiling over into widespread strike waves, concerted class struggle, and mass working class consciousness and organization. Or, more glibly, to effectively neutralize workers' most powerful leverage. Engaging in this system is a lose-lose strategy for all workers and unions, but particularly for those of us who aim to build One Big Union of the whole working class to abolish wage slavery and seize control of the economy.

LABOR RELATIONS LAW: STRANGLING LABOR, EMPOWERING CAPITAL

In the Wagner Act model, a union files for a representation election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board. The employer is immediately notified of the petition, after which a two-step election is triggered. The first step, called a “Card Check” or “Authorization Card Check,” requires the union to collect “authorization cards” from a majority of the workers in the proposed bargaining unit. These cards essentially say, “I, the undersigned worker, authorize the union to bargain on my behalf” — they are not union membership cards nor do they involve or imply union membership.

If this hurdle is passed, a second election is scheduled. This is the “election” proper, where there is a NLRB-overseen vote yes/no vote of the bargaining unit of whether they want the union to represent them. At both stages of this process, the

employer can pull all kinds of dirty tricks – legal and otherwise – to head off the election. These include intimidation, propaganda, surveillance, increased discipline of known union supporters, expanding or shrinking the bargaining unit to include unaffected workers or exclude known supporters, and so on. One core strategy is to prevent as many workers from showing up to vote as possible, usually achieved by the previously mentioned tactics.

Presuming that those workers who show up on the NLRB election day vote in support of the union's representation, the employer is legally bound to begin bargaining a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the union's lawyers. Contract bargaining can take years and often takes place behind closed doors, with details usually only sparingly shared with the workers if at all. Only then do most workers become full members of the union, with the option of opting out of membership in some states. Dues are deducted from members' paychecks automatically, not by voluntary contribution or initiative on the workers part.

More “progressive” unions may hold actions including strikes to engage the workers in support of the negotiation team. They may include membership card drives to withstand union busting. However, most unions do not actively seek to use economic disruption as a bargaining strategy. Nor do they seek to build the willingness and capability of workers themselves to collectively take action or confront management directly to address grievances; everything flows through the lawyers and through the contract.

The most important effect of this model is to take the power and agency of improving working conditions – and society – out of the hands of workers and put it into the hands of union bosses, lawyers, negotiators, and legislators. In a sense, the Labor Relations (LR) system epitomized by the Wagner Act takes the idea of “collective bargaining” of masses of workers on the shopfloor stopping work to negotiate as one with management, to some logically tortured concept of every worker being represented by the same lawyer in a boardroom somewhere. Don't confront management on the shop floor. Don't strike or disrupt the economy. Work now, grieve later, and let the lawyers handle it for you. All while the profits flow to capital.

In some cases, such as for railroad workers in the US (covered under the Railway Labor Act) and most Canadian labor law, there is a superficially different system that results in similar outcomes. In these jurisdictions, contract bargaining goes through several stages and strikes are only legally allowed after several rounds of negotiations and “cooling off periods” designed to prevent labor disputes from stopping commerce. Even then, as we will see, the US President or Canadian Parliament can simply declare a strike illegal and order workers back to work with threat of severe legal sanctions or other forms of breaking the union.

In all cases, the labor relations system acts to substitute mediation, arbitration, and legislation in place of strikes, boycotts, and other economic disruption. The ruling class, liberals, conservatives, and others who benefit from the status quo have different moral or philosophical arguments for why workers and unions should engage with it. But in the end, the effect is the same and should be clear to any Wobbly: the labor relations system is to keep workers from doing class struggle.

This dynamic is clear from observing or participating in almost any labor struggle today, but here I'll focus on three examples: the 2021 – present day Starbucks Workers Union, the aborted 2022 US Railway Strike, and the recent 2024 Canadian Railway Strike.

CASE 1: COFFEE GETS HEATED

The Starbucks Workers Union (SBWU) first emerged into the public consciousness around 2021 when workers at a Buffalo, NY cafe filed and won a NLRB certification election. A steady flow of certification elections followed after this first cafe; at the time of this writing in late 2024, SBWU claims almost 500 union cafes and over 10,000 union members across the United States. While SBWU is not the first effort to organize Starbucks cafes, it has been one of the most enduring and successful at growing its ranks.

Working conditions in the foodservice industry are notoriously bad. Wages are low and workers rely on customer generosity (i.e. tipping) for survival; healthcare benefits are poor or nonexistent; hours are long and schedules change at the whim of management; time off is generally few and far between; sexual harassment is rampant; and so on. While these issues have been endemic to the industry, the COVID pandemic brought many of these issues to a head as cafe workers stood on the front lines of the lockdowns and the social disintegration that followed, helping spur greater interest in organizing among this section of the workforce.

SBWU organizers have certainly done an excellent job at quickly winning NLRB certification elections, building a collective identity through branding and propaganda, and bringing unionism to a younger generation of workers (including a large proportion of women, LGBTQ workers, and workers of color) in an industry that have largely been overlooked by mainstream labor unions. Difficulties that have long pervaded organizing the foodservice sector – large numbers of small, independently-owned shops, geographically dispersed locations, high turnover, etc. – are less present at Starbucks. As a multinational corporation with high-density clusters of locations and a centralized ownership and management model, Starbucks presents a good target and a nice anchor point for union activity in the sector.

SBWU has also done a decent job of regularly taking action

to engage the workforce and keep the union campaign front and center. These actions include “Red Cup Days,” one-day strikes, informational pickets, etc. Their website is full of photos of stylish young workers holding picket signs and Labor Notes features their activities regularly in their events and media output. The progressive liberal media, from The Nation to Labor Notes to Jacobin, hails SBWU as the vanguard of a newly militant and confrontational labor movement that can appeal to the alienated young workers of today.

However, despite the radical appearances, what is actually happening is not very different from the same status quo business unionism that has dominated for decades.

Let's start with the organizing strategy. SBWU is a project of Workers United (WU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which are both deeply entrenched in the mainstream labor movement. As such, SBWU approaches each shop as its own mini-union or bargaining unit; the workers at each cafe file for an NLRB election. This allows the organizers to avoid an all-or-nothing election campaign, instead trying to steadily grow the number of members and shops under its aegis more sustainably. On the flip side, most SBWU bargaining units are only a handful of workers, which limits the universe of actions each unit can take.

SBWU will often hold visible events such as “Red Cup Days”, “Red For Bread Days”, and occasional one-day strikes at isolated locations. This gives an air of militancy and willingness to engage in confrontational action with the employer; however, true militancy, meaning disciplined, widespread actions such as a truly economically disruptive strike, a union-wide sit-in, etc. have never been attempted or hinted at by SBWU.

SBWU actions are almost always superficial, symbolic, and tied to ongoing contract bargaining, whether it's to just get Starbucks to the bargaining table, or to advance stalled negotiations. They often rely on outside supporters and members of the public instead of the internal strength and militancy of the shop workers. The weakness of this strategy is on display by reading through the demands and looking at the overall SBWU timeline:

Summer 2021: First shop files for election and wins; several more follow

March 2022: SBWU enters contract bargaining and “wins” tipping for workers

2022 – 2024: Steady stream of elections

March 2024: SBWU announces an agreement with SBX for a “framework for bargaining and organizing”

Demands (as of March 2024) include:

- More lax dress code
- Easier tips
- Slightly more sick time
- 5 percent wage increases applied since 2022

In other words, over the past 4+ years of organizing, countless Red Cup Days and other “solidarity actions” involving customers, and so on, SBWU has not won anything meaningful beyond tips (which, it should be said, costs the employer nothing). Contract bargaining has endlessly dragged on to no effect; it has taken 2 years to agree to a “framework for bargaining,” to allow workers to wear jeggings, and to allow workers to wear fun pins. Contrast this with the strike wave of the 1930s, where the Autoworkers had the automakers and the federal government on their knees, caving to demands within 3 months of the Flint sit-down strike. Notably, the wins that SBWU has chalked have only come from disruptive collective action (though those actions typically aim simply to bring management to the table).

This is the logical outcome of organizing for a legal contract through the LR system, where the contract is king and labor peace is the price: endless negotiations, millions of dollars in lawyers fees, years of wasted time, a neutered labor movement, and despondent workers desperate for meaningful improvements to their lives finding none. Class struggle, class conflict, outright economic disruption, and ultimately worker’s power, are deliberately sidelined in order to win “formal recognition” from the government and make pathetic demands on the employer such as 5percent raises and the right to wear jeggings. Employers will not bargain in good faith, ever; the government will act in capital’s favor, always; and the LR system will never win a world for workers. It is high time to bring back real, disruptive worker militancy – not the same old business-as-usual with a coat of black and red paint.

CASE 2: AMERICAN RAILS

In 2022, the 12 main unions that represent most of the railroad workers in the US were posed to walk out on strike. Contract negotiations between these unions and the Class 1 railroads broke down repeatedly throughout the course of the year.

Support for a strike had been building for years, largely through the efforts of the cross-trade labor network Railroad Workers United (RWU). Working conditions on America’s railroads have rapidly declined since the late 1990s; railroad managers have implemented a litany of policies designed to extract maximum profits out of an increasingly squeezed labor force. These policies include “precision scheduled railroading,” one-man train crews, increasingly long double-decker trains, in-cab operator monitoring, last-minute crew scheduling, and so on. Railroad engineers reported at

the time that due to being on-call almost continuously, they effectively worked with less than 10 days off per year. Operators reported having to skip major life events such as births, funerals, weddings, and graduations in order to work a shift last minute. Of course, freight accidents, derailments, on-the-job deaths and injuries, and other workplace safety incidents skyrocketed. These include such rail disasters as oil and coal train derailments in the Columbia River Gorge, chemical spills around the Midwest, and so on.

Railroad workers are not covered under the Wagner Act; the Railroad Labor Act is the governing law here, which is superficially different from the Wagner Act but affects the same outcome. This is partially due to the older, longer history of unionism among the railroad workforce in the US than other sectors, and partially due to the critical place railroads occupy in the economy. Several crippling rail strikes paralyzed the US economy from the 1870s through the early 1900s, prompting the government to intervene in the 1920s and 1930s, placing hurdles to rail strikes.

Under the Railway Labor Act (which, like the Wagner Act, has the stated purpose of preventing economic disruption¹ and also covers airline workers), rail operators and their unions are required to bargain contracts every few years. Industrial action is theoretically allowed, but any strike action can only be taken after a 60-day “cooling off period.” After repeated rounds of failed negotiations, the office of the US President can simply step in and dictate a deal.

And this is exactly what happened during the 2022 US Railroad contract negotiations. The talks broke down repeatedly over the course of almost a year; RWU and other supporters built up widespread support for strike action among the workforce. Union memberships voted down poor contracts in several of the trades. Union leaderships issued notifications of strike action. Ultimately, in the midnight hours before workers would have walked off the job, President Biden and the US Congress stepped in on December 2 and imposed a contract in line with the railroad trust’s “last, best, final offer.” The “yes” vote in Congress included self-described socialist politicians Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush, and Ilhan Omar.

Thus, despite the workforce’s willingness to fight and probably win against the railroad trust, the legal system stepped in to prevent class conflict from breaking out, leaving workers a raw deal. And, for what it’s worth, the president’s deal did not include any meaningful improvements to working conditions or quality of life issues; simply a small pay bump and a single paid day off per year.

Shortly after the deal went into force, the Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, Ohio occurred, spilling large amounts of carcinogenic chemicals into the soil & water of

¹ Railway Labor Act, https://railroads.dot.gov/sites/fra.dot.gov/files/fra_net/1647/Railway%20Labor%20Act%20Overview.pdf

the working-class town. The massive plume of thick black smoke circulated for a few weeks of the media cycle, with liberals calling for tighter regulations on the rail industry that never came. The train was operated by a one-man crew.

CASE 3: CANADIAN RAILS

In August 2024, Canadian rail workers threatened a strike over broken down contract negotiations with the Canadian rail majors, Canadian Pacific Kansas City and Canadian National. For a few days, the US media was alight with doomsday predictions on what this would mean for the US economy and “global supply chain issues.”

Labor relations in Canada differ slightly from that of the US and restrict strike activity even more. During the lifespan of a contract, the union is legally forbidden from industrial action under any circumstances, unlike the US, where they are theoretically legal but difficult to achieve in practice while under contract, or if the contract contains an all-too-common “no strike clause.” Strikes can only occur in the window of opportunity between contracts and under highly circumscribed conditions; thus the employer always knows when a strike may happen. And, like under the US Railway Labor Act, any striking union may simply be “legislated” back to work by an Act of Parliament.

And, again, this is precisely what happened in August 2024 during the Canadian Railway Strike. After barely one day of picketing, Parliament declared the strike illegal and ordered workers back to the job². Instead of defying the order and engaging in outright class conflict, the unions ordered workers back onto the job and lodged legal complaints in early September. Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific Kansas City Railway had annual profits in 2023 of 9.8 billion CAD and 1.4 billion CAD; they can easily afford a few nuisance legal cases.

CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CONTRACT TRAP

It may be helpful here to elaborate on what I mean by “class struggle,” because the term has suffered an unfortunate meaning creep since the mid-20th Century. Class struggle is the conscious effort by workers to organize ourselves and directly, collectively, confront management and capital on the job over control over our work, our working conditions, and who gets the fruits of our labor.

Class struggle can be done on the small scale and the large scale. Most minds probably jump quickly to the titanic struggles of the early 20th Century labor movement, such as the big strikes of the 1930s. These are the actions that go down in the history books and are rightly commemorated by future generations of workers.

² Canada moves to end rail shutdown quickly; CN workers to return to work. Ljunggren, David and Mukherjee, Promit. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/canadian-national-railways-canadian-pacific-lock-out-teamsters-union-workers-2024-08-22/>

But for every big strike involving tens of thousands of workers, there were countless struggles carried on by smaller teams of workers over everyday grievances. These day-to-day grievances over safety, poor treatment, and quality of life issues were where previous generations of militant workers honed their skills and developed the culture of fighting together.

As these grievances – and the workers willingness to fight – accumulated, they eventually boiled over into larger conflicts. In the ultimate practice of democracy, fighting the class struggle from the smallest scale and upward required cultivating thousands of leaders, engaging tens of thousands of rank-and-file unionists, having millions of one-on-one conversations, and taking on countless grievances that, while small, materially improved workers’ lives. Stan Weir, a legendary Wobbly in the maritime industry, shares an anecdote describing the individual experience on the red-hot San Francisco waterfront in his classic *Class War Lessons*³, which chronicles a shop action on a merchant marine vessel.

These practices and culture were passed onto younger generations of workers as they came up through the workforce, naturalizing the reality of class conflict while also denaturalizing the alienating nature of labor under capitalism. Cultivating this militant culture and engaging in the endless smaller struggles built the solid foundation that the legendary class struggle could build on.

And it is exactly this foundation that contracts and legalism aim to destroy.

In most contracts, the “grievance procedure” strips away the militant’s access to immediately fight for better conditions. Small grievances are pushed toward a long process of arbitration, mediation, and other management-friendly venues. This takes the focus off the work floor and out of the hands of workers, shunts grievances towards professionals and union staff, and effectively creates long “cooling off periods” where workers interest and emotions evaporate before any resolution is reached. Thus, workers are left frustrated and stymied by their lived reality that nothing ever changes.

The grievance process removes the everyday presence of the union as a fighting force on the floor. The requisite shunt towards professional staff and lawyers also acts against the democratic nature of widespread shared struggle. It takes no professional skills or knowledge to be a rebellious worker; in fact, workers don’t even need to know how to read to be radicals. They just need to have a job and an understanding that their employer’s interests directly contradict their own. By abandoning the commitment to workers’ self-activity and becoming a vehicle for professional staff

³ *Class War Lessons*. Weir, Stan. <https://libcom.org/library/unions-leaders-who-stay-job-aka-class-war-lessons-stan-weir>

and careerism, the union is left as a shell of itself, evolving into little more than the “third party” that union busters so often trot out.

Only focused organization and willingness to turn away from contractualism’s grievance process toward day-to-day class conscious struggle will reverse this trend in the labor movement. The IWW is the only union in North America with the aim to build organization on the job and cultivate everyday class struggle to confront the boss; virtually all others are slaves to the contract.

CLASS STRUGGLE VERSUS THE LAW

From the very beginning, labor law was written in order to destroy workers’ most powerful weapon, economic disruption. The idea that the law exists to protect workers and “protect the right to organize a union” is a comforting fiction told by mid-20th Century liberals and exemplified by the New Deal compromise between capital and labor that was brokered by the state. This compromise itself was a reaction to decades of protracted, sometimes violent, class struggle and revolutionary action on the part of workers around the world that threatened the fundamental structures of capitalism.

All labor law in North America is anti-union, anti-class struggle law if we measure it purely by the outcomes of union activity and economic disruption. This is because class struggle, in the materialist sense of class conscious, militant workers’ struggle over control of the means of production and surplus value is a fundamental threat to the existence of a ruling capitalist class. They will never “let” us have class struggle – we can only do it ourselves, whether it is legal or not.

Previous generations of workers understood this, and their dedication to the struggle often meant kangaroo courts, prison time, and more. They understood the risks and costs, and they knew that the ruling class could never abide class conscious workers. But they fought struggles, led strikes, and went to prison either way; for some, that is the price of emancipation.

With today’s legal structure, that energy and effort that previously went towards building class organization and bailing strike leaders out of jail now goes toward paying lawyers and arbitrators to settle minor grievances. Unions that buy into this system shoot themselves in the foot and in the chest; they cut themselves off from the struggle’s fuel and opt to take struggles into venues that are designed for them to lose on all levels. A long time Wobbly who now works for mainstream union has told me (and I’m paraphrasing):

“The cost of arbitrating a single grievance through the courts can reach \$100,000 and almost never ‘gets the goods.’ Legal fines for breaking the law to go on strike and bailing a union leader out of jail can cost the same, but if you have

a successful strike, your members win gains, you’ve built a ton of solidarity and organization among the workers, and you have battle hardened class warriors out of it who can carry the struggle forward.”

I know which alternative I would rather have. Capitalists understand that paying fines – for breaking labor law, environmental health & safety regulations, etc. – are the cost of doing business. We must begin approaching class struggle with a similar view.

Unionists need to embrace this reality and start choosing the correct path. Industrial action and class struggle are what build unions. Direct conflict with employers and industrial trusts has been sidelined and punished by the state precisely because it works. Today’s abysmal working conditions, political degeneration, and fractious social conditions are simply the result of the absence of the uniting, uplifting influence of class struggle activity across North America. It will not be easy, but confronted with continuing immiseration of growing swathes of the workforce, compounding wars, economic and environmental crises, it is the only option that will work.

The sooner we recognize these facts, the sooner we can start fighting back meaningfully. Everything else, from legal cases, to legally enforceable contracts and the like, is a distraction at best and a trap at worst. It is time to abandon these failed strategies and embrace class struggle not just in the abstract, but in practice. Our children and grandchildren will thank us.



NO NLRB? NO PROBLEM

February 7, 2025 | x364181

Last week Trump fired two members of the National Labor Relations Board, leaving the body without quorum and the ability to process cases. Many

unions are wallowing in despair because they are so reliant on the government, but there is an elephant in the room here nobody wants to address. Why is the labor movement so dependent on the government in the first place? Can we afford to be in a situation where one orange man can suspend the union process? The moment has opened our imaginations to what labor organizing would be like without the NLRB.

After being fired, NLRB General Council Jennifer Abruzzo said, “if the Agency does not fully effectuate its Congressional mandate in the future as we did during my tenure, I expect that workers with assistance from their advocates will take matters into their own hands in order to get well-deserved dignity and respect in the workplace, as well as a fair share of the significant value they add to their employer’s operations.” This is interesting because ‘taking matters into your own hands’ is something labor law was designed to prevent.

TAKING MATTERS OUT OF OUR HANDS

In the early 1900s, workers across the U.S. faced low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions, which were made even worse by the Great Depression. Workers responded with militant strikes and sabotage. For example, in 1919, over 65,000 workers in Seattle launched a general strike, and in 1934, the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike brought the whole city to a halt. It was in this context that Congress created the legal framework for ‘collective bargaining’ that eventually consolidated into the National Labor Relations Act in 1935.

The purpose of the act was to derail militant labor activity into more polite bureaucratic avenues. For the government, workers’ self-activity was too uncontrolled. It interfered with “the free flow of commerce” and risked revolutionary destabilization of the class system. If employers would just recognize unions and engage in bargaining away from the shop floor, capitalism could be made more stable and efficient. It also became obvious to those in power that labor organizations were going to exist whether they liked it or not. What is a government to do? Since they could not beat labor out of existence, the next best thing was to take control over what it meant to be a union. Unions were enshrined in law and given an “acceptable” avenue to express themselves. Union structure and practice were molded to promote ‘industrial peace,’ thereby defanging labor’s more radical tendencies.

TRUMP’S CHILDISH STATECRAFT

In this context, Trump has pretentiously sabotaged his government’s own mechanism for containing worker militancy. But it remains to be seen if a dysfunctional NLRB will lead to unions “taking matters into their own hands.” If that were the case, it could be the revival of the labor movement

we are looking for⁴. We do not need more of the same labor movement. We need a different direct action movement that operates beyond the control of government – on our own terms – for a world that meets human need and not the profits of the ruling class. Labor’s strength has always been grounded in its control of production, not these arenas of ‘collective bargaining’ we are funneled into by the NLRA. The shopfloor is where class war is waged, while the bargaining table is where labor goes to be tamed, integrated, and defeated.

So however disappointing a dysfunctional NLRB is, it is healthy for labor to think outside the box. Do we even need to be recognized by the NLRB⁵? Are polite negotiations the only way to win? If the General Council of the NLRB can think of an alternative, then we sure as hell better be able to. Although, I stress this should not be a secondary strategy we use when our dear NLRB flounders. It is the only direction that guarantees our power. Regardless of Trump’s shenanigans, the winning strategy for labor has always been to abandon the state’s polite bargaining framework.

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Taking matters into our own hands will require a great transformation of the labor movement’s habits. In the nine decades since 1935, unions have been shaped to rely on the NLRB. Union leadership will be reluctant to go down any other path; Indeed, that could mean eliminating their own careers since their job is to serve the NLRA’s style of unionism to workers. For this reason, it will be key to develop other kinds of unions, like the IWW, where rank & file committees have control instead of comfy union officials.

Further, most unions have bargained away their ability to ‘take matters into our own hands’ by signing contracts with no-strike clauses; The law does not allow for direct action if the NLRB can’t make quorum. So the heavy legal consequences remain for workers who have signed away their power. Obviously, the government will be more than willing to use the NLRA to protect capitalists from any contract violations. Again, the contract framework provided by the government is more about maintaining the class system than helping workers. It would be great if labor took action overnight, but due to these contractual traps, undoing labor’s habits is more likely a long term project. Unions need to be rebuilt from the ground up, by the rank & file, in a way that preserves the freedom to strike. Then we will have the freedom to move in situations like this.

It is not just the contract or the larger union apparatus that is so dependent on the NLRB, but workers themselves. Workers are trained to ask their bureaucrat to file the grievance or ULP. Even in the IWW, a union that favors

4 *More Juice*. X364181. <https://industrialworker.org/more-juice/>

5 *Practice Involuntary Recognition*. X350520. <https://organizing.work/2022/10/practice-involuntary-recognition/>

direct action over contractualism, we get starry-eyed new members itching to file for recognition without building a functional committee. They arrive to us miseducated by the NLRA regime, the labor press, and general approach of mainstream unions. The NLRA's culture has weaseled its way into the very intuition and habits of the working class: "Where are you, bureaucrat? Have you seen the form I filed yet? What can you do on my behalf?" So it is not enough to exclaim workers will just do it themselves. Yes, we must, but it will be difficult to change our habits. Like a smoker attempting to quit cigarettes, people will not immediately claim their power. They will crave the old way of doing things, especially if there is no clear understanding of the problem at hand, and no effort to break the dependency. It'll take a lot of intention and discipline.

We are at a point in history where the government may not need to channel the labor movement into the NLRB. Labor's militancy has become so degenerate that Trump can sabotage the board and leave unions hamstrung. The potential absence of the NLRB is a very different scenario compared to the situation prior to the NLRA. Back then unions were more wild and capable. They were just beginning to be led into a cage and still possessed wild traits. But now a sudden removal of the NLRB avenue is like depriving cattle of the farmer's feed. Perhaps this is giving Trump too much credit, because I doubt the blathering fool is aware of the history of social control, but look at it from the enemy's perspective: there is a good chance that tossing a softened, polite animal out into the wild will just result in their death. He senses labor's weakness.

Perhaps a dysfunctional NLRB will cause rank & file workers to get upset, adapt, and take a different direction. However, once things get rowdy, the government can simply open the floodgates of the NLRB and channel labor into its normal avenues. They'll remember how to dangle the carrot in front of us. Even Trump will realize his mistake and learn that the NLRA is the most sophisticated technology of capitalist rule. At that point, workers may feel inclined to come home to roost, for their bodies have not forgotten what it's like for 'someone else' to do it. Will any new habits be strong enough to resist old temptations?

Trump's gutting of the NLRB is timely. It's happening at a point where the tameness of the working class is at an all time high, and union membership is rock bottom. It makes sense for them to sabotage the NLRB until unions prove they can 'take matters into their own hands.' It's like a test to see if social control is even required anymore. Perhaps labor is so domesticated everyone will slave away without disrupting anything. But I know we can shake things up.



THE ORGANIZER AND THE DISORGANIZED RESISTANCE

August 22, 2024 | Daniel Bovard-Katz and Margaret Ignatowski

Last year, my workplace instituted a number of changes to our time off policies. While a couple of these changes were good, most ranged from annoying to very bad. We lost most of our ability to take paid sick time (down to the legally mandated 5 days) and were informed that any vacation time we had at the end of the year would be lost without being paid out (previously it would roll over). While the company tried to spin the changes, most people recognized what was happening: things were getting worse.

Anticipating this, our bosses had human resources put on two virtual presentations to explain the changes for any of us who might be confused. Neither had time for questions, suggesting that HR understood exactly what was happening. The first presentation, however, had dozens of workers expressing displeasure through the chat feature. One worker said, "now we know why there is no time for questions," and another even said, "we should keep making a fuss." In the second presentation (which had the same content), HR disabled the chat. The changes continued to be a topic of discussion throughout unit meetings and among co-workers, and slowly management began rolling back some changes. First, they announced that workers who lost a vacation day due to the new method for calculating days would get a bonus vacation day the following year (meaning there would be no net loss for anyone), then it was announced that up to one day of vacation could be paid out if not taken, then finally that any unused vacation time would be paid out at the end of the year.

Throughout this time, I had begun talking with my co-work-

ers about the changes, as any good Wobbly would, and a few of us had started a small organizing committee. This makes it tempting to count the changes our bosses rolled out as wins. Are they, though? After all, most of the people complaining hadn't spoken to a committee member before doing so.

Before we answer that question, I want to contrast this with another worker in a similar situation in a similar workplace. Their summary follows:

A few years ago, my employer changed the supplier for the prescription drug insurance benefit offered to salaried employees located in the United States. As a result of this change, employees were abruptly forced to transfer their prescriptions from their pharmacy of choice to either Walgreens or a mail order service, and they were restricted to filling long-term maintenance prescriptions in 90-day quantities. This was communicated poorly, with vague language emphasizing that the change was giving employees the power to choose (between picking prescriptions up from Walgreens in-person and having prescriptions delivered by mail) and suggesting that employees could save money by transferring their prescriptions to Walgreens (rather than clearly and explicitly stating outside of fine print that employees would not be able to get prescriptions covered at other pharmacies). In addition to these changes, the list of covered medications changed, resulting in a number of employees losing coverage for expensive prescriptions. Overall, the impression was very much that the prescription insurance benefit became substantially worse.

Employees who had been negatively impacted by the change in benefit provider began to discuss their experiences with each other through a variety of internal channels of communication. As one of those employees, I was involved in a number of these discussions, but they were only that—discussions among employees with no clear plan for action. At around the same time, I was also getting involved in a very small organizing campaign, and I wanted to do something about the change in benefits, but I knew that we did not have nearly the numbers that would be needed to publicly take direct action as a union. Instead, I worked with some contacts from a corporate employee group to collect emotionally impactful stories about the negative consequences of the change and feed them to a sympathetic employee in HR. Eventually, the company worked with the new prescription benefit provider to allow employees to once again utilize a pharmacy of their choice. This was a win, but it was a small one, and while I believe that we collectively influenced the company's decision to make a change, it wasn't something for which our campaign could take credit. I wasn't able to talk openly with everyone involved about organizing, which was unfortunate. Still, given the size of our campaign, I

think that avoiding public action was the correct choice.

While our win was small, I have been able to use some of the conversations sparked by this issue as springboards to bigger conversations around organizing. I have since had one-on-one conversations with a couple of fellow workers who were impacted by this issue, and one has joined our campaign. For me, the whole experience shows that there is value in taking even small actions, that even a small number of workers can make a difference through direct action, and that paying attention to the concerns of fellow workers pays off.

First of all, we should note that a union is multiple workers acting together to make changes in the workplace. However, a union that seeks to endure as an organization cannot be a group of workers that takes collective action once. From this perspective, while what we did was union activity, it reflected a response to existing discontent rather than stemming from our organizing. Looking at my fellow worker's actions in their campaign, I want to draw a few contrasts and lessons.

First, by collecting stories and identifying a channel by which HR could be pressured, the organizer was able to increase the pressure on management to fix the problem. This shows how knowledge of how to formulate and conduct good direct action can be applied even if other workers aren't familiar with what you're trying to do. Second, by using the experience in further organizing conversations, organizers can easily demonstrate to our co-workers how even loosely coordinated action can have some effect. Identifying imperfect examples of collective action in our workplace can be more impactful to our co-workers than more perfect examples from elsewhere (although I think both types of stories have value).

Some organizers, in encouraging greater militancy, have said that "union is a verb." This is true, but union is also a noun. The union is workers acting together, but it is also the organization that exists between actions. To the extent that workers engage in union action without a union organization, we should expect to see things we wouldn't recommend, such as individuals singling themselves out or communicating their displeasure or even desire to organize in public. We should encourage organizing best practices when we can safely and covertly do so, and we should also use the action to try to build the union as an organization. For example, in identifying the right target for the action (such as a specific person in HR) and suggesting delivering the demand in a way that maximizes emotional pressure in a short period of time, we can make demands more likely to be met. By later reminding other workers of the action and emphasizing its collective nature, we can help workers see

the power of collective action. After all, if one mostly unplanned, loosely collective action gets some changes, it's no great leap to realize that planning more collective actions is a way to get more changes.



FIELDNOTES: BOBCATS UNITED IWW CAMPAIGN

December 5, 2024 | x423752

“Oh, I don't know, Bobcat Bonnie's just isn't the right environment to organize in. No one else seems to really care enough to take a stand,” I told the facilitator of the Ypsilanti IWW's Workplace Control and Resistance workshop in early July of 2024. I said this as a somewhat experienced organizer, too! I had already taken an OT101 and been part of two organizing campaigns prior to my employment at Bobcat Bonnie's. Even experienced organizers can fall prey to this type of “doomerism” thinking. As you read along, you will see that there was always an opportunity to organize here, and everywhere, including your own “unorganizable” workplace.

Little did I know, less than two months after this workshop, individual workers would begin to be very vocal about their

grievances at the restaurant. A couple of days after Labor Day, I woke up to this message in my 7shifts (our scheduling app) group chat from a fellow worker:

“For everyone listening...You can't expect us to work Labor Day while we wait to cash our paychecks. For my coworkers, educate yourself on French history. Fire me.”

I immediately realized I was wrong in my assessment I made back in July. I then felt a sense of urgency to meet with this person (let's call them Ember) and get organized. So, I reached out to them over Facebook Messenger:

“Hey, Ember, I really loved your messages in the 7shifts chat, and you're 100% right. We should get together for some coffee in the next couple of days to talk about this.”

I will note here that the staff at Bobcat Bonnie's was a really tight-knit crew. We were all friends with each other and hung out outside of work frequently. We mostly had each other's contact information, and for those we didn't, it was easily accessible on the 7shifts app. The boss gave us a great resource for gathering information through that app, and we already had built amazing relationships with one another. So, in a way, I think we were informally organizing before this happened, and it set us up for success.

So, when Ember and I met for coffee, it was nothing out of the ordinary. Then, when we took it a step further and asked a few of our closest coworkers to meet for dinner and fill them in on our discussion, it also was nothing out of the ordinary. Let's fast forward to that dinner.

Ember and I began the conversation by talking about the bounced paychecks and how f*cked up it was that many of us worked on Labor Day with no pay. Out of the seven of us at the table, the majority had at least one bounced paycheck. Personally, I never had a bounced paycheck, but after this discussion, it became apparent that this had been an ongoing, widespread issue for over a year and we had no idea because everyone was gaslit by management into believing it was their own fault somehow. This is why it is critical to agitate. Ask your coworkers about what makes them upset on the job, and record it somewhere; we could have started organizing around this issue much earlier. One worker had six bounced paychecks in just the past year.

The conversation quickly evolved into an informal grievance hearing. We realized we were all collectively experiencing many issues besides just the bounced paychecks. I suggested to the group the idea of a petition; it seemed like a good first step to collectivize our grievances. So, in the coming weeks, we continued to meet and workshop together as an informal organizing committee until we had a finalized petition on September 16th with a plan to deliver it to the corporate office on October 7th. It had four demands outlined in it:

1. An end to bounced paychecks and a resolution of

payroll issues by the next payday, October 11th.

2. Guaranteed, consistent scheduling with sufficient hours to meet each individual employee's needs starting November 2nd.
3. Updated and comprehensive training procedures for both management and employees by November 18th.
4. An immediate end to inappropriate comments from management. Management routinely belittled us and talked trash behind our backs to our fellow workers, in an effort to pit us against each other. Other times, they would talk inappropriately to the younger women on staff, using their positions of power to make predatory remarks.

We also worked together in this time to complete a full social networking document with each employee's name, contact info, job position, an assessment column, "Who Is Talking?" column, and an area for notes. With a finalized petition in hand, we split up the rest of the staff amongst each organizer to complete one-on-ones, so we could get their input and, hopefully, their signature! Over the course of these three weeks leading up to our delivery date of October 7th, we spoke with every coworker and received signatures from nearly 90 percent of the staff.

Armed with a petition with full support from the entire staff and signatures from the overwhelming majority of us, we hatched a plan to march on the corporate office in Ferndale and hand-deliver the letter to the owner of the company. A group of nine of us committed to driving out to Ferndale from Ypsilanti; we assigned roles to each person and role played the delivery beforehand. Not only this, but we prepared⁶ an employee "press release" flyer to hand-deliver to the workers at each Bobcat Bonnie's location across the state of Michigan so that our narrative would spread before the employer could formulate a response to our organizing. We split into different teams to cover the most ground in the least amount of time. This flyer explained what we did, why we did it, and contained a QR code that led to a carrd.co website we had prepared which let people know how to join

the fight. We also plastered these flyers near employee entrances and dumpsters.

Everything went according to plan. The March on the Boss (MOTB) was beautifully executed. The workers at the other Bobcat locations were all sympathetic to the cause and expressed similar grievances. The general vibe at each store was "Wow, I'm surprised this didn't happen sooner." We felt like we were on top of the world and that it was only a matter of time until the other stores would join the struggle for a better Bobcat Bonnie's.

Things from this point on, however, escalated very quickly. Someone, not a worker, passed by one of the back entrances at one of the restaurants. We received an email on our newly created union email: "I really support you guys so I wanted to do what I can to help out; so, I posted your flyer on Reddit." Boom. **Just like that, the cat's out of the bag.** It blew up, and within an hour, the owner found out and was having a full meltdown in the comment section. Rumors and other misinformation began spreading as well. We agreed it would look bad to battle it out in the comments (unlike the owner), and decided we needed to produce a Bobcats United press release. We were forced to go public far sooner than we wanted. Then, just two days after going public, an hour after our dinner service concluded on Sunday, October 13th, and while our organizing committee was in an active meeting discussing next steps, the owner sent out a 7shifts announcement informing the Ypsilanti staff:



"...as we stated, we will be taking action on the concerns you have shared about inappropriate and/or harassing behavior. As such, we want to make sure this is done legally, and thoroughly so we will be suspending operations after Sunday's service."

Just like that, we were all out of jobs, and we were smart enough to know that this was probably not going to be a "temporary" closure. Since we were already in a union meeting, we started to

discuss what to do, and immediately filed an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charge. While ULPs are not the most effective tool, we were out of work; we had lost our most powerful weapon, shopfloor direct action. Knowing the ULP process can take months to years to resolve, we also began preparing plans for an emergency picket line outside the corporate

office demanding either a reopening of the Ypsilanti store or severance pay.

Due to the extreme reaction Bobcat Bonnie's had to our organizing in conjunction with our announced plans for an emergency picket, our union email began flooding with inquiries from local news outlets like WXYZ, CBS Detroit, Fox 2 Detroit, MLive, and Detroit Free Press. The community pressure, the extensive news coverage, the damage to the reputation of the company, the legal pressure, and our informational picketing outside of the corporate office proved to be too much. The company gave into our severance pay demand on day two of our picket.

And that's kind of where the story ended. Obviously, it wasn't a great ending; if anything, it was bittersweet. This campaign left me asking a lot of questions: how did things go so well, but so wrong at the same time? Was it going public that shut our store down, or was the Ypsilanti store on the chopping block already? After all, the Partridge Creek store had closed about a month ago and, as you know, paychecks had been bouncing for over a year. We will probably never be able to definitively answer these questions. But here are some of my key takeaways:

- I feel like going public was what inspired the company to take swift and severe action against our store. We delivered our petition on October 7th. We were forced to go public on October 11th. We were shut down two days later. Not only this, going public shifted our focus from organizing and winning demands to trying to appeal to the general public. It transformed the fight from improving our conditions to desperately trying to save our jobs (or at least win severance pay). I often wonder how this campaign might have been different if that random passerby never posted our flyer to Reddit. Or, perhaps, if we were more careful to prevent that from ever happening. In my estimation, going public escalated the situation greatly, but not in a way that built lasting worker power. It escalated the situation in a negative way and in a way that was not in our control. Escalation plans are meant to be in the workers' control!
- Despite this, negotiating a severance agreement on the picket line and winning it was a huge win for food workers. We caused a big enough problem that it made the boss realize giving in was cheaper than fighting. We also spoke to many food workers on that picket line who told us how inspired they felt to take action in their own workplaces. Thanks to the public-facing nature of this campaign, we were able to spread the Wobbly gospel widely. I think it was good for food workers to see the power of solidarity unionism in action.
- Even more importantly, many of my coworkers

learned how to organize on the job, attended an OT101, and became active members of our local IWW branch. And the former Bobcats organizing committee is meeting to come up with a brand-new branch project. We can scatter and continue to build the IWW wherever we go.

- This campaign revealed to me the ultimate purpose of the IWW is to develop more worker-organizers. We can't hyperfocus on any individual workplace; our focus is on organizing the worker. As we do this, our capacity to do bigger things exponentially grows.

Now, it's your turn! Get a head start on organizing your "un-organizable" workplace. Schedule a one-on-one with some of your coworkers. Start agitating. Who knows, an Ember might be in your workplace; fan the flames of discontent!



PEET'S ENACTS SWEEPING HEAVY-HANDED DISCIPLINE ON UNION MEMBERS

February 13, 2025 | Peets Labor Union

Berkeley, CA—Peet's Corporate is stonewalling the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as we try to negotiate a first contract at the five Peet's stores we work at. In 2023, workers at three Peet's stores in Berkeley and Oakland decided to organize with the IWW. In 2024, workers at the 4th Street store in Berkeley and at the NE Broadway store in Portland joined the IWW. All of us expected Peet's to promptly bargain a contract with us. Peet's has instead treated our bargaining attempts with contempt. They have been slow in responding to our requests for bargaining and are continually putting off contract negotiation.

These union busting tactics came to a boiling point late this past Autumn. Seven union organizers, known as the Wobbly 7, were given so-called “final warnings” by Peet’s before and after Thanksgiving, relating to a union action that had happened over six weeks before, on October 10. On that day, union members and their allies showed up to support a fellow worker (also a union organizer), who had a disciplinary hearing.

After a weeks-long investigation, which none of the workers being investigated were informed was happening, Peet’s management distributed letters to the Wobbly 7, informing them that these letters served as their “final warnings.” None of these workers had received any similar disciplinary measures prior to this, and were shocked that Peet’s was seemingly targeting union activists, including those with previously spotless disciplinary records, with a “final warning.” The “final warnings” did not contain specific allegations about what the workers had supposedly done at the October 10 action, and further did not provide any evidence that the Wobbly 7 organizers in question had violated any policies. In fact, all that the “final warnings” contained were the policies that the workers supposedly violated.

After attempting to file a grievance with Peet’s management over these abysmal union busting practices and targeting of the Wobbly 7, Peet’s replied to us that they would not consider our grievance until we began contract negotiations. We find this particularly frustrating, as it comes from the same management that has stonewalled contract negotiations from the moment we reached out to begin bargaining.

unjustly for forgetting to let her manager know that another worker was late. It hardly seems worth firing someone over, and represents clear retaliation from the employer. As Peets’ says on their Instagram, “anyone could be next.”

Image Credits: Peets Labor Union. <https://linktr.ee/peetslaborunion>

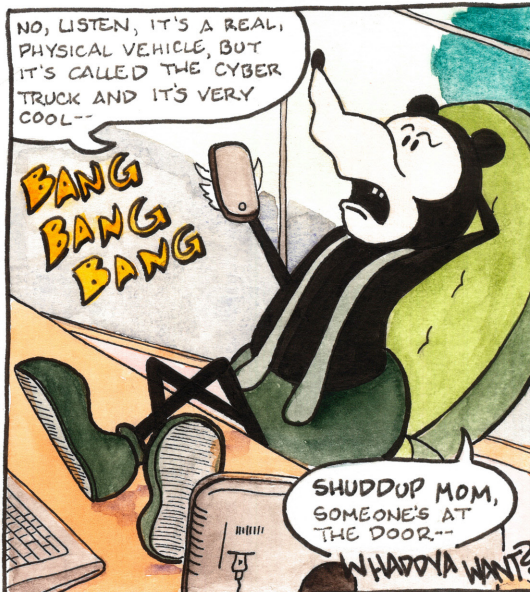


The IWW is urging customers of Peet’s who are outraged by the union busting behavior of Peet’s management to contact Peet’s customer service. The IWW will be distributing flyers to customers to inform them of these horrendous anti-union behaviors, which exist alongside pre-existing and ongoing health and safety and scheduling issues. The IWW hopes that Peet’s will promptly come to the bargaining table instead of continuing to target union activists while rebuffing contract negotiations.

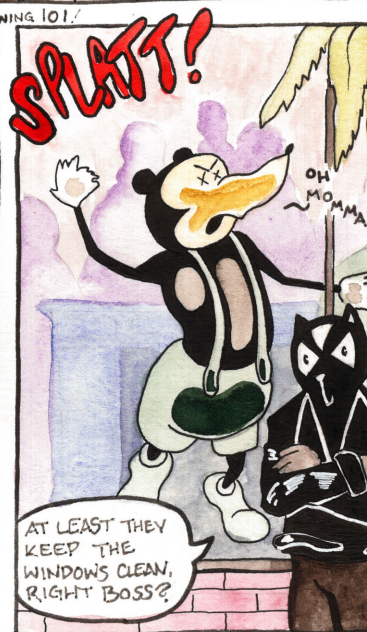
Editor’s Note: As of February 3rd, Fellow Worker Deya was fired

7 <https://www.instagram.com/peetslaborunion/>





I BET THEY PLANNED THIS 'MARCH ON THE BOSS' I BET THEY TOOK ORGANIZER TRAINING 101!

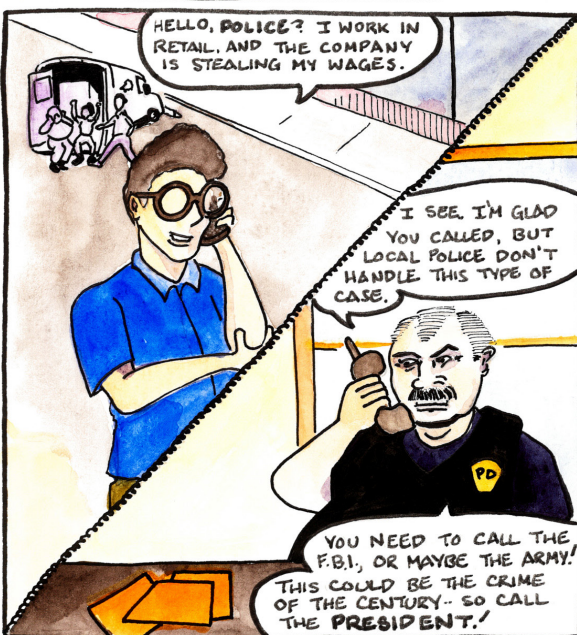
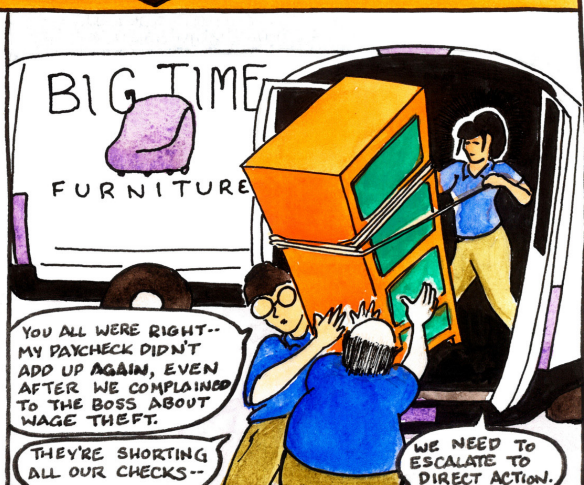
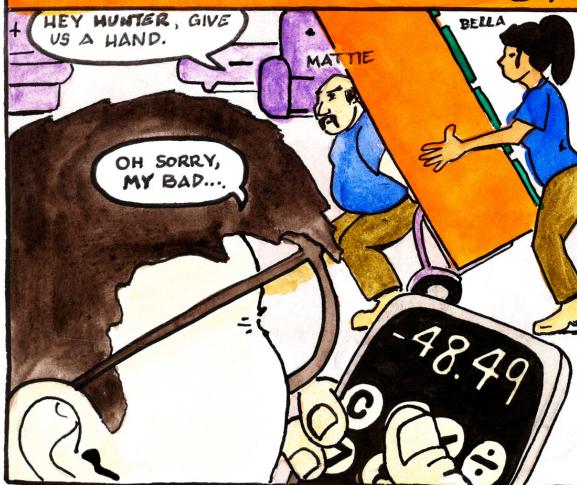


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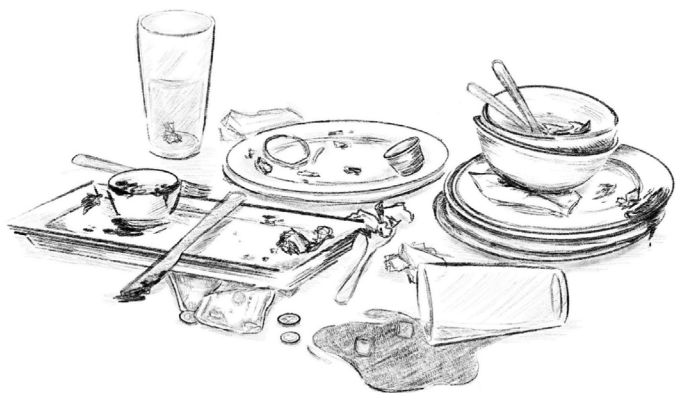
THE SABO CAT



"SICK OUT, DON'T STICK OUT"







SERVANTS IN THE SHADOWS: THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE 9-5

April 4, 2025 | x423752

“So I was getting myself ready for the revolution till I remembered I have work in the morning... the revolution will have to wait till after 5 PM I guess” ~ Apes of the State

There is a concerning trend that I have noticed in my experience doing radical organizing: I’m typically the only restaurant worker in the room. That is, when I’m even able to make it to the room at all. Meetings will often be scheduled with only a few days’ notice, maybe a week or so in advance. So, we can try our best to get our shifts covered if it conflicts with the meeting time. Which it usually does because they will often be scheduled during the evenings on weekdays (anywhere from 5-7pm), or midday on the weekends (anywhere from 12-4pm). As a 7-year service industry veteran, I very rarely happen to be free during these times. I might get lucky and have one of my off days lined up with a day the meeting happens to be scheduled, but that’s not typical.

SERVING THE 9-5

Let me explain why these meeting times are so hard for us. My job exists to serve the 9-5. Many restaurants open every day at 11am, just in time for the 9-5ers to come out for their lunch or their business meetings. And then, we’re open late, generally until 11pm or later, to entertain the 9-5ers after they get off of work. There’s something in the restaurant industry called the “mid shift” which is usually from 11am-7pm or 8pm which is designed to be there to serve the rushes from both of these crowds. Further, as a chronically understaffed industry with chronically underpaid workers, many of us are forced to work at least one double per week, meaning you’d probably be working 11am-10pm or so in this theoretical restaurant that I’ve been describing. Now, couple this with the fact that most restaurants will pressure

workers to have “open availability.” Meaning, you have no set schedule; one week you could be working a mix of opening, mid, or closing shifts, or all of the same. Or you could have three doubles or no doubles. You just won’t know. Even the days you work could change week-to-week, and they often do. Finally, our bosses will frequently release the schedule just a day or two before we’re supposed to work it. While not every restaurant or retail store may be the same, our schedules are always unpredictable.

We are 21st century servants. Many of us in this industry joke about how we “live” at the restaurant, which brings me back to my original point that I’m usually the only food worker in radical spaces. I’ve heard friends say “how can we get more ‘normies’ into our spaces and engage in the struggle?” and my response is that there’s a reason they aren’t in our spaces: These radical spaces are usually structured around the 9-5ers. The meetings happen after they get off of work on weekday evenings, and days when they’re off of work, like middays on weekends.

This matters. We must meet people where they are. According to the National Restaurant Association⁸: “The restaurant and foodservice industry is the nation’s second largest private sector employer, providing 15.5 million jobs – or 10 percent of the total U.S. workforce. This includes 12.4 million jobs at eating-and-drinking places, plus an estimated 3.1 million foodservice jobs in other sectors such as healthcare, accommodations, education, food-and-beverage stores, and arts, entertainment and recreation.”

What’s the number one private sector employer, you might ask? The retail industry. According to the National Retail Federation⁹, “The retail industry supported 55 million full-time and part-time jobs in 2022, accounting for 26 percent of total U.S. employment.”

Combined, food and retail workers, whose jobs are designed to revolve around the 9-5, make up 36 percent of the country’s workforce. 36 percent of this nation’s working class is being structurally excluded from organizing spaces.

A major consequence of this exclusion is that organizing efforts are taken over by members of the labor aristocracy (probably unconsciously, in many cases, but still...) The labor aristocracy is disconnected from the daily life and struggle of those who work to serve them. We must resist replicating the top-down structures that surround us in this capitalist society we live under: Our goal should always be to build social movements that are committed to the unity of the entire working class. This is the only way that we can begin building a better world.

8 National Restaurant Association, <https://restaurant.org/getmedia/6f8b55ed-5b3f-40f5-ad04-709ff7ff9f0f/nra-data-brief-restaurant-employee-demographics.pdf>

9 National Retail Federation, <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/retail-industry-continues-be-largest-private-sector-employer-according>

THE IWW AND RESISTING EXCLUSIONARY IMPULSES

I would like to note here that most of my organizing experience is with the IWW, organizing militant, grassroots unions in the service industry. As of yet, I've been on three organizing campaigns at three different restaurants, and when we, the service workers, created this organizing space for ourselves, we found ourselves meeting late at night, around 10, 11, or even midnight, when our coworkers got off work. Or early in the morning at 9 or 10 before we had to go into our shifts.

Although, in other radical spaces, this isn't taken into consideration. Most of the people in these other spaces don't want to meet at these "odd" times. But, why are these odd times? Are we really going to let the capitalist 9-5 workweek dominate even our liberated spaces? If so, these spaces are not truly liberated. How can we get more of these 70.5 million food and retail workers into our radical organizing spaces? These are questions we must ask ourselves.

This is also a reflection of the lack of solidarity in many of the traditional business unions. The IWW emerged as a response to the domination of business unions by the labor aristocracy. Today's food and retail workers are in a similar position as the "unskilled" workers who originally built the IWW: These workers were rejected by the labor establishment, despite the fact that they were some of the most exploited workers and made up a substantial portion of the working class. This prompted them to build their own radically inclusive union, the One Big Union open to all workers. But, the history of the IWW doesn't guarantee anything; our commitment to the abolition of the wage system and the unity of the working class (which is a rampart against the domination of the labor aristocracy and class collaboration) must be renewed time and time again. Not just in the IWW, but in every radical organizing space.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Another point of exclusion is more social in nature. Service workers form our own social groups that are completely separate from radical social groups.

How do you get into radical organizing spaces? Having social relationships and sharing community with people in them! Again, this makes it tough for service workers to establish themselves in these spaces.

The liberated spaces that many of our communities have built don't exist late at night. When we get off from work, my peers and I will go out to other bars that might still be open (which isn't a healthy option for many of us). We befriend the workers at those other workplaces. We share our grievances we had that day at work over a beer. We talk shit about our shitty bosses. We have a pretty close-knit community. In any given town, you will find that a lot of the

service industry workers know each other, especially with how frequently some of us hop from restaurant-to-restaurant, store-to-store, bar-to-bar. But this community that exists is isolated from radical communities.

As a rank-and-file service industry worker and radical labor organizer, I can tell you that the issue isn't that service workers don't want to organize: They simply don't have access to organizing spaces. The tools, resources, and community are not easily accessible.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE 9-5

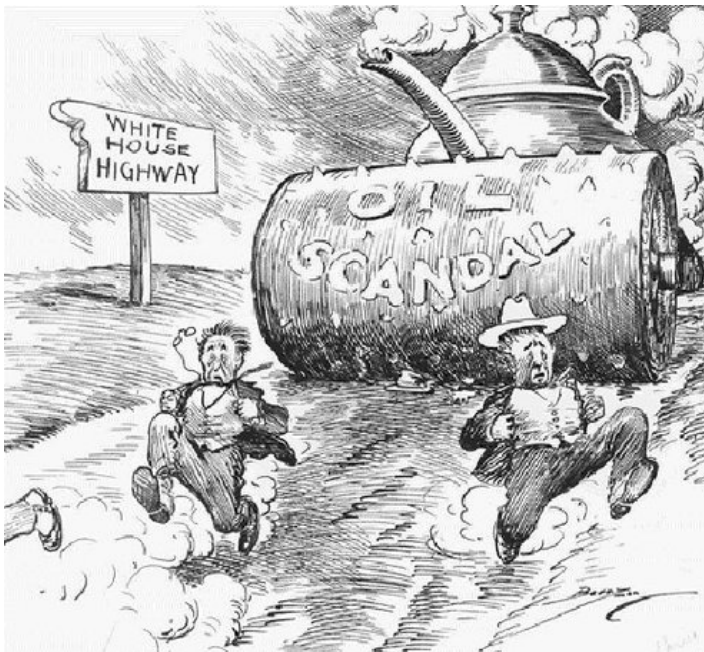
I have outlined a structural flaw that plagues many organizing spaces, but what is there to do about it? How do we bridge the gap? How do we activate these 70 million or so service workers?

One thing that my local branch of the IWW has done in the past is to organize "meet-a-wobbly" events at local bars. We hang out with each other where the rest of the working class is hanging out and build relationships. We introduce them and invite them to radical community, something many working-class folks may have never seen or experienced. host events that are designed to bring these people in. Let's merge our radical communities with working class communities.

Once we've started to build these relationships and bring people into our radical spaces, we must be flexible. We have standing committee meetings in our IWW branch, but if a new fellow worker is unable to attend due to schedule conflicts, we can find a new time for when that committee meets to ensure that everyone can participate. This can be a really intimidating ask in other groups. When everyone in the chat overwhelmingly says "Yeah, Tuesday at 6pm works great," I think to myself "Damn it, that's Taco Tuesday, I'll never get that day off. Do I say anything? I don't want to inconvenience the rest of the group..."

I encourage folks reading this to be flexible; don't be afraid of having a midnight meeting or informal gathering (if I knew my comrades were hanging out at midnight when I got off work, I might not go to the bar as much). Also, having an alternating meeting schedule can really boost engagement: As an example, one week have a meeting on a Friday evening at 6pm for the 9-5ers and then one week have a meeting on a Tuesday at midnight and alternate between the two. So many of these 70 million or so workers, and even other workers outside of this industry, are awake, bored, and restless from 11pm to 2am. But because of the 9-5 capitalist schedule, it is stigmatized to even text someone at this hour, despite the fact that so many of us are awake.

Let's normalize gathering, meeting, plotting, and scheming in the shadows! The revolution will not revolve around the 9-5; so our organizing spaces shouldn't either.



THE IWW “GETS THE GOODS” ON A TEAPOT DOME CROOK

July 4, 2024 | K. King

The year was 1924, the middle of the “Roaring Twenties,” and the United States had quickly moved on from wartime scarcity to peacetime abundance. Prohibition was in full swing, complete with speakeasies and bootlegging and mobsters. The Russian Revolution and the Red Scare were all over the news, and “Big Oil” was getting a huge boost from an increase in automobile ownership.

Meanwhile, hundreds of members of the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, were languishing in prison or awaiting deportation. The repression of immigrants and radicals during the war years continued during the “Red Scare,” and in the 1919 and 1920 “Palmer Raids¹⁰,” the government had deployed vigilantes to ransack union halls and had made mass arrests. Because of “criminal syndicalism” laws, it was a crime to simply belong to the IWW in many states. In response to violations of civil rights against immigrants, conscientious objectors, and the IWW, the American Civil Liberties Union was founded in 1920.

This was the backdrop against which a massive government scandal occurred, named the Teapot Dome Scandal. It began with a tiny irregularity around an oil lease on government land and kept expanding to include more and more public officials, all the way up to the cabinet of former president Warren G. Harding.

It took years for the full story to come out, but in short, oil barons bought the U.S. presidency and cabinet and then exploited it to gain access to land that had been specifically set aside by the government for emergency military use. Given that World War I had only ended six years before, with all the America-and-apple-pie citizens in full patriotic fervor, this must have come as a shock.

How had so much corruption gone unnoticed? The head of the Justice Department, Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty, should have been investigating, but he covered it up instead. He had used his role to build a criminal enterprise that is now remembered as the “Ohio Gang.” In the book *The Teapot Scandal*, Laton McCartney explains how the gang made money selling liquor permits, pardons, and paroles to bootleggers. At the head of this enterprise was the Bureau of Intelligence director William J. Burns. He thoughtfully covered up the murder of a close friend of President Harding, and he sent federal agents to spy on senators and ransack their offices in an attempt to frame them.

What a surprise! Who could have predicted this? For one, the Wobblies.

BILLY BURNS AND LABOR SPYING

At the time of the Teapot Dome scandal, labor espionage was rampant and widespread. For a picture of the scope of espionage, I recommend the article “From Pinkerton to G-Man: The Transition from Private to State Political Repression” by John Drabble¹¹. It was a big business. The combined annual income of the Pinkerton, Burns, and Thiel agencies was estimated at \$65 million in 1920 dollars, which would be about a billion dollars today. There were ten thousand local branches with 135,000 spies on their rolls.

Spies would not only infiltrate union campaigns and union leadership, but also act as “agent provocateurs,” either inciting union members to violence, or failing that, throw the bombs themselves. Corporations were happy to pay detective agencies to stop union campaigns, and the agencies paid morally bankrupt employees to provide juicy details. The spies had a financial incentive to draw out conflict and in some cases instigate violence.

None of this was a secret. The detective companies operated legally and with full approval by law enforcement. William J. Burns was also well known in the labor movement. In 1912, as one example among many, the poet and IWW member Covington Hall painted a verbal picture of Burns detectives spying an interracial timber worker’s union with “I am Here for Labor”:

“Private detectives are everywhere, and in the Timber Belt today we have practically a government of the people by

¹⁰ Palmer Raids. https://depts.washington.edu/iww/justice_dept.shtml

¹¹ *From Pinkerton to G-Man: The Transition from Private to State Political Repression*. Drabble, John. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/996399>

a detective agency for the lumber trust. These social vultures, these spawn of Burns and Pinkerton, follow us on the trains, are in the mills, the camps, the forests, and even in the jail among the imprisoned workers, posing as martyrs to the sacred cause of human liberty!" (International Socialist Review, September 1912.)

Burns was also well known to the American Civil Liberties Union president Roger Baldwin. In 1923, Burns accused Baldwin of working for Moscow, and Baldwin prepared to go on the radio to "answer Burns the way he deserved." Burns used government connections, including the Department of Commerce, to encourage radio stations not to let Baldwin speak. This entertaining story is told in the article "FBI's predecessor once tried to keep the ACLU off the airwaves."¹²

At the time, the ACLU was working hard on behalf of the IWW "class war prisoners." It was fighting deportations, trying to stop criminal syndicalism laws, and trying to secure the release of Wobblies arrested during the Palmer Raids.

The IWW, then, was not alone in wanting to stop Burns and get him out of office. However, knowing Burns was corrupt and proving it were two different matters. Even after the Burns Detective Agency sent agents to break into a senator's office, Burns claimed it had nothing to do with his role as director of the Bureau of Intelligence, because he had "stepped down" as head of the company. He testified under oath that he kept his business separate from his government office. He was lying, and the IWW was about to prove.

THE IWW GETS THE GOODS

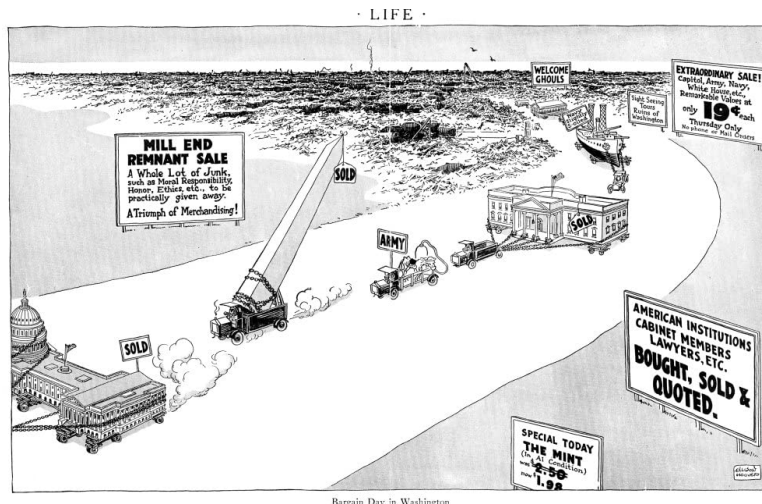
In the summer of 1923, two federal operatives from the Bureau of Intelligence, with Burns at the head, infiltrated the union at the Old Dominion Copper Company of Globe, Arizona. The first was Haines, and his successor was J.J. Spear.

Members of the IWW found evidence that Spear was a private detective and sent it to General Headquarters. For a taste of the documents the IWW acquired, here is a message from Spear to a superior in the Justice Department from The Labor Spy by Sidney Howard and Robert Dunn¹³:

¹² FBI's predecessor once tried to keep the ACLU off the airwaves. Komatsoulis, Carolyn and Brown, JPat. <https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2018/oct/18/fbi-aclu-radio/>

¹³ The Labor Spy. Howard, Sidney. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000956371>

"Dunn gave me the name of a fellow worker in Superior, M. Demitroff, an Austrian, who I am to see when I go over there. He is an active Wobbler, not an American citizen. He was a deserter from the Austrian army during the war and is very much afraid of being shot if he were sent back to his own country. This ought to be a good chance to get rid of one red."



Remain Day in Washington

goods on him. Here is Burns' own official letterhead, with his bona fide signature and seal of the department on it. It is a nice scandal..."

Some of the evidence was published by the IWW in the publication Industrial Solidarity on March 29th, 1924, a month after Burns had sworn under oath that his detective agency wasn't connected to the Bureau of Intelligence. The exposure of Haines and Spears proved he was lying.

On April 1st, the Communist Party's Daily Worker reprinted some of this evidence with the sensational headline "Burns Man Planned Deportation and Shooting of Foreign-Born Miner, Secret Letter Shows."¹⁵

These disclosures didn't make the New York Times, but they would have circulated among radicals and liberals who were trying to bring down Burns, so they would certainly have weakened Burns' position.

On April 10th, on subpoena to a Senate Committee, Burns admitted to sending federal agents to spy on Senator Wheeler in an effort to frame him.

In his remarks to the IWW convention, General Secretary-Treasurer Doyle explained¹⁶, "People back East got interested in this information. They wanted this information taken down to Washington and used against Burns. He was under investigation...It was necessary to get him to resign."

[org/Record/000956371](https://www.marxists.org/Record/000956371)

¹⁴ Extracts From The Verbatim Report Of The 16th IWW General Convention 1924. <https://archive.org/details/extracts-from-the-verbatim-report-of-the-16th-general-convention-1924>

¹⁵ Burns Man Planned Deportation and Shooting of Foreign-Born Miner, Secret Letter Shows. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/dailyworker/1924/index.htm>

¹⁶ Extracts From The Verbatim Report Of The 16th IWW General Convention 1924..

In May, GST Doyle was asked by Robert Dunn of the American Civil Liberties Union to take a trip to Washington to present his evidence before a senate committee in order to get Burns to resign. The evidence was also important in fighting future anti-union “criminal syndicalism” laws. Burns beat him to the punch, however, by resigning the day before Doyle was to testify.

FAREWELL TO BURNS

The resignation of Burns from the Bureau of Intelligence was a major blow against one of the IWW’s biggest enemies. Unfortunately for everybody, he was succeeded by an up-and-coming intelligence agent, J. Edgar Hoover, and Burns kept on running his detective agency.

The evidence gathered by the IWW, though, had a lasting impact on the public’s understanding of labor espionage. Later that year, *The Labor Spy* was published, revealing the full scope of industrial evidence and including excerpts of the documents provided by the IWW. This book was followed in 1932 by the book *Spying on Workers* by Robert W. Dunn. In 1935, the U.S. government made it illegal for companies to spy on workers. And between 1936 and 1941, the U.S. government investigated violations of free speech and the rights of labor in the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Teapot Dome scandal taught the American public, not for the first time nor the last, that government and big business work hand-in-hand, against the public good. The Burns Detective Agency was happy enough to violate the civil rights of union members and immigrants, and it was equally happy to help cover up graft and to terrorize senators. There was a downside to privatizing law enforcement and espionage.

But maybe the biggest lesson is that strong unions are a benefit to democracy. Plenty of people had evidence against Burns, but they were afraid to use it. But the Industrial Workers of the World had the guts and got the goods.



Photo credit x388133.

Monument Committee members unveil the monument.

DEDICATION OF THE IWW’S MONUMENT TO VICTIMS OF THE 1919 CENTRALIA TRAGEDY

July 18th, 2024 | x331980

Centralia, WA—The Industrial Workers of the World dedicated the ‘Union Victims’ monument in Centralia, Washington on Sunday June 23rd following years of effort by the union’s Centralia Monument Committee. The monument is located in George Washington Park right next to the 100-year-old American Legion monument ‘The Sentinel’ and right across the street from the famous mural ‘The Resurrection of Wesley Everest.’

An enthusiastic audience of 40 gathered for the formal unveiling of the new granite monument. There were IWW present from Portland, Centralia, Olympia, Tacoma, Bremerton, Seattle, Everett, and Bellingham, as well as a couple at-large members who had never before met another Wob. The Monument Committee asked all the Centralia residents in attendance, 20 or so, old and young, to step forward to symbolically receive the monument as the union’s gift to the city.

The story should be well-known in Wobblydom. On November 11, 1919, four Legion men were shot when they kicked in the doors and windows of the IWW hall. 10 or 11 Wobs were arrested, while a couple others managed to escape and were never identified. It is not known who, if anyone, other than Fellow Worker Wesley Everest, fired a weapon during the attack. That night FW Everest was dragged from the jail and lynched. The other Wobs were tried and convicted of second degree murder in one of the great show trials of the Red Scare. Five jurors later swore they had been intimidated by the prosecution and recanted their guilty verdicts.



Photo credit x388133. FW Tuck addresses the audience.

During the presentation, a brief account of the post-imprisonment lives of the IWW members named on the plaque was presented: in addition to Wesley Everest, they are FWs Eugene Barnett, Britt Smith, O.C. Bland, Bert Bland, James McInerney, John Lamb and Loren Roberts, as well as their dedicated attorney, Elmer Smith. Virtually all were Centralia-area residents who returned to the area after prison, and they are buried in local cemeteries.

IWW speaker Dave Tucker of Bellingham acknowledged the unions and Labor Councils who contributed money and labor: Laborers International 252, Northwest Washington and Kitsap Central Labor Councils, Firefighters State Council, and Firefighters District Council 7, a couple dozen IWW branches, the General Administration's Siitonen Fund, the workers in Vietnam who quarried the 3-ton granite pedestal, the Centralia Monument Company who produced the final monument, and the couple hundred individual workers who donated hard earned nickels and dollars.

A few minutes of silence were observed to mark the death of IWW member and former General Executive Board chair Dylan Brooks of Olympia, a young man who passed away from cancer on Saturday morning.

The dedication ceremony featured a poem by Wobbly bard Ralph Chaplin, 'Mourn Not the Dead' and concluded with all in attendance enthusiastically belting out the British Transport Workers Union's inspiring song 'Hold the Fort' from the IWW's Songs of the Workers— also known as the 'Little Red Songbook'.

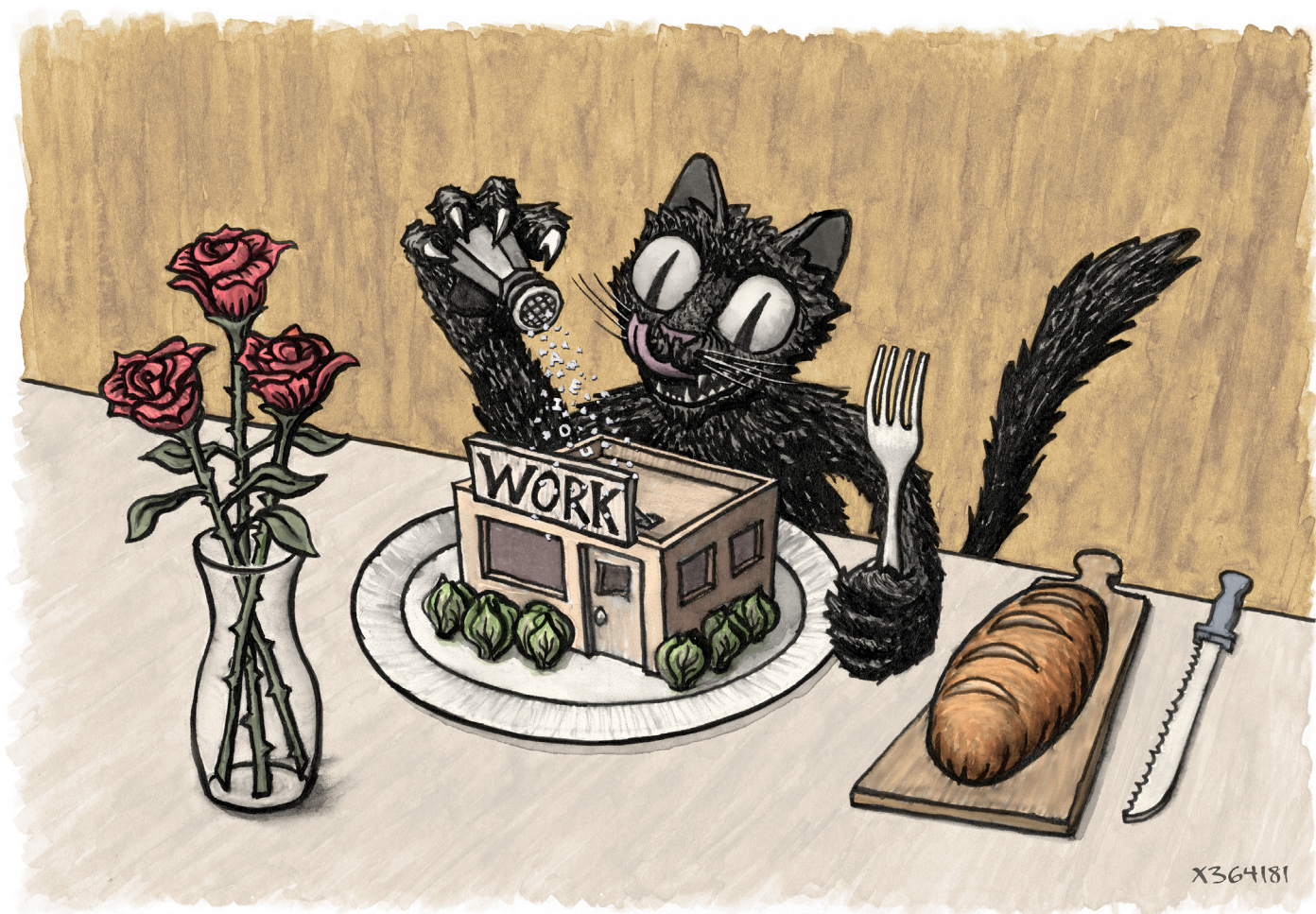
The 'Union Victims' monument marks an important event in Centralia's checkered past, as it now acknowledges a different telling of the Centralia Tragedy than has been previously admitted in public.

The Monument Committee will soon provide a self-guided online tour to sites associated with the events of November 11, 1919. For anyone passing through Centralia on Interstate 5, stop off to see the monument. George Washington Park is just a 5 minute detour.



Photo credit Grace W. The monument's bronze plaque, funded by generous donations from workers around the world.





SALT IS BACK ON THE TABLE

December 19, 2024 | Noah Wingard

HOW THE ORGANIZING DEPARTMENT IS FORMING A NEW SALTING PROGRAM FOR THE UNION

Recently, I got the chance to sit down with members of the IWW's Organizing Department Board (ODB) to discuss the creation of a new training and education program for members of the Union. Aaron Conway-Fuches – chair of the ODB – along with Tegan M. and Rose S., are ODB board members. They are currently developing this program to teach union members how salting works and what strategies can be employed. Salting can breathe new life into an ongoing organizing campaign, or it can start new ones in the same industry or under the same employer. The program, which was approved for development at the 2023 NARA Convention, is meant to be separate and supplementary to the Organizer Training program that the IWW provides to its members. It is meant to focus on how those outside of a shop can get more emboldened and educated on how to help efforts on the shop floor.

For those unfamiliar, salting is when workers seek employment for the purposes of kick-starting an organizing campaign, or to assist an organizing campaign already in motion. Salting can come in a variety of various strategies, depending on what organizing looks like in a specific shop or what the conditions are like in a specific industry. There are five strategies identified by the ODB that will be elaborated on in a future organizing training specific for potential salts: Horizontal expansion, vertical expansion, expanding capacity, growing the union, and what Fellow Worker Conway-Fuches refers to as “pick and choose.”

Out of all the possible strategies for salting, one stood out as the most viable for expanding organizing efforts. As Tegan described: “Horizontal expansion could be the easiest approach, as workers skilled in organizing in one particular industry or with one specific employer can use their experience to expand into other shops or other departments of the same industry.” This can create opportunities for branch members who are aware of ongoing campaigns in their area, or for at-large members of the union willing to assist with already ongoing organizing campaigns in a specific industry. An example of this, according to Conway-Fuches, is Starbucks workers organizing at a cafe, and then the organizing expands to another cafe.

Conway-Fuches cites another strategy called vertical expansion, where the workers use salting to expand organizing efforts along a supply chain or production chain within a particular industry. For example, workers and organizers can assist the organizing efforts of coffee growers by organizing in the distribution or retail sales of coffee. Expanding capacity is identifying an existing campaign and encouraging fellow workers to be employed in a particular shop or industry for the purposes of bolstering an ongoing unionization campaign. Growing the union involves encouraging at-large members to associate with a branch of the IWW, so branch members can assist in either their own campaigns or other campaigns already taking place in the branch. This can be especially helpful for smaller branches with fewer members or resources on hand.

There are some limitations and drawbacks to using salting as a strategy of union organizing. Salting may not be helpful for starting a campaign in a “hot shop,” where turnover is high and workers are burnt out from the brunt of the labor they perform.

“I don’t know that I would encourage seeking out a hot shop to salt in,” said Conway-Fuches, the chair of the ODB. “I think if you have one thrust upon your branch, it might be a more appropriate case for expanding capacity salting. Someone with experience who can strongly encourage people to slow down. The OT101 used to have a module called ‘picking a target’ that we moved away from as a union, because we understand that any job can be one where you organize. It’s not to say that a shop can’t become hot unexpectedly, and employers don’t advertise that when they are trying to hire people, so you can find yourself in that situation unexpectedly. I wouldn’t encourage people to seek it out.”

A particular salting strategy not encouraged by the ODB members, Conway-Fuches added, is when union members “pick and choose” the most available shop or industry for organizing to take place. Rose S. agreed with Conway-Fuches’ perspective, and both emphasized an important point in the discussion regarding this strategy: that prioritizing salting as a way to start campaigns can ignore the possibility of organizing workplaces already available to union members. Conway-Fuches stated: “I think that one risk with salting that we have run into is that some jobs are more important to organize than others. Our view is that as a union every worker should be an organizer. A corollary to that is that every job is worth organizing. It raises the question ‘Why aren’t you organizing now?’ ...salting should never be the primary way that we are doing organizing.”

Rose spoke about her own experiences salting in a prior campaign, commenting on how salting can sometimes be used as an “out” for fellow workers who are discouraged from organizing their own workplaces:

“Salting is searching for an external solution instead of looking inward and changing where we ourselves work. We want to organize ourselves. The idea of having a salting program is a sickness where we feel like we can’t do it, so we search for an alternative...I have salted in the IWW. It made sense that it was a place I would get a job at. I did it and was involved, there were moments where it was beneficial and I could do tasks, but at the end of the day that organizing is successful because the workers had done a lot in the OT101 already, like building an organizing committee, and they didn’t have the impression that they needed a salt to be successful. People have to organize themselves.”

Tegan also agreed with Rose’s observation that salting can unintentionally side-step the more important consideration of organizing our own workplaces first, and how some fellow workers might be shy to organize for a variety of reasons:

“Salting can be an impulse we think about because we are afraid of organizing our own workplaces. ‘All of my coworkers are too conservative.’ ‘My coworkers are too liberal.’ ‘My coworkers are busy in the DSA.’ ‘My workplace is too big.’ ‘My workplace is too small.’ I have heard every single one of these things as a challenge in organizing. They are all real challenges. They will not be fixed by you going to another job. You will face additional challenges.”

Rose went on to explain that practices of salting should have an approach of social integration and community building, and should help workers come together and focus on what concerns matter most in any given shop or industry:

“The best way to get any campaign or salting effort off the ground is to become more affiliated and familiar with the workers you know at your shop. A poor application of salting can lead to the idea that we as the union ‘need to go help out workers in some other shop or industry’ that our members might not be immediately associated with, rather than focusing on the shops that we already know that our members are part of.”

Despite these limitations, salting can still have an impact on the efficacy and direction of organizing efforts already taking place, and can provide critical assistance to campaigns that need the extra support. Conway-Fuches expressed hopes that the salting training can get more workers directly involved in organizing efforts in the present:

“We should look at why people aren’t organizing in their own workplaces. If the salting program gets some people to organize who aren’t, I think that is good. Talking to people about why they aren’t organizing is good and important. Looking at why people don’t. They lack confidence, they lack support...I hope it gets more people organizing. I want people to be able to overcome barriers they are facing right now. If it gets more people interested in organizing who weren’t for any reason, I would consider that a success of the salting program and something we would want to build on.”

As for how the IWW plans to fund the program, Conway-Fuches explained that “the broader union has allocated funding that the branches can apply for, and the ODB could encourage members to move to other areas or branches to assist organizing campaigns, assistance with getting licensing to apply to certain industries/jobs, travel expenses for OT101 training, and creating a salting guide for branches with tactics or strategies as for how Fellow Workers can salt workplaces.”

Tegan further elaborated that “the ODB budget is healthy enough to approach a salting program of this scale, and that funding can be applied for through the ODB for various campaigns or salting strategies, with a \$1500 limit per request as requested by branches. The budget is carefully considered so that all possible campaign or salting leads in the future can be accommodated for.”

Overall, there are many strategies around salting that can effectively bolster ongoing organizing campaigns, or campaigns that are struggling to meet its goals and form better connections with workers in a given shop. The training program under development by the ODB can help current organizing efforts by providing trained union members more opportunities to join in on workplace organizing efforts.

The ODB hopes that the reintroduction of salting as an organizing tactic, as well as the future training program, can provide feedback from union branches as to how well these strategies are implemented, and how the training program can be modified in the future for better use. Giving feedback on this program is critical to its future success, and allows the ODB to make adjustments to how salting is implemented by the union, or how education to the membership can be adjusted to be more effective and practical. As Tegan put it, “We can make a decision going into the future to see if this is something we want to keep investing in.”

For the IWW, salting is once again returning to the toolbox of fellow workers, eager to advance the efforts of the union.



TOO SMALL FOR DIRECT ACTION?

May 8, 2025 | x409232

In a recent conversation, a Fellow Worker relayed a line of questioning posed to her by other Wobblies: How small a group is too small for direct action? When is it too soon to begin pushing back against the boss? At what point does one reach a “critical mass” big and strong enough to start getting gains on the job? These are important questions for workers organizing their shop because answering them incorrectly can lead to real trouble down the line.

But this way of thinking is general and almost philosophical. Like all philosophical questions, there is a present danger of merely analyzing the abstract workplace rather than trying to change the real one in front of us.

The first answer to the question, “When is it too soon to begin pushing back on the boss?” is never. This is because there is always some degree of pressure, however small, that we can bring to bear on our employer. Individual workers do this all the time, independent and uncoordinated, and often just for our own catharsis.

How many of us say, “Yes, sir!” and do the opposite once our manager stops looking, because we know our way is better or takes less needless effort? So often workers say one thing and do another because management has lost touch with how the workplace actually functions.

At my job, there is one janitorial worker acting under the supervision of a janitorial manager. (Why a manager exists for the sake of one worker is another philosophical question I won't get into here.) A while ago, this (still probationary) worker approached me with a problem: Until that day, they had been entrusted by their manager with a master key. This enabled them to access the entire building to clean, stock supplies, and do tasks like change light bulbs.

When another manager discovered the worker had this key, they made a mountain out of a molehill. Rather than seeing that this worker was just doing their daily work, managers made an issue of them having such wide access to the building. Though they had never given any indication of dishonesty, they were painted as a risk to the building's security. It didn't matter that the worker's direct manager had entrusted them with this responsibility or that they realistically needed access to various rooms to maintain the building. Management took the master key. The worker's direct manager told them to quietly get a spare master key when needed and never mention it, but the worker feared they would eventually be caught and in even deeper trouble. What to do?

We had some options. We could go the business union route and try to file a grievance. Human Resources likes to say that our probationary employees cannot file grievances, but while this stipulation is in some contracts, it's nowhere in ours. So, typically we file anyway. And, historically, HR hears the grievance. ("Labor peace" is a sword that cuts both ways.) But was the best option to file paperwork, spend weeks setting up a meeting time, and wait weeks more for an answer (which may not be the answer we want)?

I didn't think so.

The worker was angry. They did their work well and had shown themselves to be trustworthy. They felt insulted, even targeted, and they wanted to lash out. So first I told them to take a deep breath. And then I advised this worker, "Consider if every time you are asked to do something that requires that master key, you politely drag your manager into it. Every time you need to open a storage closet, access an office, stock a shelf, you have to ask your manager to come around with your master key. You smile kindly at the other managers and say, 'I'll have to call them for that.' What do you think would happen?"

They liked the idea.

It took a few days for management to throw in the towel. After all, this was almost as bad as having no janitorial worker at all. Practically every time the worker needed to do the basic functions of their job, their manager would have to make the long trip up to the right floor or another building to turn a lock. Supervisors were forced to wait in the chaos of the workday for something as simple as toilet

paper or a new light bulb.

There was no blow-up, no dramatic showdown with management, no discussion of the root issue at all. In less than a week, the master appeared back on the keyring. It wasn't brought up again.

Now if just a single worker can find ways to push back, so can two or three. The key is to know the limits of the group one is working with and keep in mind the art of escalation. (In shorthand: don't put a target on your back.) A handful of workers probably can't get the whole workplace higher pay, better vacation, or an improved sick leave policy. This was revealed to me all too vividly during our contract negotiations, when the handful of us alone on the bargaining committee couldn't get management to budge on most big issues.

But a few workers may be able to win many small gains that, when stacked, add up to major changes in the workplace. A couple of workers can often push back on a bully supervisor, or convince others to start changing workflows and methods, or create precedents that other workers can appeal to later. And it is really never too soon to begin mapping out these possibilities. I have acted with one or two other workers on these issues more times than I can count. Even more exciting, I've watched them start to do it on their own.

Each workplace is already made up of tiny little unions acting independently of each other. We call them social groups. As informal work groups, they can win some real gains for themselves. Even if not by design, these gains sometimes spill over to benefit others.

When we organize workplaces based on solidarity, rooted in shared concerns and demands, we bridge the small power of these groups to create a unified front. We coordinate but do not replace these little cells of worker self-defense. These small groups never stop existing and, if we're smart, we're always helping them find ways to act on their own initiative whenever it makes sense. There is a natural subsidiarity in the strongest solidarity.

Indeed, these small actions are usually the basis of bigger ones down the line. They can also be harder or seem less worthwhile for the boss to quash. Little wins instill people with confidence, build trust, and give us examples to show that a better workplace is possible. Once a culture like this is formed, it's tough for management to undo.

Approaching organizing in this way likely means it will be a slow, deliberate, methodical process, not something that escalates and ends in a few weeks or months. But this approach is generally safer, more stable, and longer-lasting. These small wins begin to link up, forming a web of resistance that can expand over time to cover the whole job. If we press on in this way, the boss will eventually find himself all tied up.



WRITE FOR THE INDUSTRIAL WORKER

We are looking for submissions about organizing stories and lessons, debates on Wobbly topics, reporting on labor news from a Wobbly perspective, historical pieces on Wobbly- or Wobbly-adjacent history, obituaries for Fellow Workers, labor cartoons, and reviews of labor media!

If you have an idea that isn't listed, please contact me.

- FW Hannah, IW Editor

BLOG@IWW.ORG

CONTACT

Contact the IWW today if you want to start organizing at your job.

IWW.ORG/ORGANIZE

If you are a member in good standing and wish to take the Organizer Training 101, please email the Organizer Training Committee at **OTC@IWW.ORG**.

If you would like to request a group OT101 with your GMB, job branch, or coworkers, fill out this form: **tinyurl.com/OTrequest**