

# FIRE THE BOSS!



**NEFAC & ANARCHISTS**  
**in the Labor Movement**  
**-January 2011-**

# **FIRE THE BOSS!**

## **NEFAC & ANARCHISTS in the Labor Movement**

INTRODUCTION - Page 1

WORKPLACE ORGANIZING - Page 2

NEFAC WORKPLACE POSITION PAPER - Page 3

CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE GREEN MOUNTAINS - Page 12

PRECARIOUS & PISSED OFF - Page 19

PISSED OFF PROJECTIONISTS - Page 36

FLOC & THE MT OLIVE CAMPAIGN - Page 52

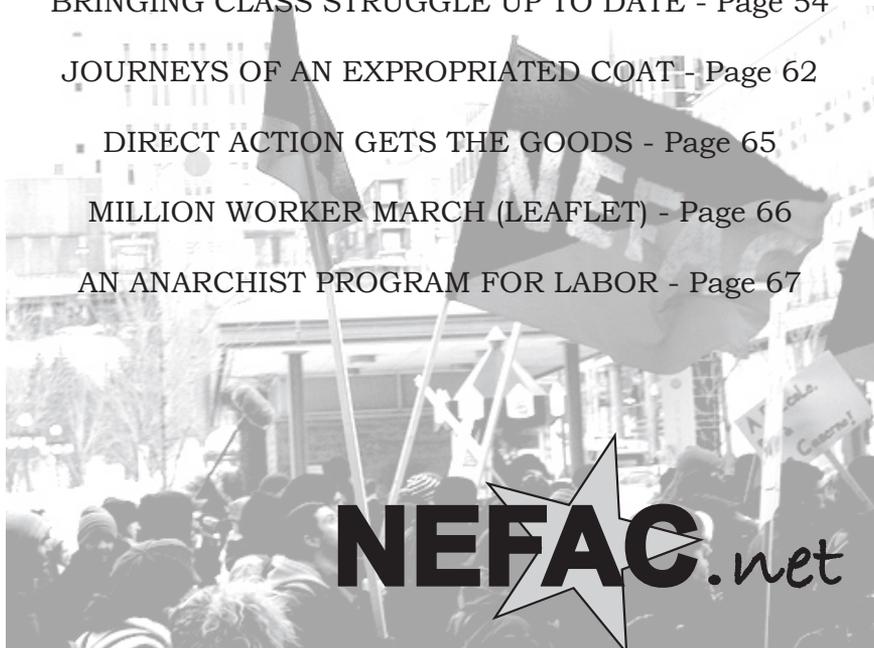
BRINGING CLASS STRUGGLE UP TO DATE - Page 54

JOURNEYS OF AN EXPROPRIATED COAT - Page 62

DIRECT ACTION GETS THE GOODS - Page 65

MILLION WORKER MARCH (LEAFLET) - Page 66

AN ANARCHIST PROGRAM FOR LABOR - Page 67



# INTRODUCTION

**A**s this is written U.S. capitalism remains mired in a breakdown crisis, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930's. However, from a glance at the corporate media this is not obvious. It reports, for example, that non-financial companies in the Standard & Poor's 500 Stock Index have piled up on some \$2 trillion in cash. In addition to just sitting there, this money is largely being spent on corporations' buying back their own stock (up threefold in one year to \$143 billion), dividend increases (one third of the S&P 500 have raised their payouts by \$13 billion), and purchases of other companies. The fact that none of this cash is being invested profitably to produce the goods and services necessary for the well being of the people is glaring evidence of the breakdown of the system.

Of course, working class and oppressed people don't have to parse financial reports to experience the rot: the unemployment, racism and sexism, homelessness, hunger and on-the-job harassment are facts of everyday life.

When the financial system first began to unravel in 2007-2008, the response of most working class and oppressed people was to go into survival mode—and vote for Obama. Even when the capitalists showed themselves unable to manage their own system as giant firms went bankrupt in the fall of 2008, most ordinary people opted for individual rather than systemic solutions to their problems.

We believe this will change. Collective resistance will increase. We don't know when, what, where, or how this will happen, but it will. Much of it will be centered at worksites, whether unionized or not. The resistance will immediately raise questions to workers, such as: what should the attitude be toward the existing union bureaucracy, if there is one, or any loudmouth rank-and-filers who are wannabe bureaucrats? What organizational forms should the struggle take? What about electoral action and left-leaning politicians? What should the attitude be toward the demands of oppressed people? And in general, what sort of social program should the struggle adopt?

We believe that anarchists must play a role in the coming resistance for two reasons. First, to fight for a mass democratic revolutionary movement that neither cannot be used for supporting capitalist reform (that is, the Democratic Party), nor taken over as a battering ram for the establishment of



state capitalism as in the old Soviet Union, China or Cuba. Second, to make sure that in a revolutionary situation, the movement is victorious and not led into disaster by the same reformist or state capitalist forces, as they have done in Spain, Chile, Germany and Indonesia.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to start a conversation about all the above questions, using examples of labor work in which anarchists have led and participated.

# **WORKPLACE ORGANIZING**

**Adopted at the eleventh federation congress,  
November 5-6, 2005, Sherbrooke, Quebec**

**T**he struggle toward libertarian communism must be brought about by the whole of the working class, the workplace and labor unions are an essential point of agitation and struggle. Anarchist-communists must organize within the ranks of labor unions, active in this struggle as both advocates of social revolution and as fellow workers in a collective battle against exploitation.

Class struggle is by no means confined to workplace. Class conflict occurs everyday in neighborhood-based battles for decent housing, the fight for welfare, the battles for access to quality education, the struggle against prisons and police brutality, in the arena of popular culture, and especially against racism, sexism, and other oppressions that stratify and divide the working class. However, as anarchist-communists, we have a particular strategic interest in workplace struggles due to the ability to directly challenge the material interests of the capitalist class

Independent rank-and-file tendencies within existing unions, coupled with workplace resistance groups, solidarity networks, and, eventually, workplace assemblies and coordinating councils, provide a glimpse at the kind of self-managed workers movement needed to not only effectively challenge the employers, but also develop the unity and revolutionary class consciousness needed to overthrow the capitalist social order.



# NEFAC Workplace Position Paper

## INTRODUCTION

**A**s anarchist-communists, we want a radical reorganization of the workplace. We want workplaces that are run by directly democratic federated workers' and community-based councils. We want the highest decision-making body to be general assemblies of workers held on the shop floor and in the communities where they live. We want to abolish the wage system, end the alienation and division of labor, and usher in a new society of libertarian communism.

To achieve this society, we engage in a struggle against the bosses; a struggle between the working and the employing classes; a revolutionary class struggle that will only end when the class system itself is destroyed and everyone controls and shares in the wealth that we as working people produce.

We believe that the struggle toward libertarian communism must be brought about by the whole of the working class, and see the workplace and labor unions as an essential point of agitation and struggle. Labor unions represent the largest organized grouping of the working class. For this reason we feel that anarchist participation within the unions is essential. Anarchists must be involved in workplace struggles, because we are both workers, as well as revolutionaries. As we fight the bosses with our fellow workers, we also fight the mediation of our struggle.

We anarchist-communists must organize within the ranks of labor unions, retaining our specific praxis. We become active in this struggle as both advocates of social revolution and as fellow workers in a collective battle against exploitation. We choose participation over authority and solidarity over isolation. It is through the process of collective struggle that people become radicalized and more open to anarchist ideas. To win the battle of ideas, we fight for direct action, mutual aid, and direct democracy in our unions and more importantly in the workers' movement as a whole—in short, revolutionary anarchist praxis.

## CLASS STRUGGLE

At every stage in the historical development of society — from ancient times through feudalism, to present-day capitalism — there has been a division between those who produce goods and services, and the small minority that appropriates. This division has led to the development and



irreconcilable interests of the two primary social and economic classes, resulting in an ongoing class struggle between them.

Capitalism is, above all, a social relation; but it is also an economic system with real material weaknesses at the various points of production, communication, and distribution. Our greatest strength as workers is in the collective refusal of our labor. An organized working class is a force that has the potential to shut this system down and re-create society in our own interests.

The workers who produce the wealth under capitalism differ from all previously oppressed classes. Firstly, we now have the productive capacity to create enough wealth to provide the basic necessities (food, shelter, clothing, education, health care) for everyone and still have plenty to spare for science, culture, luxuries, etc.

Secondly, and more importantly, our everyday life as workers prepares us to eventually self-manage our society.

## **UNION BUREAUCRACY AND REFORMISM**

Although we realize there are some exceptions, the reality of the labor movement today in North America is one of compromise, and often collaboration, with capitalist exploitation. Unions serve as a mediator between the working class and the bosses, often playing the role of business organizations that negotiate the sale of their members labor power to employers (and, in exchange, they offer workers material benefits: job security, health care, better wages). They seek a fairer form of exploitation under capitalism, rather than an end to exploitation itself.

As the labor movement has failed over the years to mount a fundamental challenge to the power of the bosses, the unions became increasingly top-down in their structure and integrated into the system. The officials who run these organizations work to contain workers' struggles within the framework of their longstanding relationship with employers and politicians.

While there are variations amongst the unions (some of which are more democratic and militant than others), most are dominated by a hierarchy of paid officials and staff, who control bargaining with employers, the handling of grievances, and tend to have a social service relationship to the rank-and-file (with whom they remain unaccountable to). This bureaucratic stranglehold, along with years of regulatory labor legislation, has led to unions often becoming roadblocks to serious working class power in North America, rather than fulfilling their historic role as effective vehicles for class struggle.

It is important to understand how this bureaucratic leadership emerged. Successive waves of union organizing,



often involving militant tactics such as wildcat strikes and occupations pressed a tactical retreat on the bosses and the capitalist state, leading to the extension of new rights to workers' organizations. In place of open class warfare, a process of limited and uneven concession granting was established. This truce regulated and compartmentalized workplace struggles to keep them below the level of serious disruption. A new layer of union functionary emerged to broker and executes this deal. These union executives needed to placate membership with regulated contract gains while simultaneously ensuring labor force stability and an environment suited to accumulation for the bosses. While limited outbursts were permitted, union leaders were obliged to police the deal and maintain order in the ranks. The bureaucracy developed centralized structures and methods of control and direction that fit its role and function.

Beyond bureaucracy and internal hierarchies, most unions that are officially recognized by the state are unable to act outside of existing labor laws, and often limited in their ability to take effective action against employers. This means that they can support only the most moderate action, and they are typically unwilling to risk even this. Local unions that pursue a more independent, militant stance against employers are likely to run up against roadblocks of officials to effective action. In the worst cases when AFL-CIO or CLC affiliated locals are deemed too militant, national or international unions use their power to impose a dictatorship called a trusteeship, tossing out their elected officers and seizing control of the local with appointees of the bureaucrats.

Anarchist workplace militants must become revolutionary opponents of the union bureaucracy, refuse the terms of compromise with the bosses, and directly challenge those who seek to enforce it. It is necessary to build a rank-and-file movement which understands how this bureaucratic hold has entrenched itself, and which can actually work to break both the union bureaucrats and the bosses' hold over workers' struggles.

As the existing unions are not suited to overthrow the capitalist class (or, often times, even capable of taking effective action against employers) a workers' movement that can transform society needs to be built independently of the existing union hierarchies, both inside and outside of the union bodies. As workers move towards more militant action and more widespread solidarity, self-organization becomes a more realistic possibility.

Independent rank-and-file tendencies within existing unions, coupled with workplace resistance groups, solidarity networks (flying squads, workers' centers, student-labor action groups, etc.), and, eventually, workplace



assemblies and coordinating councils, provide a glimpse at the kind of self-managed workers movement needed to not only effectively challenge the employers, but also develop the unity and revolutionary class consciousness needed to overthrow the capitalist social order. These are the areas where NEFAC seeks to be actively involved in the workplace.

## **DIVISIONS WITHIN LABOR**

We recognize the exclusion that many workers face within capitalism due to certain forms of discrimination (such as racism and gender discrimination). These forms of divisions prop up capitalist isolation tactics between sectors of the workforce, as well as reinforce reactionary attitudes between various sectors of the working class.

We must recognize the vast divisions in the world of labor between people of different language, “race” or ethnic origin, which fuel racist, xenophobic and reactionary attitudes amongst workers. We must struggle against these divisions, by acting autonomously and building internationalist and anti-racist alliances. Through class organizing in the workplace, workers can develop strategies that break down racist and xenophobic divisions inside as well as outside of the workplace, demonstrating that racism is a social construction that serves to maintain ruling class power (divide to rule). By making an internationalist and anti-racist class struggle possible, we live a social alternative enabling worker’s from different background to meet and learn from each others. We must defend undocumented immigrant workers from attacks by capitalist exploitation of their “legal status”. We must defeat racist and xenophobic attitudes amongst sectors of our class, by building solidarity between rank-and-file workers of “legal” and “illegal” status. Our most powerful argument against these racist attitudes is by organizing for common goals, so that capitalists can’t take advantage of immigrant worker status to push the standard of wages and conditions down for all workers. By organizing defense of immigrant workers within the workplace we expose the relationship between capitalist organization of national boundaries as a relationship that serves the interests of the capitalist class, and not for selected sections of the “legal” workforce within artificial geographic boundaries. This activity also weakens the statist control of national and ethnic distinctions.

We must recognize the specific oppression of women under both capitalism and patriarchy. A long time before industrialization - and long after that – the place assigned to women was one of the “queen of the home”, a place pointed out as their first and natural vocation. When the massive participation of women in the workforce occurred, opposition came out from all



sides, from religious groups to the unions, saying that female work was against the natural order of things. But since society could not afford to develop itself without the work of women, essential to the development of capitalism and above all to the survival of working class families, we saw a great range of laws orienting the work of women towards jobs fitting better with their “nature”. This has caused the creation of large female job ghettos in which the professional qualification of women was not recognized since it was “natural”. If the work of women was not recognized as the fruit of diverse learning and special aptitudes, but rather as being part of their innate qualities, it was not worth a particular remuneration. In this way women’s jobs were, and still are today, paid much less and not valorized. The capitalist reality of the “double day” of work – social reproduction labor (such as housekeeping and childcare) in addition to this undervalued wage labor – forces women to stay home in a private sphere and contributes to their isolation. We must therefore fight against the economic and social inequalities that women live in society and in their workplace by struggling against the wage discrimination towards women and the low union rate of jobs worked by women, as well as their precarity and bad working conditions. The solidarity of the workers’ movement must be extended to all workers, no matter if their labor is recognized, waged, and legal or not. We also must support and defend autonomous women’s organizing around their material conditions and militantly defend all the gains made by our class, including those that provide advancement for women.

We don’t believe that by simply abolishing capitalism, that racist and patriarchal attitudes in the working class will be destroyed. Class struggle is a struggle against all forms of oppression; therefore the class system must be brought down by a cross-gender and interracial mass workers’ revolution. By organizing against these forms of discrimination inside the workplace we connect the dots between capitalist exploitation and social oppression, how they are linked and how we can draw these struggles together into one united class struggle for the liberation of all workers. Through rank-and-file action we must organize against these divisions by building campaigns and workers’ organizations that are anti-racist, pro-immigrant, and anti-sexist. By agitating and acting in defense of these excluded sectors of our class in the workplace, by supporting and encouraging the autonomous organizing of all oppressed groups in all areas of society, and supporting leadership and activity within these struggles, we participate in creating class-based, internationalist, feminist and anti-racist organizing strategies that are capable of developing into a more advanced class struggle movement.



## **RANK-AND-FILE AUTONOMY**

If society is a vast interlocking network of cooperative labor then those networks of cooperation provide a good starting point, if only a starting point, towards throwing off the bonds of coercion, authoritarianism, and exploitation. It is in these relations of cooperative labor, which encompasses millions of daily acts, that one can find the real basis for social life. Without these networks, often unrecognized and unpaid, society would collapse. We believe that for workers' struggles to move towards anarchist-communism, that they must provide within them the social basis for the re-organization of production into a libertarian communist economy. This social basis necessitates that workers' struggles be cooperatively run on the shop floor, while expanding and generalizing not only to other workplaces, but also outside the workplace to the community that the workplace is located in.

Sometimes this struggle formalizes itself into groups of workers that act outside and in opposition to not only the exploiting class, but also the union bureaucracy. Some names that these formations have taken in the past are workers' committees, flying squads, resistance groups, action committees, etc. Other times, this is expressed through unofficial spontaneous collective action, such sit-down-strikes, occupations, slows downs, sabotage, and wildcat strikes utilizing informal networks that exist between workers. What matters is not the name or even the specific organizational form they take, but rather the way that the unmediated class struggle of these workers' formations starts the transformation of the organization of production.

## **COMMUNITY-LABOR ALLIANCES**

This brings us to the importance of building active links between the grassroots popular struggles in the neighborhoods and the labor struggles taking place inside them. We call this the community-labor alliance. Community-labor alliances are best built by a mutual reinforcement of ongoing struggles in the communities and workplaces. It is for this reason that NEFAC advocates workers' and people's organizations actively support each other, build solidarity, and end the artificial division between the workplace and community struggles.

## **ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS**

The labor movement once put a great deal of energy into building more permanent forms of alternative institutions. An expanding variety of mutual aid functions were provided through workers' organizations in the early days of labor. Long before the government monopolized social services,



many workers' organizations created a network of cooperative institutions of all kinds: schools, daycare, summer camps for children and adults, homes for the aged, health and cultural center, insurance plans, technical education, housing, credit associations, etc. While we recognize that, in the past, working people have won significant victories that have forced the government to provide these services; we actively fight for self-managed social services that are controlled directly by the workers themselves.

While on their own such institutions can and are absorbed into the capitalist system (and do not constitute a strategy for revolutionary change), we take a position in favor of creating workers' owned and run services that operate, as best they can under capitalism, on the basis of the need for the entire working class with the participation of the communities that benefit from the services. We believe that such institutions and programs open up space for experimentation of a limited form of self-management under capitalism.

## **WORKERS CENTERS**

Today one expression of this need for alternative workers' institutions, as well as the previously mentioned community-labor alliance, is seen in the development of workers' centers. Workers' centers provide a location and organizational support for campaigns in defense of precarious workers such as immigrant workers, workers in small shops, and non-unionized industries. NEFAC takes a position in support of workers centers and encourages participation and utilization of them as part of our extra-union strategy.

## **GRASSROOTS SYNDICALISM & INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZING**

We support industrial organizing over organizing by trade or craft. Industrial organizing brings together all workers in a workplace into a common union organization. Trade unionism - which allows each location, profession, or sector to be represented by different unions, weakens class identification and solidarity. With the aim of creating a workers' movement on a class basis, NEFAC supports the goal of eventually building grassroots syndicalism, which would incorporate all workers regardless of skill, trade, industry, or even current employment.



## **THE GENERAL STRIKE**

A central part of our program is the call for the general strike. It serves as a bridge between demands for reforms and the ultimate goal of revolution. The old method of each union fighting for its own gains, striking one at a time against a particular boss, is of limited use. The capitalists help each other against the unions. Companies have grown in size, through mergers and expansion, on a national and international scale. A multinational company uses the profits of one part of its business empire to make up for losses due to strikes in another part. The bosses have their own “union”, namely the national state. Through the state, they have outlawed the most effective methods of striking, such as mass picketing, sit-down strikes (occupation of work sites), and cross-union strikes (sympathy strikes). They have given the courts the rights to limit strikes, and some workers are legally forbidden from striking at all.

We think the answer is to increase solidarity among unions, as well as among unions and the community. As many workers as possible should be prepared to strike together. Most useful would be for a large number of workers in an area to strike at once, effectively shutting down production in the whole area. The area might be a city, a country, multiple countries or global. Such general strikes would be very difficult to break.

Rather than just walking out of the factories, offices, and other work sites, the workers should occupy them. This would make it harder for the capitalists to bring in scabs or to assault the strikers (since such assaults could destroy their property). Locking out the bosses, the workers could decide to restart the workplaces, to produce goods and services on the basis of the needs of the community.

There have been general strikes in many countries at various times—in the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Most of these strikes were for limited gains. But a general strike poses the possibility of revolution, especially if it is over several cities or even nationwide. To have the workers running a city or region, even for a while, to have workers councils instead of the state, to have the workers patrolling the street instead of police, to have work sites producing for the needs of the workers—these suggest a different form of society. They ask the question, “Why not get rid of the capitalists and the state?”

Right now the workers have suffered many defeats and only a few victories. They do not trust in their power. More than all the radical rhetoric, a successful general strike would show in practice that we have the power to change the world.



# REVOLUTION

Any popular movement for working class power must be prepared to defend itself. The working class already has one source of power; it has the ability to shut down the economy and to start it back up on another basis. This is not enough to resist a persistent reign of physical terror by the state. Working people must be able to resist with weapons in hand. Workers' defense squads must grow from defense of pickets from scabs and goons to popular militias. Armed defense must be combined with a political appeal to the ranks of the armed forces sent against the workers. The ranks of the armed forces consist of the working class and can be reached. They are more likely to do so if they feel that the workers are prepared to fight to the end, until they win (it is no light matter to defy military orders and soldiers will not do so unless they feel they will get away with it). The more prepared the working class is for serious self defense, the less violence there is likely to be.

Violent revolutions in the past have resulted in new rulers. We, however, are building a movement for the self-rule of the working class, where the armed people are democratically organized and the economy is a communist one based on the maxim: "From each according to ability to each according to need". We wish to smash the state, to dismantle capitalism and all authoritarian institutions, and create a lasting freedom of libertarian communism.

We want a social revolution, literally a "turning-over", so that those on the bottom of society overturn their masters and manage themselves. If society is to survive, the workers must replace capitalism with a federation of self-managed industries and communities with production based on needs, not profits.

Under capitalism, workers are a component of producing an ever-accumulating surplus of value that is stolen from our labor. In an anarchist-communist society, production will be organized on the basis of need where there is no surplus of value. This anarchist-communist production can only be realized by the cooperation in production that takes place in the community as a whole. There can be no isolated anarchist-communist workplace; the reorganization of production by its nature requires the elimination of division between the workplace and the communities in which we live.



# Class Struggle in the Green Mountains: Vermont Workers Center

*By Lady, NEFAC Pittsburgh, formerly of Green Mountain Anarchist Collective & NEFAC Vermont*

The Vermont Workers' Center (VWC) opened the doors to its first office space in the spring of 1998. The mission of the center reads: "We seek an economically just and democratic Vermont in which all residents have living wages, decent health care, child-care, housing and transportation. We work to build a democratic, diverse movement of working Vermonters that is locally focused and coordinated on a statewide basis. We work with organized labor in moving towards economic justice and in strengthening the right to organize. We are committed to taking action on the full range of issues that concern working people, and to building alliances nationally and internationally." The VWC seeks to build an effective and meaningful labor movement within the particularities of Vermont.

The overarching goal of the VWC is to empower those persons within the working class who are normally shut out of the political and economic systems that, time and time again, pursue policies that do not uplift the worker, but rather push them closer to the precipice of poverty and ignorance. To quote from their outreach pamphlet: "By organizing public hearings, forums, publicizing people's stories, and taking part in direct action, we support workers throughout the state who are trying to improve their wages, benefits, rights on the job, working conditions, and their communities."

This is not to say that the sole focus of the VWC is centered on the piecemeal issues that are perpetuated by the basic internal dualities of capitalism (which can be seen as the idea that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer). In short, the VWC is not simply running around sticking their fingers in leaky dams. The center also makes the connection to, and is actively working towards, long term, more comprehensive solutions to the problems of capitalism and the oppressive contradictions between worker and owner, labor and management, the working individual and the "boss," the voter and politician.



## ROOTS OF THE VERMONT WORKERS CENTER

The founding membership of the VWC came from a community group formed in 1996 called Central Vermonters for a Livable Wage. This group was made up of welfare recipients, activists, labor union people, community members, union staff, high school students, and religious affiliated people. Additionally, one-quarter of the groups' membership was made up of members of the #10 Anarchist Collective (formerly Love & Rage members). Central Vermonters for a Livable Wage did solidarity work with labor struggles, and brought people together to talk about economic justice. Tanya Waters, a former member of the #10 Anarchist Collective and founding member of the VWC recalls: "Many of the members began talking about raising the minimum wage, which meant legislative work. We were effective in earning another \$1.00 an hour, but we wanted to do work that was more focused around working with the community. Whereas, legislative work was a disempowering experience."(1)

The first projects of the VWC were a statewide workers' rights handbook and hotline (which still functions today), solidarity with Bennington Potters, Capitol City Press in Barre and Berlin, Trans-ed, anti-privatization with janitors in Barre, and work on raising the minimum wage. The VWC also gave presentations on workers' rights at adult ed programs, churches, union shops, several high schools, and a few colleges.

The creation of the VWC was an evolution of three years of work and tactics that originated as an issue organization (Central Vermonters for a Livable Wage). Issue organizations are harder to keep together than a workers' center that organizes around several of the concerns working class people have. A workers' center is an organization that people will self-identify with, a place where people can find others who share similar experiences. It serves as a place with resources that the community can access, such as writing press releases, phone banking, and a meeting space. It organizes campaigns that try to improve wages, benefits, rights on the job, working conditions, and ultimately the community.

Functionally, the VWC has a steering committee and a coordinating committee made up of unions, community organizations, religious groups, and individuals. The steering committee meets 4 times a year to democratically decide on projects they will work on, and the coordinating committee meets as needed to focus on more day-to-day issues. The VWC is funded through foundation grants, individual donations, and union donations. The first year it started with an annual budget of \$11,000 and the ability to pay two staff members \$100 per week. Currently, through its display of successful work to union and community members, their



budget has increased to \$65,000 a year, and the ability to pay one full-time staff person.

## **HOW VWC DIFFERS FROM OTHER WORKERS' CENTERS**

One way the VWC is unique is because Vermont is traditionally different than areas where workers' centers primarily exist. This difference is reflected in two areas: race and population. The population of Vermont is 620,000 most of which is comprised of rural areas. With rural living comes a high unemployment rate due to economic flight (i.e. effects of "free trade" policies) and a minimal amount of jobs employing a large number of people, such as factory employment. 85% of businesses in Vermont employ nine employees or less. "Vermont is unique because there are no models where you can organize 85% of the businesses. You really have to pull your resources together," says Tanya, "we build rights and power for people who might not work in a large factory and have the minimal protection of a union."

Most workers' centers in the U.S. are located in immigrant communities. However, in a state that is 97% European-American, there is no prevalent immigrant community or even a larger "minority" population, for such a center to connect with. "Our analysis early on was really about finding the power to make change. Early on we recognized race was not going to be our rally point," says Tanya, "gender has always been an issue, and economics is what we found to be most powerful because it is something people here can relate to."

Another point of uniqueness the VWC holds a dual function as a Jobs With Justice chapter. It tries to combine the general workers' rights focus with solidarity for workers who already have unions.

## **CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPICAL MODEL OF WORKPLACE ORGANIZING**

Stereotypically, workplace organizing is done largely in industrial, male dominated sectors, by paid organizers. This model often leaves out work that is traditionally done by women, and can be isolating when and if attempted. "A lot of our work is inherently feminist," says Jason Winston, a former member of the #10 Collective and founder of the VWC, "we work with people who are mostly in a traditionally female workplace such as nurses and nurses' aids, school support staff, and teachers. Here we are confronting the [stereotypical] model of the worker. Also, a lot of core activists with the VWC have been women." Tanya adds: "I have seen a lot of the [stereotypical] model of organizing that womyn don't really respond to. When you connect issues in the work-



place to issues in the community, such as household issues, childcare, healthcare, food, etc., the connection between these issues and the workplace makes this struggle important to women.”

The focus of the stereotypical model of organizing is on individual bread and butter issues as they relate to the individuals in the specific shops. The organizing the VWC has done is different because they often try to link the struggles of an entire industry as opposed to an isolated workplace, and in turn they try to show how those particular struggles relate to larger issues that effect society as a whole. The recent Justice For Healthcare Workers campaign is a good example of this effort. When the workers at Berlin Health & Rehab Center in central Vermont organized with UE in 2000 to become the first unionized private nursing home in the state, the VWC immediately began solidarity work in their struggle. They helped by leafleting, phone banking, writing letters to the editor, coordinating rides for community members to their picket line, calling the hospital CEO, and attending a rally. The workers prevailed and formed a union, UE Local 254, who then began negotiations to win their first contract. To support the workers through this struggle, the VWC formed a community support committee that organized rallies, targeted parades, and informational pickets at its sister facilities. Not only did the workers get their contract in January 2002, but the state responded to the attention generated by the solidarity work by implementing the first ever staffing rules for Vermont nursing homes. During this time, the VWC realized that short staffing and poverty wages were prevalent in all other nursing homes in the state, as well as hospitals. From these realizations, the Justice for Healthcare Workers campaign was born.

The campaign was successful in several ways. The nurses at Fletcher Allen Hospital won their contract on June 21. The contract included key changes made to the hospital policy such as safe nurse-to-patient ratios, which will greatly improve the time that nurses have to spend with each patient, a ban on mandatory overtime, which will ensure that nurses are not forced to work grueling back-to-back shifts, and an economic package that will improve the hospital’s ability to recruit and retain qualified nurses. Also, this victory is seen as groundbreaking in the healthcare field because the campaign has held rallies, forums, workshops, and public education events around the need for universal healthcare access, and created a potential for fixing the broken healthcare system in Vermont. The central thesis of the campaign was that if Vermonters want quality healthcare, one of the ways it can happen is when people are not overworked and underpaid, thus linking the need for universal healthcare for all people, and how it is needed in society as a whole.



The campaign did hold events in efforts to educate the public around the need for universal healthcare, but the VWC realizes that educating people about such capitalist B-movies coming to life is not enough. If the working class is to circumvent the intentions of the wealthy and/or ruling class, it must not only voice opposition to the absurdity commonly referred to as “policy,” but must also give voice to and develop its own vision as it relates to the present and future. And if this vision is to gain the significance required to make a play for the common future, it must be comprehensive in character and content.(2)

A current project brewing at the VWC targets the building trades and is similar to the above campaign in that it frames the struggle for good jobs throughout the state as one big struggle, in the broader context of the working class and as a social justice cause. James Haslam, director of the VWC says that “the Justice for Construction Workers Campaign (which is being called Good Jobs for Vermont) will begin the process of bringing people from the building trades together to talk about a common agenda to establish good wages, benefits, and union membership within the construction trades. Since many construction projects are commissioned by public institutions or include the use of public funds and/or financing, our Good Jobs for Vermont campaign will insist that the jobs produced pay good wages, benefits, and have safe working conditions, or in other words, are union jobs.” Plant closings and layoffs have culminated in a loss of good jobs and a threat to public services in Vermont because of “free trade” policies and corporate globalization. The campaign will connect this issue with the need to create good living wage jobs.

## **ANARCHISM & VERMONT WORKERS’ CENTER**

The VWC was founded by a large proportion of class struggle anarchists, and currently those who do a lot of the organizing identify to one degree or another with anarchism. While the volunteers involved with the center do not all identify as such, a number of those who do are known to the community as anarchists. However, their politics are not front and center; it is about the work they are doing. The VWC prioritizes its work by first building a movement around people and what their issues are. Then, the need to figure out how to build that movement into a more democratic one emerges. “We are far from being revolutionary,” says Jason, “but we have the strategy of starting where people are at. People only joined because of what we were doing, not because of what we said. We didn’t act like we could tell them what they wanted to hear. It is not a theoretical relationship. You build trust with people because you stand on their picket line.”



It is important to note the VWC's recognition of the historical limitations of bureaucratic trade unions (of which they work closely with), as often these organizations fail to see beyond their limited self-interest. In the current union model, the labor unions are not the all powerful defenders of the working class they have the potential to be. Due to the collaborative nature of many unions between leadership structure, party politics, and cooperation with the bosses, numerous labor organizations are compelled to traverse undemocratic paths, which often stifle attempts of direct action in the workplace. Acknowledging these flaws, we can see that mainstream trade unions in the U.S. are not currently revolutionary organizations, and that most also fail to promote radical worker self-activity and serious class warfare. The issue is not whether unions are revolutionary, rather how anarchists work within unions towards a revolutionary end.

Marx once referred to the unions as "the universities of the working class." While this may have been clearly true during his time, we should understand the potential that unions retain today for such educating to occur. Through participation in labor unions, workers acknowledge class interests and develop class consciousness. The trade union movement is the most important mass movement the working class has built. Based on the numbers of people represented by unions, anarchist groups must have a program that addresses and relates to these organizations and the workers who participate in them.

As anarchists and leftwing activists we aim our efforts at establishing a society through which the basic needs of all persons are guaranteed, and through which the chains of alienation are fractured by an inclusive democratic structure that reaches out to all people. Toward that goal, the efforts of the VWC as illustrated above, must be applauded, supported, and duplicated, if not made even stronger. It is true that it will be a difficult road to revolutionize these organizations due to certain conservative tendencies within labor bureaucracy. Even so, we are armed by the failures and arrogance of the capitalist class who, driven by greed, is not content with the status quo of domination and are seeking new innovations to exploit us as wage slaves. There is a potential for such radicalization to occur within organized labor; let us not forget the thousands of sheet metal workers, steelworkers, and others who, during the battle of Seattle, broke rank with the union bureaucrats and joined anarchists, students, and radicals on the barricades. We, as revolutionaries, must look for ways to force unions to take more radical stances, and also to create a truly popular front through which the rank and file can and will go beyond the status quo elements that are content at sticking their fingers in leaky dams instead of rebuilding the fucking thing.



## **NOTES:**

*(1) Currently, Vermont's minimum wage is \$6.75/hr; well above the national standard. And the city of Burlington has set the minimum wage at \$10/hr for all businesses that do over a certain amount of work for the city.*

*(2) On September 28, 2002, well over 1,000 Vermonters rallied for universal healthcare in Montpelier (that's the capitol folks, and keep in mind that only 8,000 people live there). Aside from the recent demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq, this was one of the largest rallies in Vermont history.*



# Precarious & Pissed Off: Lessons from the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union (2003-2005) & Beyond

*By Sean West, NEFAC Philadelphia*

## **BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS**

In June of 2003 the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC), an affiliate of Jobs with Justice and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), launched an ambitious and unique model of worker organization, known as The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union. The union was based geographically in Vermont's capital city, among workers in the restaurants, retail outfits, and non-profits. Any worker, whether or not they worked in a shop that had union recognition and a union contract, could join, participate, and engage in the grievance procedure if they had a problem at work. By the summer of 2005 the union was gone: dead in the water, so to speak.

I could tell you the blow-by-blow story of how this organization rose and fell. The story would be comprised of tales of workers sitting down "eye to eye" with their employers, alongside stewards, and winning grievances; of a fierce and vibrant debate in the newspapers, coffee shops, and pubs of Central Vermont; of a dedicated group of downtown workers reaching their wits' end pulling together newsletters, holding long meetings, handling grievances, and talking endlessly with other workers; of marches in the middle of blizzards; of public forums; of acting like a union without any legal union recognition; of successful actions and mistakes; of asshole bosses, obnoxious lawyers, and workers who found their own voice; and of all the many ingredients that went into the ultimately unsuccessful two-year-long struggle to forge a lasting institution to defend downtown workers and advance our interests.

However, the more I look back on it all, the more I realize that this story is not what is important. Dave's article, "The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union: Building Working Class Democracy One City at a Time," gives a fairly detailed point-by-point history of the project.<sup>(1)</sup> What is more important now is that we draw some lessons from the experience of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union, so that other workers, especially those in the non-unionized retail and restaurant occupations and the service sector more generally, who attempt to gather co-



workers together to build self-organization, concerted activity and collective resistance -- in short, a fighting union -- have an idea of what did and didn't work for us in the MDWU.

However, before I go into those lessons, I should note some objective factors, both within the retail and service sectors in general and in Montpelier in particular, that conspired to make organizing a union among retail and restaurant workers and advance our interests an uphill battle, and ultimately one we would lose.

## **CHALLENGES ORGANIZING WITHIN THE RETAIL & RESTAURANT SECTORS**

First and foremost, there is the obvious: retail and restaurant workers have not been organizing in vast numbers across the US and Canada in recent history. Nor are they now. If they were, almost every union in the respective countries would have retail and service sector branches, and would be eagerly initiating organizing projects to bring new members from this sector of the economy into their dwindling ranks. The reasons for the lack of self-organization in this sector are many.

One is that we generally feel powerless and vulnerable. In this sense resistance at work in restaurants and retail in the US and Canada becomes highly individualized. Instead of collaborating to defend each other against unjust disciplines or to fight for better wages or conditions, we as workers often protest in our own individual capacities: quitting rather than confronting an obnoxious boss, stealing to make up for the fact that we don't make much money, calling in sick rather than dealing with aggravating conditions of the workplace or obnoxious customers, and of course doing petty sabotage to feel like we're getting back at the customer or boss who just scolded us. This is the everyday reality of workplace resistance for most in the service sector. We might confide in our co-workers that we are resisting, if we resist at all; rarely, though, do we engage in collective, concerted, public activity together. At the end of the day this individualized resistance might feel good, but it does not solve our problems at work in the long term.

Two other leading factors that make self-organization at work difficult are the twin burdens of high turnover and a low sense of entitlement among workers on the job. High turnover is widespread in retail and restaurant work. In 2005, 44.9% of workers in the leisure and hospitality trade, and 32.6% in the retail trade, voluntarily quit their jobs.(2) If the workers at your workplace are constantly changing, they tend to have low investment in changing the workplace. This makes it difficult, but not impossible, to organize with them.



The decision to quit instead of demanding more is in part a result of a low sense of entitlement. People often feel like these are “dead end jobs” that they can do nothing about. Instead of asking for a raise, workers will often just look for a better-paying job. Instead of demanding that working conditions are changed, they will find ways to work around the daily humiliations and difficulties of the workplace. The dishwasher throws out a few dishes to lighten the load, the retail worker doing back-room inventory doesn’t bother counting a box of items that is hard to reach, and the servers at the local diner joke with each other about the obnoxious customers they are serving with a smile. We do these things simply to retain a sense of dignity.

In short, these positions in the economy breed a high sense of social insecurity, or precarity. There is low (if any) job security, low wages, and an awareness that we are easily replaceable. We work from paycheck to paycheck, so instead of having “nothing to lose but our chains,” we have nothing to lose but our housing, groceries, heat, electricity, phone, internet access (if we have a computer), health insurance (if we have that), luxury of going out for a drink or to the movies, car (if we have one), car insurance (if we can afford it), and the numerous other things that give us a sense of stability, place, and continuity in the modern shit-hole that is capitalist society.

## **CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZING IN MONTPELIER, VERMONT (OR: THE PLIGHT OF THE PETIT-BOURGEOISIE)**

If you take a glance at the retail and restaurant outfits of Montpelier you will find very few corporate outfits. (I worked at one of them, Brooks Pharmacy, but that was more the exception than the rule for employment downtown.) As you walk down Main Street you’ll find coffee shops, bookstores, clothing shops, and so on: all independently owned. Turn the corner onto State Street, and you’ll find more of the same. When you look down Langdon Street, you’ll see an independent record store, an independent sporting-goods store, numerous boutiques, and of course Montpelier’s only worker-run enterprises, the Langdon Street Cafe and Black Sheep Books.(3) In short, the bulk of the market share of the retail and restaurant sector in Montpelier, fueled by the purchases of tourists and state workers, is owned by sole proprietors who are often seen working alongside, or at least around, the workers they employ.

Running a business in the retail and restaurant sector can be a challenge for the small bosses. The whims of the market take small business on a roller coaster ride that often has the locals talking over a beer about which merchant is



rumored to be in dire financial straits, or which enterprises are weathering a particularly bad business year well. As a result, what most of the small business owners we faced in the Downtown Union struggle lacked in fiscal capital, they made up for in “social capital.” The merchants are not only a hub of local information, but are also seen as the public face, and the custodians, of downtown Montpelier.

They are organized into an association, The Montpelier Downtown Community Association, and they can be found in the local bars after hours along with everybody else. More important than the MDCA, they form an informal social network of people who, though they might not always like each other, share a strong commonality as a class of small merchants. Their woes of a bad business year and their lamentations about the need for more parking occupy more space in local newspapers than the challenges faced by the working poor in their shops. Most of the public -- working class, middle class and elite alike -- has some degree of sympathy with their plight. From the beginning, they were in a better position to win the battle of ideas concerning unionization.

When we went public in our organizing efforts with the MDWU, with majorities in five different shops, not only did the particular merchants of those shops quickly erode union support by having one-on-one meetings with the workers about why the MDWU would be bad for everybody, but they quickly organized themselves in opposition to the union and began to organize their workers in opposition. The small merchants' messages against the union quickly outpaced ours in the media and in public discourse. The only thing that kept us up and running in the PR battle was that there were enough workers at enough businesses who were willing to remain publicly strong and vocal about the issues they faced, and about the union drive.

To these ends, the MDWU did much to dispel myths the business owners spread. Amanda L., a worker at La Pizzeria(4) at the time and now chief steward at the local co-op grocery store, Hunger Mountain, was insistent about this fact:

I remember one thing: all the business owners, and even the mayor, were saying that these were just transitional jobs for young people. I tried so hard to get people to understand that if you go into Shaw's [a supermarket], yes, there are young people working the register, but there are just about as many older people working there. You can't say this isn't a career. Many of us don't want this to be a career, but you don't have this choice.

It was a decisive victory that we were able to create a dialogue about service workers in downtown Montpelier that was able to dispel certain myths, but the business owners always had the edge in the public discourse.





They bought ads in the newspaper, were ever-present downtown, and had the luxury to talk, while at work, to inquiring members of the community and workers about their thoughts on the union drive. “After all,” many shop owners would say, “I treat my workers just like I would want to be treated, and if they don’t like it here, they can always go and work somewhere else.”

While this dynamic is fairly common among all organizing drives, the bosses in this case had faces that one would see everyday on the streets of Montpelier. They were not an administration that was detached from the everyday public, nor were they a faceless, heartless corporation removed from the “community” of Montpelier: they were a social class within the town. They were seen as stewards and leaders of community life, and we were painted, quite successfully, as a thorn in their side, trying to make trouble in an already equitable community. Our success was that at times we were able to dispel this illusion: to show how workers were being mistreated, to highlight the class divide in Montpelier, and to ask the simple question: ‘If this is an equitable community, what’s the big deal of workers having their own organization?’

## **LESSONS FOR ORGANIZING FROM YOUR HUMBLE AUTHOR AND OTHERS**

So here are some lessons culled from The Montpelier Downtown Workers’ Union and beyond. Beyond, you ask? Well, yes. The people I interviewed for this article have since had numerous experiences beyond the MDWU, and some were never involved. I went on to organize nurses in a healthcare union in NJ, and am now an organizer for a community-labor alliance. Amanda L. went on to become the chief steward at Hunger Mountain Co-Op in Montpelier. Kristin W. is organizing healthcare workers in Nevada. Nick R. attempted to start a project to organize chain store workers in Vermont, and is now moving to Florida to help organize WalMart workers with a group that has been at it for several years now. Steve R. was never part of the Montpelier Downtown Workers’ Union, but was involved in a similar campaign: the South Street Workers’ Union, based along the South Street business corridor in Philly and affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World. Dougen was a salt with the Ironworkers in Vermont while the MDWU was active, and is now a healthcare organizer.

Take these lessons and use them as you will. Some might be applicable to your situation, and some



might not. These lessons are culled primarily from the experiences of workers who were unorganized seeking to organize.

Some lessons might be applicable to workers who are already organized to do some internal organizing in their workplace and union, perhaps against your boss or bureaucrats who stand in the way of you fighting your boss; some might not. Hopefully this will start a dialogue about the practical organizing lessons we've all learned. Above all, keep your head up, listen to your co-workers and fight the good fight. While as a class we might be "born to lose," our aim is to "fight to win!"

## **1. ORGANIZE**

If you work at a retail and restaurant outfit and there are common issues that need to be resolved, it's up to you and your co-workers to do something to remedy the issues. The best way to do this is to organize together into a union that is appropriate to your industry, and fight to win a legally binding contract that strips the boss, manager, or administration of the power to make arbitrary changes to your working conditions, wages and benefits.

This will entail getting a majority of your co-workers on board to wage a protracted battle to force union recognition or secure it through an election or card check, and then go on to win a decent contract that deals with your issues. Of course, the fight never stops at the contract: it is a continual struggle to enforce the contract (i.e. make it more than a piece of paper), to keep your co-workers organized to deal with the day-to-day issues that arise on the job, and to fight for more control over your working conditions. This is not self-management, nor the classless utopia which is our ultimate goal; it is simple self-defense. The point is for you and your co-workers to build confidence, class pride, and power on the job. From this point of power you can do a number of things to expand your organizing efforts on the shop floor and beyond into the community.

While the above traditional method of workplace organizing might work for some, it might not work for others. Steve R. of the South Street Workers' Union recalls attempting to connect with a grocery store workers' union while working at Whole Foods: "They told us they were organizing at every Whole Foods store in the area and that they would get back to us. They never did." As an alternative method, Steve and some of his co-workers adopted a model of Solidarity Unionism, and went to the IWW for assistance. In this model, he and his co-workers "acted like a union," filed Unfair Labor Practices charges when the company would trample on their rights, and generally made it hell for shop-floor managers who



tried to mess with anybody. (They successfully dispatched a number of them by making conditions so unpleasant that they quit.)

The MDWU workers had a similar experience of shop-floor solidarity, and while many grievances were won across town it led to a very heavy burden on the union leadership and ultimately to burnout. In the high-turnover retail and service sectors, this is the downside of what is sometimes referred to as “Minority Unionism,” when a minority of workers act together on the job to deal with issues and grievances without formal union recognition or a contract. Much of your energy and power went into day-to-day fights around particular issues and grievances, rather than the bigger picture of forcing our administrations and bosses to concede to our power and deal with issues and grievances across the board.

There are, however, other alternatives. If you work in a shop and there is no union body that is willing to back you up in your fight, you can form your own independent union. You will need to sign up a majority of your co-workers on a union petition, secure union recognition through an election or a concerted campaign of pressure, and bargain out a contract.

Other methods of worker organizing that might be useful in your circumstance include, but are not limited to, “Workplace Resistance Groups,” informal groups of workers which can act outside the bounds of legality without the repercussions that unions face, and “Flying Squads,” groups of workers in a particular department, shop, or region acting as teams in solidarity with each other and other groups of workers. And then there is the good old-fashioned “crew,” where you and co-workers that you’re friends with watch each others’ backs. This is probably the most organic, informal and widespread form of workplace organization, though it is limited in the long term, because it is rooted in friendships and therefore excludes a large number of co-workers.

In the end, whatever method you employ, the point is to win. What does “win” mean, to organize successfully? It means that you and your co-workers are able to leverage your power (on the shop floor and in the community) against your boss or administration. It means leaving them no choice but to recognize you, the union of organized workers, as a force that cannot be ignored or snuffed out, whose concerns and issues must be addressed if “business as usual” is to continue.

The legally binding contract is so far the best way to solidify the gains that workers win in this process. But your union, like anything in life, is only as good and powerful as you make it. If you don’t organize co-workers to be an active part of the struggle and union life, it’s easy for bureaucrats or sectarian activists to take over your union



and run it in your name. So build your union from the bottom up, listen to your co-workers, get the majority involved and active around issues that are important to them: this is the best protection against those who would seek to co-opt your workplace organization. So how the fuck do I get there, you ask?

## **2. WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER: LEARN PROVEN, TIME-TESTED ORGANIZING METHODS**

“You need to learn the ins and outs of organizing from others who have done it successfully,” says Dougen, an organizer for a healthcare union in Nevada. “Rarely do people organize spontaneously and successfully without building the skill sets needed to get the job done, day in and day out. Look at Rosa Parks. The history books would have you believe she just sat down on the white man’s seat one day, but in actuality she was trained in non-violent civil disobedience, knew exactly what she was doing, and was part of a strategic campaign to end segregation.”

Dougen is, for the most part, right. You need to utilize methods of organizing that win. In this section I’ll attempt to outline some methods for organizing your workplace. However, nothing is more valuable than having mentors that can teach you methods of successful organizing face-to-face. For some of you, an internship with SEIU or some other organizing union may be a good way to learn some skills. For others, activists in your local Central Labor Council or Jobs With Justice chapter may be able to give you pointers. For others still, perhaps there is an active IWW chapter that has veteran organizers who have won union fights in their time. Whatever the case may be, my best advice is to seek out people who have real-life experience organizing and winning to teach skills, mentor you in your organizing efforts, and let you bounce your ideas off of them.

Here are some very basic things you’ll need to do if you and your folks want to get organized:

### **A. MAP OUT YOUR WORKPLACE**

Every workplace and community has social contours that ebb and flow beneath the surface. There are cliques, family relationships, friendships, personality clashes, history, etc. Your job as a workplace organizer is to figure how this social puzzle fits together.

You need to map out the different departments and work spaces within your work. You need to find out which employees are looked up to, and who co-workers go to when they have problems. What cliques exist, and who are the informal leaders of those cliques?



Who respects who in a department, who doesn't get along, and why? Who trusts who? How long has each person been there? Ultimately, you need to figure out who people look up to and follow. Doing this early on, and on a regular basis, will make it possible for you to figure out which people you need to get on board so the rest of their clique, or others who respect them, will be willing to join. We may not like to think about informal social hierarchies, but they exist, so this is a matter of making good use of limited resources. If you don't win over the natural leaders first, management will.

A major failing of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union was in not regularly mapping out the social dynamics of different workplaces, or of downtown Montpelier as a whole. In a sense, we were a ship with no map, constantly drifting in the social seas and occasionally being lucky enough to find land upon which to dock.

## **B. ASK QUESTIONS, LEARN HOW TO MOVE PEOPLE**

Ask questions first, shoot later. You need to learn what's going on with people-what their issues are at work, what their personal interests are, and what they do in their off hours-in order to be able to bring them on board. If a conversation with a co-worker hits a dead end, often the best way to keep it going is to ask them other questions and get more of an idea of where they are at. And once you have assessed them, you have to move them to join your efforts to change conditions at work. "If we had a training on how to have a basic, point-by-point conversation with other workers, it would have been invaluable," said Kristin W., former chief steward of the MDWU and current healthcare organizer in Nevada.

For the purpose of this section I'd like to steal a little bit of wisdom from another healthcare organizer I worked under, named Christi. Her point-by-point method of having a conversation with workers was summed up by the acronym ISIT (Issues, Solutions, Inoculation, and Tasks):

When first conversing with co-workers, find out what their ISSUES at work are. They may not have "problems," or they may not feel comfortable telling you right off. So keep the conversation going. Ask them what they like at work. Ask them what it's like to do their particular job, and what it's like to work with their co-workers. Keep asking until you find out what they care about and what they want changed.

The next part is SOLUTIONS. Organizing together with your co-workers is the only way you can ensure that the things you like at work stay the same, and the things you detest get changed. Ask people how they've tried to right wrongs in the past. How would they deal with management arbitrarily taking away something they like on the job? Have



they had a friend who was unfairly fired or disciplined? When people answer these questions, this is your window of opportunity to hammer home that the long-term solution is to organize together with the majority of their co-workers into a union, able to make demands of management, deal with grievances, and win concessions.

INOCULATION means going over the typical things that management will say in an attempt to dissuade people from organizing, and how to respond to them. The best guard against the anti-union message of the boss is the power of prediction. Tell people what they can expect the boss to say and do, and they will be much less likely to get scared by the boss's "anti-" message. I'm not going to go over all of the typical things that a boss or administration will usually say. A little research at a local union hall or on the internet will provide you with pamphlets and lists to your heart's delight. However, I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this step in a conversation. It could mean the difference between the boss scaring the shit out of a union supporter (who you worked hard to get on board), and the boss listing talking points against the organizing effort only to have the unfazed union supporter reply, "I knew you would say that!"

Last, set TASKS. What will your co-worker do to advance the organizing effort? Ask them questions about other people in their department: who would they be willing to talk to about signing a petition or union card? Will they come to the next organizing committee meeting? As always, it's important to emphasize that everybody has to do something to move the effort forward. Do whatever you can to not let your co-worker off without taking on some responsibility that you can follow up with them about. Everybody must do something, no matter how small.

The ISIT outline by itself is completely inadequate for the purpose of organizing. Having these conversations is as much an art as it is a science, and nothing can replace talking with an experienced organizer about your "rap" with co-workers. What I hope I have provided is a framework to think about how to carry out organizing conversations. Ultimately, you'll have to find out what works for you.

## **C. IF YOU CAN'T ASK SOMEONE TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION, THEY PROBABLY WON'T JOIN IT**

This is simple but cannot be overstated. You need to ask people to join the organizing effort. I can't count how many times I had organizing conversations with my co-workers at Brooks and didn't ask

people to join the MDWU, so I wouldn't come off as a missionary or something. In hindsight, this was wrong. Every worker deserves the right to be asked if they want



to join a workplace organization. To not ask them is to insult their ability to make up their own minds to a very simple question. Steve R. of the South Street Workers' Union expressed a similar fear: "I didn't want people to think we were running some sort of scam, so I was hesitant to ask people to join the organization."

This fear is common among the best of organizers, and you need to get over it. Want to know how? Ask people to join the union, and keep asking, until you get over it. Indeed, we learn as we walk. We become comfortable by immersing ourselves in what is not comfortable. It's as simple -- and aggravating -- as that.

## **D. BUILD FIRST-TIER AND SECOND-TIER LEADERSHIP**

Steve R. adds another important insight on his organizing work in Philly: "I don't think we pushed people enough to take on responsibilities in the union." This, if anything, was the ultimate downfall of the MDWU. We had a dedicated core of activists, but no one to step up to the plate when we needed a hand or were burnt out. Building a second tier of leaders -- that is, a group of people who take on light responsibilities on a regular basis -- is invaluable to your efforts.

How do you do this? Regularly make sure that people who don't attend all the meetings or are not at the front of the line take on tasks and invest themselves in the organizing effort. Involve them in a routine of doing something for the organizing effort. If someone shows initiative, enthusiasm, and energy, don't just encourage them or pat them on the back. Push them to the front, and get them invested in regular union responsibilities.

## **3. GOT MILITANCY?**

So you're a militant. You want to put up the barricades, seize the workplaces, institute popular assemblies, and throw some molotovs while you're at it. Here's the good news: As militants, we have the fighting spirit that it takes to commit ourselves to the tasks ahead of us in the class struggle. Here's the obvious, bad news: We're not there yet.

## **A. GO TO WHERE PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE ARE AT & TAKE BABY STEPS TO ORGANIZE THE MAJORITY**

People need to be on the same page. They need to find common ground, develop trust in each other, and build confidence before taking more risky action together. This begins with the obvious. Find out what the majority of your co-workers are ready to do and push them to get to it. For many of us, signing on to a public statement, especially one which



makes demands of our employers and mentions the dreaded word “union,” is a pretty risky and militant step in the first place. If a supermajority of your shop wants to go on strike to get demands met and secure recognition, that’s great. For most of us, that won’t be the case, at least at first. We need to start small and build from there. Getting people to sign a union petition might be a step that, once a majority are on board, can lead to co-workers openly wearing union buttons or stickers around specific problems at work, to leafleting co-workers outside of work, and eventually to a whole host of appropriate escalations in your fight. When you take action, take majority action.

This is mass-based organizing at its core, the point of it all. We wield power together as a majority. As a small group, we can wear buttons supporting a union, but then we look like a weak group to the rest of our co-workers, which may make them be hesitant to join. We can leaflet with a handful of individuals by our side, or we can leaflet with many, to show that we aren’t fucking around. When you’re organizing, always make sure that you and the other gung-ho folks who are pushing things forward don’t outpace and therefore alienate your co-workers. Get them to take the actions, no matter how small, alongside you.

## **B. DON’T SUBSTITUTE YOUR CORE GROUP FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION ON THE SHOP FLOOR**

This leads nicely into a lesson that we in the MDWU learned all too well. You can’t substitute yourself for collective action on the shop floor. After our first strategy of securing a critical mass of union shops downtown came to a halt, we regrouped and surveyed approximately 100 downtown workers about their concerns at work. (We should have been signing them up for the union at the same time.) The conclusion of the survey was that the number-one concern for downtown workers was unfair firing and discipline, so at one of our quarterly Downtown Worker Town Meetings, we voted on creating a grievance procedure for all downtown workers and went to work. Stewards were trained, a chief steward was elected, and we assigned territory based on the different streets and shops in Montpelier. The Citywide Grievance Procedure, as we called it, was fairly innovative, and in its beginning we won a considerable number of fights -- more than we lost, for sure.

The procedure was fairly routine. A worker would contact a steward, the steward would proceed in conducting an investigation which would consist of interviews of the worker and possibly some co-workers, an information request would be sent to the boss, and then a remedy would be



suggested by the steward. If the boss didn't accept the remedy, we would get a respected member of the community to try to resolve the dispute. Finally, if there was no getting through to the boss, we would involve our Downtown Workers' Defense Squad, which consisted of dedicated union activists and supportive community members.

Sounds great on paper, but here's the problem: we didn't organize workers in their shops to defend each other, and therefore didn't build the union in the particular shops. Our system was mostly based on other downtown workers from other shops intervening on the behalf of workers in a particular shop. To get our assistance in the first place, workers should have had to convince at least 4 or 5 of their co-workers to be willing to take public action to defend them. Why? Because winning small battles is not enough. We needed to build the union by getting co-workers to act with each other.

Of course, there are exceptions to this. For example, if someone was facing sexual harassment, racist or homophobic bigotry, or similar discrimination, it might have been appropriate to take action as outsiders, on moral grounds alone. However, the question that should have been at the core of our thoughts at every grievance should not have been, "How do we win this grievance?", but "How do we build the union, at this shop, through winning this particular grievance?" Our failure to get the grievants' co-workers to be the agents carrying out and winning their grievances with them became our Achilles' heel. Down the road when the bosses wised up and got lawyers involved, we were served with papers prohibiting us to speak with them, and with "no trespass" notices. If the first step of our strategy had been to help the grievant organize their co-workers to do the investigation and put forth the remedy, we might have fielded fewer grievances, but they would have resulted in more than wins for the individual grievants: they would have laid the groundwork for the union at entire shops.

## **C. DIRECT ACTION INVOLVES COLLECTIVE DISCIPLINE & ACCOUNTABILITY**

When and if you get to the point where you're taking direct action, always remember that it involves planning, guidelines, and accountability to the union as a whole. I will provide one example of a good action that went awry. Union member David V., a local bartender at Charlie O's, was unjustly fired by his notorious scumbag boss. The patrons rallied around him and complained and were generally pissed off, because he was a good bartender and a great storyteller, and because they liked him. The union we felt we needed to take action quickly. We devised a



plan: people would go to the bar the night the manager, Stacey(5), was tending bar, and they would put stickers on their beer bottles that said “Bring Back Dave.” To apply additional pressure on the manager we called for a “Tip Strike” against her alone. We found that people at a going-away party for two other ex-bartenders were willing to rally their friends to participate. Things went wrong. Before people got into that bar and participated, we should have had clear guidelines for what the action consisted of and what it didn’t. Instead, we used the party as our earliest opportunity to launch the action, with few guidelines of what was appropriate and what wasn’t.

Toward the end of the action, an ex-bartender who had her own gripe with Stacey threw a pint glass at her head. (It missed.) While we might have smiled at the thought of an asshole manager almost getting her just desserts, the political hangover drained our energy and time, and cost us support among our allies, which would make later grievance fights more difficult to win. What was the biggest shame of it all? The “violence” instigated by the “disruptive union action” overshadowed real collective action taken by the majority to highlight David’s unjust firing.

You can’t substitute the militant action of one person for the collective action of a group. If we had organized people in a more disciplined manner, the sticker action and the tip strike could have led to an escalation of tactics. Instead, the campaign was derailed. One good friend said to me after the episode, “If you guys got twenty other workers, and not just lefty ideological workers, to throw pint glasses, it would be a different story. But you didn’t, and so you have totally lost the moral high ground the original action created.”

In short, when you’re going to take an action, whether it be a picket, a leafleting, or something more creative, you need to have discussions with all the participants beforehand and decide on appropriate ways to deal with bosses, anti-union workers, and anti-union customers. Not doing this cost us a lot of political capital. (Oh, and “liquid courage” might not always be the best thing to mix with union actions!)

## **D. RUN ISSUE-BASED CAMPAIGNS IN THE WORKPLACE & IN THE COMMUNITY**

One thing we can be proud of as a union, without a doubt, is that we never bought into the artificial divide between class issues in the community and at work. When local liberals tried to institute a “Local Options Tax” that would have increased the tax on food, services, and goods in our town, we ran a campaign against it and held a public forum.



While the opposition to the tax was much broader than the MDWU -- many merchants also opposed it -- we brought our issues to the table. After all, downtown workers often ate downtown on their lunch break, or bought goods for home after the end of a shift. We were underpaid as it was, and an extra tax would adversely affect us.

We should have done more of these public campaigns. Along with our work with the Citywide Grievance Procedure, we should have run a "No firing or discipline" public campaign, getting workers and community members to sign on to a petition demanding representation at any disciplinary meeting. We did discuss the idea of creating a "Montpelier Standards" campaign, which would have outlined standards addressing an array of issues for downtown workers, but we never followed through on it. If we had narrowed it down to the issue which workers were most concerned with, unfair firing and discipline, we could have had followed through and might have won.

#### **4. THE POINT IS TO WIN, SO FAILURE IS NEVER AN EXCUSE TO GIVE UP**

We lost the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union. And the fact is, most organizing drives fail. The cards are stacked against us. At many facilities, workers will go through 3, 4, or even more union drives before attaining success. If organizing at work is truly important to you there are plenty of unorganized places to organize. So don't let one failure get in the way of continuing to fight and eventually winning. We didn't.

David V. went from the downtown union into freelance journalism. He is on the board of his Central Labor Council, and is a member of a writers' union. Kristin W., Dougen, and I all went on to pick up skills and win battles for hundreds, even thousands, of workers as staff organizers. Nick R. is taking a staff job with a group that organizes WalMart workers, and Amanda L. went on to get a union job and become a chief steward. Steve R., while currently traveling, is going to settle back in Philly -- anybody who knows him knows he'll be giving the status quo hell in the "215."

There are also a number of people who didn't jump from this fight right into another. But there may still come a time when they use the hard lessons we learned when they have a problem at work. As Joe Strummer would say, "the future is unwritten."

Persistence, humility, a willingness to learn from our missteps and to listen to our comrades and mentors, and overall stubbornness are the keys to fighting the class war on the terrain of the workplace.



## **ANARCHIST ASPIRATIONS**

What I have described above for the most part is simple unionism. Some would say it's merely reformist activity.(6) Is it? Revolutionary socialist anarchism as a political philosophy is based on the fundamental hope that the majority, the working class and all oppressed people, can be the agents of change that will bring about a federated, democratic, and free society of self-managed communities and workplaces.

If we, as the majority of common people, are going to do this, we will need to build confidence as a class, and to learn how to work together for our defense and for the advancement of our common interests. Revolution, it is said, is learned upon the barricades. That is to say, we do not learn how to build popular power by reading it in a book or having someone patiently explain it to us. Like riding a bicycle, we have to learn by actually doing it. So it is that we learn how to build the new society in the shell of the old by engaging with others in mass struggle. Anything less leaves us ill-equipped for the tasks and trials ahead.



## **NOTES:**

*(1) Northeastern Anarchist #10 (Spring/Summer 2005), pg. 11-18. This article deals with most of the history of the MDWU, but was written before its end.*

*(2) Statistics quoted from the Employment Policy Foundation, [www.epf.org/pubs/factsheets/2005/fs2005317.pdf](http://www.epf.org/pubs/factsheets/2005/fs2005317.pdf)*

*(3) Yes this is a shameless plug for these two worker collectives. When in Montpelier go buy books at Black Sheep Books and have food and coffee from Langdon Street. Ohhh, and did I mention they sell beer and wine?*

*(4) It's interesting to note that of the five business where we originally demanded recognition, three (La Pizzeria, Karma Imports, and State Street Market) have since closed. Another shop where we had a contract, Mountain Café, has also closed, but only after viciously busting the union. Fuck you, Chu!*

*(5) On Labor Day of this year, Stacey was fired. Reportedly, another ex-bartender ran into the bar that night and yelled "The Wicked Witch Is Dead," and the entire bar applauded. Dave got his, finally, and on Labor Day no less!*

*(6) I will be the first to say that the lessons above are far from comprehensive, and by themselves, do not go over the bulk of successful organizing strategies and lessons. More needs to be written by other organizers on this subject.*

# Pissed Off Projectionists: Bringing The Class War To A Theater Near You!

*By Class Against Class, NEFAC Boston*

**B**oston has a rich history of anarchism and class warfare. Unfortunately, at least until recently, the days of anarchist influence within labor struggles was exactly that: a relic of the past. The last time an anarchist had played an influential role in a successful Boston-based labor struggle was in 1938, when Rose Pesotta led a strike to organize over a thousand women dressmakers. Since then, anarchism has been defined mainly as a counter-culture or form of identity politics, with very little relevancy to the everyday struggles of the working class in this city.

Over the past few years anarchists in Boston have begun to retrace their class war roots by taking a more proactive approach to local labor struggles -- mainly in the form of solidarity work. Recent labor disputes (NECCO factory workers, SEIU janitors, etc.) have seen principled support from the local anarchist community, whether it be solidarity on the picket line, benefits to raise strike funds, distributing strike literature, mobilizing people to attend rallies, or else taking direct action where unions are prevented from doing so themselves.

Labor solidarity, in and of itself, can be crucial in assisting class victories against the bosses. However, in terms of how much influence anarchists are able to have over strategies and tactics or overall direction of a given struggle, it can be limiting. After all, principled solidarity requires total respect for the self-activity of the direct participants -- the rank-and-file workers -- to determine their own means and ends during the course of a struggle. As anarchists we should be up front about our politics and prepared to argue for anarchist alternatives to the dead-end reformism and bureaucracy of traditional trade unionism. However, so long as we are providing solidarity for other workers' struggles, we should accept our role as outside supporters and not overstep our boundaries.

Earlier this year, a handful of us from NEFAC took our activity a step beyond supporting the struggles of others, and set out to organize our own workplace. For the first time in nearly seventy years anarchist militants would be at the forefront of a class struggle in the Boston area, successfully leading a campaign for unionization using explicitly anarchist strategies, tactics, and methods of organizing. Although we are humble to



the fact that our efforts fall far short of the scale and magnitude of Rose Pesotta's work with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, we recognize that the success of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' to organize workers at the Somerville Theatre represents an important turning point for class struggle anarchism in our city.

## **WITH A WORKPLACE LIKE THIS, WHO WOULDN'T BE PISSED?**

The story of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' began over a year ago in Somerville, a traditionally blue-collar city just north of Boston. At the time, there were only two projectionists working at the local theater. Both were making minimum wage (\$6.75/hr), receiving no benefits, and consistently putting in 50-hour weeks. The projection booths were dimly lit, poorly ventilated, and extremely hot. Repeated pleas for equipment repairs, control over scheduling, or even minimal pay raises were consistently ignored, or else outright refused. To top things off, the boss had recently instructed the manager to hire more projectionists and cut back hours in an attempt to avoid overtime pay.

It was obvious that things could not get much worse, and conditions were certainly not improving under the new manager who had taken over in mid-summer. Even though the time seemed ripe for action, the opportunity quickly passed as new projectionists began to be hired, leaving those who were ready to fight back as a minority amongst question marks. Over the next few weeks, the original core of projectionists attempted to feel out their new co-workers, making a point to see how they reacted to low wages and piss poor working conditions that were all too familiar.

By the end of the summer, there appeared to be some promise amongst the group, but the time was not right to pop the question. Further hirings and firings in the fall and winter changed the complexion of the workforce once again. This high turnover rate appears to be typical of "independent" movie theatres that take advantage of young and inexperienced workforces. All too often, these small corporations can be the most exploitive, and they take full advantage of the reluctance of younger workers to be involved in workplace struggles (a reluctance that represents, at least in part, a reflection of the larger disconnect between organized labor and young workers). It should be said that the nature of the projectionist trade tends to attract some fairly interesting characters: film students, punks, social misfits, etc. The Somerville Theatre was no different, and, unfortunately for our boss, as open positions began to be filled by personal recommendations by one of



the original projection workers, almost half of the projectionists would now be revolutionary anarcho-communists. Suddenly the prospects for organizing in the workplace became much more interesting. With a solid core now in place, the process of organizing would soon be in full swing.

## **TRADE UNIONISM VS WORKPLACE RESISTANCE GROUP: BRIDGING A FALSE DICHOTOMY**

Before moving forward with the organizing campaign and actually seeking out representation from a union, there were many important political and strategic discussions to be had amongst ourselves. Those of us who identified as anarcho-communists obviously had strong criticisms of trade unionism (and still do!), and acknowledged the potential for compromising ourselves if we were to uncritically embrace an orthodox trade union strategy.

At the most basic level, joining a union implies that workers have different interests from the boss. Unions have traditionally acted as defensive organizations for working people under capitalism, and in the best of times (that is, during periods of heightened class struggle) have maintained an antagonistic relationship to capitalist social relations by posing a direct challenge to the interests of the ruling class.

Unfortunately, the reality of the labor movement today is one of compromise, and often collaboration, with capitalist exploitation. Instead of acting as defensive organizations, unions play the role of business organizations that negotiate the sale of their member's labor power to employers. They seek a fairer form of exploitation under capitalism, rather than an end to capitalist exploitation itself. Most unions are structured as a top-down hierarchy, with unaccountable bureaucrats calling the shots from above, often restricting the self-activity of the rank-and-file membership. This bureaucratic stranglehold, along with years of backward labor legislation, has led to labor unions often becoming roadblocks for serious class conflict in North America, rather than fulfilling their historic role as effective vehicles for class struggle.

However, unions still represent the largest organized pole within the working class, and like any mass organization, it is essential for anarchists to develop a program for how our activity relates to them. The issue is not whether unions are revolutionary, but rather how we as anarchists work within unions towards a revolutionary end.

It should be noted that the labor movement in the United States is currently a shell of what it once was, with only a fraction of its former membership strength (in 1958 nearly 39% of the private sector was unionized, as compared to 2000 where membership fell to under 9%... the lowest level



since 1902!). But, after a long retreat, there now seems to be something of a progressive shift within the labor movement. An increasing number of unions have embraced, at least to some extent, experimental forms of organizing and a strengthening of rank-and-file democracy. This leaves interesting possibilities for class struggle anarchists who are serious about building militant rank-and-file workers' movements.

Aside from the theoretical arguments to be made in regards to unionism, there were also some very real factors to be taken into account in our situation. We eventually agreed that, at least in terms of a long-term strategy, it made the most sense to join an established projectionists' union. However, there were serious contradictions that needed to be addressed. All unionized theaters in the Boston area are organized through the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, a very conservative trade union affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Historically, this union was formed under the pretext of "combating the socialistic tendencies of industrial unionism" and from there only got worse. Red baiting, black listing, and mob ties were all standard features for this union at one time, and an air of conservatism still reigns to this day.

For us this was almost too much to swallow. But, after holding our noses and doing some further research, we eventually warmed up to the idea of organizing through IATSE. Most important for us was the fact that, despite the overt conservatism on an international level, the actual structure of the union allows for a high level of autonomy and independence for the locals. Also, the particular local we would be dealing with (Motion Picture Operators' Local 182) had suffered a serious defeat the previous year after a severe labor dispute with Loews Cinemas. With relatively few resources, no paid organizers, and the recent defeats, the local seemed very open to a self-managed campaign using experimental forms of organizing.

So, it was agreed. Officially we would be organizing under IATSE Local 182. But, having made this decision, a few of us went a step further and decided to organize ourselves into a workplace resistance group ('Pissed Off Projectionists'), so as to better be able to coordinate our activities as an explicitly radical pole within what we considered to be a limiting trade union framework. We felt this to be necessary for a number of reasons:

## **(1) INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-ACTIVITY**

As anarcho-communists, we believe very much in the necessity of pushing struggles as far as possible, so as to not only challenge the immediate exploitive relationship between ourselves and our employer, but to challenge the system-



atic class exploitation embodied within capitalism as a whole. The very nature of trade unionism is one of class mediation within the existing system, making it insufficient as a vehicle for systematic challenge. It is only through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class that isolated class struggles can be generalized into a genuinely anti-capitalist movement, and in order to achieve this we must continue to build forms of self-organization that are able to go beyond existing trade union structure. (How's that for some dense theoretical reasoning?)

On a more practical level, let's face it, there will be periods of class conflict where rank-and-file workers will need to be prepared to fight not only the bosses in the workplace, but also the union bureaucrats who seek to hold them back (and often sell them out). Why wait for the inevitable to happen before establishing alternative structures within the existing union body? It is important for radical workers to band together in order to effectively assert themselves among the rank-and-file, and create a "dual power" relationship with the official union leadership.

## **(2) MILITANCY**

The most crucial aspect of independence is how you exercise it in action. Trade unions are very much bound by existing labor laws, and limited in their ability to take effective action against employers. They can be sued for libel or slander; they are unable to call for secondary boycotts, and any form of direct action that crosses the line of legality is obviously out of the question. A workplace resistance group has no such legal dilemma, as it is not a legally recognized body, has no financial assets, and is not accountable to anyone outside of the workers directly involved in a given workplace. Slow-downs, sabotage, sick-ins, non-cooperation, unsanctioned pickets, anti-boss actions, and direct action against scabs should all be on the table as possible tactics to be used during labor disputes, and it is through workplace resistance groups that such tactics can be carried out and applied to a larger strategy for developing workers' autonomy.

## **(3) POLITICAL IDENTITY**

We accept that conscious anarchists are an extreme minority within working class movements today. But we feel strongly enough about the validity of our ideas to actively build support for them. Traditionally, anarchism has been a fighting ideology that developed through class struggle, and we believe that anarchism still has a lot to offer the labor movement in terms of strategy and vision (direct action, self-management, rank-and-file democracy, mutual aid, etc.). Throughout the duration of



our organizing campaign at the Somerville Theatre it was important for us to be honest about our political affiliations. We wanted to win using explicitly anarchist tactics and strategies, and we wanted to do so in a tactful, yet very public, way. Basic propaganda-through-example. However, we had to use caution in how closely these affiliations were linked directly to our union. This was another area where it was important for us to be able to coordinate our activities semi-autonomously.

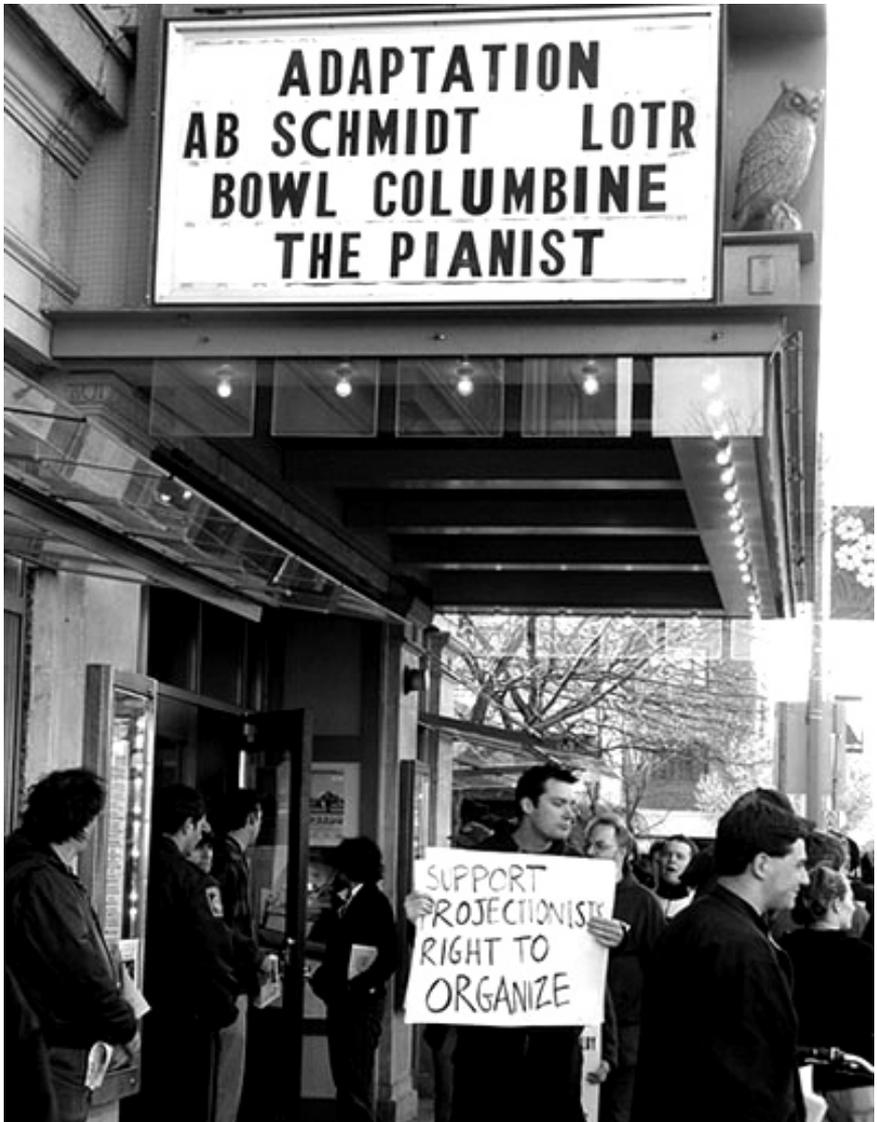
What was interesting in our particular campaign was how easily the lines between seemingly contradictory forms of organizing became blurred and developed into a highly effective labor strategy. Official representation from an AFL-CIO trade union certainly gave our struggle a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the larger labor community, which was extremely important (ex: unionized UPS drivers would not cross our picket line to make deliveries). Also, we had access to legal protection that would otherwise have been unavailable to us. Fighting it out in labor court with our boss was hardly the road we wanted to take, but it was definitely to our benefit to have a union lawyer able to file 'unfair labor practice' suits, challenge the legality of hiring unlicensed scabs to run the projectors, and eventually negotiate a fair contract on our behalf. This helped to keep our boss constantly on the defensive and allowed us to sustain an aggressive fight and keep the upper hand at all times.

While this was all taking place, those of us from the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' were more or less left to ourselves and given a free hand in running the day-to-day aspects of the campaign. We organized our own pickets, rallies, leafleting and phone actions. We developed our own support networks, distributed our own propaganda, and maintained our own public relations. Towards the end of the campaign, when negotiations began to break down, because of the semi-autonomous nature of our organizing we were able to step up the antagonism against our boss in a big way and eventually pushed him to the point that he agreed to cave on practically all the union's demands so long as he would be free of the anarchist menace! (More on that later).

## **FROM THE PROJECTION BOOTH TO THE PICKET LINE**

During the early meetings with the union rep from IATSE, it was clear that they wanted us to follow a 'traditional' path to unionization. This would entail filing for an election with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) once a majority of the workforce had signed cards for representation, waiting at least 42 days, then voting at an election that would take place at the theater. On the surface, this tactic sounds like a straightforward, safe bet, but there are many other factors that generally come into play in the real world.





*Picket outside the Somerville theatre*



According to NLRB statistics, only half the elections filed result in a victory for the union. As a result, it is becoming increasingly popular for unions to seek card-check neutrality agreements and other alternative methods of recognition. The most glaring reason for the failure of the NLRB route is the lengthy opportunity it opens for the employer to run an anti-union campaign, stick-and-carrot style. Employees can be psychologically and physically harassed (a tactic that could be easily used in an isolated projection booth with only one worker on at a time) or fall for false promises and bribes. In addition, the whole process can be dragged out indefinitely with litigation. Facing an employer with a reputation for being rabidly anti-union, this was a scenario that we wanted to avoid. However, these concerns were not our main reasons for wanting to take an alternative strategy.

If anything radicalizes, it's a hard-fought struggle that results in victory. Even if we were to win through an NLRB election, it is hard to say what exactly would be won. Without a real fight and the opportunity to show what we were made of as an organized workforce, the prospects for fruitful contract negotiations would be dim. We would remain untested, unaware of our capabilities, and lacking the experience to know where our power lies. In sum, the NLRB process largely divorces those involved from the possibility of engaging in tactics that directly impact the day-to-day operations of the boss and truly change the balance of power.

By the time we got it together to unionize it was obvious that a majority of the workforce was pissed. There was little fear in losing our jobs because most of us figured the conditions could not be all that much worse in other theaters. Things had to change and we were ready to make it happen. We began meeting independently of the union rep to discuss our options, and then something happened that forced us into action. It was announced that the Independent Film Festival of Boston would take place at the Somerville Theatre from May 1-4. For us, this meant about five times as much work, for four days, at the same shit pay. It was all sprung upon us on very short notice and definitely the last straw. We met once again and came up with a plan. We would pressure our boss into voluntarily recognizing the union, or else we would strike on May Day! Naturally, the union was opposed to this because it was outside of the normal course of action. When told, "You can't just walk out", we replied, "We're the workforce. We can walk out. It's a question of whether or not you're going to support us."

The risks of striking for recognition were not lost on us. We were aware that any scab could be told that they were being hired as a 'permanent replacement' and they could legally take our hours in a post-strike period.



There was also the chance that one of the pro-union projectionists could get cold feet at the last minute and scab on us. However, in our eyes, the positives outweighed the potential negatives. The film festival appeared to present a great starting point for the campaign. We would walk out and begin a campaign of direct action, with the majority of the projectionists now free to devote all of their energies in struggle against the boss.

On the night of April 30th, the demand for union recognition was presented to the manager along with a strike deadline of 6pm the next day. Although it was entertaining to watch the manager lose his shit, fumble his words, and threaten us with termination, we would have to wait for the final say from the boss, who is rarely present at the theater. The next day the union lawyer received a message that voluntary recognition would not be granted, and the strike was on. It should be noted that we agreed to allow the union rep to simultaneously file an NLRB election, even though we had no faith in this process. This was for the purposes of tying our boss up with legalities (for instance, you cannot legally fire striking workers or offer financial incentives to scabs after an NLRB election has been filed), and allowing ourselves some space to be able to more effectively plan for a nasty and prolonged fight on the picket line. We also filed reports with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Department of Health for good measure.

Utilizing our existing networks from years of activism, email, word of mouth, and independent media we were able to turn out at least seventy-five people for the picket line on the first night. There was a high level militancy that evening, with a lot of the support coming from a cross-section of local anarchists (NEFAC, BAAM!, IWW, etc.). The night was marked with scuffles with the cops (shoving, de-arrests) and shouting matches with wannabe Hollywood stars and hipsters who were inconvenienced by our picket line. Those who honored the picket line were mostly blue collar Somerville residents who, incidentally, make up a large chunk of the theater's business throughout the year. The festival would go on, thanks in large part to the free scab workforce brought in by the festival organizers, but the groundwork would be laid for a sustainable economic boycott and a long-term campaign of direct action.

If we were to win, it would require the ability to adapt to the many twists and turns of the campaign. In the days following the film festival we would make our next tactical move by unconditionally offering to return to work. During the course of a strike, so long as an NLRB election was filed there is a 30-day window during which the employer is legally required to



take back any employee that offers to return. Having no other choice, the management agreed to take us back in theory, but, as expected, we were never put back on the schedule. Fine by us, because now our campaign would officially be transformed into a lockout. This would eventually result in back pay for all the locked-out projectionists, and more importantly, it would prevent the hiring of more scabs. In addition, the words “locked out” seemed to add weight to our call for a boycott.

Week after week, we tirelessly walked the picket line, held weekend rallies, and handed out thousands of leaflets. It’s hard to say exactly how many people honored our boycott, but attendance appeared to be half of what it normally was. In addition to turning away would-be patrons, we began to contact promoters and artists scheduled to have live performances at the Somerville Theatre. We were successful in convincing Jonathan Richman to cancel an upcoming performance and received promises from other artists and promoters that they would not return until the dispute was resolved.

Being members of NEFAC, an anarchist federation that spans the northeast of the US and Canada and has ties to the international anarchist movement, also had its perks. On a regional level, members were able to publicize our struggle in their respective cities and unions, put together strike fund benefits, and most importantly, offer strategic advice. Calls to the boss flooded in from throughout the region (and some from halfway across the globe!), and letters of solidarity arrived from a variety of North American unions (including a rather memorable one from the Canadian Auto Workers) and internationally from anarcho-syndicalist comrades affiliated with the CNT-Vignoles (France) and FAU (Germany), among others. On the picket line, we began to form solid ties with other union members, activists, and most notably, members of the surrounding blue-collar community. Folks would stop by on their lunch break to share a story about an angry phone call they made to the owner, talk about their own union experience, offer advice, or just ask about what was going on. Often conversations would go beyond our strike, and people would discuss issues such as gentrification of the area, or the weakening economy, or how much of an asshole they thought George Bush was. Older folks, having seen the past gains of labor movement wither away during their lifetime, were enthusiastic over seeing a new generation of workers getting involved and essentially carrying on where their generation left off. This strong showing of solidarity we received would lead to larger and larger rallies (special thanks to Jobs With Justice), keep our spirits up, undermine the boss’s red-baiting attempts (see below), and eventually land us at the negotiating table.



## **ANARCHISTS IN THE WORKPLACE**

From the start, we always made a point to be open with our politics. To be honest hardly anyone seemed very shocked by the fact that we were anarchists (including members of IATSE). Anarchists or not, it hardly made a difference to most of our working class supporters, so long as we were giving the bosses hell on the picket line. And why should it? Many of them have just as much disgust for politicians, bosses, rich people and the general state of the world as we do! I doubt that any of us will forget a retired ironworker in his seventies who said, “Every workplace could use a few anarchists to ensure that the boss gets an ass kicking every now and then.”

However, about midway through the lock-out, a series of events took place which led to our anarchist politics being placed center stage by our boss. On two separate occasions the windows at the Somerville Theatre were smashed in, resulting in thousands of dollars in damages. Were any of the projectionists involved in these actions? Absolutely not. Our activity was focused on building community support and applying public pressure on our boss to end the lockout and recognize the union. If any of the projectionists could have been connected with illegal activities against the theater it would have been grounds for immediate lawful termination. We were certainly not going to give our boss that satisfaction. Whether or not some of our supporters carried out these actions on our behalf was completely unknown to us. Nor did we care. Our basic position was that it was the theater’s problem, not ours, and although we did not necessarily advocate for such tactics to be used on our behalf, we certainly weren’t going to condemn them either. Every action has a reaction, and if an illegal lockout by our boss resulted in anonymous acts property destruction to his theater, so be it. Welcome to the class war.

Although the theater never attempted legal action against any of the locked-out employees for these actions (indeed, despite their now constant presence at our daily pickets, the police never even took a statement from us), our boss used them as a pretext for red-baiting certain projectionists who they deemed the leading agitators in the organizing campaign. After some investigation, the boss’s lawyer determined that a handful of us were “dangerous anarchists” and began compiling information packets which were sent to local politicians, our union, and who knows where else. Each packet contained an extensive collection of police records, published writings, and print outs from the NEFAC website. Any references to workplace organizing, anti-capitalism, or direct action (especially sabotage) were highlighted in an attempt to somehow connect the locked-out projectionists with the recent vandalism at the theater and dismiss the organizing campaign as “political trouble-making”.



Unfortunately for our boss, by this time our politics were already fairly well known, and no one was especially fazed by the information contained in the packets. Obviously our union was concerned as to whether or not we knew anything about the windows, but once it was established that we had absolutely no knowledge of these actions, nothing else was ever said of it. Aside from our immediate supporters, our boss's attempts at discrediting the organizing campaign through red-baiting completely backfired with local politicians as well. On June 12th, the Somerville Board of Aldermen responded by passing a resolution unequivocally supporting the locked-out projectionists. One local politician who spoke at a public rally in support of the locked-out projectionists went even further, publicly condemning the "disgusting red-baiting tactics" used by our boss to try and defame our struggle. She ended by stating that "all workers, including anarchist workers, have a right to join a union and fight for a living wage in the city of Somerville".

## **NEGOTIATING VICTORY**

After two months of sustained pickets, an effective boycott, hundreds of phone calls of support for our demands, and the total failure of an attempt to red-bait us, the boss finally agreed to sit down at the negotiating table. However, we quickly learned that his anti-red sentiment would cloud the whole process. It was clear that, in no way, did he want to negotiate with "the anarchists".

Once we were at the table, the process was not moving along in a positive direction, and threats of closing the theater were repeatedly made. It appeared that we were heading for a rather nasty stalemate until a last-ditch option presented itself. We had become such a thorn in the side of the boss that he could barely mutter names without losing it. The 'Pissed Off Projectionists' and the union had now become separate entities in his mind. The concerns over having a unionized workforce became secondary to him compared to the campaign unleashed by "the anarchists". He wanted us gone one way or another. After much debate, the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' agreed that we would step aside as a gesture of solidarity with our co-workers and take employment through other theaters represented by IATSE if it would ensure union recognition and a fair contract for the others.

The idea was discussed and negotiations began to look hopeful by the end of the week. We agreed, after much prodding from our lawyer, to call off our pickets as a show of good faith. However, when everyone reconvened on Monday things took a turn for the worse. It looked like we were back to the same stalemate, and talks were put off again. We discussed the state of affairs with



our union rep and came to the conclusion that the owner had pulled out of the negotiating process. If this was the boss's decision, then it would be all out war from our end. Within hours we began to publicize that the regular picketing schedule was back on and that a "Rally Against Union Busting" co-sponsored by Jobs With Justice and the Central Labor Council was going to take place the next weekend. A trip out to the boss's posh little neighborhood to post some nice little 'Wanted' fliers (for union busting, poverty wages, etc.) took place the next day.

Well, it turns out that there was a bit of miscommunication between our lawyer, the union rep, and us, and the negotiations were actually going to resume after a two-day break. Oh well, we thought it was a good idea to put the heat back on. Despite the boss's claims that this was the last straw, our willingness to go on the offensive at the drop of a hat, made us look like rabid dogs not to be toyed with (as our lawyer put it). Negotiation did in fact resume and within a couple of days we emerged victorious with both union recognition and a two-year contract. Under the current contract, the starting wage for projectionists is now in accordance with (and fixed to) the Somerville Living Wage Ordinance (currently \$9.55/hr), which is a 40% increase; all full-time employees will be offered health benefits and vacation; and most importantly, the Somerville Theatre is now a 'union shop' for projectionists, which allows for more control over the work environment by the workers themselves and preference for hiring new employees in the hands of the union.

## **CLASS WAR CONCLUSIONS**

On the surface, the success of our organizing campaign represents an incredible modest class victory. Although any victory of workers over a boss is significant in its own way, there is nothing to be gained by inflating the importance of this particular struggle. Now that it is over, and the dust has settled, it is in order that we look back and evaluate certain aspects of our activity with critical honesty.

### **(1) CHALLENGING THE ELITISM (& CLASS ISOLATION) OF "SKILLED LABOR"**

One aspect of the campaign that should be criticized is the fact that, despite repeated attempts, we were unable to connect our interests with the interests of "unskilled" concession workers, and thereby failed to unify all theater workers in a generalized struggle against the boss. Incidentally, we were also equally unsuccessful at linking up with fellow workers (including projectionists) from a sister theater owned by the same boss.



In our particular situation there were a number of factors that led to this failure. For starters, the very nature of our work as movie projectionists is one of isolation. Even pulling together meetings with fellow projectionists proved to be a difficult task, as we rarely saw one another during shift changes. For obvious safety reasons, a licensed projectionist is supposed to be on hand at all times while films are showing. During our shifts we are not allowed to leave the projection booth for more than a few minutes at a time, so our ability to talk with fellow workers in other parts of the theater was obviously very minimal. A passing comment against the boss or the pay conditions while getting a soda refill was pretty much the extent of our ability to agitate among the concession workers.

Other factors included issues of age, experience, turnover rate, and most importantly, trust. Many of the concession workers at the Somerville Theatre (like most theaters) were young, and had little job experience. For some, working the concession counter or taking tickets was merely a summer job until the school year started, and they had little invested interest in the long-term conditions of the workplace. The bottom line for any workplace organizing campaign is trust in your fellow workers. The fact that we were unable to build a solid relationship with any theater workers outside of the projection booth meant that trust could not be established, and therefore we could not risk bringing them in on our plans to unionize before we went public with the campaign.

The experiences we gained through our organizing at the Somerville Theatre only reinforce our support for industrial unionism. Industrial organizing, within the same location and sector, clearly affirms that a union is the sum of its workers. Trade unionism, which allows each location, profession, or sector to be represented by different unions, is an ideological construct that weakens class identification and solidarity. Functionally, trade unionism not only divides workers by skill, profession, or type, but it creates divergent interests among workers. It is most strategic for the employees of single boss to belong to the same union and that certain worker's gains must not be made at the expense of others.

The future for movie projectionists (ahem, motion picture technicians!) is one of uncertainty. With increasing levels of automation, the work has become much less of a skilled trade as compared to fifteen or twenty years ago. Gone are the days of carbon arc lamps, multiple film reels, and manual changeovers. Some of the larger corporate theaters are moving away from analog film projection altogether, in favor of digital, which will all but eliminate most of the work currently performed by projectionists. A sharp decline in union membership and increasingly weaker contracts for projectionists in recent years only confirms this trend.



Beyond the theoretical arguments to be made in favor of industrial unionism, our very future as projectionists will depend on our ability to organize beyond our craft and build a strong union that embodies all theater workers. You can bet that a long-term goal of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' will be to fight for an industrial organizing strategy within our union.

## **(2) THE UNION MAKES US STRONG?**

Although we were able to effectively challenge certain tactical orthodoxies employed by trade unions, we never posed a serious challenge to trade unionism as such, and ultimately some would argue that our efforts only served to reinforce an institution that has become an integral component of the capitalist social order. Fair enough. As has been already stated, we share many of the anarchist and ultra-left criticisms of trade unions, and would agree that they are insufficient vehicles for future revolutionary activity. However, despite these criticisms we still consider trade unions to be important areas for the development of class-consciousness and struggle. For this reason alone, it is important for anarchists to develop a program for how we relate to these organizations and the workers who participate in them.

For as long as class exploitation has existed, workers have organized themselves into class defense apparatuses. From trade guilds to modern labor unions, workers' organizations have been at the forefront of the class struggle. When certain forms of defensive organization have proven themselves to be ineffective, new forms have emerged. The very nature of class struggle rests on the ability of the working class to be able to effectively resist the exploitation of the ruling class. We have a strong faith in the ability of workers to move beyond obsolete forms of class organization during advanced periods of struggle and develop new forms of revolutionary self-activity (such as councils or action committees) able to subvert the capitalist social order. But let's not fool ourselves. We are not there yet.

## **(3) RHETORIC & REALITY**

Militant rhetoric aside, it should be said that we never really pushed for demands beyond union recognition, basic workplace democracy, back wages and a fair contract. Okay, so we did not touch off a militant workplace occupation, or lead a workers' insurrection from the Somerville Theatre. No bosses were lined up and shot, no workers' soviets were established, and last we checked, the wage system was far from being smashed. However, the significance of this struggle was not necessarily in what was gained in the end, but the means for which these



gains were made. What was particularly unique in our campaign, as compared to most other struggles for union recognition, was the fact that we were able to win primarily through direct action and community pressure rather than relying on the official channels of the State.

All the militancy in the world won't radicalize anyone if it isn't backed up by tangible victories. As anarchists arguing for self-organization and direct action in our struggles, we must be able to back up the talk with results. In order to build a mass base of support for anarchism, we need to be able to not only identify and express working class discontent, but also have the ability to fight for (and more importantly, win) material class gains using explicitly anarchist tactics and methods of organizing. Instead of attacking what we see as dead-end strategies from the comforts of our magazines or newsletter, we put our alternative strategies to the test. Our success laid in making our ideas relevant to our co-workers and the community. Hundreds of conversations in the workplace, in meetings, and on the picket line culminated in victory because we were able to explain, logically and in terms not filled with jargon, why we could win by striking, boycotting, etc. It wasn't always easy, but our persistence paid off. In end, we were successful in convincing fellow workers that our power exists at the point of production and in solidarity of our struggles, not in the courtroom.

The fact that we were able to develop working class relevancy for anarchism in our city is, in itself, an important victory.



***Somerville Projectionists On  
Strike, May 1st, 2003***



# FLOC & the Mt Olive Campaign: an Anarchist Perspective

*By Prole Cat. First appeared in Our Dawn, an anarchist communist periodical published out of Oakland, CA*

## THE MOUNT OLIVE PICKLE BOYCOTT IS OVER

In the face of a growing boycott promoted by activists of many hues, but dominated by anti-capitalists and with a large anarchist contingent, the bosses have relented. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) has been recognized as representing the workers in the cucumber fields of North Carolina.

According to a media advisory released by FLOC, the union “will oversee the employment of over 8,000 workers from most Mexican States who will come to work in North Carolina with H2A visas through the U.S. Department of Labor.” The advisory refers to these workers as being “almost exclusively undocumented”. Apparently the agreement openly acknowledges that the workers are “illegals” (to use the racist/nationalist parlance).

While it would be an exaggeration to call the agreement lucrative for the workers, it at least addresses the issues of wages, housing conditions, and abuse of workers by bosses. The contract provides for a 10% pay increase over 3 years, creates a standing committee to address housing improvements, and establishes a seniority system and formal grievance procedure. (The media advisory made no mention of protection from toxic pesticides, one of the central demands of the campaign).

Activists across the southeast and beyond are doubtlessly taking a deep, satisfied breath, and pausing to reflect on the five years of struggle that brought this victory. In the comments that follow, I will address the question of what this victory means in terms of the prospects for future worker struggles, and particularly for anarchist militants.

## A CONTRACT IS NOT A REVOLUTION

In the euphoria that follows a union victory, we anarchists must remind ourselves that winning a contract is a far cry from the self-organization of liberated workers that is our goal. In the fields of NC as elsewhere, the union leaders will represent the workers in negotiations with the bosses. The world we fight for is one in which there are no bosses, and the elected officials of any worker organizations are directly and immediately



responsible to the rank and file. In unions, as in other organizations and society at large, we champion the practice of delegates with specific and limited mandates, against the American norm of “representative democracy” (in which elected representatives, in collusion with big business owners, in fact rule).

Still, victory in a struggle such as this has merit on two fronts. First, there are the benefits that accrue to the workers. This is not to be made light of. Latino “guest workers,” among the most oppressed of the oppressed, are not pawns to be played in games of strategy between CEO’s and leftists. As a result of this victory, people will eat better, children will have better clothes, and the housing of thousands of our brothers and sisters will improve. This is no small matter, and the fight would have been worth it for this result alone.

A further benefit is that class consciousness is enhanced. The fact that the bosses had to be drug, kicking and screaming to the negotiating table will be noticed by the workers involved, their many supporters, and (we hope) by interested observers. However Mt Olive Pickle Company’s public relations gurus may try to spin the deal, everyone knows that they are reluctant participants in the betterment of our Latino friends. The futility of the reformist school of thought, that claims that the way to improve worker’s wages and conditions is by appealing to the better instincts of the owners, is thrown into sharp relief.

## **PARTICULARS OF THE MT OLIVE STRUGGLE**

What lessons can anarchists and other pro-worker activists glean from this particular struggle and victory? The circumstances are most unusual. During a period of general union decline, that has seen the rate of unionization in America fall to barely one in ten workers, a group of brown-skinned workers with no social privileges whatsoever, most of whom do not speak English and are not American citizens, have won representation and a contract. Not only that, but the victory took place in the heart of the anti-union South. In fact, the agreement is “the largest union contract in North Carolina’s history.” What are we to make of all this (beyond being awed by the courage and audacity of those who launched this effort to begin with)?

It would be a mistake to make overmuch of the progressiveness of NC. No, the power structure has not had a change of heart. The same white men are still in charge. Rather, we should surmise that a persistent and determined worker’s struggle can win anywhere, and look for what separates this effort from the unsuccessful ones. Why is FLOC winning while the UFCW flounders in its attempts to organize Wal-Mart, for example? Of course



Wal-Mart is a more formidable opponent than even Mt Olive Pickle Company. But just as surely, the class solidarity that came into play in the recent FLOC campaign, is in large part responsible for its success. FLOC asked for and received the support of labor activists all over the southeast and the nation. This widespread support made the boycott many times over more powerful than it would have been on the strength of a FLOC press release alone.

Meanwhile, the larger and wealthier unions, those that represent a dwindling portion of the carpenters, grocery clerks, and electricians, continue to pursue a go-it-alone strategy based on market-share business decisions. This model makes no effort to call into play the concerted effort of workers as a class. It assumes that no one ever does anything, except as it directly impinges on their immediate personal interest. Of course, these are the values that capitalism promotes, and that too many take to be the “natural” order of things. And yet, as the FLOC struggle makes clear, there are many people who will devote a great deal of time and energy for the betterment of their fellows. If the business unions ignore this lesson (as they have in the past) their decline is likely to continue, whatever market strategies they may choose to pursue.

As anarchists, even as we champion our ultimate ideals of liberated self-organization, we should continue to support limited tendencies in the direction of mutual aid and solidarity, such as the FLOC/Mt Olive campaign. And we should join with rank and file militants of all unions, in their efforts to unseat the business managers who dominate them, and make those organizations accountable to their memberships. Let's put some movement back in the labor movement!

## Bringing Class Struggle Up-To-Date

*By Flint, NEFAC Baltimore/DC*

The two most common criticisms of the recent mass protests against the institutions of neo-liberalism have been the lack of local focus with summit-hopping and the lack of quantifiable direct action. The two problems are interconnected - involvement with the struggle of a local community is often the very terrain in which direct action becomes possible on a popular scale. However, that does not mean that protests against international trade agreements and neo-colonial debt are useless - quite the contrary - a global struggle



often can have a local connection. The struggle by laundry workers in Baltimore is one example of how anarchists and anti-globalization protesters can make a local difference.

The Union of Needletrades & Industrial Textile Employees (UNITE!) has been hit particularly hard by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It has lost tens of thousands of union jobs as textile factories have relocated as sweatshops. UNITE! has had to at least partially changed it's organizing focus from clothing manufacture to shops that can't "run away". Industrial laundries are largely tied to their local community as they provide linen cleaning to hospitals and hotels. Ironically, they have become more of an industry as hospitals have outsourced their laundry to these firms to avoid paying for union benefits.

The first target in Baltimore for UNITE!'s strategy of organizing laundries was Up-To-Date Laundry, the largest in the city. Up-To-Date is an expanding business specializing in the "challenging-to-clean" linens of Baltimore and DC's large health care industry. Employing some 250 workers, the projected sales are over \$5.5 million. It's new facility gave it additional capacity to carry the work of other industrial laundries in the area. To organize all of the laundry workers in the area, winning this shop was key.

Working conditions in industrial laundries are harsh with their noise, heat and chemical treatments. Respiratory distress like "lint lung" can develop from the large amounts of dust and lint. The danger is further complicated when dealing with medical waste; workers in the "soil room" where dirty laundry is unloaded and sorted are exposed to blood, fecal matter, vomit, afterbirth, body parts and needles. Even in the best situations, it's a tough job - but the bosses at Up-To-Date made it hell.

Workers at Up-To-Date were not properly trained about the dangers of working with hospital linens and toxic chemicals. Ironically since they deal primarily with hospitals, the workers lacked health insurance, Hepatitis B immunization, and failed to receive immediate medical attention after being stuck by needles. They even lacked basic safety equipment like gloves. For all the health risks that workers endured while working as long as ten to twelve hours, starting pay was \$5.15 an hour; don't even think about a pension.

The class struggle at Up-To-Date was not only about wages and working conditions; but also about dignity for the mostly Black and Latino workers. Racial discrimination by the bosses was rampant at Up-To-Date starting with the first day on the job, with Black workers earning \$5.15 an hour while other workers started at \$6 for the same work, as well as denied the "opportunity" to work overtime. Black workers were assigned the worst shifts and tasks, as well as being denied state-legislated breaks.



The bosses weren't just racist, but sexist as well to largely female work force. Both male and female workers faced unwanted sexual advances, sexually explicit and suggestive remarks, groping and stalking. The organizing drive with Laundry and Dry Cleaning Local 66 from Boston also had to deal with the issue of sexual harassment, just like the Up-To-Date workers. "We had one woman who was being harassed by a supervisor who had a history of sexually harassing all the women, dating many of the women that worked in the shop and threatening them with the loss of their jobs if they didn't cooperate with him. When we went out and tried to solicit support from the other workers and the other women who had actually witnessed a lot of this, or had been victims of it, it was very difficult to get people to come forward. A lot of women felt that if a woman gave in to the supervisor, then she was just as much to blame. A lot of the men didn't want to deal with the issue at all." At Up-To-Date, however, women and men came forward to expose the sexual harassment in the workplace.

While Black workers faced racial discrimination and women were the most sexually harassed, Latino workers had the most precarious employment. When workers were hired, the bosses often informed them that they knew about their undocumented status and would "protect" the workers from immigration, since the bosses found the workers attractive. The bosses would fire groups of Latino workers for demanding raises, resisting assault and supporting the union.

In the beginning, the UNITE! campaign at Up-To-Date wasn't well known outside of the workers and their families. The organizing drive began as a rather typical National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election. 80% of the workers had signed cards authorizing a union election, but through the lead up to the election, over 50 workers were fired. The Union filed over 100 charges of Federal labor law violations including: illegal termination, coercion, intimidation, discrimination, bribery, slashing working hours, rearranging schedules, moving union supporters into the "soil room", and in some cases even threatening workers and union organizers with weapons. The bosses also stepped up surveillance, installing cameras, searching workers' vehicles and personal property. In this environment of fear, UNITE! lost the election.

After having lost the initial election, UNITE! appealed to the NLRB and the Maryland Commission on Human Relations. While the cases dragged on through the courts, local activists began to get involved. It started with a solidarity action by local students with the Student Labor Action Committee (SLAC) at John Hopkins University, Z-point student group at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and the local Direct Action Network's Baltimore cluster, the Coalition Against Global Exploita-



tion (CAGE). It was through their participation as individual members of student groups and CAGE that anarchists became involved in the class struggle at Up-To-Date.

On September 26, as part of a local solidarity action with the protests against the IMF and World Bank in Prague, they strung up a “dirty laundry” line outside the laundry with slogans of support for the workers and condemnation of the bosses. By December, the campaign expanded to include students from four universities, Greens and SEIU who protested outside the University Hospital, fore-shadowing the secondary boycott campaign.

The legal battle with the NLRB led to a settlement between UNITE! and Up-To-Date, granting the organizers shop floor access, reinstatement of fired workers with back pay, and a new election. Committing to the difficult campaign, UNITE! continued to do out reach in the local community. CAGE and UNITE! planned a local protest in solidarity with the demonstrations in Quebec City against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). Maryland had lost 8,000 jobs, while UNITE! had lost tens of thousands of union jobs to NAFTA, and the FTAA was expected to exacerbate the problem. Starting at the World Trade Center and then moving to a nearby customer of Up-To-Date, the Sheraton Hotel. At this action, anarchists distributed literature linking the actions against the FTAA with the struggle of workers at Up-To-Date sweatshop along with the “No Borders, No Bosses” and “Globalize Liberation” banners. By the time of the teach-in that evening, the Sheraton Hotel had pulled it’s contract with Up-To-Date, and at least one of the bosses was vomiting.

One misused phrase in the recent protests against global trade agreements and banks has been the reference to street protest as “Direct Action”. A protest alone is not direct action, particularly if it is only an appeal to power - that is indirect. Direct Action acts without intermediaries, our class taking action in struggle that builds dual power. The phrase originates from the labor movement with it’s strikes, boycotts, sabotage and expropriation... but it has found more manifestations. The workers at Up-To-Date saw the success of the protest at the Sheraton Hotel, and decided that direct action could meet their needs in the way that the indirect action of the NLRB could not.

Since the settlement, 11 workers had been fired at Up-To-Date. Two days after this strong show of community support at the FTAA protest, the workers at Up-To-Date abandoned the strategy of an NLRB election for a recognition strike! 150 workers participated in the strike vote, and 170 workers of 240 walked out, and the bosses brought in scabs from a temp service. The strike was to last 60 days before reaching victory for the



workers. As anarchists were involved as neither Up-To-Date Workers or UNITE! staff, discussion will focus on the community support.

Mutual aid was supported by the community with fund-raising for the strike, food donations some of which came from Food Not Bombs. At one rally, the UNITE! offices were robbed. The thieves took only the union's computers. Suspicion fell upon the bosses at Up-To-Date. Within days, anarchists had donated computers to UNITE! to keep the union running.

The rallies supporting Up-To-Date workers continued to increase in size and composition. They included students from half a dozen campuses, an equal number of labor unions, NAACP, and the majority of the left in Baltimore. Among anarchists, there was involvement from wobblies, black blocers, Food Not Bombs, punks, Claustrophobia, Agitate! and Roundhouse. The rallies, alone might not have been able to win the strike, what was needed was more direct action to support the direct action of striking workers.

A secondary boycott was the natural next step. A secondary boycott is where economic pressure is brought on businesses that are the customers of another business. In the case of Up-To-Date, where the customers were institutions like hospitals and businesses like hotels, then the only place to mount a successful boycott is by targeting the hospitals and hotels. Secondary boycotts, like sympathy strikes, are a prohibited activity for unions under Federal labor law. They are prohibited because they can be quite effective and risk spreading a labor struggle across whole industries and regions, which is against the collective interests of capitalists and the State - and is in the interests of anarchists and the working class.

UNITE! organizers, laundry workers and community supporters (including anarchists) began leafleting hospitals and affiliated universities. The leaflets called attention to the strike, talked about the risk to people's safety from badly cleaned linen by scabs; but stopped just short of calling for a secondary boycott. Still, when leaf-letters were caught on hospital property they were arrested. In response, students and alumni used one of the signature tactics of the World Trade Organization and World Bank protests - they locked down in the hospital with bicycle locks around their necks, while others leafleted staff, patients and visitors - they too were arrested, and the television media was refused entry to the building.

Two days after the lockdown, the Mid-Atlantic Anarchist Book-fair came to town. The anarchists were under surveillance, and the police had staked out the Up-To-Date Laundry early that morning and were asking those on the picket line about anarchists - they were at the wrong place. Anarchists organized a march of about a hundred protesters to a Union



Memorial Hospital, a portion of the corporate Medstar Health System that was a large customer of Up-To-Date. This was the first protest at any of the Medstar hospitals. The literature and banners were provocatively titled, "Blood on Their Sheets", and explicitly called for a secondary boycott of Union Memorial and Medstar for endangering their patients and dealing with a struck company employing scabs. This action got UNITE! hauled into the NLRB court with charges of secondary boycott; however since the action was organized by anarchists independent of the union, none of the charges stuck.

This was to set the tone for the rest of the strike, with rallies increasing in size and diversity, with more protests at hospitals and hotels. The protests spread from Baltimore, to Washington, DC. Eventually, Up-To-Date customers buckled from community pressure, many of them announcing 60 day notices of contract termination. Two months after the strike started, the bosses at Up-To-Date finally caved into workers. The workers won recognition of their union, a pay raise to \$7 an hour, free health insurance, an employer-paid pension plan, and a union health and safety committee. The charges of racism and sexually discrimination were being settled on an individual basis.

Unfortunately, that is the end of the story. The unfortunate part has to do with lost opportunities. From the beginning, UNITE!'s community supporters were informed that the struggle at Up-To-Date was part of a larger campaign to organize all the industrial laundries in Baltimore. The organizers were planning on borrowing a tactic from Justice for Janitors, when victory appeared close they would roll their striking picketers over to other laundries and activate walk-outs with the workers committees inside those laundries, effectively spreading the recognition strike through sympathy. Now, almost a year after the Up-To-Date strike, the rest of that campaign has failed to materialize and it would help future struggles to ask why.

Often, during a struggle like this, criticism of the strike doesn't appear until after public discussion of it would not cripple the strike and show division among it's supporters to the bosses. Even if stated, there are almost always divisions. Divisions between the workers, the organizers, the union local and international, with and between the community.

One of the divisions was the nature of the organizing many international unions are engaged in. Often, they "parachute" in organizers to a community who have just enough time to organize a drive, and then when victory or defeat appears eminent, they are then relocated to another city for another drive. This creates problems for building long term connection between the union organizers and the community, as well as having the organizers being viewed as "outsiders". Often, organizers spend



much of their time just getting to know the workers, that outreach to the community is considered a secondary concern when it is considered at all. Some unions have responded by sending in special community organizers to do outreach. Many organizers complain of their inability to connect with the community and their feelings of isolation that can lead to burn out. While the organizers are often dedicated to helping workers organize, ultimately the International calls the shots and relocate them in the middle of the campaign. During the Up-To-Date strike, one of the organizers who was working close with anarchists and students engaging in extralegal action was relocated to Toronto. After the workers at Up-To-Date won, almost the entire organizing staff was broken up and sent to different locations as a way for the International to discipline a disobedient staff.

Through much of the campaign, even being outside the union, there was a tension between locals on the ground, and the direction from the International in New York. The International, while obligated to support the recognition strike was hostile to direct action coming from the uncontrollable community supporters. The strike was expensive, costing the union a lot in funds, and risking injunctions and fines by skirting close to an illegal secondary boycott. The strike, for involving such a small number of workers was extremely high profile. At times, it seemed that the International would have been happy with the financial ruin Up-To-Date, so that a nearby regional laundry with a union contract could acquire Up-To-Date. New York didn't even believe that the NAACP would support the strike.

While the community, including anarchists, was quite supportive of the laundry workers, they failed to develop a relationship directly with the workers at Up-To-Date and other laundries in the area. After the UNITE! organizers were pulled out by the International, the connections didn't exist for the community to help laundry workers continue the campaign in the absence of support from the International. It was often much "easier" to talk to union organizers about what they needed done next instead of crossing a threshold of comfortability to talk with the workers. The barriers here are difficult to recognize while they are happening. Partially it was linguistic with so many Spanish speaking workers and English speaking supporters, sometimes the only exchange was in chants.

It may have been easier for the predominately white activists to identify with some of the organizers as fellow activists, than the middle aged black worker from the soil room. The striking workers have an even more intimidating threshold of comfortability to reach out to others for support. While the UNITE! strike was one of the largest multi-racial actions in Balti-



more in the last five years, it also shows that there is a long way to go.

The anarchist response to the Up-To-Date struggle was overwhelmingly positive, but somewhat uncoordinated. Early on, it was not “as anarchists” that anarchists were participating, but rather through student and activist organizations. While some anarchist literature was distributed on the picket lines and with the boycott campaign, much more could have been done to agitate for anarchist ideas during the strike. There were often opportunities, like the daily picket lines, and the participation of UNITE organizers and workers speaking at the anarchist book fair.

Anarchists have largely abandoned the mainstream labor movement in the U.S. Part of that is the historical divide between the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the AFL-CIO, but when the IWW was at a low point after the 1950s, the hesitation had to be more than old arguments about “dual unions”. Part of this has been the rejection of organization, the myth that somehow organization alone leads to hierarchy. Another problem has been a question for ideological purity in the organizations that anarchists do participate in, which has been an failing of numerous splits in the International Workers Association (IWA). There is a mistaken notion among some that participation with mass organizations is a form of Trotskyist or Fosterian “entryism” where the goal is to capture the union by seizing positions of authority in its hierarchical structure. Finally, there is often hesitation of involvement with a union because, by their very nature, unions have become integrated with the capitalist state by labor law and compromise with the bosses.

The problem is in expecting unions to be revolutionary. The majority of unions are not revolutionary, in so far in that as they currently exist they will bring about the revolution. Rather, unions are designed to reduce the rate of exploitation of workers in an employee-employer relationship. A union must act as a mediate between labor and capital, to the workers it must deliver increasing benefits, and to the employer it must deliver a work force. No matter how militant the strike, and how much popular support it has... until there is a social revolution against capitalism and expropriation, workers will have to compromise and return to an exploitive relationship.

As anarchists, we must participate in the popular broad-based movements of our class and agitate for our principles of direct action, direct democracy and solidarity. Through our participation in these movements, we can push for them to not only resemble the structure of a future society, but also through class conflict we can bring about ruptures in the system which will one day lead to a social revolution. If we fail to engage with mass movements, we will always be on the outside of those struggles, offering what support we can, but ultimately voiceless and power-



less when it comes to the direction a movement moves. Participation in unions, for all their contradictions, provides us with a forum to agitate for our ideas with our class that has the potential for social change. A unionized shop might already have several workers who understand the importance of direct action, solidarity and democracy, and the struggle to form a union can be just as enlightening.

Some anarchists have learned through the protests against neo-liberalism that it is possible for anarchists to participate in mass demonstrations with a variety of ideas, fighting the ideas of both liberal reformism and authoritarianism, to create a more democratically structured movement from the bottom up that favors illegal direct action and puts forth a revolutionary perspective. We can participate in a principled way that doesn't require us to water-down our politics, that we can do it in a collective way that protects us from isolation, and that we will not be resigned to only doing the grunt work of a struggle. It is now time to reach out from that protest movement into areas of popular struggle of our class. One day, we will have a strike that fortunately ends -- in a social revolution.

## Journeys of an Expropriated Coat

*By Frotchie, NEFAC Baltimore/DC*

**M**y coat was born in the Lebow Clothing Factory in 1985, shortly before the owner closed it down, firing several hundred seamstresses and quietly knocking away one of the last bastions of manufacturing that stood in the way of Baltimore's inevitable transformation into a post-industrial wasteland. The factory was closed, locked, and boarded up, and no one bothered to remove anything from inside. Endless rows of sewing machines sat rusting, great hay-bale sized rolls of textile lay collecting dust, and this coat, along with twelve thousand of its brethren, hung neatly wrapped in plastic, unseen and forgotten. Like the women who made it, it became redundant, unwanted, a discarded relic of a dying era...

There it sat, undisturbed, for decades. Sometimes it yearned for a glimpse of the outside world. Sometimes it worked itself into a fit of gleeful rage imagining a hundred vengeancees, each more terrible than the last, visited down upon the head of the heartless owner who had so cruelly confined it there. Many times, it simply wept. It carried on that life for twenty-two years--until, suddenly and miraculously, it was freed. A



daring cabal of elusive swashbucklers known only as the Coat Liberation Front had broken into the factory. They were stealing dozens of cartloads of woolen garments for free distribution to the city's dispossessed outside, each day that Food Not Bombs was served. These brazen scofflaws had never failed to infuriate the miserly owner of the factory, a man who goes by the unlikely moniker "Abraham Zion." Googling him, or his alias, yields few results outside of Hebrew Studies websites. The only detail one might encounter is that he was once sued by two Israeli scientists who he had shafted, in typical super villain fashion, after commissioning them to develop a new kind of shatter-resistant glass. Further delving unveils a synchronicity: the glass in question was to be produced at a certain windows and doors factory in Chicago, the same one that was swarmed and occupied by workers demanding severance pay when it closed last December. Three months earlier, this coat had been responsible for a lower-profile (but, at least for me, equally exciting) class conflict.

Several months after I obtained the coat, I was volunteering on the local hotel workers' union's "boycott committee," a ragtag collection of leftist radicals who the union had brought together to carry out clandestine actions for the boycott of the Sheraton Baltimore City Center. A Kentuckian company called Columbia-Sussex had recently bought the hotel shortly after the workers' contract expired, and it soon became clear that they had no intention of bargaining in good faith. The new bosses were attempting to rob banquet servers of their tips, fire housekeepers who had formerly enjoyed 25 years worth of seniority benefits, and raise workloads and the price of healthcare for everyone. In response, a boycott of the hotel was called for almost unanimously by the workers.

In April 2008, a cheerleaders' convention came to the Sheraton. Union officers requested that they honor the workers' wishes and pull out their event, but the cheerleaders defied their reputation and responded with uncharacteristic snide bitchiness. Having already asked nicely, union organizers decided to turn up the heat. They assembled the boycott committee and asked us to carry out a "door drop," a practice in which union activists pretend to be customers and leave flyers under every door in the hotel, which we were instantly all too eager to do. On the first night of the convention, the cheerleaders were all arriving in their finest dress clothes for an opening banquet. A group of eight scruffy anarchists, each concealing a stack of leaflets and walking just a bit too quickly, must have looked out of place moving through the posh, cheerleader-infested lobby. I, in all my wisdom, had decided to show up wearing the Lebow trench coat, hiding flyers beneath it in a manner that was not unlike a mafia hitman. Consequently, I now found myself with a suspicious secu-



rity guard (a non-union private contractor) hot on my heels. This gruff, mustached fireplug of a man pursued me into an elevator, where we stood in uncomfortable silence for what felt like ages. I silently cursed myself for lack of caution, smiled uneasily at him, and stepped out onto the seventeenth floor. As the guard followed at a distance, I walked throughout the hallways, quickening my pace and ducking every time I rounded a corner to slip a flyer under a doorway without getting caught. I heard him growl something inaudible into his radio, and, a moment later, he bounded around a corner and bellowed, "Give me the gun!"

It took a couple seconds for what he had said to register.

"What?" I finally sputtered, dropping the papers and showing him my open palms. "You want a flyer, dude?"

"Stay right there," he growled sternly. He turned away from me and muttered again into his walkie-talkie. A manager appeared shortly, a gloating grin plastered across his plastic face. I started to sweat as the implications of what was happening sank in. I moved for the elevator, but the guard stepped in front of it, scowling and pressing his chest up against mine imposingly. I turned back to the manager.

"We finally caught you!" he chortled in my face, showering me with spit. Undetected door drops had irritated the company to no end. "You're trespassing on our property and you are going to jail for a good long time, sir!" He glanced at the guard. "Did you call the police?" The short man swayed back and forth embarrassedly, and softly explained the misunderstanding.

"I'll call the fucking police!" I shot back. "You're holding me here against my will!"

"I'm afraid it's too late, sir," he snarled. "They're on their way." Sirens wailed in the distance as the tension between us mounted. Minutes later, a heavily armed SWAT team burst out of the elevator doors with submachineguns drawn (these, in contrast, were real, not imaginary). "Down on the ground! Get down on the fucking ground!" they barked.

"You guys like a flyer from the housekeepers?" I asked timidly from the floor.

Minutes later, some frustrated and severely disappointed cops escorted me back down to the lobby as their sergeant scolded the manager for wasting their time with a false police report - Columbia-Sussex has since been fined by the City of Baltimore. The elevator doors chimed open, and we stepped out into a hallway lined on either side with anxious cheerleaders, whose banquet had been interrupted because of the threat of the imaginary shooter. One of them shrieked and withdrew into the banquet hall as I walked past, coattails trailing proudly. As I walked by ten cop cars and an armored paddy-wagon, I grinned at the irony of



the situation: the impression of my coat on an alarmist guard had done far more to disrupt the convention than the union ever could have — I doubt those particular women will ever patronize the Sheraton again. I've since been banned from the hotel, which has worked wonders for the boycott: if I so much as poke my head in the front door, they call the cops...and no yuppie wants to check into a hotel with a police cruiser parked out front. Walking off into the night, I could feel the coat chuckled along with me, satisfied to have subverted Baltimore's new robber barons, the new Abraham Zions —and to have won a small victory on behalf of the city's housekeepers, its latest generation of exploited women, the contemporary analogues to the coat's mother seamstresses.

## Direct Action Gets the Goods

*By Andrew, NEFAC Ontario*

**W**orkers at Collins & Aikman in Scarborough, east Toronto, reacted to the company's refusal to pay severance pay by occupying the plant. This and solidarity action by workers at the plants in Guelph and Ingersoll won a victory in only two days, guaranteeing six million in payments.

Collins & Aikman, a Michigan-based company with 45 manufacturing facilities in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in May 2005. The Scarborough plant manufactures plastic dashboard parts for Chrysler, Ford and GM. It employed 400 workers, most of who had been laid off at the end of March. The workers are members of CAW Local 303 whose local bargaining committee was demanding one week of severance pay for each year of service. Many of the workers have been in the plant for 20 years.

On Friday the workers heard that the company intended to try and remove the plant machinery the following morning. A blockade of the gates was quickly organized with up to 300 workers blocking the gates on Saturday morning while another 100 occupied the plant itself. The Toronto Sun quoted 56-year-old, machine operator Josephine Ebanks, who had worked in the plant for 30 years as declaring, "I'm going to be here every day until I get my money".

The solidarity actions demonstrated how Just In Time production methods can give power to workers. The plastic parts of the Scarborough plant go to the Guelph plant whose output is in turn largely used in the Daimler Chrysler's plant at Brampton. When the Collins & Aikman workers



in Guelph stopped working in solidarity with the Scarborough workers production at the Daimler Chrysler plant also quickly ground to a halt due to a lack of parts. Daimler Chrysler assembly was disrupted for four hours leading to the loss of production of several hundred vehicles. Daimler Chrysler caved in and guaranteed to pay \$1.8 million toward the outstanding severance, its proportion of output from the plant.

The union told Ford and GM that unless they likewise agreed to guarantee their proportion of the severance pay their production would also be targeted. Ford gave in before the union deadline on Saturday, agreeing to pay \$1.45 million. On Saturday night workers at the Collins & Aikman plant in Ingersoll stopped shipment of parts to General Motors truck plant in Oshawa. According to the CAW web site "On April 4 General Motors agreed to contribute its proportional share", the CAW described this as "a hell of a victory for the workers at Collins & Aikman".

Workers are often told that the dispersed manufacturing methods of modern industry, including Just in Time production, mean that the corporations can do what they like. The idea of workers standing together and trade union solidarity we are told is old fashioned nonsense. The speed at which these solidarity actions forced not just one but three of the major auto corporations to back down and cough up the cash suggest otherwise.

## Million Worker March (Leaflet)

*By Open City, NEFAC NYC*

### **AFTER THE MARCH, WHAT?**

**T**he demands of the Million Worker March are just, desirable, and above all, necessary for the freedom and well being of working-class people. By bringing us all together, this March itself is a historic first step in winning the demands.

How are the demands to be won? We of the Open City Collective of the North Eastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC) will argue that no form of capitalism can meet all these demands: we need a whole new system, a libertarian socialist revolution. We don't say that no demand can be won, but if one is, it will always be under attack, as overtime, affirmative action and abortion rights are today.

We will also argue that unless people who see the need for a libertarian socialist revolution don't organize and talk about it now, it will never happen. Taking as examples three demands from the March's Mission Statement, we



ask the following questions to illustrate our viewpoint:

(1) How can a form of capitalism which by its very nature produces riches for a few and poverty and subsistence for many provide a 'living wage that lifts people permanently out of poverty'?

(2) How can any form of capitalism, which needs to keep its workers in check, repeal repressive legislation and 'extend democracy to our economic structure so that all decisions are made by working people? The experience of workers and oppressed peoples both in Western societies and state capitalist ones like the old Soviet Union shows otherwise;

(3) How can any form of capitalism, which always looks at Nature as something to exploit, stop 'poisoning of the atmosphere, soil, water and food supply...'?

Moreover, Labor's experience has shown that significant victories have been won only through militant struggle. The eight-hour day, company-paid health insurance, workers' comp, pensions, indeed, the very existence of our unions, have come as a result of general strikes, plant occupations, and the defense of our struggles by any means necessary. In particular, our victories have not been won by voting for supposedly friendly politicians or relying on a strategy of capturing the state in our own interests. In fact, as anarchists we are for abolishing the state and replacing it with a federation of worker and community councils.

Because we believe that militant struggle is necessary, Open City would like to see the creation of a Radical Workers Network open to anyone who wants to continue the fight for the demands of this March.

## An Anarchist Program For Labor

*By Wayne Price, NEFAC NYC*

**T**oday there is a general unrest and anger among working people, even though most workers continue to hold usual "American" views (support of capitalism, the two parties, racism at some level, patriotism, etc.).

This unorganized discontent has resulted in a change in the hierarchy of the unions, a move toward a more liberal, more active group of bureaucrats, under John Sweeney. The new leaders are worried about their loss of membership (bureaucrats who cannot even keep their dues base are pretty pathetic). They have managed to link up with college activists (especially on the more affluent campuses) to oppose sweatshop labor, in the U.S. and abroad, and to include environmentalism.



But a conscious movement of worker radicals will develop, in opposition to the union officials (not the unions) as well as the capitalists and the State. It is important that the most radical, militant activists link up with each other, as a nucleus of broader oppositional work. Anarchist workers should not leave the union leaders alone in a mutual non-aggression pact. Union officials, even the most decent and honest, are a layer within the workers' organizations which represent the interests of the capitalist class.

More precisely, the bureaucracy balances between the workers and the capitalists. It needs to get something for the workers (or it would be out of business) but it seeks to keep class conflict within limits. Anarchists should constantly challenge the union officials, criticizing their actions from below. While working as much as they can with others on specific issues, anarchists also must make clear that their program is different from all others. It stands for the complete self-organization of society. If anarchist militants make their program clear, they will rarely be elected for union office above the lowest levels of shop steward or factory committee. Running on a radical program, anarchist militant workers will only be able to unseat the highest level of reformist union boss in times of upheaval and stress, when the ordinary, conventional-minded, workers will take their full program seriously.

While a full program for all of the unions - recognized and as-yet unrecognized - cannot be laid out here, some principles can be suggested. Such general principles include militancy, democratization of the unions and the workplace, and solidarity.

Militancy includes a willingness for civil disobedience (breaking the law) when needed. By no accident, many of the most effective tactics of labor are either banned by law or denied by the courts. Even simple strikes are illegal for almost all public employees and frequently banned by court injunction for many other workers. If a strike is permitted, pickets may be allowed for informational purposes - but mass picketing to prevent strikebreakers from entering is illegal. A struggling union may call for boycotts of the bosses' products - but it is illegal to organize other workers to refuse to handle or transport the products or to refuse to bring in necessary goods for the products. These are "secondary" or "sympathy" strikes and injure other bosses (as if the capitalists do not support each other in the event of a strike). In between contract negotiations, local complaints in a particular department must be handled by grievance arbitration, not by mini-strikes or "wildcat strikes." Strikers may picket a plant but must not occupy the plant, because this violates the owners' private property. As if the great industrial unions were not formed in the 1930's by such sit-down strikes!



Workplace occupations are particularly effective because they prevent scabs from being brought in, they prevent machinery or offices from being used or even removed, and they limit violence since the capitalists are reluctant to damage their mechanical property.

So anti-authoritarians should urge such tactics as public employee strikes, mass picketing, sympathy strikes, and, especially plant occupations. None of these should be done lightly, of course. They need careful preparation beforehand, to confront the state and the bosses with the greatest possible show of strength.

Discussing sympathy strikes already raises the issue of solidarity. The willingness of workers to stick together, all of those in a plant, or an industry, or a city, is the greatest strength of the working class. It is the counter to the main weakness of the working class, namely its divisions: racial, sexual, occupational, and so on. "An injury to one is an injury to all" must become the workers' slogan. The workers (as workers) must also support struggles of all oppressed people and win the support of every community. This includes opposition to all racist practices within the workplace, including support for "super-seniority" for Black workers' advancement, for example, and opposition to all racism outside of the workplace. Faced with multinational corporations, unions need to organize internationally, and to be prepared to strike internationally.

An especially powerful tactic is the general strike. If most of the workers of a city (or region) go on strike at one time, then the capitalists are severely weakened. The workers can decide what to allow to still run (perhaps the firefighters, food to shelters, or hospitals for emergency. This does not include police unions, since the police, although "public employees," are not workers and will be used against the workers. They should be replaced by worker and community patrols!). It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to enforce court injunctions or no-strike laws. Middle class white-collar working people would come to terms with the organized working class, as public transit stopped, bridges were raised, telephones stopped, and truck deliveries ceased. Computers would stop without the support of the rank-and-file keyboarders. Electricity might be turned off.

Such militant and united tactics as workplace occupation and the general strike are potentially revolutionary. They raise the possibility of the workers not only stopping production effectively, but of the workers starting it up again under their own control. The workers in an occupied factory can decide to start it up, making useful things that people need-

-but first arranging with other plants to get the necessary materials for their factory, and then arranging for distribution of the product. In a general strike with factory occupations, the workers can decide how to run the whole city or region,



economically and politically. It could be the beginning of a revolution.

For such reasons, the capitalist class and the State would not peacefully accept mass picketing, plant occupations, or general strikes. It would attack them with police, the National Guard, and private company police. All these have been repeatedly used in U.S. history. The workers must be prepared to defend themselves in an organized and effective manner. This would be the beginning of a popular militia.

All this raises the issue of democratic organization. General strikes and international strikes will require a certain increase in centralization of unions, which must be balanced by increased local democratization. No strikes should be done without careful planning and organization (with the possible exception of wildcat department strikes which may happen on the spur of the moment). If we are discussing potentially taking over factories and cities, we are considering a lot of organization. Anarchists should want both democratization of the unions and of industry.

Anarchists need to demand democratic control of union locals and of the national (or international) unions, with direct election of all officials, instead of appointment from above. They should call for the end of the single-party system, whereby union oppositions are, at best, shut out of political life in the internal publications of the unions, and, at worst, face violent suppression. They should call for rotation of offices (a different president every year or so - as is usually done in professional organizations of doctors or psychologists). During strikes and even negotiations, they should advocate the election of workers' councils at each workplace, with local decision-making powers, and contacts among the councils. All contracts should be voted on by the membership. If the union bureaucracy does not accept such democratic ideas, the workers should go ahead anyway to elect local councils, support the rights of oppositionists, elect local officials, etc.

The union bureaucrats and bosses usually negotiate lengthy, several-year, contracts, with no-strike clauses. The union then serves to enforce workplace conditions upon the workers. It would be a mistake to return to the historic IWW opposition to all contracts; contracts can register gains for workers. Instead militants should insist on one-year contracts, with the right to strike over local conditions. When the bosses drag out negotiations past the expiration of the contract, radical workers insist on 'No contract, no work.' Contract negotiations should not be seen as business-as-usual deals but as campaigns for which the workers are mobilized.

Specific issues around which unions are organized or strikes called will depend on conditions in each workplace and each industry. There is no magic formula (such as the Trotskyist 'transitional program' or Maoist 'mass line')



for sliding from the concrete needs of ordinary people to revolutionary demands. We just have to keep working at it.

Of course anarchists should be for higher wages, better benefits, and shorter hours. In principle they call for a sliding scale of wages and hours. That is, as inflation increases, so should wages, automatically. Further, as unemployment increases, work hours should decrease, without loss of pay. This is, in principle, the basis of a socialist economy: dividing the amount of work needed by the number of workers available. This is a demand on all of society, including on the state, for public works for the unemployed.

But anti-authoritarians should also raise demands implying worker control of the workplace: demands about working conditions and quality of life. These demands challenge the right of management to decide as it pleases about the working life of its employees. They raise the question of how people are forced to work and how they might work differently, more humanly. Issues include assembly line speed, health and safety on the shop floor, restroom breaks, number of immediate supervisors, and even demands for better products (safer, longer lasting, less polluting, cheaper). The peace movement has offered to work with weapons manufacturers and their unions to plan for a transition to peacetime production. This can be generalized, as unions work with public groups to plan for a transition to a peacetime, nonpolluting, "post-industrial" economy.

Unions of "professionals" (teachers, nurses, or librarians) are the opposite of most blue-collar workers in this regard. The blue collars feel it is right to negotiate wages but usually accept that working conditions are "management's prerogative." But "professionals" often feel uncomfortable about demanding higher wages, yet feel it is right to demand more control over "working conditions" (smaller class sizes, control over textbooks, a better nurse-to-patient ratio, etc.).

Consider the slogan of the American Federation of Teachers: "Teachers demand what students need." Why not "Steelworkers demand what the community needs"?

The demand for workers' control of industry does not mean endorsing the various "equality circle" or "team" approaches of management. These are methods for workers and management to "work together." They deny that there is a conflict of interest between workers and bosses. Activists should participate in these "teams," in order to demonstrate to the other workers that these are devices to increase their exploitation.

Instead, we can advocate the collective contract. Rather than hiring individuals, the capitalists hire a "gang" or group, perhaps through a union hiring hall. The bosses provide the capital, the machinery and raw material, and



the goal of so many cars or widgets. The workers divide up the tasks among themselves and set their work schedule. The group may include technical specialists, or the specialists (but not bosses) may be provided by management. Workers choose “supervisors” (coordinators) and discipline themselves. Unlike the “team” approaches, there are no management supervisors on the shop floor. Finally, the capitalists pay a lump sum to the group and the workers divide up the pay among themselves by whatever scale they have decided on.

Such methods have in fact been used occasionally (for example, among autoworkers in Coventry, England), and elements of it have been used in the U.S., such as the union hiring hall. In theory it is not incompatible with capitalism and would increase productivity, but it is hard to imagine capitalists adopting it widely. The collective contract directly exposes the unnecessary role of capitalist management. Who needs them? Just for this reason, anarchist workers should publicize the idea and demand steps in that direction (such as election of foremen or of a rank-and-file safety committee, or the location of factories, decisions to open or close plants, the type or price of products).

Questions arise about whether anarchists should be for making demands on the State. Anarchists do not believe that the solution to capitalism’s problems is for the capitalist State to take over the economy - and history has supported this opinion. But what if unions’ campaign for public works for the unemployed or for public ownership of certain industries (such as the Tennessee Valley Authority or the British coal industry)? In recent years there has been an ongoing battle over privatization.” The right wing has advocated selling off (or giving away) services run by government, such as schools, transportation, sanitation, maintenance, postal services, etc. This is being presented as ways to increase “efficiency.” Since there is no magic alternative way to teach school or clean the streets, the only way the private firm can be more “efficient” is to cut workers’ pay and increase their workloads.

Anarchists should oppose privatization and should make demands on the State. The State claims to represent the community. People should demand that it live up to its claim. Since it cannot, it will stand exposed as what it is, the bureaucratic-military agent of an oppressive minority, the capitalist class and other oppressors. Anarchists should say that workers should not trust the State, and say why, but support the movement against privatization as a struggle in defense of the community and workers’ rights.

Most workers in the U.S. do not support proposals for government takeover of new industries, even in areas where it might make sense. The argument that public ownership is inefficient is pretty much accepted by U.S. work-



ers. But they may accept the idea of taking away industry from the rich and powerful (expropriation), to be democratically run by the workers and local communities. There have been a number of instances where failing local industries have been taken over, or tried to be taken over, by unions, or local employees, or local communities. These efforts have often received a lot of public support, unlike calls for nationalization.

Wherever possible, anarchists should raise non-State programs. For example, it is right to support “single-payer” health care programs, which are usually interpreted as government-run health (“socialized medicine”). But anarchists can call for health care run by a national federation of health consumer cooperatives (perhaps with state subsidies). Local health centers could be democratically run by patients (everyone) and medical personnel.

The issue of the State also arises in considering union democracy. Faced with a thoroughly entrenched union bureaucracy, liberal oppositionists have often turned to the courts or government agencies to try to enforce democratic rights. Generally these attempts have gotten nowhere. The government does not like to intervene against established union officials, and when it does, it is so biased, and works at such a glacial pace, that little is achieved.

However, there have been instances where the lack of democracy was so exceptional, and the political climate was right, that the State did intervene in union struggles to increase democratization. One well-known case was in 1972, when it intervened in the United Mine Workers. The incumbent was Tony Boyle who had his rival murdered right after the 1969 election, along with members of his family. As a result of government oversight of the union election, Arnold Miller, leader of the reform group, Miners for Democracy, became president.

Similarly, in the 1990s, the government pressed racketeering charges against union officials of the Teamsters and decided to oversee elections. A decent reformer, Ron Carey, was elected, with the support of the reform group, Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

It is a mistake to call for or support state intervention in the unions. Despite apparent advantages, it means letting an agent of the ruling class make internal decisions about the workers’ organizations. The union bureaucracy is also an agent of the capitalist class and the State, but the union is one of the few organizations still “owned” by the workers. Their aim should be to get rid of the bureaucracy, not to increase State intervention. Rank-and-file organizations should be built to fight the bureaucracy, rather than relying on reformist labor lawyers.

If the State does intervene, anarchists must decide how to relate to the union reformists. The reformists’ willingness to use State intervention is one issue but not the only



one (considering that the incumbent bureaucracy is also an agent of the capitalists). Often we may support the oppositionists, in order to open up the union and make room for more militancy and democracy - which should have been done in the miners and the Teamsters' elections just mentioned. But anarchists must warn of the limitations of the reformists' program (including its support of the State, as well as other limitations).

The danger of relying on the State was demonstrated in the Teamsters' Union. After helping Carey get elected, the government overseer of elections banned him from running in the next national election, even though he may have been the most popular candidate! The excuse was his use of some financial tricks to aid his re-election - not nice, but not remarkable in the unions. This guaranteed the election of James Hoffa Jr., the candidate of the conservative bureaucracy. What the State gives with one hand, it can take away with the same hand.

In conclusion, from their beginnings the unions have had two potential directions. One is to integrate a minority of the working class within the capitalist system. It is to build up a weighty bureaucratic layer which lives off the struggles of the workers and which cooperates with the ruling class to maintain social stability. In return they get a certain amount for the ranks, of better job security and a better standard of living, even if within the confines of an oppressive society. However, the bosses regard these business unions as necessary evils at best, to be crushed when times are difficult. Workers gains are to be beaten back whenever possible. We are seeing just such attacks on the unions now as they are defeated again and again.

On the other hand, the unions may be seen to be examples of the self-organization of the working class. Potentially they are mighty weapons of the workers. Even to workers who have never read a word of anarchism or Marxism, the unions have political implications. The formation of unions imply that the capitalists and the workers have different and conflicting interests. Their existence implies that individuals cannot do it alone, making personal deals with the boss, but need to cooperate together, to stand in solidarity. By no means are the unions the only forms of popular resistance. Nor are they inevitably revolutionary. But they will play a major part in the North American revolution. And if not, there will be no revolution.



# Contact Nefac

If you would like to contact us please do so via the emails below!  
We will do our best to respond as quickly as possible!

## General:

National Secretary - [secretary@nefac.net](mailto:secretary@nefac.net)  
International Secretary - [int@nefac.net](mailto:int@nefac.net)

## Local:

Baltimore, MD / Washington, DC - [baltwash@nefac.net](mailto:baltwash@nefac.net)  
Boston, MA - [boston@nefac.net](mailto:boston@nefac.net)  
New York, NY - [nymetro@nefac.net](mailto:nymetro@nefac.net)  
Philadelphia, PA - [philly@nefac.net](mailto:philly@nefac.net)  
Pittsburgh, PA - [pittsburgh@nefac.net](mailto:pittsburgh@nefac.net)  
Providence, RI - [providence@nefac.net](mailto:providence@nefac.net)

## Regional:

New England - [newengland@nefac.net](mailto:newengland@nefac.net)  
Upstate New York - [upstateny@nefac.net](mailto:upstateny@nefac.net)

## Northeastern Anarchist Magazine:

United States Distribution - [lady@nefac.net](mailto:lady@nefac.net)  
Canadian Distribution - [mick@nefac.net](mailto:mick@nefac.net)

**[www.Nefac.Net](http://www.Nefac.Net)**





**NEFAC**