

Mottos and Watchwords



A Discussion of Politics and
Mass Organizations

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by Nate Hawthorne

The IWW Preamble declares that “Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wages for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system." It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.” In what follows, I use this as a jumping off point for discussion about the relationship between organizing and taking on openly revolutionary views.

In the section called “An Undemocratic Organization With Only Paper Radicalism” I discuss a hypothetical situation sometimes used rhetorically against the idea of radical unions and similar organizations. In the next section, “Should Unions Ever Carry Revolutionary Banners?” I answer, “yes, at least sometimes.” I suggest that even if we answer “no” there are similar problems that organizations face even if they do not decide to be radical. In the next section, “Militancy Is Not Radicalism,” I argue that whether something is militant or not tells us very little about whether or not something contributes to revolutionary transformation. I argue here that the old slogan “direct action gets the goods” can be misleading. In the next section, “Two Kinds of Struggles in One Messy World” I point out that apparently less radical struggles often do still have radical potentials. These pieces all fit together fairly closely. Together they form an argument in favor of radical mass organizations. The example I am most familiar with today is the contemporary IWW. I personally think that more people on the left should be involved in the IWW, especially if they want to do workplace organizing that doesn't seek to win recognition and contracts from employers, but the point of this discussion paper is not to argue for involvement in the IWW. Rather, the point is to open up some discussion about the connections between a radical perspective that calls for long term change and organizing for short term change now.

The next few sections relate to each other and to the over all theme but they do so more loosely. They are closer to independent articles. These form a sort of second half of the discussion paper. The piece “Shared Interests And Mass Organizations Make And Remake Each Other” defines what I mean by “mass organization” and tries to argue that mass organizations should not be understood simply and narrowly as bodies of economic self-defense. Instead, they should be understood as having their own internal value system or moral economy. I also draw on a distinction from the writer E.P. Thompson, between struggles to get more goods and struggles that express outrage at the ways capitalism limits human possibility. These are not mutually exclusive. In the next piece, “Where Do Radicals Come From?” I argue that people with a commitment to fighting capitalism and other forms of injustice are not usually motivated by a desire for more stuff but rather are motivated by a moral outlook and/or emotional attachments. In the next piece, “What is a Fair Day's Wage, Anyway?” I present what many readers will find to be an obvious analysis of why “fair wage” is a contradiction in terms. I also discuss some passages from Karl Marx which influenced the early IWW. The discussion paper ends with a note on some changes in the IWW's preamble during the organization's first few years.

My thoughts on all of this are still in progress. I welcome feedback, at crashcourse666@gmail.com. This paper also has an appendix which includes some additional material, lists some of the sources and influences that shaped this paper, and

recommends some further reading. The appendix is online at <http://zinelibrary.info/appendix-mottoes-and-watchwords>

An Undemocratic Organization With Only Paper Radicalism

The IWW Preamble rejects “the conservative motto, A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,” and says instead that “we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, Abolition of the wage system.” Why must we inscribe this on our banner? And who are “we” anyway? This line from the IWW Preamble is a claim that unions and similar organizations can and should take on explicitly revolutionary perspectives at least some of the time.

There are some revolutionaries who reject the idea that unions and similar organizations should take on radical political perspectives. This means that they implicitly take a reverse of the IWW Preamble: they say “we must not inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, Abolition of the wage system; at most our banners should pose the common sense motto “a fair day's wages for a fair day's work.”

Some people like to use a hypothetical scenario to explain their rejection of radical unions. The hypothetical scenario goes something like this. “You inscribe on your banner the phrase, abolish the wage system. Well, imagine that a lot of working class people suddenly join the organization. This will create a huge problem. An organization should be democratic. The organization can only be democratic if it reflects the consciousness of its members. Most of the working class currently do not want to abolish the wage system. At most, they want a fair day's wages for a fair day's work. That means if a lot of working class people join up, then either the organization will not *really* want to abolish the wage system – so the slogan will be just empty words – or else the organization will not be democratic – the people who want to abolish the wage system will control things and the rest of the people will not have any real input or participation.”

This hypothetical scenario is very compelling rhetorically but let's look at it more closely. If most of the working class today do not want to abolish the wage system and are not willing to join an organization that wants to do so, then we don't really need to worry about how to keep the organization democratic if large numbers of workers join because it simply won't happen. The problem dissolves.

If most of the working class today do not want to abolish the wage system and are not willing to join an organization that wants to do so, something will have to change before large numbers of workers join such an organization. One thing that could change is that the organization drops its commitment to abolishing the wage system. Another thing that could change is that the working class becomes radical in its consciousness. In that case too, the problem dissolves.

Another possibility is that the working class comes to see some benefit in membership in the organization and so pretends to want to abolish the wage system. This is possible. There is quite simply no way to prevent people from joining who are not sincere in their expression of agreement with radical views. People might lie. We can attempt to test for lies, but no tests are 100% accurate. The same problem occurs to some extent in any organization. Currently unions often face the problem of needing to make members active participants in the organization and its activity, and to build a culture of

solidarity. Failure to do this can lead to members crossing picket lines and otherwise not standing with their fellow members.

The problem of people seeking membership and expressing an insincere commitment to “abolish the wage system” is not as pressing as the problem that people might express a shallow or temporary agreement with an organization’s radical principles. To put it another way, the hypothetical situation does not examine what joining is as an activity or what it means. There are real problems with recruitment, retention, and member education, but the hypothetical scenario doesn’t help with any of that. While there are no quick fixes, one key piece of the puzzle is to make joining into an interactive activity.

Joining a union can and should involve a frank discussion with a member of the organization about values. This is a conversation about why the organization exists, why the person is joining, why the current member is involved. There can and should be a conversation between two people about their understanding of the world and of the world they would like to see, at whatever small scale and in whatever general terms. That is, there can and should be a conversation about existing shared interests which is simultaneously a conversation that is a small step toward remaking shared interests or creating new ones. Furthermore, after joining, there can and should be educational components of membership in an organization, including written materials, discussions, various parts of the life and culture of the organization, and, above all, relationships with other members, all of which reinforce aspects of shared interests.

Part of the difficulty here for radical unions (to the very limited extent that they exist) is that people are dynamic. They heat up and cool down. Most people who are radicals and who have been for many years will admit that at certain moments they have contemplated, at least in a vague “what if...?” kind of way, the possibility of giving up on their radical commitments. Our lives would be so much easier if we could only accommodate to the system... our views make life under capitalism even harder to endure... And of course many of us have seen fellow radicals waver more strongly, and fall away. This problem happens in existing radical organizations. There is no simple solution to this. We should have longer conversations about this, about how to reduce the frequency of people cooling off. Many of us who have stayed radical for a long time have managed to take the heat we have experienced -- from our outrage at the world, from our passionate relationships with other radicals, from the collective struggles we have participated in -- and combine it with other things -- ideas, value systems, stories, and more -- in order to create our own internal heat source. We need to figure out better how to deliberately replicate this in others, so that we can make more radicals. Beyond that, we must recognize and prepare for the fact that people will cool off, and we should prepare for the consequences this will have. Among other problems, we want to avoid having the situation where members have cooled off and become only paper members. One mechanism for this is to make dues payments require face to face or recurrent interaction, rather than mechanisms like dues checkoff. This way to handle membership dues keeps organizations financially dependent on having real members, rather than paper members. There is much more to be said about all of this, but most of that is for a longer conversation for another time.

The hypothetical scenario has one additional flaw, about democracy. To be blunt, why should we care if organizations are democratic? Democracy is not an end in itself,

democracy is a means. A bad decision made democratically is still a bad decision. There are two reasons to care about democracy. Democracy is good when it results in good decisions – when groups decide to do good things. And democracy is good when it has good effects on the participants – when it makes them better and more likely to do good things. This results in tensions. Participation in democratic decision-making can have important shaping roles on people’s shared interests. But sometimes people’s shared interests are narrow and conservative. Say there are two mass organizations, both with a lot of conservative members. One is highly democratic and votes to exclude racial minorities or to oppose a program of member education around racial oppression within the organization and in society. The other is highly undemocratic, with a leadership to the left of its membership. In the second organization, the leadership undemocratically create a program to educate members about race and change the members’ attitudes. Clearly both of these situations are highly imperfect. Clearly the second is preferable. Above all, we should strive to create the conditions wherein an organization can act democratically and make good decisions in a democratic fashion. Sometimes this means encouraging democratic processes even though this will result in worse decisions than if an enlightened leadership made them. Other times, however, certain issues are important enough that being less than fully democratic is worth it because it will avoid catastrophes or create conditions which change members’ consciousness over time.

Should Unions Ever Carry Revolutionary Banners?

The rejection of radical unions expresses important truths. For one thing, we should not overestimate what an organization says – what really matters is what an organization does. But words do matter. More to the point: it matters when organizations make explicit commitments to world-views and ideas. It matters when organizations deliberately try to spread these ideas – or rather, it matters when an organization’s official structures have created space and provided resources for one section of the organization (whether officers, staff, members, or some combination) to propagate ideas among the people that make up the organization and among other people beyond the organization. For example, whatever else there is to say, it had important effects when the UAW agreed to sign no-strike pledges and urged members to buy war bonds during World War Two, or when it showed opportunistic support for anti-Communist provisions in Taft-Hartley. Union support for racial discrimination similarly has had important effects in U.S. history.

The rejection of unions and similar organizations taking on radical perspectives also expresses the important point that taking radical positions really does limit who will be involved. All things being equal, a radical organization will face additional difficulties that other organizations will not face. Quite simply: it’s harder to be radical than it is to not be radical. An organization will have greater difficulties in society the more that it portrays itself as opposed to dominant values in society and even more so as it actually threatens dominant values.

These problems are not limited to slogans like “abolish the wage system.” Should organizations make internal efforts to overcome contradictions in the working class such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and others? If so, should these be official positions of organizations? The sad fact is that much of the working class holds racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and other bad ideas. Organizations of the working class that do

not take steps to address these forms of oppression implicitly support them. This is because organizations are a product of shared interests but they also create shared interests, including shared interests that segment off some sections of the working class from others or interests which seek for one section of the class to advance at the expense of another.

Taking strong stances means that individuals who oppose those stances will not join the organization unless we manage to change their minds, or they will join in ignorance of or direct opposition to those stances. Taking strong stances also provides reasons for other people to strongly oppose the organization and it gives the organization's opponents resources for attacking the organization in rhetorical and material ways. Taking a stand has consequences. The United Electrical Workers were attacked with a combination of re-baiting and raids which nearly destroyed the organization in the aftermath of Taft-Hartley, and some unions didn't survive these attacks. The early IWW was attacked with violent state and vigilante repression which reduced the organization to a mere shadow for decades. Unions that practiced civil rights unionism in the Jim Crow south faced additional obstacles that other unions did not, because of their opposition to racist ideology.

If an organization officially opposes forms of oppression and divisions within the working class and takes steps to combat these problems among members and in the world, this places the organization to the left of much of the working class. This is how unions ought to be. And in reality, this is how many current unions already actually operate: they take stances to the left of much of their membership. Job advertisements for openings in the labor movement often describe the union as building social justice. The union officialdom also poses this in terms like standing up for workers rights, battling for dignity and fairness and respect, and they sometimes contribute political funds for lobbying for gay rights and other issues that many workers have reservations about. Now, of course, being revolutionary is much to the left of all this. But the criticism that the organization is to the left of the class and therefore the class won't get involved or therefore the organization is flawed, that applies to most actually existing organizations already, except for those which are truly reactionary. The issue of whether or not an organization should be radical is on a continuum, and the arguments against organizations taking radical perspectives often imply positions that would fall on that continuum to the right of many actually existing unions.

"Okay, fine," someone will say, "but surely sometimes we have to work with people who do not agree with some of our values. We have to work with people who do not want to abolish the wage system." Yes, absolutely, and this is difficult. This is not something that can be fixed through theoretical maneuvering; we will have to do different things depending on the situation, and we would benefit from more discussion in detail about real examples when we have dealt with these problems in various ways. At the same time, when we work with people who don't want to abolish the wage system we can not simply say "we want to abolish the wage system and you do not, that's okay, it's just like how I like romantic comedies and you like action movies." Our vision and values are not taste preferences. We must talk about what our vision and values are, and to the best of our ability we must talk in terms and appeal to values held by our fellow workers, and we should try to convince them of our values. This does not mean we should preach. And this does not mean that we should only associate with them if we

manage to convince them. If we don't convince them we should still associate with them, and over time perhaps our relationship with them might help us change their minds. What this does mean is that we should speak frankly about our vision and values, we should build relationships of trust and affection with people who disagree with us, and we should try to get them to hold our views.

Inscribing "abolish the wage system" on our organization's banner provides a requirement for us to have these difficult conversations with our fellow workers. Often the hesitation about radical unions and similar organizations is a hesitation to speak frankly about and try to convince people of our values. It is much more comfortable to group with people who already agree with us, and to do our outreach to the unconvinced in passive ways via media rather than face to face, in real time. This effectively leaves it up to people to convince themselves before we talk to them about our vision and values.

Militancy Is Not Radicalism

What distinguishes radical from conservative organizing? Some people answer "militancy." Militancy is always brave, but it is not always radical. The old slogan "Direct action gets the goods!" expresses one kind of commitment to militancy. This slogan is only sometimes true. Not all direct action gets the goods. That is, direct action is not a guarantee of success. And sometimes people get the goods without direct action. It's undeniable, though, that in some settings direct action really is the best route to getting the goods.

But who cares? Who wants goods anyway? Imagine that the global economy recovers in a big way. Prosperity is the new order of the day. A rising tide begins to lift most boats. There are increasing opportunities for electoral politics and in the United States NLRB elections begin to genuinely improve many people's lives under capitalism. In that case, we could "get the goods" in a variety of ways other than direct action. Would this change how we orient toward electoralism and recognition? If our main motivation is getting the goods, then the answer should be yes. But if our motivation is abolishing the wage system, then the answer should be no.

"Getting the goods" under capitalism is a matter of "a fair day's wage" won through direct action. Of course it's good if people have better lives, and changes under capitalism really do matter for individuals' lives. But we can mislead ourselves if getting the goods is all we are about – that is, if the goal is what the struggle gets people in our lives under capitalism, as opposed to how the struggle contributes to the consciousness and ability of the working class. Engels expressed this misguided view once by calling the idea of a general strike "nonsense." He said that "whenever we are in a position to try the universal strike," – Engels' terms for the general strike – "we shall be able to get what we want for the mere asking for it, without the roundabout way of the universal strike." (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_05_10.htm) The mistake here is to limit the strike to what sort of goods it is about – "we shall be able to get what we want."

A friend told me a story once about a group of workers who organized themselves independently against a big public facility. This was a relatively small group of workers compared to the size of the facility, no more than 300 people in relation to a facility that has employees numbering in the thousands, serving members of the public numbering in the tens of thousands, and dealing with millions of dollars. The workers had the power to

shut the place down, and they used that power to bring the facility to a stop temporarily. They put forward a list of demands they wanted met. The bosses gave in on every one of them. The bosses then said “hey next time you have any problems, let us know and we’ll fix things right away so we don’t need to have any of these headaches.” In terms of “getting the goods,” this arrangement is a victory. The workers got what they wanted and they had an experience of collective action. Most of us would love to be in the position of these workers -- more money! making the boss concede! -- who wouldn't want those things? At the same time, what happens next time? Management said "next time, come to us, we'll give you what you want without all this trouble." Will the workers do so? Should they? If we think in terms of simply “getting the goods” then the workers might as well get whatever they can without action – after all, nothing is too good for the working class, as Bill Haywood once said -- so why not get as much as possible for as little work as possible? But “getting the goods” is not the point. Direct action simply to get goods is merely militancy. We should not care about militancy on its own. Militancy is not necessarily radical. There is no contradiction between militancy and the conservative slogan “a fair day’s wage.”

Our commitment to “abolish the wage system” means that we don't just want more under capitalism – we want to abolish the wage system. That requires more people to understand that an injury to one is an injury to all and to want to abolish the wage system. Marx and Engels referred to the struggles of the working class as “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” We should care about direct action when it contribute to this “real movement” to abolish the wage system. This is about how direct action affects the people who carry out and witness the direct action.

We should orient toward making direct action into radical militancy. Radical militancy deepens and spreads class consciousness – “an injury to one is an injury to all” – and a commitment to having a new society – “abolish the wage system.” We should organize in ways that spread a correct and radical understanding of capitalism: there are structural forces which limit the ability for most people to have a good life under capitalism. As long as the wage system exists, even if some people get improvements these will often be threatened in the future.

Another part of having a radical perspective is understanding that an injury to one is an injury to all. That is: sometimes some groups of workers can get ahead at the expense of other workers, or sometimes capitalists will pay for improvements for one group of workers at the expense of another group of workers. This is unacceptable to us, and we need to make it unacceptable to others. Eugene Debs once said, “I want to rise with the ranks, not from the ranks.” The same could be said about groups of workers. Some groups of works have benefited by rising above the rest of the working class, and by the costs of that rise being shifted onto others. We want all or at least very many of the working class to believe in Debs’s slogan, and to believe that an injury to one is an injury to all. “The ranks” mean the global working class. When direct action spreads these qualities, it contributes to as “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” Then and only then is direct action radical.

Two Kinds of Struggles in One Messy World

Despite what I’ve said so far, the distinction between “a fair day’s wages” and “abolish the wage system” is not a neat and clean one. In theory or ideology it is. We can

and should be able to articulate why there is no such thing as a fair wage. We can and should distinguish between struggles that explicitly call for an end to the wage system and struggles that explicitly aim for fair wages. This distinction is important. But in practice, the line between the two is blurry. For one thing, just saying “abolish the wage system” doesn’t mean we actually make a contribution to ending the wage system. We could put that on our banner but actually just end up fighting for better wages and never winning more than that, if we even manage to win better wages. Really, “a fair day’s wages” and “abolish the wage system” are points on a continuum, and particular struggles and swing quickly from one pole to the other and back.

Even though I said above that militancy is compatible with the conservative motto “a fair day’s wages”, militant struggles for a fair day’s wages are potentially transformative. Put simply, there are aspects of conflict with the boss that it is good for workers to experience. The collective organization involved, the relationships we build, the act of standing up for ourselves, all of this has the potential to help people start to understand the world differently. It can help make less politicized people start to understand that we have to abolish the wage system for the good of all (or almost all) humanity. This means that when the boss says "next time, come to us, we'll give you what you want," the boss is attempting to create a situation that makes for less conflict and so less moments that have the possibility to radicalize people.

When people collectively fight the powers over our lives, we do various things. For instance, in workplace struggles we discuss and make decisions about tactics and strategy, we march on the boss, we walk off the job, and so on. There are at least two elements of this – running our own affairs and standing up to people over us. These are related but not identical. There are various results that follow from these activities. Experiences of running our own lives can help people have more confidence, more skills, and more of a taste for running our own lives in a way that makes it more intolerable when we don’t run our own lives. Experiences of collective conflict with people in power over us can also help us get more confidence in ourselves and other members of our class, help us get more of a sense that collective action is the way to solve our problems, and it can deepen our sense of opposition to the power over us.

Among the things these two things have in common in the most general sense is that both of them have the potential to radicalize or further radicalize the people who experience them, particularly if they haven’t experienced them much before. It’s not guaranteed that these experiences will radicalize people, though, and it’s not guaranteed what conclusions people will draw. This is part of why it’s particularly important for revolutionaries to be involved in struggles in ways that place us in relation to people who are having these experiences, particularly if they haven’t had these experiences before or haven’t had them much. That is: revolutionaries should strive to be organizers. If we’re placed in ways that put us in relationship with people having these experiences we can shape the ways that these transformative experiences play out. We can potentially make them more transformative and try to make it more likely that they eventually become revolutionaries in response to these experiences.

There is another way that some fights that are explicitly for fair wages can have elements that go much beyond this conservative motto. To understand this we have to ask the question, why do people fight? People in struggle often take big risks that can have huge effects on them as individuals and on their loved ones. Most people will not fight

for a dollar, or for the right to put a piece of paper in a box on voting day, or to sit in the front rather than the back of a bus. You might say to yourself, “this isn’t true – there have been important fights over wages, voting rights, segregation and many other issues.” My point is that people tend to fight over issues that they see as tied to values and relationships. “It’s not about the money, it’s about respect,” many people will say. “It’s the principle of the matter.” I personally want more money and more stable health insurance. This is a desire for economic gains that any liberal could agree with – “you should have a fair day’s pay, including better insurance!” The reason I want these is not as an end in itself, I want these because I worry about the future for my daughter. My desire for my child to have as good a life as I can provide her is not economic but it requires economic inputs. I don’t want it for economic reasons but it requires economic means.

Because struggles are about values, people in struggle can overflow their boundaries and transform themselves. Most of the time when workers fight together for a better life, this fight takes place on terms that the capitalist class has set. Most of the time this fight is thought of in terms that still assume capitalism will continue. That is, usually people imagine victory to mean victory under capitalism – a better capitalism, “fair wages.” And most of the time the understanding that people have of their self-interest is narrow: “the ranks” sometimes means just “my union” or “my job class” or “people of my nationality” and so on. Even so, the collective power and intelligence and outrage of workers gathered together is a powerful and volatile thing, especially when it combines with experiences of collective action. Indeed, the formation of the IWW came out of decades of struggles and numerous attempts to form organizations (such as the Western Labor Union and the American Labor Union), attempts which radicalized people and taught them practical lessons.

At the founding convention of the IWW in 1905, one of the delegates attending, Pat O’Neil, made this short speech from the floor. He said “I want to ask you just a plain, practical question. You have got a big strike on right here in this city. The teamsters’ portion of your transportation department are out on strike. About two months ago a large shipment of machinery was made from this city down to Spadra, about thirty-five miles from where I live. Now, mark you, I want to show you that these fellows recognize that an injury to one is an injury to all, in spite of the evidence of John Mitchell to the contrary. When that machinery got there at Spadra our men refused to unload it. Then they went over to Russellville and got a few men, mostly negroes and a few white men, and when they came over there the men had a talk to them, and they too refused to unload it. Now, mark you, the proposition. The president of our district went down there; Peter Handy, the president of the U. M. M. A., District No. 21, went down to Spadra and ordered the union men of Spadra to unload that machinery under threat of losing their charter. They still refused to do it, and on the day when I left for Chicago twenty-five of them were in the United States jail.”

<http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/unions/iww/1905/convention/ch13.htm>

O’Neil’s short speech makes an important point. The reality is that different organizations and struggles exist within the working class. They have a dynamic relationship to each other. They have different explicit ideologies – revolutionary watchword and conservative mottoes – and different implicit principles in action.

Organizations and workers in struggle are internally dynamic as well. O’Neil made the important point that workers who started off fighting for what they thought was a fair day’s wages came to a class consciousness understanding that “an injury to one is an injury to all,” at least to some limited extent. These workers rejected racial divisions and took risks for other workers. A fight has potential to move people. Workers acting together in struggle can develop a sense of their own individual and collective potential and a greater sense of class consciousness. That is, workers can become more aware of and opposed to the constraints that the capitalist system puts on us. The struggle can begin to move beyond terms set by the capitalist class and can provoke people to begin to imagine an end to capitalism. In the terms I’ve used here, sometimes the struggle for a fair day’s wages can teach workers that we need to abolish the wage system. When the struggle doesn’t go beyond fair wages, it doesn’t really challenge the system and might even help it. When the struggle begins to move toward a vision and a practice of ending the system, well, obviously this is a very different thing.

We want to identify and amplify the tendencies toward or potentials for revolutionary perspectives within fights for a fair day’s wages. We want to move people toward a systematic understanding of capitalism – of how the wage system works – toward a view that it’s not enough to just get by as an individual or as a member of a group who has it okay – that is, we want people to come to the view that capitalism must be abolished for what it does to many people, even if we as individuals may be managing to get by. If these changes in people’s consciousness never take place, then no matter how militant a struggle is, it will only ever be reformist. Militancy is not radicalism. Moving people from “a fair day’s wage” to “abolish the wage system” means having good relationships with people who currently do not want to abolish the wage system, struggling alongside them. This also means having an organization of people who *do* want to abolish the wage system. One key piece of this is having unions and similar fighting organizations that aim to spread the awareness of the need to abolish the wage system and to deepen the understanding of people who current see this need.

Shared Interests And Mass Organizations Make And Remake Each Other

I have talked a lot about unions here and sometimes said “unions and other organizations.” My preferred term for these is “mass organizations.” A mass organization is not the same as a massive organization. That is, “mass” is not a matter of numbers. I once helped organize a committee of tenants in a building in Chicago where the landlord was doing loud, unsafe, and unsanitary construction work in the hallways. He wanted to drive tenants out so he could convert the building to condominiums. He wanted to drive them out by illegally starting the construction while people still lived in the building. The committee touched off a rent strike and began to reach out to tenants in other buildings owned by the same landlord. There were maybe 30 tenants in the building. The group had maybe 10 people, with a few active people doing most of the real work. This was a tiny, limited group, but it was a mass organization.

As I understand the term, a mass organization is a combative organization that comes together around shared interests and takes action. “Shared interests” must immediately be qualified, because there are easy mistakes to be made otherwise. Interests are simultaneously things that exist that people can be made aware of and things to be constructed and revised. To put this another way, we live in more than one world, or one

world made out of many layers which can inform different perspectives. From one perspective, all working class people have an interest in ending capitalism because capitalism is a system that is bad for all working class people (though of course not equally so). From another perspective, many working class people have an interest in capitalism continuing because they benefit from aspects of it, in limited and short term ways. At one level, there is what would be best for the working class. At another level, there is what the working class thinks is best. While it can be argued at length that one of these perspectives is true and the other is false, in a way they are both true. And both of these perspectives are, in a sense, moral perspectives. They are prescriptive perspectives that are just as much about how the world ought to be as they are about how the world really is. To draw a parallel, think of someone addicted to some substance like alcohol or cocaine. For some people this is an abstract example, for others, we have real people in our lives who have wrestled or still wrestle with this difficulty. Anyone who has watched a loved one and perhaps tried to help a loved one in the struggle with addiction knows that the person is better off if they can stop using the substance, if they can get their drinking under control, and so on. This is the person's interest. At the same time, the person has an interest in continuing to use the substance: it feels good; it is likely bound up with their social life and their friendships, such that changing their use of the substance will have an impact on their relationships. For some, substance use is a way to cope with other problems that they will have to face directly if they change their substance use. The person has two interests which are in tension or contradiction with each other. We can, if we like, say that their true interest is in changing their substance use and that it's not really in their interest to continue their current substance use, but this means very little. When we say "their true interest is to do XYZ ..." what this primarily means is "we very much want them to do XYZ." Expressions of interests are as much or more about the world as we want it to be as they are about the world as it is. Of course, we exist in the world as it is. The way we want the world to be shapes our view of what the world is, and what we think the world really is shapes our view of what the world ought to be.

Thus, to say that mass organizations gather around shared interests means that mass organizations gather around shared understandings of the world and shared understandings of what the world should be like. This is too general, of course. More particularly, mass organizations gather around an understanding of the world that has a wide level of agreement and doesn't require a very complicated explicit articulation to exist. In reality, mass organizations do have very complicated understandings of the world, but this is rarely if ever conscious or explicit. As an analogy, think about catching a baseball. Catching a baseball involves a complicated set of processes – watch the ball, where it currently is; predict where the ball will be; be conscious of where one's body is in space now; predict where one's body needs to be in order to catch the ball... this involves data coming into the body and brain, data being sorted into relevant (the speed of the ball, the direction of the wind) and irrelevant (the color of the sky, the shouts of other people watching), data being processed into information and decisions and estimates made, instructions going back to muscles. And in the meantime, one keeps breathing, one's heart still beats... All of this happens, and little of it happens consciously as a result of direct decisions. Humans make history but not in an immediately conscious manner; this happens in much smaller scales than all of humanity, it includes individuals

as well. The understandings of the current world and ideas about the future world and the decisions that people make as part of their participation in mass organizations are very complex, but little of them are conscious. To catch a baseball does not require knowledge of any of the above processes. Likewise to be part of a mass organization does not require explicit awareness of the value systems and complex mental work that goes on as part of being part of the mass organization.

The shared understanding that people have of the world as they group into mass organizations are often general in the sense of wanting things like fairness and justice and happiness, or having more control over life. These things are subject to a huge variety of interpretations, including contradictory interpretations. More than generality, some people in mass organizations tend to be involved around localized and specific concerns: “I want this particular problem in my particular workplace to be alleviated and being part of the organization is a way to help make this so.” Sometimes involvement is about anger more than a vision of alternative: “I am outraged at this problem, it is unacceptable, so I will be part of this organization who accepts my outrage and will act on this problem.” Other people are involved for more abstract, and, in my view, better reasons: “The problems I have will only be solved through collective means; I want all of us to have more power so that all of us can have better lives; I will not have the better life I want unless all of us have more power.” All of these sorts of reasons and others can co-exist and people often change their minds. People are complicated, contradictory, and dynamic.

Mass organizations do not just gather people around shared understandings as they currently exist. Mass organizations also shape the understandings of the people they involve. To put it another way: mass organizations are made of people. Mass organizations are people who come together around shared understandings of how the world is and ought to be. In mass organizations, people take action together on the world as it is, motivated by understandings of how the world ought to be. In their interactions with each other and through their experiences of collective action, people’s understandings of the world as it is and as it should be can develop and change. To make a long story short: shared interests are in part made through mass organizations. As such, we should orient toward both shared interests as they currently exist and toward shared interests as we want to make them become. This is a balancing act, but we need both. To orient only toward what we wish to see happen is to have no vision of transition from the unacceptable present to the needed future. To orient only toward current interests is to pander and perhaps to reinforce elements of the present which continue to delay or deflect progress toward our needed future.

Shared interests are in part made by mass organizations in their activity. People often do not have one perspective which stays the same before they join an organization, while they join an organization, and while they participate in the organization’s activities and struggles. People change across those moments. So if people currently do not have radical ideas it does not mean that they will not.

We need to have a rich and dynamic understanding of “interests.” People often think that mass organizations gather together around “economic” interests, by which they mean “more money” and similar things. That’s not the case. People gather together in mass organizations because of their outlook on the world. Above all, for people to engage in combative behavior in mass organizations, they do not simply want lower rent or more

money. They want value-laden things, like more time with family, more respect, a sense of dignity. These often translate into economic costs for employers. But fundamentally mass organizations of the working class, at least to the degree that they matter for radicals, are about the ways in which the capitalist economy forecloses human possibility. (Of course, mass organizations can sometimes be conservative in their outlook and in their effects: seeking or achieving only a different allocation of the foreclosure of human possibility, or to expand one group's possibilities at the expense of another group's possibilities.) The marxist writer E.P. Thompson put the point well:

“The injury which advanced industrial capitalism did, and which the market society did, was to define human relations as being primarily economic.” Above all “the injury [that capitalism inflicts] is in defining [humanity] as “economic” at all.” Working class people in struggle and in mass organization “desire, fitfully, not only direct economic satisfactions, but also to throw off this grotesque “economic” disguise which capitalism imposes upon them, and to resume a human shape.” The term “direct economic satisfactions” might be better put as “narrowly economic satisfactions.”

These two impulses, toward “direct economic satisfactions” and toward throwing off, or at least resisting, the grotesque economic guise into which capitalism casts human life, both of these impulses exist within mass organizations. Mass organizations take actions around both of these aspects of human life under capitalism – not in the same way or to the same degree, of course; this varies by circumstance and location. Furthermore, in some cases, mass organizations can play a role in furthering the reduction of human life to narrowly (capitalist) economic forms, reinforcing the grotesque economic guise or at least abandoning objections to it in favor of more money. For example, in contract negotiation a union might be forced to or choose to abandon a demand for safer staffing levels and more control over hours in order to get higher rates of pay. Or, there is sometimes an “obey now, grieve later” mentality which argues against fighting major injustices on the job when they occur in order to obey the law and prevent consequences. Mass organizations face tremendous pressures to behave in this way. Those pressures can be contested, however, at least to some degree. But if our perspective on mass organizations concedes too much ground to a narrowly economic perspective – if we allow the money economy to predominate too much over the moral economy – we will have less to contribute to pushing mass organizations away from exchanging more “directly economic satisfactions” in return for less efforts at pushing back the grotesque economic guise capitalism pushes onto our lives.

Failure to recognize that both of these elements exist in mass organizations is a failure to recognize that, in the words of the marxist writer Raymond Williams, “Practical consciousness” which is to say, the actual consciousness of the working class under capitalism, “is almost always different from official consciousness (...) practical consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms,” that is, to the official version of working class consciousness which tend to privilege directly economic satisfactions over opposition to the reduction of our lives to economic factors and capitalist ideology which encourages this reduction, “is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.” As noted above, mass organizations are people grouped

together around complicated understandings that are often not *consciously* complicated. These understandings overlap with, reinforce, contradict, and escape official working class ideology and capitalist ideology. Above all, these differences co-exist dynamically in the working class and in mass organizations. Mass organizations are both a product of and a shaping factor in these understandings.

Where Do Radicals Come From?

It may seem strange or simply dishonest to say that mass organizations express an interest in ending the grotesque reduction of human lives to a narrow economic calculus. In fact, though, many of us who see ourselves as radical have experienced this interest in action. That is, we have been part of moments where people have opposed aspects of life under capitalism in ways that begin to open onto the reduction of our lives to simply salable labor power.

A friend of mine talks about how his union has won grievances that apply to large numbers of workers, and the union officials have totaled up the dollar value of this grievance per person and said “look at this massive sum of money we have won from the employer!” This is true in a sense but it’s misleading: a grievance spread across 3,000 workers may add up \$150,000 but that is only fifty dollars per worker, which sounds very different. It’s understandable why organizations will want to talk in large numbers like this, it sounds more inspiring.

Ultimately, though, for many of us who are committed to struggle in some level, the main sources of inspiration are not dollar amounts. The things that have gotten us fired up and kept us going are harder to quantify, mostly respect and dignity issues and workplace control issues. Those indignities have been really intolerable so we feel strongly a gut level need to fight on them, and the aftermath that we carry with us is more the experiences of the fight and the relationships we built in the process, more than the contents of the win. And when we do get fired up about the contents of the win it’s usually mixed and it’s usually about management having to eat crow more than it’s like “work is fine now” because work *isn’t* fine. That is: we are motivated more by opposition to the grotesque reduction of our lives to a narrow form economy and by attempts to limit this reduction, as well as the experiences of the fight and the relationships we build during it, than we are motivated by a desire for more goods and greater amounts of narrowly economic satisfactions.

We don’t really want money in exchange for our time and for the horribleness of being at work and being bossed around. We sometimes settle for that, and are sometimes asked to and sometimes the other side will raise the amount of money to get the settlement but... The equivalency in that exchange is a false one, the quid pro quo (“this for that”) doesn’t make quid (“this”) and quo (“that”) identical. Even if they’re rendered monetarily equal they’re not *really* equal. The employer, and more broadly the employing class, can be made want to give money instead of our other demands, and there’s a reason why they want that.

What we really want is not the equivalent of our demand in money because what we *really* want is not really representable in monetary terms. You can’t buy what we really want, even if we might be willing to agree to undergo this shit for a sum of money that doesn’t really mean that the undergoing and the money are truly equivalent. There’s an element of this sensibility in every movie and TV show ever where someone shouts all

melodramatic “I don’t want your dirty money, I want XYZ that I want!” There’s a fiction in some of the laws that cover injuries and that cover work and workplaces, about this equivalency that isn’t really an equivalency, the idea of being ‘made whole’ via being given a certain amount of money. We reject that, we’re not going to be made whole by more money — we’ll take the money if that’s our only option, but that’s not really what we want. Those of us who reject this capitalist world, many of us come to this understanding through things we’ve read. Experiencing groups of workers in action who share this rejection – however momentarily and however unclear it is articulated – is incredibly powerful, even for people who already thought this. And many mass struggles and mass organizations have this at least temporary recognition that the equivalency at the heart of capitalism – money for labor time – is a false one and a rip-off. A mass organization inscribing on its banner “abolish the wage system” can and should be a commitment to this perspective, a commitment to proceeding in mass struggle in a way that spread this recognition among workers and which aims eventually to end capitalism.

What is a Fair Day’s Wage, Anyway?

The line from the IWW Preamble that rejects “fair” wages in favor of abolishing the wage system is an almost exact quote from Marx’s Value, Price, and Profit. The passage from Value, Price, and Profit that the IWW Preamble quotes is worth looking at closely. Marx wrote that “struggles for the standard of wages are incidents inseparable from the whole wages system, that in 99 cases out of 100 their efforts at raising wages are only efforts at maintaining the given value of labour, and that the necessity of debating their price with the capitalist is inherent to their condition of having to sell themselves as commodities.” This means two important things. First of all, capitalism will always involve conflict between workers and employers. Second, these conflicts will usually be about fighting against continued lowering of wages, worsening of conditions, and layoffs. That makes attempts to achieve or maintain “fair wages” more likely.

Marx continues, saying that “[t]he working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights incessantly springing up from the never ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market.” Marx adds later in this piece that “Trades Unions work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system.”

That is to say, fights about limiting the effects of capitalism are limited fights, if they don’t become fights to end capitalism. Organizations that fight for “fair wages” are organizations that seek to limit what Marx calls “the encroachments of capital.” These organizations and these fights have important potentials but they are unavoidably limited unless they come to recognize the need to end capitalism and take steps to act on this need. This is why Marx argues that instead of being “exclusively absorbed in (...)”

unavoidable guerilla fights” with capitalists, workers need to consciously organize toward ending capitalism: “Instead of the conservative motto: ‘A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!’ they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword: ‘Abolition of the wages system!’” Readers will no doubt see that that this is almost exactly the same line as the IWW Preamble, except the Preamble says “we” instead of Marx’s “they,” because the IWW was a working class organization as opposed to Marx’s position outside the working class.

This brings us to the issue of a fair wage. What is a “fair” wage? “A fair wage” is a contradiction in terms, like “deserved abuse” or “good injustice.” In capitalism, people can’t get many things we want and need unless we have money. There are really only two basic ways to get money: hire someone to produce something which you try to sell for a profit, or get hired by someone to produce something, which they will try to sell for a profit. This is why no wages under capitalism can be truly fair (and we can ask, would there be wages under any other, better society?). This is because the basic arrangement, the starting point for it all, is already unfair. Under capitalism we are required to spend our time working for other people – if working class people don’t work for wages or find someone who works for wages who will share their wages with us – then we can’t get money and so we can’t get things we want and need. Furthermore, the stuff the capitalists sell: workers made it. The capitalists’ profits generally come from the difference between the price they charge for the stuff we produce and what they paid us to produce the stuff. That difference is inherently unfair.

Sometimes liberal or progressive capitalists and people who are in favor of capitalism will become concerned that wages are too low and conditions are too bad. This is because capitalists need workers. The capitalist class needs there to be workers tomorrow, and in ten and twenty years. Smarter capitalists and people who support capitalism sometimes realize that if wages get too low then workers may have a hard time coming back to work tomorrow. You may know this from your own life, if you have ever dug through the couch cushions to find bus fare to get to work, or if you’ve had to work long enough hours or in bad enough conditions that your immune system crashes and you get sick and have to miss work. And if wages get too low then in the long term workers might not have enough kids and provide their kids with the sorts of education and training that will make them be what employers will want in 10 or 20 years. That is, sometimes capitalists behave in ways that maximize profits in the short term but which have the potential to undermine the stability of the company or of capitalism as a whole in the long term. The recent global economic meltdown triggered by financial markets is another version of individual capitalists putting the short term goal of maximum profit ahead of the long term interests of the capitalist class as a whole.

Liberal or progressive capitalists and their supporters recognize that capitalists overall will be better off if there is a balance between the short term interests and profits of individual capitalists and the long term needs and interests of the capitalist class. This leads these progressives to call for fair wages. Capitalist “fair wages” – and really, would there be wages under any economic system other than capitalism? – means that individuals get paid enough that we can support ourselves in order to keep on working. In the long term, “a fair day’s wage” means that the working class gets paid enough to keep having kids and raising them up so that there continues to be a working class. From our perspective, as workers, of course we want more money for our work, not less. But

we also need to recognize that wages and improving working conditions for some workers is often in the long-term interests of the capitalist class. This is why there are laws like minimum wage laws and health and safety laws. This also accounts for the motivation of some capitalists to support initiatives like universal health care. They want to ensure healthy and productive workers are available for the production of profit.

One of the most important dynamics in the capitalist system is that some sections of the capitalist class try to use the struggle of the working class to identify ways to reform the capitalist system in the long term interests of the capitalist class. That is, they use the working class's struggle to identify places where capitalism needs a course correction, ideas for what this course correction would look like, and as a club to push stubborn capitalists into line with the over all interests of the capitalist class. Fights for fair wages, even fighting in a very militant way, often play this stabilizing role – they whack the capitalists upside the head with the need to preserve a basic level of well-being for workers, for instance. This is one reason why many countries give legal recognition to unions.

Historical Note

The part of the IWW Preamble I have been focusing on did not appear in the first version of the preamble adopted at the IWW's founding convention in 1905. The line was adopted at the 4th convention in 1908, the convention which resulted in the group around Daniel DeLeon leaving the organization. That convention added a whole new paragraph to the Preamble, as follows:

“Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wages for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system." It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the every-day struggle with the capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

That convention also replaced the line “between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold that which they produce by their labor through an economic organization of the working class, without affiliation with any political party” and with the line “between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.”