



Revolutionary Unionism

By Maria Garcia

There are many ways to effect positive change in the world (activism, electoral politics, legal action, changes in individual behavior, etc.), and all of them have been used with various levels of success in addressing the acute problems caused by our economic system. But any attempt to effect real, permanent, systemic change while avoiding the depredations of the power-hungry, will require organizational action that is geographically broad, self-perpetuating, and - most importantly radically democratic.

Workplace organizing has always been, and will continue to be, the most effective form of this action.

Workplace organizing has brought us the forty hour week, freedom of speech, social security, and many other social, political, and economic gains. Martin Luther King Jr. and many other civil rights activists were often bailed out of jail by labor unions. The Women's Trade Union League helped win women the right to vote. The Industrial Workers of the World was one of the first US organizations of any kind to advocate for racial equality. More recently, the National Nurses United are one of the biggest forces pushing for universal health care. The fight for 15 is fighting to raise the minimum wage. And nearly every union everywhere helps reduce gender and racial income disparities while promoting health and well-being.

There are several distinct advantages that workplace organizing has over other forms of organizing and activism. First, it operates at the point of production, which is the source of all power in our current political and economic system. The oligarchs can't do anything without

money, and their money is generated at the point of production, so putting our workplaces under democratic control is not much different than putting the oligarchy under democratic control.

Second, workplace organizing provides something concrete to organize around. People must understand they are all members of some community of interest if they are to get organized, and one of the most common and obvious communities of interest is the workplace. Regardless of gender, race, religion, political affiliation, or anything else, everyone that is employed in a given workplace, and all those peoples' dependents, are automatically a community of interest. They all have an interest in making their workplace a safe, stable, and lucrative place to work.

The third advantage of workplace organizing is that it operates at both the micro level (the individual workplace) and macro level (the whole economy) without contradiction. Every win for an individual workplace, or even an individual worker, raises the expectations of everyone (workers and bosses alike). These wins also weaken the capitalists' collective ability to fight against systemic change by siphoning off financial resources that would otherwise be used to defend the entrenched power structure. And wins in individual workplaces will not completely deflate the will of the workers to see those wins applied to the economy as a whole, because making gains universal relieves the workers of the burden of fighting to keep them at their individual workplaces.

As an example of these three advantage and their effects, consider health care. If the workers at some company come together, fight for, and win a health insurance plan, the benefit to themselves is obvious. What is less obvious, is their win has also benefited the rest of us.

Because of their efforts, next time there is a proposal to implement universal health care, the company that is paying for the newly won health benefits will have both a reduced ability and a reduced will to fight against having their taxes raised to pay for it. The ability is reduced, because the company's employees have done us all the favor of redistributing some of the company's funds away from the capitalists and toward themselves where the funds can't be used to buy politicians. The company's will to fight is reduced because the company is now already making health care payments, so it just becomes an issue of shifting those payments from a private to a public provider, which is an easier lift than trying to force payments that currently aren't being made at all. Meanwhile, the employees that gained the health care will still have reason to fight for universal health care, so they don't have to go without should they lose their jobs in the future.

This same logic applies to increased wages, shortened work weeks, health and safety, management and ownership of capital, and nearly every other issue that affects the businesses we work for, which are most of the issues that affect anyone or anything at all.

For this reason, everyone should support the labor movement. Even if you aren't interested in social, environmental, or economic progress, you love your comfortable job, your pay is high, your boss is the nicest person on the planet, you can't fathom ever being laid off, and you have doubts about unions' ability to win systemic changes, you should still support the union movement. Because on the micro level, the improvement of conditions in any workplace in your community almost by definition improves the community as a whole even if your cushy job is otherwise totally unaffected.

Business vs Revolutionary Unions

In general, there are two models for workplace organizing: business unions and revolutionary (or radical) unions. Everything up to this point can apply equally well to business unions as it can to revolutionary unions, but there are significant differences between the two.

While business unions can and do effect all the positive changes listed above, their core function is that of contract negotiators. If a majority of the workers at some business vote for union representation, the union will negotiate a contract for them. As payment for services rendered, the workers have dues deducted from their paycheck. If a worker leaves the company they work for, and hence is no longer a party to the contract, they also leave the union. Since the union is now no longer providing them with any personal service, the worker no longer has to pay dues. This business model creates a lot of problems that prevent business unions from unlocking the full potential of their membership, not the least of which is the fact that they are a business model. As such, the union administrators often treat their members not like fellow workers but paying customers.

Business unions tend to be very possessive of their members as their members are not only their clients but their income stream. This impedes the ability of workers to support one another across businesses and across industries. Also, the success of the union administrators' revenue gathering efforts depend on the success of the companies that employ their members, so they tend to be very accommodating to those companies. If necessary, business unions will resort to strikes to maintain their bargaining position, but being essentially paid agents for their members, they tend to look at their members' interests as being aligned with the employers' success. Simply put, in the business

union model, well-paid business leaders of the union negotiate with well-paid bosses of the company. Worker solidarity too often becomes just a vehicle for these negotiations.

These conflicts of interest between union members and union administrators are not insurmountable. The United Electrical Workers union mostly resolves this problem by specifying in their constitution that no union officer shall get paid more than the highest paid worker in the union. The IWW constitution also has this clause, but takes it even further by refusing to use paid organizers. And the IWW currently has only one paid officer and two paid staffers in all of North America. All the IWW membership branches are fully staffed by unpaid volunteers, which completely removes financial motives.

Outside of the perverse incentives that are a consequence of high officer pay, business unions also tend to hamstring themselves with their membership restrictions. Members must be employed by a company that the union represents in order to be eligible for enrollment in that union. Needless to say, this restricts the overall size of union membership. While membership restriction doesn't eliminate the union's effectiveness, it certainly retards it. There is after all strength in numbers.

In contrast, business associations like the Chamber of Commerce, one of several virulently anti-union organizations of the employing class, are way more inclusive than any of the business unions. The Chamber of Commerce is happy to enroll any capitalist from any industry as a member, which gives it obvious advantages in numbers, money, and influence over the business unions they oppose.

Of course, the most important aspect of revolutionary unions that separates them from business unions is that while the business unions can and do improve the working conditions of

their members, they have no incentive to fully liberate their members from the wage system. Like any business, the business unions want to continue operating as long as they can, and since they primarily function as contract negotiators, they can't continue to operate if they don't have a counter-party to negotiate with. This means that the best case scenario for the business unions is a state where all the workers are clumped into disconnected unions working under contracts that allow them to keep much, but certainly not all, of the value they produce, with the remainder going to the capitalist bosses. This would be a definite improvement over the current state of things, but it would still leave us in a precarious situation.

As long as the capitalist bosses maintain ownership of businesses, they will fight to remove any and all democracy from the workplace. The only way to make sure the threat from the owning class is permanently eliminated is to take full democratic control of all the wealth flowing out of the businesses we work for and direct it back into our own pockets where it might be used to support our families, our communities, and our environment.

So if you want to take the fight against the abuses of the wage system from a specific grievance at your workplace all the way to complete democratic control of all workplaces, and you want to do so in the most efficient and effective way possible, then you should support the organizations that are in the best position to do so: revolutionary labor unions. The best way to support a revolutionary labor union is to join one. There is only one left in the United States. We are the Industrial Workers of the World.