

The militant minority will not save the labor movement

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Amidst high profile free speech battles in the early 1910s, the Agricultural Workers Organization of the IWW banned the practice of “soapboxing.” Rather than spend time and resources on legal defense for a handful of street protestors, this IWW branch decided to focus on organizing industries and viewed that project as requiring the involvement of masses of ordinary workers to succeed.

Everyone can conjure an image of the soapboxer: some passionate individual so self-possessed with enlightened ideas that they take to a street corner to shout at passersby. But even the most persuasive soapboxer knows that only a small fraction of those blessed enough to hear their wisdom will pause to consider the message being delivered.

Hardly anyone today seriously believes soapboxing is an effective means of spreading the gospel. However, the core logic underneath soapboxing, the belief that a small group of enlightened individuals can pester the masses into militancy, persists. The labor left refers to this theory as “the militant minority.”

Some versions of the militant minority strategy involve the creation of reform caucuses to oust bad union officialdoms, while others posit the militant minority as an intellectual vanguard that can more generally spread socialist consciousness across the labor movement or in the workplace. During organizing campaigns, this tendency may surface in the form of the organizing committee seeking out the worker who reads Trotsky and has a hammer and sickle tattoo.

The primary problem with the militant minority tendency is it misunderstands the central premise of unionism, which is that in order to win meaningful gains as the working-class it’s necessary to organize a militant *majority*. Unionism, in this way, requires one to adopt an attitude that believes in both the capacity of any ordinary worker and their ability to change over time.

Too often those who see themselves as belonging to a militant minority assume the opposite, that the masses are stupid and backwards and need to be led. The militant minority often approaches organizing as an ideological purity test. Because they believe they are politically smarter than their peers, the task of organizing becomes indoctrinating their colleagues into a belief system. When this is introduced into workplace campaigns it becomes a poison.

Bad organizers camouflaged as enlightened militants

One theorist of the militant minority who continues to be celebrated for his organizing theory by many in today’s labor left is William Z. Foster. Foster believed that socialists made the best and most militant workplace organizers – a conviction that is shared by many on the labor left today. But along with that went a deep cynicism toward ordinary workers. “Every experienced labor man knows,” he wrote in 1922, “that the vital activities of the labor movement are carried on by a small minority of live individuals...The fate of all labor organization depends upon the effective functioning of these militant, progressive spirits among the backward and sluggish organized masses.” Foster thought that, by definition, the working masses are incapable of critical thought and needed to be led.

Foster’s candor is refreshing, for at least he is acknowledging a key premise of the militant minority theory: that the masses need to be led. Ironically, this is the same power analysis at the root of the most cynical conservatism: the belief that what spurs progress is the actions and leadership of a few heroic individuals.

The belief in the special effectiveness of socialist-minded organizers has plenty of adherents today. Justine Medina, a salt for the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), published a short reflection on the initial organizing that took place at the JFK8 Amazon Warehouse. “You get some salts with some organizing experience, but make sure they’re prepared to put in the work and to follow the lead of workers who have been around the shop longer. You get the Communists involved, you get some socialists and anarcho-syndicalists, you bring together a broad progressive coalition.”

When this position seeps into active workplace campaigns, it has a number of negative practical impacts.

MK Lees and Marianne Garneau highlight one prevalent manifestation of the militant minority where political ideology becomes “an identity, not a set of practical commitments.” Their focus is in the beginning phases of an organizing campaign, where “there is often a temptation...to focus on people you think may be politically left – to reach out to these people first, or even to invite them onto your organizing committee.” But the results are often disastrous: leftists do not appear to be more consistently militant in workplace organizing campaigns and for that matter often behave the opposite way.

Lees and Garneau illustrate how this starting premise tends to lead to workers refusing to talk to the majority of their coworkers. I’ve also seen how when a campaign develops beyond the initial phases of organizing, the militant minority preoccupies itself with forming a small political clique within a larger organizing committee. Not only do the so-called militants, then, stop speaking with the larger population of workers, they even convince themselves that they are a special layer within the layer of worker leaders trying to form a union.

During one campaign I was directly involved with, a small group of workers were confronted about their decision to form a divisive faction, and their defense was, “but our faction are all communists.” For these workers such factionalism would not normally be acceptable, and merely divisive, if the ideas being pushed by the faction weren’t sufficiently revolutionary, but because *they* were the faction, and properly enlightened “communists” then nothing could possibly be detrimental about their activities.

Since the militant minority approach has so little faith in the working class, the question becomes: who are the targets? Rather than understanding that the goal should be to organize the working class, this facilitates an approach to organizing where leftists are simply trying to organize other leftists. Foster supports this approach in his writing, arguing that the important lists to maintain at all times are the lists of radicals among the workforce.

More questions than answers surround the militant minority thesis. Who is revolutionary enough to be the militant minority? How is a militant minority anointed as such? Further, what tangible benefits to a campaign does a militant minority even offer? So what if a campaign uses lefty rhetoric, how does that then carry into the necessary power to win demands?

Monocrop unionism and the primacy of the party

Socialist union leaders may stick to their principles and fight for more inches than other labor leaders without the same conviction, and that’s nothing to sneer at, but what kind of difference does it make (and what’s socialist about it)? Today’s US labor movement can be described as “monocrop unionism,” where, for all practical purposes, unions abide by the same set of rules and parameters. Martin Glaberman detailed how today’s labor movement, where every union simply

views its sole function and purpose as securing and enforcing collective bargaining agreements, rests on a fundamental commitment to a social compact with capitalists. The social compact in question is the guarantee of labor peace for employers in exchange for basic job improvements around wages and working conditions. Committing to this social compact creates certain kinds of unions. These limited institutional practices cannot be fixed by replacing one set of leaders with another.

The existing mass of membership would need a credible threat of insurgent worker movements forming new unions from outside the current “house of labor” to further any real reform efforts internal to existing mainstream unions. But this is precisely what Foster decried, naming it the presence of “dual unions,” and claimed that unions which did not operate in the same mold as existing craft unions of his time would harm the project of a militant minority taking over the business unions. The AWO of the IWW mentioned earlier was precisely the type of dual union that Foster believed deviated from his master strategy.

Why? Because he was convinced that organized labor, at best, would serve as a base builder for an eventual political party to swoop in and take the reins heading toward the promised land.

Much of today’s militant minority is washed in Foster’s imagination. Once one scratches beneath the surface what is revealed is that this tendency doesn’t believe the working-class are the gravediggers of capitalism, and the real political movement will take place outside of the workplace. But why should we wait around for a literal 3rd party from the working-class to build the power necessary to change society? Instead, we can cull from countless examples of unions that focused their tactics and strategy on wresting control from management over the shopfloor. These battles had a shared understanding that workers’ greatest weapon was found in the withholding of their labor, and that the path to forming a “militant majority” willing to fight was forged in the daily engagement with workers on the job. No surprise that the slogan of the AWO, the union that banned soapboxing in order to focus on building worker power, was “Get On The Job! Never mind the empty street corners. The means of life are not made there!”

To build fighting unions, ones that are willing to operate outside the confines of labor law and focus their fight on the workplace, means making a commitment to engaging ordinary workers as a practice every day. Such dedication requires viewing organizing as less a science of ideas and instead an exercise in gaining the emotional maturity necessary to develop relationships with your peers. Relationship building at this level involves a high degree of humility and respect for others. It cannot be forged if you view people as lumps of clay needing to be molded after your own image, beatific as you believe it may be from socialist enlightenment.

In my experience forging a shared politics, or better yet a real practice of solidarity, doesn’t happen by preaching on street corners, hawking party papers, or walling yourself off into a small clique. One’s politics change through the experience of engaging in common struggle and winning tangible changes through such efforts. Struggling together also changes our relationships with our co-workers, helping us move past our differences to find the common ground that builds solidarity. Such transformation doesn’t happen overnight, and it often requires moving past our initial dislike or prejudgments of our colleagues in the service of forming a fighting union.

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