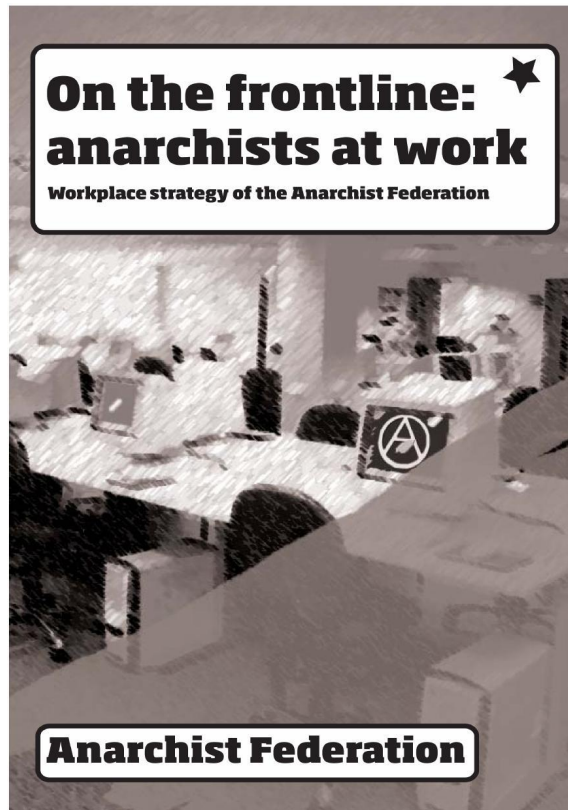


# On the Frontline: Anarchists at Work

Workplace Strategy of the Anarchist Federation

Anarchist Federation



April 2009

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>I – Waged Work and the Workplace</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Work under Modern Capitalism</b> . . . . .	7
<b>The Forms of Workplace Struggle</b> . . . . .	7
<b>II – Mainstream Unions and the Unionised Workplace</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Trade Unions, Class Struggle and Management</b> . . . . .	9
<b>AF Members in the Unionised Workplace</b> . . . . .	9
<b>III – Syndicalist and Grassroots Unions</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>IV – The Non-unionised Workplace</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Escalating Confrontation and the Recognition Struggle</b> . . . . .	13
<b>Negotiation, the Union and Avoiding Co-option</b> . . . . .	15
<b>V – The Workplace Resistance Group</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Conclusion: Beyond Resistance?</b>	<b>19</b>

The following text is the official workplace strategy of the Anarchist Federation, adopted nationally in April 2009. Drawing on the experiences of AF members at the workplace, it aims to lay out the possibilities for anarchists in the here and now and open debate in the movement on workplace organisation.

# Preface

It is necessary to explain why we felt we needed to clarify and publish our workplace strategy. Given our stated position that unions are not revolutionary organs, and that they play an important role in the management of workers, many comrades have expressed puzzlement at the involvement of AF members in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Others, hearing these views on unions, did not understand why AF members often join the unions in their workplaces. There was clearly a perceived mismatch between our stated politics and our visible practice, and this needed to be addressed.

The existing published positions fail to adequately address the kinds of struggle and solidarity possible in different kinds of workplaces. This document is an attempt to detail the various situations working people face, and the consequent possibilities for action. Our aim is the development of a culture of resistance amongst workers, and this workplace strategy details how we believe this is possible, and the role of unions in this. In short, we hold that unions are not working class organs, and play an important role in managing and containing workers and workers' struggles. However, they are one place where class struggle finds expression. They provide important protection for workers, and are a common point of departure. However, as mediating institutions, struggle must move beyond them for meaningful change to take place. Our involvement in unions recognises what they are and how they operate; it is motivated not by trade unionism, but a broader anarchist communist perspective. We seek the broadening and advancement of workers' struggles, not the advancement of the sectional interests trade unions represent. In this sense, the trade unions are a site of struggle in their own right.

Our current publications describe workplace resistance groups as the only form of workers organisation consistent with anarchist communist politics. However, we felt that the formulation was vague, and did not address the need for workers to use unions and union recognition to defend themselves against sacking and victimisation. Moreover, extra-union forms of organisation and resistance are always contingent on the specific situation workers find themselves in, and in periods of low struggle they can be a less viable strategy of self-defence than the decision to form a union branch. This document describes the workplace resistance group as a tendency of self-organisation and militancy which can take radically different forms as a result of different contexts, but remains the form of organisation which takes on the bosses in both the workplace and in the union. It is a tendency towards self-organisation, mutual aid and direct action. The workplace resistance group can exist in non-unionised workplaces, but it is not described as an alternative to unionisation. Rather it is an important strategy in moving beyond trade union structures and towards workers taking full control of their own struggles.

# Introduction

As the first of our aims and principles says, the Anarchist Federation is an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We come together as class struggle militants to share experiences, spread activity and develop the ideas of anarchist communism. We do not see our organisation as the beginning or end of any future movement which will carry out the revolution. We are not the embryo of future workers' councils, not the seed of a revolutionary union nor a blueprint for a future society.

However, we are also more than a propaganda group. Our task is not to have the 'correct' political position and simply wait for capitalism to fall, perhaps criticising workers for their 'mistakes' along the way. We recognise that class struggle is a process, a condition of life in our current society which occurs in many different ways and in many different places. The inequalities that currently exist will not change until a movement of workers organising themselves and setting their own agenda challenge them. This movement must break down the barriers of class society and recreate society on its own terms. This is the revolution. The development of a widespread 'culture of resistance' amongst working class people is a necessary condition for this to take place. This culture develops through the real experiences of people in their everyday lives. It is a grass roots movement that grows from struggle to struggle, connecting and enlarging each fight that it touches. It educates, brings confidence and strengthens links of solidarity within the class. It cannot be created from on high by any group, no matter how 'correct' their line may be.

The AF is part of this process. The ideas we try to spread and develop are not isolated theorising. They are the lessons learned from the direct struggle of workers against capitalism. They grow out of the needs and necessities of working people and from their aspirations to liberty and equality. As conscious revolutionaries, we can, with good luck and good judgement, help to spread these confrontational ideas and tactics. We can build communication and friendship between isolated struggles. We can spread the lessons of defeats and victories from different places and historical periods from struggle to struggle, reconnecting workers with a broader history and tradition from which to draw not just lessons and tactics, but also inspiration and confidence which are just as important. The way that we do this is by getting involved. We don't preach and expect people to listen. Nor do we wish to build support for particular ideas or to attempt to institute a political programme. We get stuck in and earn respect for ourselves and our ideas because we show that our ideas work in practice. Direct action gets the goods. Confrontation gains us confidence and material rewards, negotiation makes us dependent and robs us of what is ours by right.

As revolutionaries and as AF members we engage in struggle wherever it is possible for us to do so. This can be anything from movements for the defence of asylum seekers and migrants, community resistance to school closures and other attacks on public services, workplace struggles over wages and conditions, and all the many and varied ways that working people choose to resist. We hope that we bring to these struggles a set of ideas and tactics, and a militancy, that can strengthen them enormously. But this is not a one way process. Whenever we engage in

struggle, we enter into dialogue. As much as we hope to strengthen a particular struggle, we also hope to be strengthened by it. As much as we feel that we have things to teach, we also have a great deal to learn.

Which brings us to the piece that you're reading now. This document is based on the experiences of AF members as anarchist communist militants in the workplace. It tries to lay out what we do and why we do it. It tries to think out loud about what strategies might and might not work in the workplace and how we could put them into practice. The guiding principles are always self-organisation and direct action. What we're trying to do here is draw on our experience and analysis of the modern workplace to think about the ways that a militant can engage effectively to encourage this direct action and self-organisation.

There are many things that this document is not. It is not a blueprint for the struggle of waged workers or a set of diktats to the working class. It is, more modestly, simply a set of general observations on the nature of workplace struggle and ideas on how militants should engage in their own workplace. This is also not an indication of some great change in the AF's thinking or in the nature of class consciousness and class struggle. Simply because we're writing about the workplace here does not mean that we believe that fighting in the workplace is more important than fighting elsewhere. This document is just one part of the wider process through which we develop our ideas and practice in light of the changing situation and our growing experience.

There is one last thing that this document is not. It is not final. We present this as provisional, as all revolutionary ideas must be. Our commitment to developing these ideas in the light of new ideas and experiences is absolute. Nothing short of a successful revolution will end that process.

# I – Waged Work and the Workplace

## Work under Modern Capitalism

Work under capitalism is much more complex than the simple exchange of a wage for labour. Unpaid housework, various social security systems like pensions, incapacity and unemployment benefits, the commodification of ‘leisure’ time and so on all mean that even those who do not work for a wage are contributing to the circulation of capital and the generation of profit. To be a worker does not simply mean being chained to a factory bench for twelve hours a day. It means being forced to participate in the production of profit for a minority whatever you do.

There are many different kinds of working class struggle against work as exploitation by the ruling class. These include the struggles of women over housework, of benefit claimants and the unemployed against ‘workfare’ schemes and cuts, of undocumented immigrant workers against state harassment and of many other groups in many different situations. No one form of this struggle against work is more important than another. Each has its own dynamic and priorities that can only be set by those directly involved.

This document does not look at the full range of these struggles. Instead it considers the ways that an anarchist militant can engage with resistance to waged work in their own workplace. These terms are defined broadly. ‘Waged work’ includes many ‘self employed’ contractors and those on commission and piece rates as well as those of us who get a pay slip every month. The ‘workplace’ can be anything from a vast factory or call centre to the kitchen tables of millions of outsourced homeworkers. Whilst this variety presents different challenges to different workers, there is always the potential for workers to connect with each other and resist in their workplace, however it is made up. The same questions of how to organise arise; the same risks of co-option by trade unionism are run.

The Anarchist Federation encourages, wherever it can, direct action by wage workers against their bosses. It encourages workers to organise themselves without leaders or representatives. It encourages workers to control their own struggles and resist cooption into management structures. We do this because we believe that these forms of organisation strengthen not just the particular workers involved, but the entire class through contributing to a broader culture of resistance. We believe that the best way that we can spread these ideas in the workplace is through our own example as militant workers. We hope that the ideas below can help waged workers in struggle do this more effectively.

## The Forms of Workplace Struggle

Just as we define ‘workplace’ and ‘waged work’ broadly, we also take a broad view of what counts as struggle in the workplace and a workers’ movement. Working people experience the exploitation, lack of control and boredom of waged work every day. Because of this, they resist

in whatever ways they can – from very formal rank and file movements within the trade unions to loose and informal groups of friends in a single workplace who support each other in small acts of theft and sabotage. We recognise this whole range of strategies as parts of a ‘workers’ movement’.

These strategies, as diverse as they are, have two things in common. They push for immediate improvements in conditions and create a base for further action in the future. A small act of sabotage by a single worker slows down work for that day and provides an example for sabotage by two workers the next. The grass roots movement within the unions creates self confidence and solidarity amongst its members today, and the potential for more militant action and greater autonomy for workers tomorrow. Some actions lean further in one direction than another, but all contain both tendencies.

From the examples above, it should also be clear that we see the creation of links of solidarity between workers as an end in itself. The self confidence and experience that people gain from collective organising and action is a powerful force. This is an important factor in creating a broader culture of resistance. It is through this that fightback in the workplace spreads into other areas of life and vice versa.

These things taken together mean that we see two immediate goals for any militant organisation or action in the workplace. The first is the creation of private space where workers can talk and organise together as equals free from the interference of either management or bureaucratic trade union structures. The second is the creation of sites of public confrontation with management, and, when necessary, with trade unions. Both of these are necessary in order for struggle to be successful and to grow. There is no single way of doing either of these things, just as there is no single set of strategies that make up the workers’ movement. The forms of struggle that workers take up are dictated by the conditions in their particular workplace. What is possible and what is necessary are dictated by the particular problems that particular workers face and this cannot be prejudged by anyone outside the situation. However, it is possible to suggest the broader outlines of what an individual militant or small group of militants can do in different kinds of workplace and workers’ organisation. To that end we discuss three broad areas of struggle against waged work in which AF members are involved now: the unionised workplace, the non-unionised workplace and the trade unions themselves, both mainstream unions and syndicalist type unions (such as the IWW).



## **II – Mainstream Unions and the Unionised Workplace**

### **Trade Unions, Class Struggle and Management**

Trade Unions by their very nature cannot become vehicles for the revolutionary transformation of society. Unions have to be accepted by capitalism in order to function and so cannot play a part in its overthrow. Trade unions divide the working class (between employed and unemployed, trade and craft, skilled and unskilled, etc.). Unions have to be able to control their membership in order to make deals with management, and must police unofficial action in order to avoid legal liability. Through negotiation they aim to achieve a fairer form of exploitation of the workforce. The interests of leaders and representatives will always be different from ours.

The full range of strategies and formal and informal organisations that make up the workers' movement can never be fully represented by or organised within the trade unions. Because of this the trade unions will actively resist the parts of the movement that they cannot control. Any revolutionary tendency in the workplace will come into conflict with the trade unions and must be prepared for this.

However, we do not argue for people to leave unions until they are made irrelevant by the revolutionary event. We also do not believe that workers' organisation can bypass the question of trade unions altogether. The union is a common point of departure for many workers, where more militant workers can meet each other and begin to organise. It also provides, in the current climate, important material advantages that workers simply can not afford to ignore (e.g.: better pay and conditions, better health and safety, some legal protection for industrial action and so on).

This contradiction between the union's role in disciplining and controlling workers and the material advantages and opportunities to organise that it brings cannot be wished away. Any militant in the workplace must find ways of working around these problems and find ways of using the opportunities and protections unions offer without being co-opted and controlled by union structures.

### **AF Members in the Unionised Workplace**

The AF as a whole will always support workers struggling for improvements in their pay and conditions or to defend themselves against management, except where these struggles are at the expense of other sections of the working class. For example, struggles to expel immigrants or women from a particular sector may be about improving pay and conditions for the white male majority, but they do so by dividing and attacking sections of the working class. A worker facing disciplinary action for racism may be defending themselves against management, but their success would be at the expense of the minority workers their racist actions attacked. Solidarity

must be the basis of working class struggle, not narrow sectional interest. For this reason we are also critical of the struggles of groups like prison officers or the police. They may be fighting management for better pay and conditions, but their victory would be at the expense of the working class people they exist to discipline and punish.

We stress that struggles over pay and conditions are never simply reformist, however much that struggle might be under the control of reformist institutions like trade unions. Workers' struggles pit the needs and desires of wage workers against the inhuman needs of capital. Even in their most reformist and least confrontational forms, these struggles reveal the fundamental contradiction between the needs of workers and the needs of capitalism. Because of this they always point towards the possibility of revolutionary change. Whenever possible, we will always seek to involve ourselves in this kind of struggle, whether from outside in the form of solidarity action or from the inside as militant workers. Any experience of struggle, and especially any victory, however small, potentially gives people the confidence to fight back again.

However, for any success to be lasting and for any new confidence to find expression, especially revolutionary expression, workers in struggle must move past the agenda set by management and the trade unions and start to ask their own questions. This will mean fighting not just over pay, working hours and so on, but over control of the workplace.

Management will rarely negotiate on these issues. The trade unions will almost always resist fighting on this ground. Indeed, the unions will often seek to channel this kind of anger and struggle into a more conventional pay dispute.

For progress to be possible, workers need to be in control of their own struggles. They must control their own meetings without interference from management or the unions. They must choose their own confrontations and their own tactics. Any engagement with trade union structures must have this end in mind. The goal is not a strong union branch, a successful rank and file movement, or this kind of thing, although all of these things may in some cases move us towards the real goal. The goal is for workers to organise themselves to resist management and to be able to take direct action of their choosing to achieve this.

In an already unionised workplace, the trade union provides a number of potential opportunities to further this goal. Membership of the union gives some protection for public confrontations with management, for open organising and criticism. Workplace union meetings potentially open a private space where it is possible to meet other militant workers and work together away from the eyes of management. They also provide a chance to argue for militant struggle that is directly controlled by those taking part and which goes beyond the confines of the unions involved.

Sometimes, to realise these possibilities it may be necessary to engage more directly with trade union structures. AF members sometimes take positions as reps or shop stewards, but only where they feel that this advances the class struggle. We realise that holding a rep or shop steward position can put a revolutionary workplace militant in a contradictory position. You get access to information you may otherwise not get and are able to call meetings and openly produce material that would otherwise not be possible. However, you are also expected to take part in disciplinary procedures, to negotiate with management and to stick to the union 'party line'. These contradictions can sometimes be overcome or worked around by a militant rep. At other times, militancy and a rep position are incompatible. This is a judgement that individual members have to make in particular circumstances, with the support of the organisation. Members who act as reps should always be aware of this.

AF members do not take up paid leadership positions within unions, nor do they stand for election as union executive officers. To do so is to cross a clear line into the management and mediation of the working class, and out of the real spaces of class struggle.

Rank and file initiatives can often strengthen the working class in the battle for anarchist communism. However, they are also often dragged into futile attempts to reform bureaucratic structures. The AF looks at these initiatives on a case by case basis. Where they believe a rank and file initiative can advance the class struggle, AF members will take an active part in it. They should at all times, however, argue that struggles be directly controlled by those taking part.

We always argue against seeing the rank and file initiative as an end in itself or as an attempt to reform or take over the union. We reject what can be called rank and file-ism in favour of seeing rank and file initiatives as one opportunity amongst others to broaden, strengthen or intensify workers' struggles.

Our aim is always to widen struggles. Revolution – the making of a better world through the struggle of the working class – can only come from the broadening of struggle across the lines of workplace, union membership, or lack thereof. Therefore AF members involved in union actions should always be looking to involve co-workers from outside the union, or in different unions. Likewise they should be building bridges with other workers, and with the struggles of the unemployed.

### III – Syndicalist and Grassroots Unions

Syndicalist type unions run the same risks as ordinary unions. Like any other permanent organisation of the working class, they can be co-opted into helping manage capitalism rather than fight it. They have certain legal obligations to keep their membership in line, or face sanction, for instance in channelling wildcat action into the legal structures of negotiation and industrial action. However, syndicalist type unions are more likely to remain under the control of their membership. This means that they are less likely to do the kind of deals with bosses that have turned other union bureaucracies into a part of the management of capitalism.

Where they judge that syndicalist type unions remain under the control of their membership, AF members should take an active part in these unions. We do not get involved in these unions because we believe that they are a straightforward road to revolution. We do not believe it is possible to recreate mass industrial organizations like the CNT and IWW of the past although we recognise much that is of value in this tradition. The nature of work in modern capitalism has changed and the conditions that allowed the revolutionary potential in this form of organisation to flower are long since past.

We see these syndicalist type unions in their modern forms as fighting organisations of the working class. They are not, in their current form, the same as mainstream trade unions, although they could become so. We believe that it is possible for these organisations to achieve significant gains through direct action and self-organisation, which is not possible for mainstream unions without significant rebellions within their ranks that go beyond union structures. We believe that they can contribute in this way to the culture of resistance so desperately needed.

We are also, however, aware of the risks that these organisations run. They are vulnerable to cooption by capital through any negotiating role they may take up. They can become ends in themselves leading the militants within them to confuse building the union with building working class resistance. As such, AF members who get involved should always seek to maintain militancy and struggle against attempts to co-opt these unions. They should also seek to maintain a wider perspective inside the organisation and fight against any creeping bureaucracy or hierarchy.

At the moment grass roots self-managed industrial unions like the IWW provide opportunities to spread militant struggle from workplace to workplace, strengthen struggle within the workplace and coordinate solidarity action. Where they judge that these opportunities still exist, AF members are encouraged to join them. However, with regard to syndicalist and self-managed industrial unions, judgements need to be constantly made and remade in the light of the real experience of workers involved.

## **IV – The Non-unionised Workplace**

Building Confidence and Solidarity in the Non-unionised Workplace Our goals in a non-unionised workplace are the same as in any other workplace. We encourage workers to organise themselves and to take direct action. To enable this we try to create two things. Private spaces in which workers can communicate as equals without interference from bosses or bureaucrats and public confrontations with management through which workers can begin to make concrete gains and gain confidence in their collective strength.

This is more difficult in a non-unionised workplace. There are no legal protections for action and no pre-existing spaces that could be used to meet and organise. More than this, people working in non-unionised workplaces are more likely to be on short term contracts, or working without contracts at all. This increases the risk of being seen as a militant, as it makes it much easier for management to simply sack people they see as a threat.

Seeing attempts at organisation crushed and militants sacked is a sure way to demoralise workers and stop any potential struggle before it even starts. People trying to organise in this situation need to be careful about the risks they take. There are, however, some simple steps that can be taken to increase feelings of solidarity amongst workers and to win small victories against management. Most workplaces have procedures and regulations that are routinely broken and abused by management. There are many ways to insist upon your existing rights collectively without risking an all out confrontation that you will lose. Small victories of this kind can increase confidence and create links between workers that can be used to build up to more significant confrontations.

Workers will be able to think of many points like this peculiar to their own workplaces, but there are a number of general areas where this kind of thing is possible. For example, health and safety rules offer a number of opportunities for minor confrontations that are often winnable. Disciplinary procedures are often used to isolate people. Simply refusing to let anyone go into a meeting with management alone can create a sense of solidarity where none existed before. Irregularities in contracts (e.g.: people on different rates for the same job) can often be challenged successfully. These are small examples and many others are possible.

These small confrontations should be coupled with meetings between workers wherever possible. Initially these will have to be on the basis of trust and will probably consist of only the most militant workers, meeting outside of the workplace. However, with luck, these should expand to include a significant minority or even a majority of workers in the workplace consciously looking to organise themselves to improve their conditions.

### **Escalating Confrontation and the Recognition Struggle**

Sooner or later, usually sooner, workers organising to improve their conditions face the question of how to move from minor disputes to a full confrontation with management. This means answering the question of how to take their organisation public. This is also unlikely to be a process

that workers start themselves. As more workers feel empowered to stand up for themselves confrontation with management will escalate almost automatically. Management will start fighting back, attempting to break any organisation against them.

This is not to imply that more spontaneous confrontations are not possible or that only the self conscious organisation of militants can lead to struggle in the workplace. This kind of confrontation occurs all the time and is the inevitable result of the basic opposition of interests between management and workers. However, for struggles to be sustained and broadened there must be conscious organisation as well as spontaneous confrontation. As militants we would always involve ourselves in any spontaneous outburst or conflict at work, but we also recognise that the more patient work of building solidarity and confidence is just as necessary.

In any case, whether a particular confrontation has come total y out of the blue, has been the result of months and years of patient work in building confidence and solidarity, or, more likely, some combination of the two, the same questions arise. How to win an all out confrontation with management? How, and even whether, the struggle can or should be continued? How can workers protect themselves from reprisals following the dispute?

To win, self organisation and direct action are key. The strength of workers lies not in negotiation and accommodation, but in their ability to disrupt the smooth running of the workplace. By control ing their own actions, by acting together in solidarity and taking appropriate direct action workers can achieve this and more. None of this guarantees success, but they are always our best chance.

The other two questions are more difficult to answer and the answers will differ from situation to situation and workplace to workplace. In some cases, a decisive victory can be won on a particular issue by a short and sharp confrontation. Particularly in the case of things like spontaneous occupations in response cuts or closures or wildcats over particular management abuses there may be no logic in trying to forge a more permanent organisation on the basis of this one confrontation. This may also be true in workplaces with very high staff turnover. In these cases workers need to decide amongst themselves to demobilise, and it should always be borne in mind that further action may be needed to protect 'ringleaders' from victimisation.

In many other cases, however, in order to continue the struggle or simply to offer protection against management reprisals, a more formal publicly acknowledged workers' organisation is needed. The form this kind of organisation takes is dictated by the situation in the particular workplace and the state of class struggle in society as a whole. However, outside of situations of generalised struggle, this is almost always going to mean creating a union branch of some kind. There are occasional exceptions of workers' organisations that are able to go public without taking this formal, legal step (for instance, recent examples include McDonalds Workers' Resistance and dispatch riders in London in the early 1990s.)

However, these examples are often short lived and depend on conditions peculiar to that workplace. More usually, using the legal protections of unionisation is the most practical way forward. Workers in this situation face danger from two directions. Management will resist any challenge to their authority. A recognition struggle sees a real risk of people losing work, ending up on blacklists and so on. Trade unions, however, will also make their own bid for power. They will attempt to control workers' struggles and co-opt the work of militants on the ground for its own ends. Where management is unable to crush workers' resistance trade union involvement in negotiation risks destroying any solidarity built up by workers and giving management a new tool of control – the union itself.

To deal with this situation the principles of self organisation and direct action are key. If workers are honest and democratic amongst themselves and are prepared to take direct action in solidarity when any one of them is attacked, then it should be possible to both maintain independence from the union and resist management. This means practically that meetings of all workers involved become necessary, meetings which need to be run on directly democratic principles.

Management attacks can take many forms. Sacking militants, either singly or wholesale, victimisation on the job, intimidation of less militant workers and so on. Pretty much anything up to and including physical attacks and police involvement is possible depending on the situation. However, management attacks on organisation disrupt the workplace in themselves. If workers' responses to these attacks escalate this disruption then management will seek to normalise the situation as quickly as possible. And bear in mind that management often pretend they know more than they do – collectively putting up a knowledgeable and combative front can spook them into making snap concessions.

The response to management then should be to cause as much disruption as is possible without giving it the excuse it needs to move to large scale sackings. Intimidation and victimisation on the job should be challenged when it happens and through legal channels if these exist. Any sackings should be met with whatever direct action is possible, e.g.: work to rules, go slows, even wild cat strike action if this will not be used as an excuse for more sackings (more likely in skilled workplaces where scabs are harder to come by, but this will depend on the situation). Sabotage can be particularly useful here if you can get away with it. The risks of this have to be weighed very carefully. It is here that organisations outside the workplace can have a big impact. Management rely on isolating and intimidating their workforce. If workers in struggle can demonstrate that they have support networks of their own then management lose an important source of self confidence. Pickets and phone/email blockades are obvious tactics, used with great success by the IWW recently. Indeed, it is in this kind of situation that syndicalist type unions are at their most useful. Mainstream unions are very unlikely to offer this kind of visible, direct support.

## **Negotiation, the Union and Avoiding Co-option**

At some point in this process of escalation, management will start negotiations. Their goal will be to end disruption in the workplace and to try and ensure that it never happens again.

They will be looking for certainty, for a recognisable body that they can deal with and for ways of managing worker dissatisfaction before it reaches the point of confrontation. Any trade union will be happy to meet these needs and to take its place in the management of the workplace by defusing and channelling disputes in the right directions.

Outside of situations of generalised or heightened struggle, it will also be necessary for workers to de-escalate. This kind of struggle is very stressful and without a much broader context of generalised struggle it is difficult to maintain at a high pitch over the long term.

The problem here is how to normalise the situation without losing the gains in confidence and solidarity that workers have made. It is also important that potential for confrontation is maintained. Only through confrontation can solidarity and militancy be maintained. Only if solidarity and militancy are maintained can any gains be preserved rather than chipped away by management once the opportunity presents itself.

It is essential that any recognition negotiations are entered into after solidarity and militancy has been demonstrated by direct action. This is the basis of workplace strength, not any agreement signed by management, and any struggle for recognition of a workplace organisation must work from this principle.

No outside representative should be accepted from a trade union. Those negotiating with management should be from the workplace itself and should be chosen and mandated by workers themselves. The union is there for advice and legal back up. Anything that needs to happen in the workplace itself should be done by the people that work there.

After recognition as a union branch, workers should continue to meet regularly and hold any reps to high standards of accountability.



## V – The Workplace Resistance Group

Our medium term aim is the creation of workplace resistance groups. These are groups consisting of the most active and class conscious workers within a given workplace, groups that unite workers in militant struggle against the bosses. They work in a number of different ways depending on the context of struggle they find themselves in. Sometimes they simply produce propaganda against management and the union, attempting to create a larger context for debate on tactics and goals. At other times they will engage in clandestine militant, even violent, action in support of a particular workplace conflict. They are always independent of trade unions, even when they sometimes work within trade union structures.

It is not always possible to build this kind of group in every workplace at every time. A heightened level of struggle is necessary for these groups to be possible. In workplaces where struggle is at a low level, attempts to form workplace resistance groups are unlikely to succeed and are more likely to result in the isolation and potentially the sacking of the workers involved. In workplaces with a higher level of struggle the potential for this kind of group must be judged by the workers involved.

Workplace resistance groups are a key tactic in breaking with the trade unions in situations of heightened struggle. They are one means of preventing the unions channelling the anger and activity of workers into harmless and easily controlled streams. In this way, they can maintain militancy and encourage in the independent organisation and direct action of other workers.

A workplace resistance group, as an autonomous manifestation of workers' struggles, has the potential to carry forward struggles in a manner that permanent workers' organisations such as unions cannot, either through lack of desire or for fear of legal repercussion. For instance, during struggles of a significant size, an informal grouping of militant workers can agitate for occupations and blockades, can undertake sabotage, and can directly approach sympathisers in a way which unions cannot. When such dramatic activity is not viable, workplace resistance groups can undertake other forms of direct action. They can produce clandestine and anonymous propaganda against management, against the 'negotiations' carried out by unions behind closed doors and the sale of these stitch-ups to the membership. They can give coherence to the forms of individual resistance which happen in workplaces anyway – such as stealing, slacking and scamming. But what unites these disparate tactics is their relationship to the struggle. In all these cases, the role of the workplace resistance group is to spread militancy and consciousness irrespective of the role and the activity of the union.

What we are describing is not a discrete thing, but a tendency. It is the tendency for militant and politicised workers to seek to advance their interests, and the state of the struggle. This tendency encompasses many historical examples, from miners' hit squads and unofficial flying pickets to the informal presence of anarchist and revolutionary groups in the workplace, either in individual or in broader networks such as those currently being formed through IWW dual-carding and the industrial networks of the Solidarity Federation.

Undoubtedly, were the latter two examples to coalesce into functioning unions they would cease to be workplace resistance groups as we understand them, but currently they represent the attempts of politicised workers to push struggles forward and engender a culture of resistance amongst the workforce.

In this sense they differ from the presence of leftist groups within the workplace, whose aim is invariably to 'capture' the union (and in the course of doing this defend its role), and to spread the party word and party line amongst the workforce. Anarchist communists seek the advancement of working class struggles, and for these to reach the point where they pose the possibility of the working class taking power for itself, they must go beyond the union form. We seek the establishment of a widespread culture of resistance, rather than simply the establishment of strong unions, or faith in a 'workers party'. The use of unions for struggle is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid in most situations. However, anarchist communists do not confuse the power of the unions with the power of the working class.

The workplace resistance group, as an informal and semi-clandestine group of politicised workers, will therefore develop a healthy disdain for law, the unions and management alike.

## Conclusion: Beyond Resistance?

What we have outlined here still begs the question of how we see the kinds of working class organisation we advocate translating into radical social change. After all, we do advocate the establishment of libertarian communism through social revolution.

What we have described here are general tendencies of struggle, which necessarily ebb and flow in intensity in line with the constantly evolving dynamics of class struggle. As we have described, we don't advocate building a mass organisation, whether a social democratic party, co-operative movement or revolutionary union, which will maintain its purity until it reaches critical mass and can assume power. We don't see the new world steadily growing within the shell of the old, until the point of eclipse.

The idea that structures such as permanent mass revolutionary unions can be built and maintained through the effort and will power of politicised workers – irrespective of the concrete reality of class struggle – is idealism. That is not to say that we do not want a conscious, politicised and militant working class. It is to say that we don't pretend that workers organisations go bad because of bad ideas or a lack of effort, but due to their mediating role within capitalism, something that will have to be surpassed in order to move beyond working class self-defence and take on capitalism itself.

But if we do not advocate this 'building blocks' method of revolutionary change, then what do we argue for? The strategies we have detailed in this document are means by which working class people can make concrete demands of their bosses – of capital and the state which is part of it.

We advocate the tendency towards self-organisation and direct action as a strategy against the problems inherent in unions as mediating structures within capitalism. But ultimately our goal is the working class seizing power for itself, and in so doing abolishing itself as the working class by abolishing its need to sell its ability to work in order for the money needed to live. We seek the socialisation of production, distribution and provision through communisation. This is the process by which the vast majority of us currently rendered wage-slaves take over the business of doing and making within society and re-orient it towards our own collective needs, rather than the current inhuman and alien requirement of money to become more money. This process therefore involves doing away with all the fetishised creations of capitalism – money, capital, private property and the state. We see this break, the beginnings of which have been seen in a number of great ruptures in the past, as developing out of the dynamics of class struggle which are an intrinsic product of capitalism.

The workplace resistance group is the tendency we have described towards self-organisation, direct action and mutual aid. But we do not advocate it simply because these are pleasant things, but because this tendency is what poses the ultimate negation of capitalism. All class struggle pits our needs against the needs of capital, and when struggle is of a certain magnitude the conclusion is possible that in order to meet our needs we must do away with the capital relationship itself.

And for this to happen, the working class must take political power, by itself, directly – not through any party taking control of the state apparatus on its behalf. History has shown us repeatedly that the direct form which is the natural expression of working class political power is the mass assembly, and from this the use of mandated recallable delegates to form the councils of workers required to oversee first revolutionary struggle, then the everyday functioning of the new society. Therefore, the mass workers' assembly is precisely the organisational form we agitate for in order for the principles of self-organisation, direct action and mutual aid to become the leading ones within mass struggle. It is the expression of the anarchist communist goal of direct control by people over their conditions of existence.

Clearly if we stood on the street and called for workers' councils tomorrow we wouldn't get anywhere. But it is the job of anarchist communist militants to push for the broadening of all struggles, for turning defensive struggles into offensive ones, and for struggles to be directed directly and democratically by those they concern, not dictated by union bosses or obliquely by union laws. None of this can be abstracted from the real development of class struggle on the ground.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Anarchist Federation  
On the Frontline: Anarchists at Work  
Workplace Strategy of the Anarchist Federation  
April 2009

Retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
Anarchist Communist Editions (ACE) Pamphlet No. 18.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)