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No More Fake Strikes

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The left wing of the labor movement does not have a coherent set of ideas for union revival. The labor movement is dying, captive to a system of labor control calculated to prevent effective union activity. Unlike generations past, we lack a coherent and widespread agenda to reverse union decline. Repeated calls for general strikes will do little to address the crisis.

As Kim Moody has pointed out, true general strikes are often not called but grow out of extensions of solidarity based on individual groups of workers striking. Other groups of workers put out a call for solidarity and the dispute expands. Building a labor movement based on struggle, solidarity, militancy and rank-and-file democracy should be key areas of our attention.

The question we need to grapple with is not what date to call a general strike but what sort of worker’s movement is capable of carrying out a general strike or, probably more realistically, industry-wide or sectoral strikes.

One reason I wrote my book Strike Back was to understand how millions of public employees were able to violate labor law in the 1960s with little repercussion and great gains. As we saw during the Red State Revolt by teachers earlier in the year, when workers get in motion it is truly incredible.

Contents

General strikes by proclamation	5
How strikes are called	6
Is it a strike if no-one strikes?	7
Who calls a general strike?	9
If you want a general strike, organize your co-workers	12
The motive force of society	13

The motive force of society

One response to this whole argument may be, “What’s the harm in calling for general strikes?” That was my initial inclination. It’s hard to criticize people excited about general strikes and the very idea that workers can stop society in its tracks. The source of wealth, power and privilege in society stems from capital’s control of the workplace.

The allure behind the idea of a general strike is that without human labor, society grinds to a halt. As labor’s anthem Solidarity Forever goes, “without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.” In true general strikes, power relations in society are laid bare and the very foundations of capitalist rule are shaken. As Francis Fox Piven has written, in such periods of upheaval, the ruled are no longer willing to be ruled.

There are benefits to raising the discussion of general strikes. It highlights the role of striking in general and points activists towards the workplace. As I have long argued, strikes have been the heart and soul of trade unionism, and until we in labor confront the issue of how to develop an effective strike, the labor movement will continue our death march. And without a powerful workers’ movement, the progressive forces in this country will prolong our current weakness.

The notion of the general strike also helps us think outside the box in regards to striking. To develop a truly effective strike means breaking free from the legal and ideological quagmire of the modern labor relations system, which forbids cross-workplace solidarity and other forms of effective strike activity. The idea of a general strike dispenses with legalisms, and in its true form, relies on solidarity and worker self-activity. During the Wisconsin uprising of 2011, raising the idea of a general strike offered an alternative to the trajectory of electoralism and defeat.

Despite these potential positives, how to build a general strike is not even remotely the key question facing the labor movement.

If you want a general strike, organize your co-workers

Much of the debate around the idea of a general strike is divorced from reality. Much of the commentary appears to be focused on defending strikes or general strikes, noting they have been important in history, that if we could do one it would be very effective, etc. Missing from the discussion is what about the workers' movement today that makes this the appropriate tactic, or what it would take to make these proclaimed strikes a reality. The hallmark of idealism is that ideas are divorced from reality.

The appeal of calling a general strike is that, should it happen, it would be incredibly powerful. A one-day strike by all women in the United States would have an estimated \$21 billion impact on the economy. A general strike would shut the country down and be a powerful blow against Trump. A general strike, however, must be embraced by workers. If we had a powerful workers' movement capable of carrying out general strikes, the pros and cons of the tactics would be a worthy subject of debate.

It's time to put some standards in place. These are incredibly weak standards, but standards nonetheless. The test of whether to promote a call for a general strike is whether you individually can get at least ten of your co-workers to commit to striking. Certainly, in calling for a general strike shutting down the whole of society, committed activists should be able to do at least that. If the presumably most conscious organizers cannot do this, then they either lack connection to workers through a workplace or a union, or they have a lot more work to do.

Collectively, any initiative that is calling for a nationwide general strike should be composed of hundreds if not thousands of such individuals or organizations, with deep ties in the working class.

General strikes by proclamation

In recent years, middle-class activists with little relationship to unions, workers or workplaces have routinely called for general strikes. Over the last decade, there have been a dizzying number of general strikes announced. The ones that I can remember are: in the wake of the Wisconsin uprising, in San Francisco following the Occupy movement, on May Day for most of the last decade, a whole spate of general strikes in the wake of Trump's election, earlier this year around the TSA shutdown, and a recent call for a reproductive rights strike. There is also a call for a global climate strike, which may or may not be a call for a strike as opposed to a protest.

That I am sure I am missing some should be a bit of a tip-off. If you have to struggle to remember a call for a general strike, then it probably was not successful.

The bulk of this article will focus on the general strikes called on social media back in the wake of Trump's election, in the spring of 2017. The Spring 2017 calls included a call for an immigrant worker strike on February 16, calls for a February 17 general strike in the wake of the momentum around Trump's inauguration, a widely publicized Women's Strike on International Women's Day, and a strike on May 1. There were so many calls for general strikes it was hard to keep them straight. None of them resulted in general strikes, and other than the immigrant worker strike, none resulted in any appreciable number of workers actually going on strike.

Unlike real strikes, which take a ton of work, calling a general strike is apparently a simple affair. A date is picked, a Facebook post is created, the labor liberal press picks it up, and a general strike is born. This raises the question of under whose authority they are being called.

By and large, you see very few unions participating in these so-called general strikes. There are a couple of instances of unionists syncing up strikes around specific issues, such as the Chicago

Teachers Union threatened strike on May Day 2017. How is it possible to have a general strike with virtually no union participation?

How strikes are called

Most union constitutions have detailed rules and procedures for striking, including rules on when and how strike votes should be conducted. While some may dismiss this as mere bureaucracy, strike votes are taken seriously by most unions because the stakes are so high for the affected workers. By voting to strike, a group of workers commits themselves to a battle which has major repercussions for their individual and collective futures. A failed strike can mean the loss of a job, and even a winning strike may mean months of hardship—this is not a decision to be made lightly.

As a democratic decision, once the decision to strike has been made, all workers, whether they voted yes, no, or did not vote, are expected to honor it. Everyone must honor the picket line and go on strike — or be deemed a scab. Most union constitutions call for fining or expelling strikebreakers, and back in the day scabs would be ostracized for years after the conclusion of a strike.

Having been involved in many strike votes over the years, they usually involve lots of collective discussion in the workplace, answering questions and what-ifs. Legal strategy and possible repercussions are talked about, and strategy is debated. Striking is a collective decision, and typically the work group solidifies around the idea. When the group does decide to go on strike, folks began to act collectively and labor and management become polarized.

Certainly there are situations where workers have not voted to go on strike, as with wildcat strikes, which are strikes without the support of, or typically in opposition to, the union apparatus. Such initiatives typically are rooted in the “shop floor” (workplace) and led by rank-and-file organizers. Like all strikes, true wildcat strikes are rare today, with the last big wildcat wave in the early 1970s,

choice of words, which was that we need to have a discussion in our unions about a general strike. Having a discussion in our unions is very different than taking it upon yourself to call a general strike on Facebook. Likewise, activists in Wisconsin agitating for a general strike in 2011 did so by leafleting the crowd to get the discussion going and promoting a discussion in the Madison Central Labor Council. Again that is raising the discussion point within the movement rather than taking it upon themselves to just call a general strike.

Contrast the arrogance of some liberal outsiders who decided to demand that government workers go on strike. During the shutdown, the New York Times of all places published an opinion piece by author Barbara Ehrenreich and former union organizer Gary Stevenson, in which they argued that TSA workers should go out on strike. Neither have any particular base among TSA workers or government workers in general, nor ties to any of the public employee unions.

While the authors criticized the TSA workers’ union the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), there is no indication they talked to those unions. Nor, in advocating for a TSA agent strike, did they mention even one discussion with a TSA agent.

It’s pretty clear that after decades of austerity and right-wing government policies, many middle-class liberals are looking for a way out of the morass. One obvious place to look is the working class, which is the one class which has the power to grind society to a halt. That’s understandable. But at a certain point, you are asking for working people to fight your battles on your issues. That rarely works.

That’s probably why the only example of calls for generalized strikes which actually worked were the immigrant worker strikes, including the 2006 strike. These essentially political strikes came from within the immigrant rights community and thus had a very different character than these other general strike calls.

Strikes, even the bureaucratic, involve mobilizations from below – implicitly they raise issues of power and control. And the fundamental place of self-activity – and isn't that the point? 'The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves.' No one can do it for you; you have to do it yourself. Not the politicians. Not the bureaucrats. Not the church. And not Occupy Oakland.

...So this is not just definitional – “What is a strike?” This project has become an issue of appropriation – and substitution, the substitution of Occupy Oakland for the workers themselves, no matter what the intentions of the organizers. It has become a challenge to the basic principles of workers' democracy – to all notions of worker's self-activity, workers' empowerment, workers' control; it suggests the opposite of democracy and is, in my mind, contrary to the best and deepest traditions of socialism – and anarchism. It needs to be abandoned.

In research for my next book, I am finding that one of the key differences between the class struggle unionism promoted by previous generations of labor leftists, and the social unionism/labor liberalism popular for the last decade, is the belief in worker self-activity.

None of this is to say that all strikes will come from the formal union process. There is a strong history of strike waves happening outside of, or in opposition to, the union hierarchy. But in all of these instances, these strikes stemmed from folks organizing in the working class and not from the minds of leftists.

None of this is to say that general strikes should not be discussed. But how we discuss it is important. An example is AFA-CWA President Sara Nelson's widely reported remarks during the government shutdown earlier this year. It is important to note her

when shop floor workers resisted a management offensive to gut longstanding work rules in the name of productivity. But even though these strikes do not involve a formal vote, to be successful, these wildcat strikes take workplace organizing and popular support from the workers involved. Workers, in effect, vote with their feet.

Leading up to the 2017 Women's Strike, a liberal critique claimed that striking was a privilege. The article provoked a quick response that working-class women can and do strike, and that opposition to the strike was coming from liberal democrats. A widely circulated rebuttal by Kate Aronoff gave four historical examples of strikes by woman. These examples were meant to show that women's strikes are not a privilege—but struggles of oppressed workers using the best tool they have available to improve their lives.

Yet, there are a number of differences between the strikes discussed by Aronoff and the “strike” on International Woman's Day. The most obvious is that these historical examples were real labor-withdrawing strikes involving tens of thousands of women. And they flowed from decisions from the women workers involved. Aronoff's article quotes the dramatic scene, well known in labor history, when garment worker Clara Lemlich made an impassioned call for thousands of garment workers to strike. But unlike these strikes, that was the garment workers themselves deciding to strike. That is far different from these general strikes by proclamation.

Is it a strike if no-one strikes?

With the exception of the immigrant worker strikes, it is clear that not many of the proclaimed strikes were actually strikes, let alone general strikes. The Women's Strike on International Women's Day, March 8, 2017 did not appear to happen. The most reported areas of actual work stoppages that day were school districts in

Arlington and Chapel Hill, liberal, high-income areas which shut down their schools preemptively based on an abnormal number of requests for the day off.

An employer cancelling classes because employees request the day off does not constitute a strike—unless, like the 2006 immigrant worker strike, when entire industries shuttered, the employers believing workers would not show up. Regardless, closing a couple school districts and some progressive restaurants out of a working class of tens of millions does not make a general strike.

Honestly, it was hard to even remember the call for a general strike on February 17, 2017. Hopefully, people will see this as a problem. If we can't even remember the "general strikes," then perhaps too many are being called. Almost 100 years later, we are still talking about the Minneapolis Truckers Strike and the Seattle General Strike. So I guess that is another way to assess these: if we remember them in ten years, they were real, e.g. the 2006 immigrant worker strike. If they are too hard to even remember a few months later or years later, then not so much.

As the exception, the February 16, 2017 immigrant worker strike had real participation although exact numbers of striking workers is hard to calculate from media accounts. Labor Notes estimates tens of thousands of immigrant workers and students participated in the strike and over 100 workers were fired nationwide. While participation does not appear to be at the level of the historic May 1, 2006 immigrant worker strike, the effort was nonetheless impressive.

The flipside of the lack of accountability in calling these strikes is that there is no accountability on the back end. When a union goes out on strike in a defined workplace, the stakes are high and worker participation is immediately known. Did any workers scab? How are picket lines holding up? What is the impact? Whether to strike or not, when to settle, and the propriety of the actions can be judged and debated for years to come.

In contrast, with these amorphous general strikes, there is also no accountability in summing up the action. In several instances, when the strikes have not gained traction, they have been re-branded as just "take off work if you can" or a more generalized day of action — do something, anything. That's great but it is not a general strike. To repeat, if you have to ask your employer for the day off, it is not a strike — it's a leave day.

Who calls a general strike?

To return to the discussion above, typically union strike votes are treated as serious affairs and come from some decision-making process by the workers involved. Certainly, if unions were to endorse calls for a general strike, we can be sure the decision would not be made cavalierly. For union leaders to call a general strike would entail, at a minimum, an expectation that a portion of their membership would actually go on strike. And on the back end, if workers did not participate in the strike, presumably there would be some responsibility assigned for making a bad call.

These calls for a general strike, however, attempt to take the allure the general strike without the organization or responsibility such a true initiative would involve. Back in 2011, in the wake of the Occupy movement, Occupy Oakland put out a call for a general strike to shut down the West Coast ports.

Cal Winslow, a long time labor activist and supporter of union democracy wrote an excellent critique of the initiative, which is still instructive today. Winslow advanced a number of critiques of the action: 1) that he was not aware of any workers actually striking, and 2) that this effort was opposed by the ILWU, which has a long history of militant unionism, and 3) the effort did not appear to come from, or have any significant participation by, dockworkers. Winslow took offense to this effort on basis of the principle of worker control: