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Sometimes We Don't Even Get to the Point of Winning or Losing...

Juan Conatz

October 20, 2010

Reading *The American Worker* and old Italian operaismo surveys of auto workers, it occurred to me that it would be worth documenting some of my own experiences in wage labor. We often forget how powerful and important first person accounts of what happens to us are.

In December of 2004 a warehouse I was working in through a temp agency was taken over by the company whose products were stored there. Everyone had to reapply for their jobs and due to my previous experience and the fact that two 'leads' recommended me to the company, I was hired on.

The warehouse was located in Peosta, a small Iowan town with a population of 1,200 and considered an exurb of Dubuque. Other than some subdivisions, two bars, a couple of gas stations and a small community college the majority of the town was comprised of the industrial park.

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The industrial park contained a number of different large warehouses and factories run by companies doing everything from power washer manufacturing to plastic molding. I would estimate that around 2,000 people worked in the park, most from Dubuque or various small towns in the area.

I worked in the building that served as a distribution center for a Wisconsin based mail order catalog business. Around 80–90 people worked there, split into two shifts. We would get containers from China, Vietnam, India or Portugal, unload the product and store them away. When the call centers in Missouri and Wisconsin received orders, we would eventually get lists, pick the orders and ship them through various parcel delivery companies in trailers.

Although I started as part of the container unloading crew that unloaded everything by hand and stacked them on pallets, I was quickly made a forklift driver and was tasked with putting away these pallets from the staging area to the racking and floor locations. This could be extremely fast paced depending on how many containers were scheduled, and I would sometimes make a deal with the unloaders (unknown to their leads or our supervisors) to slow down so I wasn't overwhelmed.

As all of us were new hires, there was a period, a kind of honeymoon with the company. There was much talk about the supposed benefits and raises we would qualify for eventually and we were waiting to see if this was all talk or something more.

Eventually, after the higher-ups from Wisconsin left and the new energy characteristic of a freshly opened division dissipated, this honeymoon ended. Workloads increased, disrespect from leads and supervisors become more common and heavy emphasis on a strict program of safety was utilized more as a tool for constant punishment and scolding than any actual reason. Of course, when these elaborate safety procedures got in the way of increasing the workload, they were quickly pushed aside by most of the leads and management.

nos and a racist co-worker, my own personal issues and a feeling that I was being provoked, watched and retaliated against by management, led to me simply walking out on the job. The next day, I gathered my humble belongings and moved an hour and a half away.

As far as I know, the effort ended there.

In retrospect, I learned a lot from this experience. It revealed to me that

1. Just because something is a union, doesn't mean they are interested in aiding workers in struggle. Many unions or locals of unions consist of aged and comfortable bureaucrats. Us workers have opposing interests to these people
2. Alternatives to the NLRB election model exist. In fact, they are preferential. Whether we win or lose, it should be on us and our direct action.
3. Don't wait until you can't nearly stand a job to start organizing. A clear head does wonders for good tactical and strategic decision making.
4. If you ever are in a situation where others can benefit from your advice, help or solidarity, do not hesitate. Every isolated and sympathetic person is someone with unimaginable potential. I avoided becoming too disillusioned and am now a member of two anarchist political organizations and still a Wobbly. I eventually continued and gained experience, knowledge and perspective. What about others? What happens to them?

Soon, sneaking out for extended breaks, coordinated theft and offhand remarks about 'starting a union' started emerging. Many of the workers above the age of 35 had been in the UFCW at the 'the pack', a slaughterhouse that existed in Dubuque from 1891 until 2001. In fact, Dubuque used to be known as a union town with a large manufacturing base, so these sentiments, in my time working in the area, are common.

These sentiments, combined with the frustration that we received no benefits, no vacation, no paid days off, no holiday pay, no bonus, one 10¢ raise a year (if we met performance requirements), forced overtime and eventually, incentive pay (quotas) led me to start contacting unions.

My personal preference was the IWW. Unfortunately, despite my membership, at that point I had never laid eyes upon another Wobbly. Anarchists, communists and radicals were people that lived in major metropolitan areas and college towns, not in the mid sized and small towns of my corner of the midwest. This is still true to a large extent.

The Laborers, UAW and UE all referred me to the Teamsters, who I had purposefully avoided calling because of my impression (from *A Troublemaker's Handbook*) of them being an undemocratic union.

I called the Teamsters and they explained to me the process. They wanted 10–15 people before they would even meet with us. After I got 10–15 people to an initial meeting, we would attempt to get 75% of the workforce to sign union cards, declaring their intention and approval to join the Teamsters. This would lead to the company requesting a National Labor Relations Board election, which could happen in 6 months and required 50% + 1 to win.

Very little advice was given. I was expected to embark on this effort with no experience and no guidance. So I made it up as I went along.

I thought that an anonymous campaign of ridiculing management through stickers and graffiti throughout the building would

contribute to the atmosphere of anger and frustration at the company and would result in an increased potential for organizing. So with a book of stickers, I started posting them up in various places. The other workers genuinely thought they were great and it became sort of an Easter egg hunt for some of them. Management was not pleased and at a weekly assembly meeting, presented samples of the stickers and threatened termination if they found out who it was.

That was humorous, but I still had not yet talked to anyone about organizing a union. It was obvious to me that I needed to find a core group of people that were liked and respected, but who should it be? The guys that were in the unions at 'the pack', Flexsteel (furniture manufacturing plant in Dubuque) and John Deere? Or the folks that I was close to and was already doing informal slow-downs and such with?

I decided on the latter and the first person I spoke with it about was enthusiastic. We met at his house in the very small town of St. Donatus, where we made up a list of other workers we thought would be interested and supportive. This list exceeded the 15 the Teamsters wanted and the next week we went about our effort.

The almost 20 people we briefly and carefully talked to at work had a range of reactions. A few were excited and gung-ho, most were supportive but cautious and the rest were either visibly frightened or apparently suspicious. We set up a meeting at a bar at the end of the week, and only 5 people showed.

We decided that we still wanted to meet up with the Teamsters regardless of our low numbers, and despite audible disappointment in his voice when I called, the 'organizer' agreed.

Me and 4 of my co-workers met with the 'organizer' at their office on what I remember as a frigid day. The 'organizer' himself was no warmer than the weather. His appearance and attitude stunk of old union bureaucrat. Slicked backed hair, gold chain down to his exposed chest hair, pinky ring, and anti-Teamsters For A Demo-

cratic Union stuff on his wall. I did not trust him and imagined possible battles with his ilk to come.

He explained the standard process for gaining union recognition and representation. The 75% of workers signing a union card, the employer's reaction and offensive, the NLRB election, and the 50% plus 1 majority needed for victory. One thing that sticks out is that when talking about the Teamsters ties to the Mafia back in the day, he stated, "Look, we won't apologize for our past."

At the end of the meeting, he said we needed to come back with 15-20 folks and then we could talk again. My co-workers and I discussed amongst ourselves who was comfortable approaching others who could be sympathetic. It was decided that me and another guy about my age would take this on.

Over the next month or so we both attempted to build our core group up to 15, but had problems. Every time we got to that number and then scheduled a meeting, 6-7 folks would say something came up. This occurred 3 times, if I remember right.

Eventually, we decided to give up for a while. The Teamsters didn't seem interested unless we had 15 people, and we could only get 9-10 to a second meeting that never happened. In addition, the organizer was difficult to stay in contact with, sometimes not returning my call for 3-4 days.

In addition to this, I and another Latino worker were in conflict with one particular guy who didn't hesitate to fling racial slurs and other objectionable rhetoric. Management knew about him, and despite numerous people filing complaints, no action was taken.

In retrospect, there was also a lot of things going on in my personal life. Basically I felt completely hopeless. I had little of what I now recognize as a support system. I felt extremely isolated and unsure of what I was doing. All of this surely affected my ability to contribute to this union drive.

Despite all this, there was still hope that we could slowly build our numbers up. I was becoming more familiar with the IWW and minority unionism. But a series of incidents between us 2 Lati-