

# **A Short History of IWW Organizing in Ann Arbor 1981–1989**

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We present the following account both as an example of how IWW militants built shop-floor, direct action-based union locals, and because the Ann Arbor-Detroit General Membership Branch played a key role in returning the IWW to its roots as a revolutionary union after decades of effective isolation from the shop floor. There are important lessons to learn from these fellow workers' successes and failures, and perhaps most importantly from their determination to continue building a revolutionary union even though their numbers were much smaller than their dreams.

This account demonstrates that the key to successful organizing is not money, but rather the commitment of grass-roots militants determined to bring their fellow workers together in a revolutionary union. Shop-floor efforts were key to the history detailed below. The University Cellar job branch—a two bookstore firm that at its peak employed some 75 IWW members, and was organized a few years before this narrative begins—began with a core of workers who had been organizing for several years on the job. Without strong on-the-job organization, all the outside support in the world can not build a lasting union presence—a lesson which should be so obvious as to be a cliché, but which many of our fellow workers (including even some Wobblies) have seemingly forgotten.

Anarcho-syndicalists played a key role in these efforts. Members of the Anarchist Communist Federation introduced the Wobblies to the shop-floor militants who went on to build the IWW at the University Cellar and other job branches. And one of the IWW's first public events, in the 1970s, was a presentation by CNT member Miguel Mesa, who toured the U.S. under IWW auspices in the 1970s, speaking on the revival of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism.

At the beginning of the Reagan era the Ann Arbor-Detroit GMB had been in existence for some six years. We had approximately 70 to 80 members and two job shops under contract, the University Cellar Bookstore, and a commercial print shop. Between 1981 and 1989, the GMB grew to approximately 150 members, and was active in organizing workers in Printing and Publishing IU450, General Distribution Workers IU660, Public Service Workers IU670, Unemployed Workers and students. We have had a shop-floor presence in 8 separate establishments. Our members have engaged in numerous job actions, including two strikes. We have won recognition at four establishments during this period.

Besides organizing on the job, the GMB has been active in several solidarity coalitions. For a number of years a Neo-Nazi group attempted an annual march in Ann Arbor. The IWW was central to the coalitions that organized counter-demonstrations which eventually drove the Nazis out of town. The GMB along with our job branches worked to extend the Hormel boycott to Ann Arbor and provide direct aid to the striking P-9 workers.

Currently the GMB is awaking from a two year depression caused by the loss of the unions largest job shop, IU660 U-Cellar Branch. The banking industry forced the University Cellar Bookstore to close two years ago. This forced close to 80 IWW members onto the unemployment line. Many of these workers are only now becoming stable in their new jobs. The organizing potential for the GMB is looking brighter today than at any time since the U-Cellar closed. A nucleus of wobs have gotten jobs at the same place and are now secure enough in their employment to begin bringing the union to their co-workers.

What follows are brief histories of a couple of the industries and work sites we have been active in through the 1980s.

## The Printing and Publishing Workers

The print shop was closed by the IRS because the employer failed to pay his income tax. Several members maintained their membership in the union and took the IWW with them to their new employers. A core group of 4 wobs were established at one outlet of a Detroit Area printing and publishing business (NRC). The establishment employed approximately 30 workers at this outlet and over 200 company wide. Education and direct action defense of workers rights were to continue for over four years at this establishment. The primary activities this rank and file group engaged in were over health and safety and solidarity.

In the summer of 1981 the last union print shop in Ann Arbor came under attack with a lock out of the unionized employees. IU 450 members walked the picket line with the Graphic Arts Union members and aided them in establishing secondary pickets in front of major costumers of the scab shop. After a long strike the union was decertified in an NLRB election in which only the scabs were allowed to vote. The GAU workers sought new employment with one of them getting a job at NRC. He joined the IWW, and worked for shop floor control at NRC as long as he worked there. This experience, (the Kolossas strike) along with their previous experience in organizing a shop only to see it closed by the government because of the bosses theft, committed the IU 450 workers to shop-floor control rather than legal certification.

Despite the activities of the IWW at NRC over four years we never won control over the shop floor. The union was effectively ghettoized among the printers with those having the most to gain from organization (the low paid bindery, xerox and microfilm workers) remaining Mr. Blocks. Despite shop wide action over health and safety the majority of the workers remained passive employees awaiting the handouts of the boss.

The organizing activities of the printing workers became focused on the creation of an Ann Arbor Printers Cooperative. Along with members of the GMB and other local activists these printers endeavored to create a worker owned-worker managed print shop. The effort to create this cooperative undoubtedly sucked up much energy that could have gone into organizing. The printers' cooperative functioned for approximately four years and was the only union print shop in Ann Arbor during that period, carrying the proud bug of the IWW.

The Printers' Cooperative collapsed in 1984, becoming a privately held partnership. It remains the only union shop in Ann Arbor today, affiliated with the Detroit-area Allied Printing Trades Council.

In the winter of 1985 the GMB was contacted by advertising sales reps. for the Detroit Metro Times newspaper. These workers were so enraged by their treatment at the hands of management that they had already gone on strike when they contacted us. We helped them maintain their picket line for several weeks. These workers failed to win all of their demands, but they did improve the working conditions and pay. They also stripped away the radical chic facade behind which the boss exploited the workers.

In 1986 an American Speedy Print Shop in Detroit was organized. The IWW was voluntarily recognized by the employer. Negotiations over a contract broke down after a couple of bargaining sessions. The union was able to raise base wages, but broke down through high turnover of employees. The shop only employed 5 to 6 workers and in the course of just a few months all of the original employees left or were laid off.

Printing and publishing remains one of Ann Arbor's chief industries. With the exception of two small shops employing less than a dozen workers, the entire industry remains unorganized.

Employers are committed to keeping the industry nonunion. The GMB hopes to return to organizing in the printing trades in the future but since 1986 our resources have been focused on other industries.

## **In Defense of U of M Clerical Workers**

The University of Michigan is the single largest employer in Washtenaw County. It has a long history of union busting activity. As I write this story a nurse's strike at the U of M Hospital has been squelched by the courts, and service workers at the same hospital are continuing a three month informational picket.

In 1985 AFSCME began a clerical workers organizing drive. Organizing among U of M clericals goes back to the late 70's. For a short time the UAW had a contract covering the clericals, but that union was decertified and at the time of the AFSCME drive the clericals had been without organization for several years. At the beginning of the AFSCME drive a group of medical transcriptionists approached the GMB asking for advice and assistance. We helped them arrive at an understanding with AFSCME where their special conditions would be included in negotiations with the university. The leadership of this group of transcriptionists immediately came under attack by management. The entire work group also came under attack through rapid equipment changes and speed ups.

Working with this rank-and-file group, we advised them not to wait for an NLRB election to begin working as a union on the shop floor. It was decided that a strategy of aggressive use of the existing grievance procedure along with concerted actions to protect members on the job could effect immediate changes in working conditions. Group grievances resulted in workers receiving back pay and a revision of the piece rate system. This victory couldn't be tolerated by the administration. Shop floor harassment and intimidation of the of transcriptionists became a daily event. Shop floor supervisors setup employees for theft charges and used any pretext to discipline the rank and file leadership.

The certification election for AFSCME came and was lost by an extremely close margin. The victory over AFSCME emboldened the administration and they moved to eliminate the "trouble makers" in the transcriptionist department. The election defeat caused extreme demoralization among the transcriptionists. The unity and solidarity they had shown in the months leading up to the election collapsed under management attack.

The administration had singled out two women in the department to make examples of and both were being dragged through the university disciplinary process in route to firing. AFSCME just disappeared and these two rank and file activists were left twisting in the wind.

Lacking any workplace solidarity for these two leaders the GMB aided them in defending themselves through the labor boards. This legalistic struggle is still continuing three years after the unfair labor practice charges were filed and four years after the events. One woman has accepted a cash settlement from the university for unlawful discharge. The second woman continues to pursue her unfair labor practice charges. The GMB role in this struggle has been mainly advisory. We have also pressured AFSCME to represent the workers. The story of AFSCME desertion of rank-and-file activists at the university is an entirely different story, one which highlights the bankruptcy of business unionism. The solidarity the GMB has shown for the clerical workers has included representation at grievance meetings, Michigan Employment

Security hearings and Michigan Labor Relation Board hearings. The production of newsletters and the organizing of demonstrations in support have also been key to our activities. Through our activities the university has been unsuccessful in carrying out their retaliatory acts against this woman.

In the one department where the IWW had some influence four managers were either fired or given early retirement, the rank-and-file activists have kept their jobs, and remain active in a limited way in protecting workers rights.

## **General Distribution Workers Victory and Struggle**

Industrial Union 660 Peoples Warehouse Job Branch was organized in 1982 and won their first contract in 1984. The Warehouse remained an IWW shop until 1992, when its owners sold its assets to an out-of-state competitor in order to break the union.

The Michigan Federation of Food Cooperatives' Board of Directors through at least six separate managements pursued a policy of either breaking the union or co-opting it. They have spent easily \$2,000 per worker in this attempt. This works out to 70 to 80 thousand dollars over six years.

The organization of the IWW at the workplace begins on the shop floor and includes a stewards council and a branch council. Key to the workers at the warehouse was their ability to participate in management. Worker participation was guaranteed by our contract and gave workers some day-to-day control over their working conditions. An egalitarian wage scale where every worker makes the same regardless of task helped keep worker participation meaningful.

The 30 plus warehouse workers who organized into the IWW in 1982 were above all committed to democracy. The local branch maintained itself through the labors of nearly everyone either taking a turn on the Branch Council, serving as a steward or working on one of the various committees of the branch. The union's stand on democracy in the workplace and equal treatment of all workers were its most potent weapons.

The union won a very powerful contract in its first negotiations and successfully defended that contract through two subsequent negotiations. Our contracts ran for two years twice and one year once. Between negotiations, management is constantly attempting to erode the contract through arbitrary actions. These have resulted in two spontaneous work stoppages, numerous demonstrations and educational activities among the member-owners.

Since the warehouse was organized, a continuing effort has been made to broaden the organization to other IU 660 workers in cooperatives. Small groups of workers have been formed in several of the member cooperatives of the Federation, many of these members are member owners of the Federation. The potential for a worker/consumer alliance to bring the cooperative movement in Michigan back to its democratic roots exists.

## **The Resurgence of the Ann Arbor Tenants Union**

The Ann Arbor Tenants Union was formed in 1968, organizing thousands of tenants into a direct action force against landlordism. By 1985 that noble beginning was ancient history. The Tenants Union had become a bureaucratic lobbying group.

In the depths of the Reagan depression the GMB became involved in unemployed organizing. This effort was unsuccessful primarily through the union's resources being spread too thin. This work did bring some new members into the GMB, and when one got a job at AATU he brought the union with him.

Over the course of two years the practices of self-organization, direct action and democracy were reintroduced to the Tenants Union. Education, demonstrations and rent strikes are the primary tools the Tenants Union uses in its struggle against landlordism. The GMB came to the realization that working people spend almost all of their time in two places, where you work and where you live. It is in these two areas of daily life where we believe it is possible to create some class consciousness.

Tenants organizing has spread to organizing the homeless. Ann Arbor is an extremely stratified community, one that attempts to hide its poverty-stricken and drive its working class into other communities. The struggle to make the homeless visible in the age of Reagan yuppiedom strikes at the heart of the "american dream" that the "good life" awaits us all.

The Tenants Union is primarily financed through the student government of the U of M. It is organized as a worker-collective and has been an IWW shop since 1986. Its existence is tenuous, constantly under attack by the Regents. It is a center of student activism at a time when activism is passe for most students.

## **A Few Lessons Learned**

We have learned a couple of lessons in our many struggles. One worker struggling for her rights is a "trouble maker"—easily isolated by the boss, and used as an example to the rest of the work force as how not to be. Two workers on the job struggling for their rights are a UNION. A weak one perhaps, but one that will still strike fear into almost any boss. And one that will be able to win some gains for all on the job.

The bosses today are only slightly more sophisticated than the ones the IWW faced 80 years ago. Divide and rule is the axiom that the boss lives by. Racism, sexism and elitism are his primary ideological weapons. Co-optation, intimidation and reprisals are his tactics. He will highlight and use every difference between workers to set them against one another. Equality, democracy and solidarity are the keys for fighting back. It is the UNION's primary role to develop and support these principles among workers.

We must never forget that we are all slaves to the capitalist system. As slaves our consciousness is constantly being molded by our masters. As individuals we are easy prey for the master classes. As a UNION at the point of production, no matter how small, it is possible to proclaim one's FREEDOM from the ideology of oppression and one's resistance to the reality of exploitation.

For 80 years the program of the IWW has been EDUCATION, ORGANIZATION AND EMANCIPATION. To practice this program the union must struggle to create EQUALITY, DEMOCRACY AND SOLIDARITY.

## **A Few Comments on Tactics**

In the above stories one will note the diversity of tactics employed. The S.E. Michigan GMB (The Ann Arbor/Detroit GMB changed its name in the mid 80's) has never been dogmatic concerning

the tactics workers employ to protect themselves. It is clear to us though that the tactics that fall under the heading DIRECT ACTION are by far the most formidable. Almost every job site that we have had influence at has employed direct action against the boss at some time. The boss fears direct action by his slaves more than anything else in life. To directly challenge the bosses' rights to control you can alter the conditions under which you work for years.

Even when you fail the workplace will never be the same again. The struggles of the IWW in Michigan have not been one resounding success after another. We can take solace though in knowing that where ever we have struggled our masters and their lackeys have paid. In the 12 years that the IWW has been active in organizing on the job in Michigan we have forced three business to close rather than accept the bosses terms and conditions. The number of managers and supervisors who have lost their jobs because of our activities nearly equals our union's membership. At Peoples Warehouse, where we had some job control for five years, turnover among managerial staff nearly exceeded that of the workers who outnumber them 5 to 1.

## **Join the IWW**

The IWW is not a business union or an employee organization. We are an organization built on CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS. Our masters have attempted to annihilate working class consciousness for 50 years. The sorry state of the american labor movement demonstrates that they have been quite successful. The class struggle is waged not just at the point of production. It is waged in the mind and spirit of every working person. Individuals from every race, class background and ethnic background have been members of our GMB. For most members the IWW has been only a transitory experience. But an experience that has altered their consciousness. Every crack in the consciousness of the ruling class is one more place where the seeds of freedom might eventually flower.



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