

# **The leftwing deadbeat**

*MK Lees and Marianne Garneau look at leftists' poor track record in workplace organizing campaigns.*

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There is often a temptation when starting out organizing to focus on people you think may be politically left – to reach out to these people first, or even to invite them onto your organizing committee.

“He’s in DSA”

“She posts guillotine memes”

“They wore one of those IWW ‘General Strike’ t-shirts to work one day!”

These people are already ideologically pro-union therefore they should be predisposed to engage in a class struggle, right?

Not so fast. In almost every campaign either of us have ever been involved in, and in dozens of stories from fellow organizers, the overwhelming trend is for otherwise proud leftists to show themselves as flakes at best, or actively undermining organizing at worst. Here are just a few examples.

## **Flakes, turncoats and rogues**

In a flagship IWW campaign, the entire staff signs up with IWW memberships – but for one holdout. This person was always “very gung-ho” on social media about social justice issues, says a coworker. “Always posting about unions, issues with racism, immigration, economic disparity... A labor activist guy.” But when it comes time to take out a red card, he refuses, and even cozies up to the boss after the union goes public.

Another worker from the same campaign, hired after the union went public, is active in the DSA, and “always doing fundraisers for justice organizations and non-profits,” according to another worker. But unlike the majority of his coworkers, he refuses to join the union.

During the strike at Mini Mart in the late 1990s the only person to scab is a leftist and fan of Noam Chomsky.

A wobbly in the Pacific Northwest who has been trying to organize his small shop relates this about a coworker:

I met him through Rojava solidarity activist circles before I started working there. He’s the “leftist professor” type in the shop, reads all the philosophy books and listens to Murray Bookchin books on tape. He asked me about organizing once about six months ago, very off the cuff, we had lunch and had a short conversation about it. I tried to follow up with him regularly for a while, and he ignored my texts. When I finally got to [talk to] him in person, he told me that “anarcho-syndicalism is a failed revolutionary practice for late capitalism,” that unions had outlived their usefulness as a revolutionary vehicle, and that he is planning on opening a small business.

An organizer with the SEIU, involved in post-secondary faculty campaigns, relates how hard it is to sign up leftist academics:

There was one adjunct prof at [redacted] college that my coworker and I went in to talk to. My coworker was listening to their lecture before the end of class. It was all about feminism and bell hooks and radical, revolutionary ideas. But this person was not interested, not supportive in any way of the union. I’ve seen that so many times in academia: the Marxist professor, or the prof who can talk about really radical ideas,

when it comes to putting some of those radical ideas into action, they are nowhere to be seen.

Another organizer, with another union, also involved in faculty campaigns, offers a frustratingly similar problem: “many faculty refuse to get involved with the union because it’s not left enough. Not anarchist enough.” Some, she says, “refuse to even sign a card.”

In fact, leftists often use their politics to argue for why they shouldn’t join the union. In the IWW’s Chicago Couriers Union in the mid-2000s, one messenger was a member of the Workers World Party. On the few occasions he showed up to meetings, he objected to the idea of the IWW being the union for messengers, instead advocating for calling up the SEIU. But he never did anything to organize his coworkers or support the organizing that was taking place.

Too left, not left enough, a leftist loves to “goldilocks” the union. Considering how little these folks do to build power with their coworkers, it often seems like little more than an excuse.

The problem with leftists isn’t always a matter of flaking. Sometimes leftists do get involved, but very disruptively. One member of an IWW campaign at a restaurant recalls that a self-identified anarchist coworker was the most disruptive committee member. He would scream at coworkers for doing the wrong thing, and when asked to debrief after one such incident, simply quit the union and bad-mouthed them behind their backs.

Other campaign members recall leftists pulling radical stunts out of line with their coworkers’ planning — in fact there is a whole section of the IWW Organizer Training 102 about what to do with coworkers who aren’t accountable to the committee. Perhaps thinking that they know it all, leftists sometimes seem least capable of collaborating with their coworkers. One organizer for a mainstream union who is also in the IWW notes that a common pattern with leftists is to “Always, always see political or strategic differences of opinion as very personal, and as a personal attack.”

## **Refusing to talk to coworkers**

By far the most common pattern we see, however, is leftists unwilling or unable to reach out and talk to their coworkers in what we call a “one-on-one.” Granted, this is a scary prospect for a lot of workers, but it genuinely seems to be more of a roadblock for leftists.

One organizer in the rustbelt recalls when a dozen members of the DSA approached her about organizing their workplace, a tech company. She met with them as a staffer for the mainstream union she works for. “They formed a committee,” she recalls. “It was only the lefties. I said, ‘you have to start having one-on-ones.’ They were very skittish about that.”

A few attended the IWW Organizer Training 101, which breaks down each of the steps involved in talking to coworkers — inviting them to chat outside of work, asking them questions about their issues — confronting all of the awkwardness and pitfalls head-on through roleplay and group discussion. But still, the DSA members did not approach their coworkers.

“After that we all met with the Director of Organizing,” the organizer says. “We did some workplace mapping, and told them next steps: gather a list. Start at least building relationships with coworkers. Just go talk to people, become friends. It will become easier as you do it.”

With nothing left to do but start having one-on-ones, “all of them dropped off the face of the earth. They stopped organizing. They said ‘Yeah we’re scared. We kind of like our bosses.’” The staffers pointed out that their company had just been bought by a multinational which was

already making cuts to benefits. “We were like, ‘guys, you *have* to talk to your coworkers.’ They just wouldn’t.”

Instead, the DSA members did something many leftists do these days: they skipped over their own workplace and sought out activism that wouldn’t involve one-on-ones or confronting the boss. They organized a large fundraiser for a nonprofit called Justice is Global.

The organizer went, at their invitation. “It was crazy. There were twenty people there, and almost everyone was from their workplace. They would have doubled the committee size if they had just talked to the people in that room about a union.”

“They were like, ‘We need to reach out to other workers in the world.’ *Have you reached out to your own coworkers?*” [The multinational company they work for] is one of the biggest companies in the world. That’s an avenue to reach out to other workers right there. You have the perfect way to do it: through a union.”

This has become a pattern. Leftists are much more comfortable reaching out to other radicals, or engaging in activism — including to help poor, downtrodden workers *elsewhere* — than they are organizing their own workplaces. Leftists will pump out social media about a general strike and call for the working class to rise up, but decline to have that same conversation with the people they work with.

## **Militancy where you’d least expect it**

Meanwhile, consider some inverse examples.

During an IWW campaign in Chicago, Steve, a former sheet metal worker, refused to support the union when approached about it. Years prior, he was run out of his job by both the bosses and the union and his concept of what a “union” meant had been colored by an ugly history. Had the IWW campaign involved a union election, he probably would have been a “no” vote — a “5” in the 1–5 business union organizer’s assessment of support. But when it came to shopfloor action, he emerged at the front of the fight. The union carefully built towards a work stoppage to win higher pay, and Steve led the charge, and even accepted a position as one of two representatives of the workers in bargaining with management.

One of the faculty campaign organizers mentioned above reflects that in one campaign among adjuncts, “the worker-leaders, those who were most actively engaged in forming the union early on, were in the business department, the criminal justice department, and some of them were politically conservative.”

The most capable, militant fighters who emerge in a given campaign are often people who had zero leftist commitments prior, or even any previous union experience. There’s a natural reason for this: folks are fighting from the heart, for what really matters to them and their family. Their motivation doesn’t come from abstract politics, as is the case for some leftists.

When the IWW’s Stardust campaign — the biggest in the union’s recent history — took off, an organizer friend of ours mused that the reason was because there were no leftists involved. Instead, ordinary workers were taking on the boss about specific issues in the workplace, doing sit-down strikes, work refusals and walk-outs, and winning. This continues to be the case, as unexpected people step up on a given issue — one they care about a lot — and lead the charge.

Likewise, when “the ranks” rise up in a mainstream union, the militants who emerge are often ordinary people who just care about the issues — not the card-carrying leftists, who them-

selves can just as easily hold the struggle back (see “The Leftwing Committeeman” from Martin Glaberman’s *Punching Out*).

## **Why is it this way?**

Why are so many leftists so dedicated to unions in their minds yet such poor union members in the world outside of their mind?

Political ideology is, for many people, an identity, not a set of practical commitments. Anyone who hangs out primarily in subcultural spaces, leftist or otherwise, is going to have a tougher time being comfortable around “normies.” Worse still, ideology can serve as a comfortable way to mask fears. If you can refuse to participate on political grounds, it’s a lot easier than acknowledging that you’re scared of losing your job, just like your liberal and conservative coworkers.

But fortunately we’re not aiming to organize leftists, we are here to organize the working class.

What workers think and say about “unions” does not reflect how they will behave when an organized fight breaks out with their boss. As we can see above, workers who are consciously committed to the labor movement will mysteriously stop returning phone calls. Workers who might never speak favorably of unions will risk everything in a work stoppage to hold their head up high next to their coworkers.

Whatever the explanation for this phenomenon is, the correlation is too strong to ignore. If you’re going to heed the lesson, not only do you stop steering towards lefty coworkers, you might even swerve to avoid them altogether.

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