

The Social Contract: Direct Action Gets the Goods

A Fellow Worker discusses the IWW's tradition of contract avoidance and what it meant for his workplace specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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04/07/2023

When most workers think about improving their working conditions collectively, a contract is the limit of their political imagination. It's not their fault, that's just the common understanding of what a union does. Anyone familiar with this process knows that the process of bargaining a contract, and even getting to the bargaining table to begin with, is long and arduous. It's part of an organizing model that relies on the work of professional union staffers and lawyers who are in effect providing a service. We call it Service Unionism.

In the IWW, we have a long history of contract avoidance. We know the repressive effects that contracts can have on our ability to make democratic decisions, to act, and therefore on our power. Bill Haywood himself wrote in his 1911 pamphlet *The General Strike* "The A. F. of L. couldn't have a general strike if they wanted to. They are not organized for a general strike. They have 27,000 different agreements that expire 27,000 different minutes of the year. They will either have to break all of those sacred contracts or there is no such thing as a general strike in that so-called "labor organization." Knowing how to talk to our coworkers about this, though, is really important for a Wobbly. We like to think in terms of our goals. Our goal is to shift the balance of power at work, away from the bosses and towards us workers. "If we want our issues changed here, is the contract our only option or is there a more direct approach?"

But our stance on contracts isn't dogmatism — it's just one key part of our worker-led approach to organizing. It comes from the collective experience of thousands of Wobblies, both within the mainstream labour movement and within the IWW. We've always had lots to say about the mainstream unions and their practices since before our founding convention, and today that same spirit necessarily includes a strategy to build worker power despite the broken labour relations system. In fact, you'll often find that the Wobblies most dedicated to growing Solidarity Unionism are the ones who have the most experience with the business unions and their legalistic service model. This isn't to say "don't go for a contract, no matter what." Instead it's more like "think critically about how a contract changes things for your campaign. What are the tradeoffs?" Because that's what a contract is; an agreement made of compromise. It means certain obligations from both parties. Ironically, for the union it is an agreement to keep the peace.

To work now and grieve later. It means we can't use the very thing that gives us our power in the first place—our ability to withhold our work in solidarity. It's really a raw deal, since we know a labour contract is only as good as our ability to enforce it. But we're dealing with bosses here, who break contract obligations all the time. They do it to us and they even do it to each other in their day-to-day business. That's why for us, legal recognition and a contract is not the goal like it is for the other unions. Our ability to make a demand, fold our arms and win is the goal. That's worker power and the fact is, you don't need a contract to do it.

I came to understand the difference between organizing for direct action around an issue and organizing for legal certification and a contract during a card drive at my last job. I worked at a fairly large retail chain in Canada with around 100 locations across the country. There were about 120 workers at our store, divided into a few departments. Our department dealt with rentals. We were always busy; lineups out the door were a daily occurrence. We'd usually have nothing left to rent by Friday, and by the time everything was returned on Monday, the shop was so crammed you could barely move. Injuries were common. We were always expected to work through our lunches or stay after the shift to help any left over customers with no extra pay, literally filling the cash register on our own time as a courtesy to our boss. Getting hurt and bum pay started to get pretty boring, and one day the 'U' word came up. It seemed worth a try, forming a union, but of course no one had a clue about what to do, myself included. I was tasked with contacting some unions to find out and so I reached out to a few in the area. One replied a couple days later – A large business union – and we met with an organizer who took some time to hear our situation. We liked her no nonsense attitude, but she was mostly concerned with our benefits package claiming "We can do way better than that!" She gave us a stack of authorization cards and some instructions: "Take these and call me when you get 70 percent of your co-workers signed up. Oh, and be careful who you talk to so you don't get fired." We were on our way. It really wasn't much but it was still better than nothing, and besides, we were excited to have a bit of track in front of the train. We ended up getting lots of cards signed, but it was no easy task. Honestly, it was an awkward and confusing process; we really didn't really know how to talk about it. It soon became difficult to keep the momentum we once had. A couple coworkers who seemed very invested only a few weeks ago had suddenly lost interest. I heard it more than once, "How does this help us? We already know what needs to change." Organizing had a polarizing effect in the shop and shifting social dynamics caught us off guard. A coworker, who for years was a very close friend of mine, stopped talking to me altogether when another coworker who was hostile to the union got to her, and only a few days after she signed her union card.

There was one other union that got back to us a couple weeks after reaching out, which was the IWW. I met with a delegate from the local branch and could tell that there was something about this union that was different from the other. We talked about the job, the authorization card drive, and the committee. He talked a lot less than the organizer from the other union. He wanted to know what me and my coworkers wanted to change. He suggested I attend an upcoming IWW Organizer Training 101. Back at the shop, we were already invested in the card drive, if not entirely sure about what we were doing. After I took the OT101 it became pretty obvious what was missing.

Before we ever got to file for our labour board election with the business union, the COVID-19 pandemic began. We were all pretty worried about it, especially in the rentals department. Customers were returning piles of dirty equipment. The store was out of sanitizer, hand soap, and toilet paper. You felt like you were working in a petri dish. People started calling in sick.

No one understood what was happening at the time, but every public health announcement was screaming “stay home!” And, in the midst of all the panic and uncertainty, our benevolent employer made their own announcement: *Not coming into work would be considered a quit!* They had a business to run after all. We were all made queasy by that policy, and there was an eagerness to do something about it. We asked, but our card drive organizer wasn’t quite sure what we could do but sign more cards and rush to the election; her hands were tied and she was already working from home. The shop, however, was red hot with agitation. Fresh out of the IWW’s Organizer Training 101, I suggested to our committee that we could try a more direct approach.

The problem was, we were not organized for direct action and we weren’t having regular democratic meetings either. Our main focus up to this point was to get the cards signed. Whatever we were going to do was going to be a longshot. After a little deliberation amongst our committee, we decided to deliver a petition to the boss. The demand: *Grant us temporary lay-offs upon request so we can shelter in place, and guarantee that our jobs would be there for us when it was time to return.* The point was to give us the option to stay home and still qualify for the government COVID relief fund, which wasn’t available if you quit your job, but was if you were laid-off or otherwise lost your job due to the pandemic.

The petition was signed and delivered to the boss. The days went by with no word from the boss within the time we demanded, so we escalated. We flooded the company’s Twitter, Instagram and Facebook; workers, friends, family, and Wobblies from the local IWW branch helped in the action. We still don’t know who went rogue, but someone even reached out to the local news who began calling management for interviews. Customers who we didn’t even know joined in, outraged by their callous decision. Solidarity forever! Two days after the onslaught began a memo was circulated with a new policy: the exact terms we had demanded. Direct action gets the goods, as we say in the IWW. Despite the strictures of those outrageous Canadian labour relations laws, no one was thrown in prison or fined; no one was even fired.

The card drive soon fizzled out. Over the next month or so, the store went from 121 workers down to around 40, and the business union organizer stopped returning our calls. When the business union pulled the plug on our campaign, some of my coworkers felt like the union cared more about collecting our dues money than actually helping us to improve our working conditions. This is the sad reality of the service union model. It relies on lawyers and staffers to provide a service, who quite often make more than the workers they represent. These unions are run like a business, so if it looks like a shop can’t support the staff salaries and legal costs, they have no choice but to withdraw. Worse, while the expenses are actually no guarantee of a win at all, it also means that smaller shops and lower paid workers are almost always passed up. But that’s another beautiful thing about the IWW – it’s run by workers who want to organize and win, who do it because they really care, no matter the size of the shop. For the rest of us back at the store, signing cards started to feel like a pointless exercise anyway. Up until that point the card campaign was a means to an ends. It was how we would get the union to represent and bargain a contract for us, but we had just won something for ourselves, despite the card campaign. I was sold on direct action after that experience.

I found first hand that the typical certification drive just didn’t motivate people to organize the way a direct action campaign did. Direct action starts with workplace issues, shows us how they affect our lives not just at work but outside of work too. It connects them with their source and gives us a solution that is directly in our control. Getting your coworkers to see for themselves that they can fight to improve their lives directly will motivate them to act; we see this in action

all the time. It wasn't the promise of pandemic relief funds that motivated us to act; it was how our boss' bad decisions directly affected us. In the IWW, we talk about "low hanging fruit" and how starting with smaller issues that have a large impact will help build momentum in a campaign to tackle the larger issues. If you're reading this and thinking "there is no way I could organize at my job. My coworkers are too complacent; they lack consciousness," just pause and think about how you can talk to them first. Listen to them talk about a workplace issue and find out how it affects them personally. Talk about how you can solve those issues directly if you work together. This is where we start to expand our political imaginations together. Instead of relying on labour relations professionals and their contracts, we can organize ourselves and win our demands through direct action. To build the new world in the shell of the old. It's Solidarity Unionism, and is the bread-and-butter of organizing in the IWW.

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