

Class Struggle Unionism

A Review

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“The labor movement today is in miserable shape, probably worse than in any period of labor history,” writes Joe Burns. To get out of this situation and rebuild unionism as an effective fighting force, Burns proposes a revival of “class struggle unionism” where unions are seen as a vehicle of direct, worker-led struggle against the owning class, whose interests are flatly antagonistic to the interests of workers. Since World War 2, a whole legal cage of repressive labor laws and unfavorable rulings of the elite judiciary have been crafted to block workers from legal use of the most effective tactics, such as secondary boycotts, workplace occupations, and effective strikes that shut down workplaces. Burns proposes a revival of these class struggle tactics, and thus labor organizations must figure out how to roll over injunctions and violate unjust laws. The book is both a clearly-written proposal for a new direction and a look at the dominant approaches in the AFL-CIO-type unions.

Burns explains class struggle unionism by contrasting it with two other approaches – traditional business unionism and a newer approach that Burns calls “labor liberalism.” Labor liberalism is a kind of evolution from the older business unionism that has become dominant among the bureaucratic layer of paid officials and staff in many unions today. SEIU is the clearest example of the labor liberal approach while the older form of business unionism is still dominant in the building trades. Labor liberalism tends to adopt the language of “progressive” left wing politics despite a top-down staff-driven approach that fails to develop worker leadership of struggles.

The business union practice and ideology was already pretty well developed in the AFL by the World War 1 era. I would describe its main features as follows:

- Acceptance of the capitalist profits system and an orientation to “partnership” with the employers
- Although officers are elected, there tends to be a monopolization of decision-making authority and union expertise in a bureaucratic hierarchy.
- “Collective bargaining” of no-strike contracts by paid officials
- A narrow sectoralist practice focused on economic fights with individual employers
- Lack of any direct way for workers in different industries to get together to develop a common class-wide program

Burns focuses on the first two of these features.

Class struggle unionism, on the other hand, starts with a recognition of the flat incompatibility of interests between working people and the capitalist owning class. The control of the workplace and society by “the billionaire class” is seen as illegitimate. Thus, class struggle unionism

- Rejects “labor/management partnership” schemes
- Focuses on the day to day resistance to management in the shop and works to build in-shop organization
- Sees agreements with employers as temporary truces in the class struggle
- Proposes worker leadership of struggles

In contrasting the labor liberalism of recent decades to the older form of business unionism, Burns notes the strong labor liberal orientation to electoral politics. Faced with the highly diverse workforce today, labor liberalism takes a more progressive stance on social questions, such as opposition to racism and defense of LGBT rights.

Although labor liberals will sometimes pursue confrontational tactics to force employers to negotiate, they downplay the importance of worker militancy. They seek to limit the level of conflict with employers to avoid a rupture in the on-going relationships between officials and management. Labor liberalism has been associated with publicity “strikes.” An example would be a “strike” picket I attended at a Walmart with activists from various organizations while the workforce continued to work as usual. The action was organized by a non-profit, working with the staff-driven UFCW Local 5. The staff-directed nature of that action fits in with the top-down character of Local 5. In my conversations with some workers at supermarkets, I’ve found that Local 5’s workplaces have virtually nil shopfloor presence for the union.

Labor liberalism tends to seek solutions to worker problems in public policy (such as a higher minimum wage) or action by politicians. Labor liberalism has an even clearer emphasis on staff directing struggles than the older business unionism, and more clearly abandons the day to day struggle over control in the workplace. Under labor liberal control, unions can be even more undemocratic than the business unions.

Class Struggle Strategy and Tactics

A revival of the labor movement, Burns says, will require a return to militant tactics not seen in years and will require violating the law. An effective strike requires shutting down the workplace, shutting off the flow of inputs and preventing an employer from bringing in strike-breakers. Workers picketing outside a workplace are vulnerable to attack, such as violence by scabs or private guards or police. The advantage of occupying the workplace is that workers are not immediately vulnerable to violence. Mass picketing has also been employed in the past as a way to over-power guards or other forces intent on breaking the picket. But employers nowadays can easily get injunctions against mass picketing and occupying the workplace is also viewed as illegal. Another effective tactic is to pressure firms using products of a company on strike — such as picketing a restaurant using linens from a commercial laundry on strike. But this picket would be considered an illegal “secondary strike.” And yet if an environmental group picketed the restaurant to protest the methods used to catch their fish, this would be regarded as a protected activity under the First Amendment.

This means that the labor movement needs popular education around ideas that would show the repressive labor law scheme as unjust. Class struggle education would challenge the legitimacy of the oppressor classes set over the working class, emphasize solidarity, and promote effective tactics. For Burns, escalation is a key aspect of class struggle tactics. In situations in the past where violent forces such as police were used to try to break strikes, class struggle activists escalated the struggle by bringing in the solidarity and support of larger numbers of working class people who were brought into the fight. Thus the community wide strikes that brought victory in Minneapolis and in the west coast maritime struggle of 1934 both illustrate the importance of escalation. In the Bay Area the events started with a strike of dock workers up and down the coast. But ship crews had their own grievances and soon the strike was escalated to a full

maritime industry fight. In San Francisco truck drivers who transported cargo from the docks demanded a strike by the Teamsters union. Soon this spread, becoming not just a city-wide general strike in San Francisco, but a regional strike that shutdown Alameda, Oakland and Berkeley as well.

A class struggle unionist approach needs an overall strategy that includes plans to organize strategic industries (such as manufacturing and transportation), how to spread worker solidarity across international boundaries, a basic challenge to capitalist control of the production process and the workplace, and “effective strike tactics to bring capital to its knees.” Burns criticizes the approach to workplace organizing that focuses on small shops because it doesn’t address the overall problem of working class lack of power in the economy and the need to challenge the capitalist elite on a grand scale. The discussion of class struggle strategy and tactics is the strongest part of the book.

The picture that Burns paints of class struggle unionist tactics is very much in keeping with the syndicalist labor tradition. The difference with syndicalism comes to the fore when we get to the *structure problem*, as we might call it — the domination of unions of the AFL-CIO-type by a paid hierarchy of officials and staff.

The Problem of the Bureaucratic Layer

“Class struggle unionists,” writes Burns, “have long believed” that the layer of paid officials and staff “have different material interests than those of the members.” Burns believes that this paid bureaucratic layer “is not the only cause of labor’s weakness, but is a major impediment to union renewal.” Paid officials want to be able to make deals with employers, and often it is easier to do this if demands are narrowed. Officials do not have to deal with the harsh discipline and oppression of the capitalist workplace.

But the reluctance of the paid apparatus to back escalating mass militancy is also grounded in their fear of threats of state attacks on the union or vast fines. Yet, Burns believes that union renewal requires a revival of class struggle tactics and effective strike actions. Under the present legal cage workers are captive in, tactics such as mass pickets, secondary boycotts, workplace occupations, or actions that violate “no-strike” contracts would face injunctions and fines. Huge fines pose a major threat to union assets. Burns quotes British labor sociologist Richard Hyman: “Those in official positions in unions possess a direct responsibility for their organization’s security and survival, a role encouraging a cautious approach to policy. In particular this is likely to induce resistance to objectives or forms of action which unduly antagonize employers or the state...”

“For established unions,” Burns writes, “the question of militancy is fundamentally a question of protection of union assets.” The syndicalist movement of the early 20th century tried to get around this problem in a number of ways. Burns quotes Ralph Darlington on one aspect of the syndicalist approach: “Syndicalists everywhere refused to build up large strike funds or to provide unemployment, sickness and death benefits for members and their families...to avoid amassing a large treasury in the hands of a centralized union bureaucracy that might develop its own interests remote from the members and...oppose strikes.” By World War 1 syndicalists had developed a consensus in favor of a conception of unions not dominated by a paid apparatus. The idea was a *self-managed* form of unionism, or “rank-and-file rule.” Various tactics were used

to avoid centralizing power in the hands of a paid executive, such as term limits, unpaid union secretaries, a strong role for worker assemblies and councils of unpaid shop delegates.

Burns says there are different approaches for solving the structure problem. Although he notes that unions without assets might be better at deploying the militant tactics that violate the present labor law regime, a project of building new self-managed unions apart from the inherited AFL-CIO-type unions is dismissed by Burns as “purist.” Burns leaves the structure problem as an open question.

Burns repeats a familiar strawman argument against syndicalism. The argument goes like this: Unions can't be the basis of the revolutionary transformation of society through an “expropriating general strike,” where workers take over democratic self-management of industry and socialize the economy from below. Why? Because “most unionists don't start out holding these revolutionary views,” Burns says. But the assumption seems to be that a grassroots self-managed union movement, of the sort syndicalists advocate, must have worker members organized on the basis of agreement with a revolutionary ideology, not on the basis of class fights with the capitalists.

This leaves out the possibility of a process of change in consciousness, organizational strength, and aspirations over time as workers build unions they control, and build a sense of power through gains they win. As syndicalist theorist Emile Pouget put it, the union “is a school for the will.” Pouget was talking about the grassroots, worker controlled form of unionism, which allows for free development of the links between working class groups and development of a sense of class possibility as organizational strength and class solidarity develop. After all, how does the working class become revolutionary? How does it develop the actual capacity to get rid of the capitalists? If this process requires mass participation, effective strike tactics, growing solidarity and a growing sense of class power, wouldn't worker-controlled unions be the best way to develop this?

Moreover, the Spanish syndicalist union CNT did demonstrate the possibility of unionism as the driving force in a revolution. The CNT unions carried out a vast “expropriating general strike” in Spain's industrialized northeast in 1936-37 — expropriating 80 percent of the economy of Catalonia and 70 percent in Valencia. Entire industries were re-organized into coordinated, worker-controlled industrial federations — health care, entertainment, electric power, railways, furniture manufacturing, dairies, and so on. This wave of worker expropriation was not “spontaneous.” For decades workers in the CNT unions had discussed and debated the steps to take in a revolutionary situation. A consensus had been created in favor of direct takeover of the workplaces and creation of democratic worker self-management, based on the workplace assemblies and election of delegates to coordinating councils.

The Militant Minority

How can class struggle unionism be rebuilt? As Burns points out, the vast wave of strikes and building of new unions in the 1930s came from years of agitation and organizing that preceded it. “During the decades leading up to the 1930s, groups such as the IWW...and others pushed a program of labor militancy, industrial unionism,” unity across racial divides, and effective strikes. “They put forward a vision of how to take on capital on a grand scale.” Burns suggests that the

absence of a vision like this in labor circles is partly due to the weakness of the anti-capitalist left.

Burns says that the potential for renewal lies in building up the layer of active workers who most want change — a militant minority. The phrase “militant minority” was coined by syndicalists in the early 1900s. Various groups of radical workers were organized to push for rank-and-file control and a class struggle orientation in unions in France, Spain, Mexico, and Italy in that era. Here he quotes Charlie Post: “Without a layer of workers with a vision and strategy for how to organize, fight and win, the labor officials have been free to pursue their near-suicidal approach.”

Burns reviews the debate between William Z Foster and the advocates of new unionism. Between 1909 and 1921, a million workers in the USA formed new industrial unions independent of the AFL. David Saposs did hundreds of interviews with the members and officers of these unions in 1918-1919. As he reports in *Left-wing Unionism*, the members and militants were generally in agreement with the “revolutionary industrial unionism” of the IWW. Foster hated this new unionism. He was able to get the Communists to back his strategy for “boring from within” the AFL unions — via rank-and-file “leagues” formed through the Trade Union Educational League. But the TUEL was a failure and by 1928 Foster lost support for his strategy in the Communist Party. In 1933-34 another vast wave of new unionism unfolded in the USA with 250,000 workers forming new industrial unions outside the AFL.

Can organized rank-and-file movements change inherited AFL-CIO-type unions into class struggle unions? Burns quotes Steve Early on the rank-and-file movements of the ‘70s: “The most successful rank-and-file movements of the long 1970s...rooted themselves in the workplace and tried to unite members in contract campaigns and day-to-day fights against the boss, while also attempting to gain control over union structures so the latter could facilitate rather than impede rank-and-file struggles.” Burns mentions Teamsters for a Democratic Union as an example. Railroad Workers United would be another example.

At one point Burns says: “Although union reform sounds radical, it is actually a fairly conservative approach because it is essentially saying the problem is just bad leaders....Electing new leaders does not resolve the structural issues of the divide between union staff or officers whose daily existence differs from frontline workers [and] the constant pressure to compromise inherent in the bureaucratized labor-relations system...” There are countless examples of people being elected as union reformers who end up over time becoming much like the former leaders they replaced.

“One of the positives of building new organizations,” Burns concedes, “is that some unions are so tightly controlled and bureaucratic it’s hard to see how they can change.” With only six percent of workers in the private sector in unions, there is plenty of scope for new worker organizations. And the recent victory of the Amazon Labor Union in New York City illustrates the potential of building new grassroots unions at large, strategic employers. For libertarian socialists with a syndicalist orientation, we also want to see increased popular education attacking the illegitimate capitalist labor exploitation regime, and the revival of class struggle tactics. Our goal is the emergence of combative self-managed unionism on a grand scale.

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