

The Case for Building New Unions

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Contents

Two Episodes of New Unionism	3
The Role of the Bureaucratic Layer	5
Self-managed Unionism	6
Class Formation	9

The British writer R. H. Tawney once described capitalist management of the workplace as “autocracy checked by insurgency.” And, indeed, a kind of insurgency takes place when workers band together to form unions. Worker unions are a key working class organization because of the potential power workers gain from collective resistance but also because of the potential role of unions in social transformation. However, unionism in the private sector in the USA has been on a long decline — from roughly one third of workers in the early 1950s to only 6.2 percent today. To build unionism into a larger, more effective and worker controlled movement, I think we need to build new unions, independent of the bureaucratized AFL-CIO-type unions.

Two Episodes of New Unionism

History is instructive here. Unionism in USA has not grown in a gradual way but in cycles that are tied to working class insurgency. The two greatest periods of union growth came in large strike waves — in the World War 1 era and again in the early 1930s. From 1909 to 1921 union membership doubled through a vast insurgency that saw thousands of strikes every year. Nearly a million workers organized themselves into industrial unions outside the AFL. The hardest edge of the new unionism was the Industrial Workers of the World. But the IWW was just the tip of the iceberg.

To take an example, the American Congenial Industrial Union was a major independent union in Pittsburgh. A group of militants of the IWW, Socialist Party and Socialist Labor Party had formed a kind of “united front from below” to organize the ACIU. Ultimately the union focused on organizing at the large Westinghouse complex in East Pittsburgh. Even though the organizing there was initiated by skilled tool and die makers, the workers rejected the AFL craft unions. A cross-craft unity was built through an organization based on elected shop steward committees. In 1915 this independent organization carried out a ten-day strike of 40,000 workers. As with the 1913 IWW dock workers strike in Philadelphia, there was an elected rank-and-file negotiating committee and the agreement hammered out with management did not contain a “no strike” pledge. The committee typed up the agreement and tacked it to the workshop bulletin boards so everyone would know what management had agreed to.

During 1918–1919 David Saposs travelled around the country doing extensive interviews with rank-and-filers and militants in the new independent unions. In *Left-wing Unionism* Saposs reports that workers in the independent unions regarded the AFL’s conservatism as “abhorrent”:

From these interviews it was quite evident...that the mass of immigrant workers had become inculcated with the IWW passionate distrust of the AFL and possessed a religious reverence for revolutionary industrial unionism....The local leaders felt that the rank and file would follow their advice provided that they did not override the current prejudice by affiliating with the [AFL] or discarding the idea of revolutionary industrial unionism.

Despite this widespread support for the IWW approach among the independent unions, few were willing to affiliate to the IWW after the federal government began its repression of the IWW in late 1917. According to Saposs, the militants were afraid they’d be putting a bullseye on their backs if they joined up with the IWW. The new unionism of the World War I era shows how the tendency towards renewal of struggle was enhanced by building new unions not controlled

by the bureaucratic layers of the AFL. A vast growth in worker unionism also occurred through another working class insurgency in 1933–37. There were thousands of strikes every year. In 1933 a million workers were on strike.

As in 1909–1921, hundreds of thousands of workers built new unions outside the bureaucratized unions of the AFL. Between 1933 and 1934, 250,000 workers built new grassroots industrial unions. For example, the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers was a militant outfit with about four thousand members — organized at the shipyards along the Delaware River in Camden, New Jersey, Chester, Pennsylvania and Wilmington, Delaware. As with the shipyard workers, other independent unions in Camden had a strong radical presence. This included an industrial union at the Campbell Soup plant and the 2,600-member Radio and Metal Workers Industrial Union at Victor Radio, which was able to force the company to recognize it. Another 75,000 workers joined the radical unions of the IWW and Communist Party-controlled Trade Union Unity League between early 1933 and the spring of 1934.

Throughout the early 1930s both the Communists and the IWW agitated against reliance on Democratic Party politicians, AFL officials, or government arbitration. Both groups agitated for industrial unionism, rank-and-file control of unions, class-wide solidarity, and disruptive collective action. This agitation fit in with working class mood at that time and helped to contribute to both the new unionism and the victories that would be achieved in that decade.

In both of these periods workers built new unions outside the AFL unions because the layer of paid officials who had developed control of those unions by the World War 1 era formed a kind of fetter on struggles by workers, and made those unions less effective as vehicles of worker struggle. Back in the early 1900s syndicalists had coined the term “militant minority” to refer to the more active workers who do organizing, have influence among coworkers, and are more committed to the struggle, to building unionism, and often are motivated by ambitious ideas of radical change. In the 1930s the thousands of labor radicals on the scene were an important factor in the organizing that took place. In the account of that era in *The Labor Wars*, Sidney Lens points to the support of the militant minority for the tendency to worker-controlled, class-struggle unionism in that era:

The radical unionists of the 1930s brought to their work a number of apriori political concepts. They opposed in principle any collaboration with capital...such as William Green had [practiced] in his attempt to win support from General Motors for unionizing the auto industry. The employer and the state were...implacable enemies to be fought to the death. Moreover, the new radicals felt that the “labor fakers” who...headed the old [AFL] unions...unless challenged, would undermine any legitimate labor struggle. The ultimate defense, then, against employers and labor fakers was to vest control of the affairs of unions in the rank-and-file membership.

The militants understood the importance of worker control of the struggles and organizations in rebuilding an effective unionism. This illustrates the way unionism has always had two conflicting “souls” or tendencies. In certain times and places, the rebel, grassroots soul of unionism comes to the fore. In other periods, a paid bureaucratic layer consolidates its position and looks to restrain the level of conflict in order to ensure the survival of the union as an institution in the hostile terrain of capitalist industry. This contradictory character of unionism is also expressed at times in the conflict between the rank and file of unions and the paid officials at the top.

The Role of the Bureaucratic Layer

Today the paid bureaucratic layer in the AFL-CIO-type unions is deeper and more entrenched than in the AFL of the early 1930s. Moreover, this layer has been unable to reverse the long decline in union membership — from roughly one third of workers in the private sector in the early 1950s to 6.2 percent today. The absence of unions in large areas of the economy presents us with both the need to “organize the unorganized” and the possibility of building new worker-controlled unions, independent of the bureaucratized AFL-CIO-type unions.

Even if paid national or local officers started out working in the unionized shops, they no longer do. Their career in union office provides a different way of life. Rank-and-file members may face autocratic supervisors, chemical exposures or job stress from speed up, but the full-time officials no longer face these conditions. Because the union official’s way of life is bound up with the union institution, they tend to oppose strikes or other courses of action that may risk fines or risk the union’s destruction. Thus we see officials adopting a mentality of subservience to the law and court rulings. Also, strikes are a lot of work and this extra stress doesn’t increase their pay.

More than 90 percent of union contracts in USA nowadays have a clause that prohibits strikes during the life of the contract. This has been a factor in post-World War 2 union bureaucratization. The elite federal judges have interpreted these clauses as banning any kind of collective struggle — slow downs, sick outs. This creates legal handcuffs, making it harder to build a strong in-the-shop worker organization to push back against day-to-day power of bosses.

No-strike contracts get in the way of unions engaging in solidarity actions with other workers on strike. For example, in 1999 the 300 workers at the 143-year old Domino Sugar plant in Brooklyn attempted to prevent the company from laying off a third of the workforce. The workers were members of ILA Local 1814. They challenged the Lyle & Tate conglomerate by going on strike on June 15. While the workers held out for twenty months, workers at other Domino Sugar plants worked overtime to make up the difference. At Baltimore there was another plant, represented by UFCW Local 1101. The head of that local explained why he refused to consider a sympathy strike: “If my contract were expired, I would have joined them 100 percent.”

Most contracts nowadays also have stepped grievance procedures. A distant grievance hearing makes it harder for workers to bring leverage to bear on beefs since their leverage lies in their ability to gain solidarity of co-workers and disrupt work. This also contributes to the lack of shop floor presence for the union because it means issues aren’t dealt with through worker self-organization on the job. Grievances are often handed over to lawyers which encourages a narrow legalism and the view that beefs should be “handled by professionals” — not workers themselves.

The pervasive “no-strike” clauses and stepped grievance procedures of today go back to World War 2 and the efforts of the National War Labor Board to force “industrial peace.” In the wake of the many hundreds of sit-down strikes in 1936–37, brief stop-work events or “quickie strikes” were a common way for workers to push back against management on the job into the early ‘40s. Issues would be resolved directly with supervisors in the workplace. The National War Labor Board developed the stepped grievance procedure as a way to suppress this kind of direct struggle.

I’m not saying the officials will not mobilize workers for fights with the employers. In fact, they do so at times because it’s necessary to force the employers to negotiate. But they try to

do this without blowing up their established relationship with management or risking the open hostility of the state. This means there is a tendency to place limits on how far the struggle escalates. They justify this because they tend to confuse the union institution with working class interests. They make this confusion since the union institution is the basis of their power and way of life.

In the words of historian Robert Brenner: “From the end of the ‘30s through the whole postwar period, the labor officialdom...made every effort to confine the union to non-confrontational methods of struggle that would not get out of hand and threaten employers.” This makes the paid hierarchy of the unions into a roadblock to the revival of the kind of widespread struggle and solidarity that are needed to build worker power, grow unionism in new areas or mount a fundamental challenge to the capitalist regime. Rather than look to building wider direct struggle to push for change, the bureaucratic layer encourages workers to look to politicians and electoral politics as the solution to their problems.

Depending on the Democrats as an avenue for social change creates a limit to union action and politics. Electoral politics is a poor avenue for building working class power. A majority of working class adults don't vote. Meanwhile, business owners, high-end professionals and managers vote very regularly. Democratic Party politicians will tend to shy away from radical proposals for fear of losing middle class votes or withdrawal of funding from people with money. We can win some gains through electoral coalitions, such as a higher minimum wage. But this is not where working class power lies.

Self-managed Unionism

The existence of major workplaces without unions means that “organizing the unorganized” needs to be a priority for the radical left. The huge surges of union membership during the World War 1 era and early 1930s illustrate how union revival is tied to the renewal of direct struggle. The rise in strikes was linked to the emergence of grassroots unions outside the inherited, bureaucratized AFL unions because the AFL bureaucracy tended to get in the way of effective struggle. The absence of unions in strategic areas of the economy today presents the possibility of building new worker-controlled unions — independent of the bureaucratized AFL-CIO-type unions.

There is a long-standing conception of how unions can be built as worker-controlled organizations. This is the concept of “self-managed unionism,” developed by the syndicalists of the pre-World War 2 era. This wasn't a frozen “doctrine” at the time but an evolving practical approach to building a direct form of working class power. As updated for our present situation, this approach would have several features.

Member control of a union starts with the way unions are organized. Through conversations with coworkers we find out what is important to people, and find people who can come together as an organizing committee. As an initial group are gaining participation of coworkers, persuading them to “join the cause,” this means getting people to act together, “in union.” This can mean encouraging small scale forms of direct resistance, building the union based on active participation of workers in the shop, not just passive voting for a distant “bargaining agent” through an NLRB election. The organizing group makes the decisions, not outside paid organizers.

Building the resistance to management in the shop is important because of the way this focuses control in the hands of the workers themselves. Advocates for self-managed unionism

are opposed to no-strike clauses, stepped grievance systems and management rights clauses in contracts because of the way these get in the way of building the struggle in the shop against management power. An important type of on-going organization for the struggle in the shop is an elected delegates council. Unlike appointed shop stewards, election creates accountability to the rank and file, assuming this is not just a pro-forma election of the local supporters of a union political machine. The elected delegates can act to collectivize grievances and mobilize and coordinate the struggle in the shop.

A core part of rank-and-file self-management of a union is the importance of face-to-face assemblies of the members. Union assemblies are the place where we, the members, call the shots. This comes into play in a variety of ways, such as the meetings where workers discuss the union's direction and agenda, decide on and control strikes, elect rank-and-file negotiating committees, or discuss and vote on proposed settlements to strikes. I don't mean committees that are mere sounding boards for officials in negotiations, but committees to do the negotiation of a settlement to a struggle. When paid officials of top-down American unions control negotiations, they often prefer to keep the members in the dark. Member control over negotiations also means direct feedback — keeping the members informed about what is going on in negotiations.

The direct deliberation and democratic decision-making by workers in assemblies is indispensable to self-managed unionism because unions are likely to be more effective to the extent they are controlled by the workers who are affected. The development of worker participation in direct struggle is central to self-managed unionism because of the way that strikes and shopfloor actions are worker centered and crucial to building worker power.

Strikes are crucial because of the way they build working class power. To be effective, a strike needs to bring the operation to a halt. An effective strike cuts off the flow of profits to the employer...or shuts down the operation of a public agency. If a "strike" consists of people picketing in front of a store while the cash registers go on ringing up sales, this is more of a PR action that doesn't do much to build worker power. To the extent that workers organize strikes and other worker actions themselves and control the struggle against the employer, this is a form of worker *counter-power*. Counter-power means that people are organized *independently* in a struggle against those who hold institutional power over them.

Self-managed unionism needs to be able to take on coordinated actions and solidarity among large groups of workers — such as in a city-wide or industry-wide strike, or action throughout a corporate chain. Coordinated action on a larger scale creates greater worker counter-power. The need for coordinated action among larger groups of workers has often been an argument for centering control of unions in a paid professional layer outside the workplace. For self-managed unionism, delegate democracy provides a different answer. Meetings of delegates elected by the worker groups at different facilities can be a way to organize solidarity and campaigns among workers throughout a company or industry, or a major struggle in a city such as a city-wide general strike.

Another aspect to rank-and-file control over a union is control of the administration of the union — maintaining the union and carrying out tasks the members want the union to do. Rather than the "strong leader" model, the self-managed union model proposes tactics such as term limits, or limiting pay for officials to what one made on one's last job for an employer. In the 1930s veteran IWW organizer Fred Thompson described how the IWW avoided long-time office holding:

We have officers, some voluntary, some on the payroll...None of them are officers for many years. The various terms of office vary from three months to a year, and in no case can a member serve more than three successive terms. Thus our members are elected in and out of office.

If they were to stay in office for life, Thompson says, they would begin to identify defense of the union's financial state as their priority. "But they don't stay," he continues, and thus "they look at the problems of organization in much the same way as the members do." He also points out that a "good portion" of the decision-making takes place in general member meetings and in district or industrial union conferences of delegates.

I'm not saying that building new worker-controlled unions in strategic sectors is going to be easy. The employers have evolved various tactics to keep a union-free workplace. For example, the United Electrical Workers union has found that as many as 70 percent of workers in warehouses they've been working to organize in the Chicago suburbs are temps. In one of these counties it's hard to find a job other than through temp agencies. In South Carolina, more than half the workers at BMW's huge factory are temps. This creates a divided status among workers and a roadblock for NLRB elections. The approach being used by UE is to build an in-shop union even if only an on-going "minority union." Workers can act as a union without going the NLRB election route. Eventually workers will have to develop the unity and organization to smash the temp labor regime.

The ability to develop and sustain self-managed unions depends on the commitment and organizing abilities of workers who are prepared to do the organizing and keep the organizations going. These kinds of skills can be learned. Sharing of skills — and learning about the system we're fighting — needs to be an organized effort. People can work at this either through one-off workshops or on-going participation in a grassroots popular education program. A union — or other organization — might have its own "worker school" to develop organizing ability and share skills among the members. A more effective grassroots unionism is possible if more working people have the skills and confidence to act as organizers and to participate in the running of their own union. This is why many syndicalists have stressed the "formation" of the worker as organizer and activist.

The Spanish unions of the 1930s CNT were a case where the self-managed union approach had been developed extensively over a period of years. The Spanish syndicalists worked to develop working people as activists and organizers. Activists in Spain built many storefront popular education centers, called *Ateneos*. They existed in all working class neighborhoods in Barcelona and Valencia. Some CNT unions ran their own school. The centers hosted classes on public speaking, debates, and workshops on social studies and the politics and practices of the CNT. Workers acquired confidence and skills that enabled them to be organizers on the job and participate actively in the movement. Spanish syndicalists of that era called this *capacitación* — building the person's capacity to be a factor in social liberation.

In the USA at present, organizations such as the IWW conduct one-off organizer training workshops and the IWW has annual sessions at Work People's College. Labor Notes also puts on one-off "troublemaker schools" which provide workshops with useful examples, and their magazine and books provide useful information for organizing.

Just to be clear, I am not here suggesting that the radical left should ignore the situation of workers in the inherited AFL-CIO-type unions. Any strategy for building a more effective and

worker-controlled unionism needs to have a strategy for these unions. We can work to build rank-and-file committees and networks in workplaces where these unions exist, independent of the paid bureaucracy — to build the struggle in the workplace, to encourage broader solidarity, and push for rank-and-file control of the union.

Class Formation

Rebuilding worker-controlled unions, production-halting strike action, and a process of growing cross-sector solidarity between the various segments of the oppressed majority are crucial to the process of class formation — the more or less protracted process through which the working class overcomes fatalism and internal divisions (along lines of race and gender for example), gains political insights, and builds the confidence, aspirations and organizational strength needed to pose an effective challenge to the dominating classes.

The working class does not “automatically” have the capacity to transform the society. This capacity has to be built. So long as people are isolated and don’t see people around them supporting each other and exhibiting collective social power such as in strikes, they will be more inclined to think “You can’t fight City Hall,” “I’m on my own”, and make decisions on that basis. Fatalism continues unchallenged. In this situation people may tend to regard ideas of radical social change as “a nice idea but unrealistic.”

When workers develop power through disruptive collective action, this encourages the sense that “we can change the society.” To the extent workers control their own struggles and organizations, this develops confidence and skills among the rank and file. Control of unions by the paid officials and staff doesn’t do this. Self-managed worker mass organizations provide a bridge where radicals in the situation can connect the grievances of their coworkers to the more ambitious agenda for change that socialists offer. Developing stronger class-wide solidarity is important to the process of building a force for social transformation because the working class needs to “gather its forces” from the various sectors of struggle to form a united social bloc with both the power and aspiration for change. In this way the working class “forms” itself into a force that can change the society.

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