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THE ORGANIZER



SMALL TIME UNIONISM

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The Organizer is the blog of the Twin Cities General Membership Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Our goal with this blog is to publish news and info about our union, as well as be a resource for on-the-job work stories and perspectives on both the IWW and the wider situation and experience of working class people in the Twin Cities.

We welcome leads, ideas for stories, reviews and original writing. If interested please email us:
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his article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the opinion of any official part of the IWW.



something more to offer workers than the IWW name and a red card. The IWW stands for more than “just organizing.” The IWW stands for direct action. The IWW stands for revolutionary unionism. All this both implies and requires a militant brand of unionism, to be more than “paper radicals.” Unfortunately, what an organization “officially” stands for does not guarantee it will live up to its principles. As said above, objective circumstances shape organizational behavior as much as ideological motives. As the experience at Jimmy John’s indicates, ideological radicalism does not guarantee union militancy. We are a small union, and much of our organizing focus has been in small workplaces and about winning small goals, in a way most other unions don’t bother with. We are now becoming larger. We should not take for granted that because we are ideologically more radical than other unions, means we are inherently more militant. Wobblies are used to losing, we’re used to scraping on with nothing, and we’re also used to reading and talking about the problems with other unions. What we’re not used to is being a large organization with the power to wage big fights against employers. A word of advice to fellow Wobs: don’t assume we’re any tougher than the “business unions.” A militant union is hard to build, and just as hard to maintain.

¹The JJWU’s actions for paid sick days- and arguably too the election, since if successful it would have led to contract negotiation and potential job actions over franchise-wide wage and workplace standards- is an exception to this... a fact which in my opinion partly explains, and is partly explained by, the large size and relative success of that campaign compared to other organizing campaigns in our union.

file workers who expressed vocal enthusiasm for the concept, practically none (including IWW members) were willing to take “premature” wildcat actions in hopes of setting off the strike, at the risk of doing so alone without the backing of other unions.

This dilemma is further complicated by the issue of the NLRB and labor law. While few in the IWW are under any illusions about labor law being pro-worker or in any way designed to encourage worker militancy, our members have relied heavily on filings with the labor board to secure legal victories which, at best, only reaffirmed the status quo at work (by, say, winning a worker’s job back) but did nothing to prove the union’s power. While a worker can hardly be blamed for taking a government handed-out victory, as a regular habit this can become a constraint on worker militancy. We see this in full form in some mainstream unions, which have a habit of acting more like enforcers of the labor law than like real labor unions. In the Jimmy John’s fight mentioned above, reliance on the government to hand out a legal victory led the union to back off from our initial plans for a direct action campaign, in the interest of preserving a good image with the labor board.



An Appraisal

We are in a period of growth, and with growth comes change for the union. The question is how to maintain that growth and have

An organization’s behavior is shaped as much or more by external “objective” conditions, and immediate real life circumstance, as by “subjective” ideological intentions. Our union is no exception. The IWW has functioned most of its life in survival mode, and the consequent lessons and habits derived from the union’s experience have been focused on how to survive and function as a tiny labor organization, whose international membership is smaller than some “mainstream” union locals. As the union growing again these days (while the “mainstream” unions are shrinking), so too is the amount and urgency of internal conversations about the philosophy, strategy and tactics of the IWW. These conversations are valuable and necessary for the union to keep growing qualitatively, in terms of what kind of membership we build, what kind of action we encourage and how strong we come out from that action. As such, some rough draft reflections about the organizational behavior and habits which I’ve variously seen or experienced in the union, and lessons from said experiences, are offered below. All meant in a purely constructive light.

Small Workplace Power

As a small organization, we often have very little power to disrupt large employers. We do, however, have a certain amount of power in individual workplaces, particularly in smaller workplaces, like fast food. Aside from other factors which can make us attractive to fast food workers (like the fact that our dues are lower than most unions, or that we accept members from almost any job), our small size and lack of “friends in high places” (and unwillingness to rely on those) has also forced us to turn our attention to smaller workplaces which would typically hold little economic attraction to a more sizable “business union” (and because of that are also almost entirely non-unionized, adding an additional incentive for us). As a result, we have attracted relatively large numbers of members from fast food and similar small workplaces, who see in the IWW one of the few labor unions with both the determination and hard won experience to run an organizing drive at their jobs. A positive side effect of this has been to put to rest the claim that small food and retail jobs are “unorganizable” (a claim which there’s plenty of

history to refute, anyway), despite the difficulties of organizing in those industries.



A slightly less positive effect of organizing in this environment is a sometimes excessive focus on “winnable goals” and often purely clandestine mode of organizing, in which the goal is to obtain the maximum gains from one’s immediate boss and assert a degree of control over one’s immediate workplace, while avoiding risky job actions over larger company-wide and/or industry-wide issues¹. This is a relatively easy concept to sell, because it’s not far from what workers already do without any organization at all. All workers exert a certain amount of leverage over their direct management, and assert a certain, even tiny, amount of freedom at work. This is natural. Any person put in a position of powerlessness will kick to assert some power back over their immediate surroundings. As far as “winnable goals” go, again that’s natural. Any worker who is dissatisfied with their workplace situation will pick the easiest way they know to solve their problems (the proverbial “path of least resistance”), and if the risk is too great, they suck it up and bide their time. The

rationale here is perfectly understandable, the goal being to make life easier, not harder.

The only thing changed in the short term by an organizing committee is the ability to plan and time a group of worker’s actions in such a way as to reduce the risk and maximize the potential gain from any given individual worker’s actions. As soon as the risk becomes greater than the likely gain, once again everyone goes back to work as usual... which, unfortunately, can make life very difficult for a militant Wobbly. The IWW being a revolutionary union, a good Wob is often willing to lose their job for the cause, and may very likely do so, where an “average worker” may be less willing – again, the goal being to make life easier, not harder. The main insight behind organizing at small workplaces- that we already have power there- can also become a trap, in that the kinds of goals which can be won there are nearly always small and affect only a small number of workers.

Direct Action or Organizing?

A disagreement came up after the Jimmy John’s firings, over whether to pursue a series of confrontational actions or lie low and “just keep organizing.” The rationale behind the latter perspective was partly the fear of scaring off coworkers by being too confrontational, and partly based on the claim that “organizing is our best weapon.” Setting aside other specifics of that particular meeting or the actions that followed, what this disagreement highlights is a dilemma all workers and all unions face in some form, the IWW more so than most: do we take direct action now in hopes of winning quickly, or do we bide our time and wait for a better opportunity? Put differently, we’re caught between a desire for open confrontation and militant workplace action, and the restraints imposed by caution, self-preservation and limited strength. The same dilemma came up, in a bigger form, during the huge protests in Madison, Wisconsin. The IWW played a very important role in spreading the call for a general strike. However, in practical conversations as to whether and how to start such a strike, the answer was in the negative. “General Strike!” was a slogan, not a plan, and few actually had any idea how to implement it; most did not even believe it was possible in the short term. As for the large numbers of rank and