

The Role of the Dual Carder in the IWW

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At the very beginning, members of the IWW carried cards from other unions, including the Western Federation of Miners, the American Labor Union, representatives from brewery workers, United Mine Workers, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance and others. Today, we retain those ties: our members in other unions include truck and bus drivers, print trade and construction workers, service and grocery clerks, government and computer workers and many others. Unionists who choose to carry two cards have many reasons but there is a fundamental connection between them.

The IWW is building a different kind of union than the one they have at work. Business unions often have unresponsive and undemocratic bureaucracies. They frequently take the position that the union is a partner with management and that capitalism or at best, state socialism, is the ideal economic system. Members of these traditional unions join the IWW in part because it gives them another vision of what a union could and should be.

This basic rationale manifests itself in two ways. First, these unionists import the strategies and vision of the IWW into their other union. They take important pieces of the Wobbly ideal - that unions should be run democratically by the workers and that they should rely primarily on the tools of direct action to achieve their aims - and show the value of these ideas to their coworkers.

The other manifestation is in bringing the organizational skills they learned as an activist in a functioning workplace union into the IWW, skills like running meetings, producing budgets, maintaining communication networks, etc. All the ideals in the world are worthless without the ability to carry out the nuts-and-bolts tasks required to spread them. Wobs from other unions serve an educational role not only for vision and strategy in their other union, but for technical skills in the IWW.

This pamphlet will lay out some basic ways dual carders can be effective in both directions and provide some ideas to new dual carders or old hands who are looking for ways to integrate their union work. The tie between the two unions is the same basic tie within one union: we are members of the working class seeking to bring democracy to the workplace and the economy and to overthrow capitalism. These ideals are the glue that binds us together and they lead to the strategies and struggles that increase the vitality of both unions.

Using the IWW to Build Power in the Other Union

Some tactics may benefit both organizations in strengthening the workplace union's strategies and increasing its active membership while also bringing recruits and supporters to the IWW. The most important role that a dual carder can play is as educator both in the IWW and in the workplace union, and so that topic will be covered extensively, but there are several other important aspects to dual carder work as well.

There are several possible goals for dual carders in the workplace union. If the other union is better than average and has many of the features a union should have, it may only be necessary to tweak a few areas to improve it. However many locals and national unions need a lot of help.

One common impulse for IWW members is to replace their local with the IWW.

There may be cases where this is the best option, but there are several reasons why another route would be preferable. The first is that most of these attempts fail, leaving a bitter legacy in the other union or no union at all for the workers. Our goal should be to improve the lot of workers, and it is a rare situation where they would be better off with no union.

Another reason is that raiding other unions' shops is understandably guaranteed to bring anger from those unions. The IWW is not the only union out there or even the only union doing good work. We are part of the labor movement, but not all of it. We must earn the respect of the rest of the labor movement by demonstrating our ability to be part of a movement, not simply a sectarian appendage on the movement. If we want other unions to respect our shops, to respect our pickets and strikes, then we simply can't pick fights with their shops.

A third reason is that it is just bad strategy to pick fights with people who are huge in comparison, especially when the fights aren't necessary. The AFL-CIO, the TUC, the ACTU and other labor federations are enormous in comparison to the IWW. We will inevitably have conflicts with them, but it isn't wise to go looking for a fight.

This suggests another option than actually trying to take another union's local into the IWW. Union reform movements have been around for almost as long as unions. It is possible to use IWW ideas to build a force inside another union to push that union in the right direction. There are different levels of formality in building this way. One option is to actually form a visible IWW caucus in the other union. The danger in this tack is that many unions have constitutional prohibitions against membership in another union, especially against recruiting to another union. If you are strong enough in the local, this may not be a problem for a while, but it is probably grounds for expulsion from the other union.

Another possibility that carries a lower risk is to build a caucus that doesn't identify and doesn't directly recruit to the IWW. These could be temporary formations to vote down a bad contract proposal or to build support for a strike vote, or they could be long-term groups to build democracy, militancy and radical ideals. In many cases, it will be more successful to build democracy and militancy and then use the lessons from actual shop floor struggles to teach radical ideas than to start out with the revolutionary talk. This requires a long-term commitment since it may take years to build a base in a large shop or local.

Building a caucus has some similarities to organizing a new union. To be effective, a caucus should reflect the workforce in terms of different jobs and shifts, race, gender etc. The visible leadership should be respected workers. It will help if they have experience in the union as stewards or officers although sometimes this may not be possible due to corruption in the union leadership.

One important thing to remember regardless of what issues you are building around is to always return to democracy. Whether you win or lose any given vote, consistently addressing the need for workers' decision making will stand you in good stead. Democracy means more than just allowing a vote on an issue. It means informed and considered decisions. If a negotiating team spends months or years negotiating a contract in secret and then expects the members to vote on it without time to read and discuss it, that isn't true democracy. Ideally contracts shouldn't be negotiated in secret, but at the minimum, workers should have at sufficient time to discuss and debate it. This gives an opportunity to see what is in the proposal as opposed to what the negotiators say is in it. It also provides time to build a "Vote No" campaign if that is necessary.

Another of the many reasons to have democracy be a primary issue is responsibility. True democracy requires participation of the membership. As one or a few individuals, especially if it is a large shop, you will simply not have the time to do all the work. Democracy doesn't just spread decision making around, it gives members a reason and a responsibility to take on tasks. Sometimes people will make decisions you disagree with and you just have to accept it. You can argue against it, present your reasons why, but if the membership of the union or of the caucus makes the decision, they are responsible for the outcome. The next time something similar comes up, make sure everyone knows what happened the last time. But whichever way a vote goes, if there was a good democratic procedure, then everyone shares some responsibility. This doesn't mean you are off the hook if you pushed an idea and everyone went for it - you'll have to own up to the mistake and move on - but if you make a mistake without democratic backing, it will be difficult to regain people's trust.

Education in the other Union

Regardless of whether it is for a single issue or a long-term battle for the soul of the other union, one of the most valuable things the IWW member has to offer is education. We bring not only a vision for the future but better ways of winning concrete goals in the present. There are many areas in which the IWW can bring new ideas, but the five main topics where we differ significantly from many other labor unions are: democracy, militancy, electoral politics, class consciousness and vision.

In all parts of education, you have to consider your audience. Since most workers are not already conscious revolutionaries, you won't be effective using a lot of rhetoric, especially left rhetoric from the last century. Words like anarchism, soviet, communism etc., do not have a positive meaning to most workers. Likewise "capitalism" has a positive sense for many and is close to the word "freedom" thanks to the actions of the various repressive governments calling themselves socialists.

This doesn't mean you can't talk about those ideas though - you just have to use language people know rather than jargon from 1917 or 1936. Talk about democracy in the workplace, or about how workers know the job better than management and therefore make management irrelevant. Emphasize the differences in employers' and employees' interests. You can talk about the need to democratize the union, the workplace and the whole economy. You can discuss the international connections between workers. Just avoid loaded words no matter what the topic is.

Democracy

This has already been discussed in the last section, but it can't be stressed enough. Most unions have some degree of official democracy, but usually it doesn't mean much in relation to where the actual power lies. By defining democracy broadly as including not only voting on officers and contracts every three years, but also wide diffusion of information, participation in committees, elected instead of appointed stewards and negotiating committees, and so on, it establishes a high level of accountability for leadership. Consistently holding the high ground by insisting on the members' right to run their union, you can build a truly democratic organization that will be able to confront management as a much more dedicated and powerful group.

Democracy can also be spread beyond the workplace. In addition to building an elected stewards' council at the workplace, it is vital to create horizontal connections between workplaces and employers in the same industry. There can be different manifestations of this idea. For instance, stewards at different shops run by the same company can meet to discuss the particular situation in that firm. Stewards at different companies can meet to learn the situation at other companies so as to equalize the compensation packages and learn how other firms run the same processes. These groups will be the germ of the workers' councils that will run industry in the future.

Militancy

This does not mean that the best way to solve every issue is with a full-scale strike, but it does mean letting management know you can shut them down. Many unions take direct action so seldom that their negotiating committees, even if well intentioned, are hobbled by the knowledge that the membership is either afraid or doesn't remember how to strike effectively.

Effective labor action is like any skill: use it or lose it. Periodic slowdowns, strikes, sickouts, or other actions do several things. First they regularly remind the membership of the power workers have on the job.

Second they remind the boss of the same thing and so make it more likely that the union can keep the boss off the workers' back on a daily basis from fear of disruptions of business. A workforce that believes it can win, isn't afraid of exerting its power, considers a variety of actions, and has the skill to pull them off will go far.

It is important to have different types of actions. Many union officers only think of all out strikes when they think of direct action. Workers have a lot of tools in their toolboxes. They can strike for a short period of time and go back to work; they can slow down; they can schedule a party during work hours; they can insist on having a division-wide meeting to resolve a problem, thus shutting down the section. Be creative and use your imagination. Many employers know how to deal with common types of strikes and actions so hit them with something they don't expect.

Additionally, remember that unions are not simply economic organizations but should also be part of a larger social movement. At the smallest level, there should be social connections in the union. Hold parties, sports teams, dances, etc. The union should also have ties to other parts of society such as churches, neighborhood and community organizations, and other groups. Creating these ties before you need them will accomplish two important things. First, it will build in the membership the view that the union is not simply a political "special interest" but rather a vibrant organization.

This will build long term dedication to the union. Second, by interacting and supporting other groups outside the workplace, the union will build an army of allies who can help in times of crisis. There are often activities that outsiders can do to contribute to the struggle. Simple letters to the newspaper from other community organizations both help increase the public support and the morale of the members. In addition, when courts place injunctions on unions in numbers of pickets or activities, strong outside supporters can take these actions, usually with much lower or no penalties.

One important example from the past was the involvement of miner's wives when the miners were legally prohibited from picketing.

Electoral Politics

Most unions in the developed world have a very cozy relationship with political parties. In almost every case, these parties side with international capital even if they occasionally vote the "right way" in parliament or congress. The union's relationship with the party means huge donations of dues money plus volunteers for staffing phone banks, putting up yard signs and other free labor. Depending on the situation, this may be a good place for agitation. In every country, the party supported by unions has failed when in power to change anything fundamental about our work lives.

If your union concentrates on electoral politics, you may be able to organize around that as a waste of members' resources. Research the amount the union spends on electoral politics and suggest other uses for that amount of money. Imagine what it could do organizing other parts of the industry to prevent non-union shops from dragging down your wages and benefits. What if it were put into a strike fund? Or used to train union members how to organize internally?

There is a certain friction associated with electoral activity, in the sense that it is an indirect way to your goal. Why go to politicians to ask them to make your employer do what you want? Why not just make your employer do what you want directly and skip the middleman?

Class Consciousness

The level of consciousness in the working class that it is working class varies greatly from place to place and over time. Most workers carry a partial knowledge of their class, but also aspirations to be "middle class", or even rich. Part of our responsibility as IWW members in a workplace is to teach how capitalism works. Often you won't be able to start by using the word capitalism, but you can say something like "this economic system," and refer to the inequalities between the workers on the one hand and the owners and shareholders on the other. In government jobs, there is a lesser but still wide gap in wages, but there also is often the inability of agencies to do their jobs because of political pressure from above.

You can use these differences to build understanding of workers' connection to other employees in the industry and other workers in general. Use it to overcome racial or gender differences. Show how unemployment or lower wages to people of color and women drags down wages for others. Keep the focus on the common enemy. When there is no struggle, people will tend to turn inward and differences in the workforce will seem greater. When the common enemy is clear, the other issues won't be as important, so keep the employer and the system in the workers' minds.

Vision

Finally the IWW has a vision of unions and of a future society that few other unions have. Democracy is a powerful word and it is hard for management or unscrupulous labor bureaucrats to oppose without showing their true stripes. When they do choose to expose themselves, you can use it to help people see how this system truly works. Many workers in the west feel they live in a democratic system and in some ways they do. A huge exception to this is the economy, which is not democratic at all, and a basic unit of the economy is the workplace. By struggling for democracy in the workplace, workers will begin to see the flaw in the shield capital used to hide its true self. Employers can give occasional wage and benefit increase, and even a better work rule now and then, but the idea of a democratic economy is the opposite of capitalism. A democratic economy demands not only that workers run the workplace, but also that production will be for need rather for profit. Capitalism at its root level is a system of social control based on exploitation of labor. Modern capital is more complicated, involving schools, media, social services, and a bit of political democracy, but at its core it still boils down to labor. The definition of labor has broadened in the last century, but it is still the key. Only by confronting capital at that level can we create a new world.

The danger of being visionaries of course is that people may see us as being disconnected to the here and now. To avoid this, we have to straddle the line between revolution and reform. We have to use our revolutionary ideas to win reforms and use those victories to build support for revolution. As with words like socialism or capitalism, revolution is probably a good word to avoid in early conversations. Consider the idea of transitional politics. This means developing struggles for changes that sound like reforms but have the capability to develop class consciousness and revolutionary struggle. Essentially we approach our

coworkers where they are now rather than expecting them to be where we are. Once we have established common struggles, we attempt to expand the understanding of those shared battles to include the entire economic system.

The danger is getting stuck in reform politics. Many revolutionaries entered unions thirty years ago with the intent of turning them into radical democratic organizations. They have had some successes, but there has also been a problem of “delinking”, which means the caucuses in those unions are not directly connected to a radical organization. Many years later, these caucuses are having to consider how to “relink” the caucuses to revolutionary organization. There isn’t a clear answer to this, but we need to be aware of the problem. Since we are starting from the contradictory system of capitalism, it isn’t surprising that our own organizations will have to deal with some of our own contradictions, like having to be reformist and revolutionary at the same time.

Education in the IWW:

Nuts and Bolts of Running a Union

The road of education is not simply a one-way street of bringing the ideas and practice of the IWW to another union. Those who have been active in another union or a reform caucus have learned vital skills that the IWW is in serious need of. For many reasons, most of the IWW’s current membership is not in shops where the IWW has job control. This means members largely do not have the skills of how to run an actual union. This is not their fault, and they certainly could learn it the hard way, but there is no need for that. Because of our dual carders, collectively we have the experience of many different workplace unions. There are a whole host of skills and tactics that unionists have developed over the last century or more to build and hold unions together. Most modern unions leave a lot to be desired but there are some things they do right and much we learn from our own experience on the shop floor. With the help of experienced unionists, we can avoid many of the pitfalls that await the unwary unionist.

Building Relationships with Coworkers

One of the most important things that come with experience is simply building relationships with workers at the shop. Good relationships can’t be taught, but if you’ve worked at creating power for your members, you know that diplomacy can be critical. You know most workers are not revolutionaries. You know most aren’t vegans, anarchists, or punk rockers. You know that we have to approach workers where they are now, not where the Spanish working class was in 1934. Different industries and different shops in the same industry have different cultures. What you can teach to our fellow workers is some of the tactics you’ve used at your workplace to reach out to others, get them to believe in workers’ power and participate in the union.

Grievances, Arbitration and Problem Solving

An important tool is helping your workmates solve problems with the employer. This has likely come through use of a grievance procedure or arbitration. Many members of the IWW have never worked in a union shop and don’t understand how grievance and arbitration procedures work. Even workers in union shops often have a misplaced belief in the power of grievances.

Since the normal trade off for binding arbitration in a contract is a no-strike clause, you could talk about how well grievances have worked, how often it fails, what typical arbitrators are like, what an unfair labor practice charge is and what tactics you have used when such legal methods fail.

Communication Networks

Another critical tool in building strength is the communication system in your union or your reform caucus. This certainly includes the personal networks of you and the people you work with, but also important are the local and national newsletters and newspapers. If you have been responsible for a publication, you can teach not only the technical methods of layout and getting it printed, but also editing skills, what styles of writing are most successful at reaching other workers, and possible ways to distribute it broadly. In small workplaces this may be obvious, but if you are in a large local or have members spread over a wide area, you could talk about how you reach them. One way may be through the internet, but do not rely on this unless you know for certain that the vast majority of members are regularly on line.

Meetings and Finances

Some members of the IWW came in with little or no experience in holding meetings. Some unions' meetings are nothing more than a rubber stamp for the business agent or executive board, but if yours were forums for actual decision making, you could teach how to hold meetings that both allow full participation and don't waste a lot of time. Meetings that have an agenda and a good chairperson can accomplish a lot in a short period of time, but those that go on too long frustrate members and erode participation.

A related part of the infrastructure is the annual budget. Holding annual budget discussions that involve the members in the decisions about how to spend money gives the members the direct power to decide how the union spends their dues. Most unions don't have that kind of democratic process but at least have regular financial reports. Bringing such reports plus the IWW participatory democracy to the budget provides accountability of the leadership and teaches members how the union works at the financial level.

Relations with Managers

If you have been in a union leadership position in your workplace, you have probably learned valuable skills for interacting with management. Sometimes you can get what you want by being the hard-nosed union rep, but at times it may be more effective to play good cop. You may have actually divided the roles between different stewards or negotiators, so if Mr. Nice Guy doesn't work, you let the mad dog out of the cage. Another part of this work is the ability to be subtle. There may be a problem for which you don't have the legal right to take direct action, but are doing anyway. If you have been in this situation, you had to make sure management understood what was going on without actually saying it to keep the union from being sued.

These kinds of skills take practice, and our fellow workers will have to hone them, but your experience can at least get them thinking about tactics they haven't had reason to consider.

Strikes and other Workplace Actions

If someone hasn't ever been in a union at their workplace then they've never had to prepare for strikes, slowdowns, and general internal organizing. You have likely found certain ways of rallying the troops.

These kinds of stories are exciting, but they also can teach others how to win battles as they begin organizing in their workplaces. Most workers aren't prepared to strike and the preparations for taking any form of direct action involve not only financial preparations, but also convincing people that they can win. Setting up picket captains, media contacts, external support, and morale committees - all this work facilitates a successful action. Some of this type of work may be familiar from other environmental movements or prisoner support but will take on new forms when it is someone's actual job.

For a long time, much of the left at least in the USA has been not taken the time to analyze successes and failures of actions. Many of the groups have been short-term projects, but a labor union is a permanent organization and doesn't have that luxury.

If you've been active in your other union, then you've probably had to think about the failures of the union's conservative leadership and what might work better. The union officers probably don't take advantage of the properties peculiar to that workplace. They just adopt a cookie cutter approach that every other union in the country uses rather than analyzing the weaknesses in that firm or industry. Since you work there, you know where the breakdowns are best focused. Every job has its weak points. If you can show how you discovered a few of those to new IWW organizers and members, it will help them come up with ideas for other types of jobs.

Differences Between the IWW and the Workplace Union

If you've operated as a rep in the workplace, you've had to learn that your coworkers are mostly not revolutionaries and have all sorts of problems and obstacles to unifying the class. You probably have racist and sexist coworkers. They may or may not support environmental movements. Most probably aren't vegetarians but are religious. Creating a powerful union means getting around the social differences of diet and religion. It means helping your fellow workers see how racist and sexist behavior damages their power in the workplace, but you can't do this if they see you as some holy man denouncing them from on high. You can help the IWW members approach workers where those workers are now. Tell them how you handled incidents between workers in the union. Tell them about a militant members of your other union

who is a beef eating Christian. Education is always a two way street and just as some workers may lack an appreciation for black culture, some IWW members may need to gain an appreciation for those who have a different culture than vegan atheism.

Conclusion: Revolution or Bread?

Working with a union that oversees the conditions of people's livelihoods requires a much higher level of accountability than a political party that can insist on ideological purity. The difficulty for the IWW as it grows into the workplace is balancing the central goals of the IWW with the need to represent workers' demands for better pay, health insurance, vacations etc. Winning those reforms serves two purposes and the challenge will be to connect them. Clearly we want a better pay package for the workers to improve standards of living, but we also have to do that if we want the average worker to consider our vision of a true democracy. More importantly than simply building respect for us as individuals, it is through struggle that most workers are radicalized. By taking an active role in the fight against an employer, a worker can learn the limitations of a pure and simple union, of racism, of national separation and ultimately of capitalism itself. By fighting battles for better pay, a worker must involve everyone. He has to consider the effect the unorganized shop will have on the employer's response. He will have to think about the question of the mobility of capital and the poor conditions of workers in Mexico. And ultimately he will have to consider the economy as a whole and how these problems are all tied together. Eventually people can come to these conclusions themselves, but it speeds up the process if there is someone nearby who has already been through the process.

Most workers have a general understanding that the boss is the enemy, but haven't connected all the dots yet because of the corporate media, the state schools and so on. The working class is rife with problematic ideas of race, gender nationality and so on. There is a widespread belief that capitalism and democracy are the same thing. Our task is not to snub those who haven't see the system for what it is, but through struggle to bring workers face to face with capitalists when they show their true colors. Our three watchwords of Education, Agitation and Emancipation are in that order for a good reason. We are not currently in a pre-revolutionary situation so our tactics will usually revolve around education. In times of struggle, radicalization increases exponentially, but first we must teach how to prepare for struggle so we are not defeated, demoralized and set yet further back. The experience of the labor unionist combined with the vision and historical victories of the IWW will combine to make the most powerful force on earth: the united and revolutionary working class. Your position as a dual carder puts you in a position of responsibility to both the revolution tomorrow and to the worker today. The lesson you have to teach is two-fold.

To the workers, you show that in the long term the only reliable source of bread for our children and grandchildren is the bakery we run; and to the revolutionaries you teach that we can't win the revolution with hungry workers.