

# CONCESSIONS: HOW TO BEAT THEM

Since the mid-1970s employers have increasingly demanded that union members give back hard-won wages, benefits and working conditions—or lose their jobs. In recent years, employers have forced concessions that have taken billions of dollars out of union members' pockets, and have cost thousands of jobs through elimination and combination of job classifications.

At first, employers demanded concessions on the basis of company survival. Union members were told "We can't compete with X or Y unless you concede." More recently, employers have gotten more blunt (and more honest) about what's going on. Workers are frankly told "If someone else will work cheaper, why should we hire you?"

The labor movement has usually responded to demands for concessions with surrender, or isolated resistance. Surrender has been a blind alley. We all know that—that's why this conference is being held. Company A demands concessions because otherwise it can't compete with the rest of the industry. Once granted, the rest of the industry demands the same concessions because now they can't compete with company A. And so on, and on, and on.

Isolated, individual resistance by one local or one union has produced some successes, but many more costly failures. More and more the companies we bargain with are giant amoebas, spilling over union jurisdictions and national boundaries with massive indifference. It is less and less likely that a strike at any one plant or even in any one industry will hurt an employer badly enough to improve or even maintain current conditions.

The labor movement needs to develop different ways of dealing with employers—ways that involve neither abject surrender nor lost strikes. The IWW, drawing both on our long history of union action, and on our current experiences in union-organizing and collective bargaining, has some suggestions to make.

★ We urge a return to a more varied range of union tactics, rather than continuing to rely solely on the walkout strike. Our experience has been that ongoing campaigns on the job, sometimes interspersed with one-shift or one-day walkouts, have often worked better. Other unions (notably the UAW and CL&GW, with their "In-Plant Campaigns") have rediscovered many of the tactics that were once common in the union movement. Others, such as the sitdown strike (a tactic still used almost everywhere in the world, except in the U.S.) have yet to be recovered.

★ We propose that the union movement decide that solidarity is more important than labor laws. The secondary boycott, mass picketing regardless of injunctions, sympathy strikes, refusal to handle scab-produced goods (hot cargo), and so forth, are powerful tools for the labor movement. Many unions represented here today would never have been organized, or grown to anywhere near their current size, without such tools. And employers know this. They know that to stick to what is allowed under the law is a way to lose. So they do what they need to do to defend their interests—and they win against strikes, and they win against organizing campaigns. Unions follow the law and lose.

Whatever benefits the labor movement may have gained by accepting the compromise that is the U.S. National Labor Relations Act have been fading away since the early 1970s, and especially since 1980. We have to decide what is more important: respect for the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act, or the interests of union members and the survival of our unions.

★ We urge that "international" become more than just a word in many unions' names. Employers have increasingly become multinational, playing unions—and governments—in one country against those in another. Often these corporations spread work around so that no single nation's unions can force the employer into the red. Even when U.S. production does play a key role in corporate profits, multinationals can usually better afford to wait out a long strike than can union members.

Our goal must be to coordinate bargaining and strike action worldwide among unions that bargain with the same employer. It will not be easy. It will take a long time. But in the long run, the labor movement will not survive—here or elsewhere—without international solidarity and coordination.

There are other things that need to be done, of course—mostly actions about which there is already general agreement in the labor movement: increased support for organizing the unorganized, greater coordination in bargaining and strike action in the U.S., and so on. To the IWW, however, the key remains what it always has been—solidarity that is expressed in actions, not just in words. If no union allows itself to be used against another union, then we can resist concessions—and a great deal more besides.



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