

Authentic Organizing

Ideas for Reviving the Grassroots

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I have always been political, but I began my organizing and activist work five and a half years ago. While that may not be much compared to some of the people I may criticize, it's still nothing to be taken lightly, especially considering so many people get tired of activism and politics within a year or two after becoming involved. Regardless, I have been around long enough to know many of the things wrong with modern organizing in the United States both on the radical side and the political mainstream. If you don't want your feelings hurt, then stop reading now. The state of organizing in America today is a state of disconnection, corporatization, arrogance, and dogma, and the way out, as I intend to show, is to break with the old ways and innovate.

Misdirection or No Direction

There is a lack of direction among today's political groups. This is true for both local groups, as well as the large, well-funded ones (big-box groups), but for different reasons. Some groups are content with just forming and loudly asserting themselves at the right times without actually starting or contributing to anything, others simply do the same thing all the time and wonder why such little progress has been made, and still more have turned themselves into businesses and disengaged with the grassroots.

Here in Richmond, Virginia, I've noticed that only a few local groups have a long-term strategy. The rest just crop up and start fighting the good fight when tension mounts around a popular issue. This isn't to say they don't do things regularly, it's just that the things they do aren't part of a coherent course of action that would help them achieve long and short-term goals. The reasons are different for different groups, but the results are always the same. The group ends up

being a small circle of friends who have no impact on the community, no impact on their issue, and end up riding the waves created by other organizations instead of making their own waves. In short, their accomplishments are minimal or non-existent.

Going Nowhere

At the time of writing, I was working with an organization that was trying to improve public transit in Richmond. Their main activity is canvassing bus stops in order to have the bus riders take a survey and give us their contact information. We've been bothering the local bus riders with variations of the same survey for a few years now, but so far we haven't taken any serious action. Unless we decide our political position is survey-ism, then this will get us nowhere. On more than one occasion I have raised the issue of organizing some sort of action that will help build enough momentum around the issue of transit to start a real movement in the city. I like the idea of organizing a town hall, and I don't mean one of those fake town halls that politicians put together. I mean a real meeting of bus riders to discuss the issues and decide on a collective course of action to take after that day. No politicians allowed and no domination by staffers with nice cars.

While this essay will often be highly critical of staff and staff-lead initiatives, members have their rotten moments as well. A few years ago I was involved with a certain local union for school employees which I will leave unnamed to avoid drama. The elected officials of this local held a monthly meeting for themselves and their staff of two (myself and my supervisor). They presented documents detailing the decline in their membership. The meeting was very brief and centered on complaining about their declining numbers. The elected leaders presented no

solutions or ideas. My supervisor explained to them that rank-and-file members felt disrespected by the elected union officials because their input wasn't sought, there were virtually no opportunities to be active within the local, and the officials didn't do anything to advocate on behalf of educators at city hall or elsewhere. Engagement, activity, and respect were running a deficit. He then explained it could all be turned around if they would put more effort into organizing in the schools and advocacy in the community. He also said members should be listened to and engaged with. The elected leaders refused to listen to him, and concluded the meeting by saying, "I don't know what we are going to do." Had I not been in the room for this meeting, I would have laughed at it and swore it was an episode of FX's *Louie* with my supervisor unwillingly playing the role of Louis C.K.

Departing from the Grassroots

The big-box groups, on the other hand, either intentionally have no direction or go in a direction that disconnects them from the people. For example, I have a friend who used to intern for a big-box environmentalist organization. Some local activists were putting together a protest outside of a meeting where the governor and other boring people were meeting to discuss various environmentally unfriendly plans. My friend alerted her big-box employers about this with the hope of getting them to endorse the protest. They refused, stating that they don't want to alienate the liberal governor. Her bosses then went on to criticize the "immaturity" of the young activists organizing the protest. So instead of making good connections with real grassroots leaders, this big-box organization decided to go in a direction that leads away from the people, away from the

grassroots. All to avoid hurting the feelings of a politician who clearly didn't care about them anyway.

The state of most large organizations today is one of separation from the masses. They dress like the bosses and the politicians, but expect the denim-clad workers to relate to their message. They hire staff to do most of the work, and then claim their initiatives are grassroots. Or worse, they wonder why there is a lack of interest from the public while refusing the ideas and any meaningful, creative participation from members of the public. They have sales quotas. The organizing bosses won't call them that, but that is what they are. The big environmentalist organizations, the unions, and many others all have quotas that their employees need to meet. At this point they aren't organizers, they are salesmen. They must sign up so many people to the organization each week, or risk being fired. Solicit so many donations a day, or get fired. Get so many petition signatures or get fired. Their staff goes through all of the troubles and abuses that workers in every other sector endure. They go through everything from tracking devices to intimidation and lies (Fuld, 2014).

To make matters worse, the moneyed organizations love jargon. Instead of the campaign having a demand or a goal, it has an "ask." Instead of a script, it's a "rap." Instead of asking someone to join the union, we "call the question." Where I'm from questions are asked not called and raps are a type of music. Why do we need professional jargon for such things? We don't, and using pointless jargon only serves to separate an organization from those it is trying to reach. In the minds of those active in, or employed by, the organization, it erects a wall between those in the group and those outside the group.

Fight for 15 campaign.

In his essay “Fast Food Unionism,” Erik Forman (2013) discusses the Fight for 15 campaign and what he calls “the McDonaldization of unions.” This basically means that unions have taken on the structure, culture, and values of their corporate counterparts. Given the information already presented and yet to be presented in this piece, I would say the so-called “grassroots community organizations” have also become McDonaldized. The rhetoric coming from the big unions today is ironic considering that the mainstream of the labor movement refused to even acknowledge the existence of fast food workers until recent years. Forman even mentions being turned down by a local UNITE-HERE leader when asking for support organizing a Starbucks he worked at. The decision to wage a unionization campaign is made not based on solidarity but on typical business calculation (Forman, 2013).

Starting in the 1970s, employers increased their efforts to resist unionization. They really began to lay down the gauntlet for unions in post-New Deal America, but the union bureaucrats refused the challenge and instead attempted to take a business approach, which contributed to not only a decline in unionized workers over the past several decades but also a decline in the average person’s faith in the unions. The unions will cut backroom deals with management and even support corporate legislative agendas in order to get a good deal with upper management. All of this comes at the expense of the rank-and-file, whose input is often excluded from the campaign and even bargaining. The potential of the average member to shut down production and force real concessions from the company is squandered at best if not ignored completely (Forman, 2013).

The current Service Employees International Union-lead “Fight for 15” campaign is nothing more than a spectacle. SEIU leaders will tell you that workers organized themselves and demanded the union’s leadership, but in reality it was all a business plan hatched out in the SEIU boardroom. The \$15 an hour living wage demand was not thought up by workers, but by Berlin Rosen PR Firm. The cities targeted for the one-day –strikes were selected not based on need, but based on where SEIU bureaucrats thought they could get the most media attention and gain a push for legislation mandating higher wages. The task of union “organizers” in this campaign isn’t to organize, but to get media attention for a cause and to sell the idea to workers and community members. No permanent infrastructure or organization is left in these workplaces or communities when the campaign moves on to the next city. Often they can’t even get enough workers to support the faux strike, leaving them to substitute naïve activists from the general public in place of the workers. Of course, the purple press releases won’t ever say that (Forman, 2013).

Direction of Spectacle

Money is, unfortunately, a very important thing in every aspect of modern life, and that includes grassroots organizing. Often reputable grassroots organizations will end up having to approach some foundation, the occasional large union, or some other money-pit, hat in hand with the hope of getting some sort of grant. As you may have guessed, this money comes with strings attached.

An old organizer I know once said to me that, “Organizing used to be about people, now it’s all about numbers.” If only everyone knew just how right she was when she said that.

Foundations want “deliverables.” Foundations want organizations to produce a certain number of member mailings, petition signatures, meetings with some damn politician, and media headlines. In other words, they want things that can be quantified. While all of these things are generally part of organizing, foundations and other lenders prioritize these things at the expense of relationships between people and the building of “leaders” from the grassroots. These two things are the heart and soul of long-term organizing (Johns & Ryan, 2014).

This has its consequences. Grassroots campaigns turn into campaigns-in-a-box or even “Astroturf.” Organizations acting under contracts from foundations shift their focus from organizing the unorganized in parts of the country that desperately need to be mobilized, to tapping into already existing networks in states with many advocacy organizations and large labor unions. The focus on quantifiable things leads to more work by staff members while input and control over the organization by actual members is discarded. Naturally, members realize their experiences and voices no longer matter and end up leaving these groups (Johns & Ryan, 2014).

Plans are written up by funders or organizing managers living far, far away from the community where the organizing is taking place. Members are given no say in this, and often take offense when approached with scripts or unrealistic plans drawn up by strangers in a distant city (Johns & Ryan, 2014). I have personally sat through Skype interviews with managers who didn’t even live in the area where the organizing job I applied for was located. A woman in Maine interviewed me for a job in Philadelphia. When I applied for a union job in Washington DC, I had the misfortune of being interviewed by someone who thought he was a big shot just because he worked in a New York City office. What would someone in Maine know about the

struggles of the poor in Philadelphia? What would someone in New York know about the actual situation and on-the-ground needs of workers in DC? Nothing.

Did Joe Hill take marching orders from a staffer in a distant office? Were Eugene Debs, Saul Alinsky, A. Philip Randolph, or any number of other historical figures in the world of organizing judged by irrelevant things like their GPA or the number of Washington Post headlines they made? No. The direction of many organizations, and sadly but still arguably the whole of organizing today, is the direction of spectacle. Organizations bound to foundation contracts are now more concerned about creating the appearance of a major grassroots movement as opposed to actually building a real movement. The focus is not on developing grassroots leaders and lasting, empowering organizations, and I get the impression very few state or national organizations even do that anymore. Now the staffers show up in your city, turn out a few activists and college students for a few days or weeks and claim it's a real movement, then leave town without leaving in place an actual organization. Now the focus is on the cameras, the Facebook likes, and the tweets with the hope that some politician will listen. Three out of every four years they don't listen. On the fourth year they listen a little and occasionally throw working people some scraps in the form of measly concessions, or they at least give the appearance of doing it to win voters. In the long-run, however, the politicians don't care because their corporate backers are giving them twice as much money as foundations give these instant campaigns. To build only the appearance of a grassroots movement results in achieving only the hollow appearance of victory at best.

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand mentions in her book how a union leader once told her: "When I first met you in 2006 you were beautiful, a breath of fresh air. To win [the special election], you need to be beautiful again." Gillibrand had been struggling with her weight after

having a baby, and this trash was what those in charge of the American labor movement passed off as good advice (Lowrey, 2014). I don't bring this up to defend a damn politician, but rather to make a point. Much of modern "organizing," focuses too much on appearance and too little on actually building the infrastructure to empower communities and working-class people.

For example, groups like ANSWER Coalition will often get a permit for a rally in front of the White House with the hope of making a big splash in the news. They will show up at large demonstrations whenever they can with as many ANSWER signs as they can pass out. All so they can get on camera. I don't mean to single them out, there are numerous other groups employing the same tactic. It's all about the glamour shots, but at the end of the day they haven't left any infrastructure in place to continue the fight or empower working-class communities to respond to any of the constant attacks on them by the wealthy and their politicians.

Lack of Respect

Let me start with the basics. There is an obvious lack of respect and maturity within activist "communities," both radical and not. The solution on an individual level is easy. If you don't respect the people you are working with, then do yourself and everyone else a favor and find another circle of people to work with. You could also go watch sports and scream obscenities at the opposing team's players, which would probably be a better thing for you to do since often disrespectful individuals in the activist scene come in with the same mentality. Such people also bring in (or form) cliques, resulting in bitter factions and distrust within the group. Understand that the cause your group is fighting for is bigger than you and your friends. It is bigger than your opinion and your ideas. Some of the most hard-working and dependable people

I have worked with over the years have been sensible and mature enough to put the cause before themselves.

At the same time, we must understand that whatever cause your group is fighting for is more important than the group itself. Even if your organization is a big-box group with a ton of money and connections, the cause you are fighting for is still bigger and more important than the organization. If the organization becomes wrapped up in itself and starts doing the right things for the wrong reasons, then how long will it be before they start doing the wrong thing entirely? What if the organization is fighting to gain control or administration over something? What if it seeks control over the whole country in the name of the workers? If the organization is putting itself before its cause, then its attempt to implement a plan for justice after it gets what it wants will be ugly. Almost like a politician who claims to want justice for this and that, but doesn't deliver once they get into office because the money and power has corrupted them. Instead of this politician fighting for XYZ, it becomes this politician piggybacking off the people's desire for XYZ for personal gain. Organizations and their leaders can, will, and have become just like a dirty politician.

Lack of Respect for Young People

I was involved in my campus Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in college. For those of you who really ought to know, SDS has nothing to do with the Democrats. Although it isn't perfect or ideal (no group is), it is a student group with chapters involved in everything from anti-war struggles, student struggles, and issues facing the local working-class. While in SDS, many non-student activist groups treated us as if we were ignorant, lacking skill, and generally

had no clue what we were doing. Some people may think it's alright to make assumptions about students and young people in general, but for those raised to have manners and basic respect it is never acceptable to just make assumptions about people you don't know.

People just assume student groups, and young activists in general, only exist to help the larger groups and political candidates. After finishing college, I had an interview with someone from Fair Share. The interviewer asked if I had built any fundraising experience with my student group. She seemed to be implying that the only value of student groups is to raise money for national groups and the like. After I explained to her that SDS didn't raise funds, but rather mastered the art of kicking ass on a shoe-string budget, she cut the interview short. Another example is when an "organizer" from Public Citizen came to one of our meetings to talk to us about doing a film screening and educating students about the Trans-Pacific Partnership. My local chapter of SDS just got a mention in *Time Magazine* for its anti-drone campaign, so we were feeling pretty proud of ourselves and confident in our abilities (Luckerson, 2013). This woman from Public Citizen just came in and talked down to us. She didn't really listen to anything we said to her when she asked us about ourselves, and at one point she implied we weren't adults. I was 22 at the time and she was in her late 20s at most. It was really patronizing, especially considering she knew nothing about our work or our lives before that day.

Often older people will just expect students to take part in their campaigns or events. They expect college activists to be some sort of political magic wand; they expect them to be able to bring out large numbers. These older activists have had their view of students clouded by romantic portrayals of student activism in the 1960s. Even if the romantic notions of students in the 1960s were accurate, it wouldn't matter because those days are over. Students are subject to the same influences, forces, and conditions as everyone else. They aren't the progressive or

radical godsend you're looking for. We need to realize that students and young people are just like anyone else. They are individual people, and they may have valuable organizing experience or they may not. They may have significant, wisdom-bestowing life experiences, or they may not. They are just like any other generation. Recognize that and you will be able to give and receive the proper amount of respect when dealing with young activists.

A few years ago, I was having lunch with my supervisor. I was an intern for a federal sector labor union. My supervisor had around a decade worth of experience in the labor movement, so it was always interesting for me to hear her insights. We were having a good conversation, and, almost out of the blue, she told me that she thinks there won't be any unions in America 50 years from now. I don't quite remember what, specifically, we were talking about, but it really caught my attention. A few years later I was having lunch with another union organizer (from a different union), and our conversation reminded me of the one I had with my old supervisor. I asked her if she thought unions would be around in 50 years, and she responded by saying she didn't think they would make 25. There are a lot of reasons for this, many of which are beyond the scope of this essay, but the big reason relevant to this section is the mistreatment of young members and young staff by the unions.

On multiple occasions I have heard staff from different unions say they were saddened by the way young people were treated in their movement. An SEIU staffer, who began her training in her 30s, told me that the trainees who were younger than her were treated like garbage. An NEA staff member told me that younger teachers were being treated as second-class members by union leaders. Finally, I have a friend in Toronto who used to work for UNITE-HERE. He told me the story of how his boss took him out to lunch, offered to buy him a beer, and then fired him for drinking on the job! So to partially answer the question why it looks like unions will not be

around in 50 (or less) years, it's because they neither respect nor want young people to be involved. After interning I went on to have my own negative experiences with unions where I was set up to fail, called a "child," and treated like garbage because of my age. If any organization, union or otherwise, is to have a future where membership thrives, then the creation of an environment where young people are welcome and viewed as equals is absolutely, positively mandatory.

Lack of Respect Between Organizations

On a different level, there can be a lack of respect between groups. I have encountered many community organizers here in Richmond that feel the labor unions don't respect them. One organizer for a statewide group, which I won't name to avoid drama, told me that dealing with unions makes her feel as if she "might as well not be in the room." Instead of talking to or with community organizations and their representatives, union staffers talk at them. Instead of mutually developing a plan for a campaign that both the union and the community organization are working together on, unions will dominate the discussion. They will tell their "community partners" how things are going to go, like it or not. All the unions really want is to borrow the members and the name of the community organizations. This leaves many active community members with a bitter taste in their mouths. Obviously this isn't good in the long run, and will prevent real partnerships from being formed in the future. The lesson is that you must not look down on organizations that are working towards the same goals that you are. The political battlefield is littered with egos, but those who seek to change the world must leave theirs at home. Our battles should not be fought for egos, but rather for truth and justice.

Last year during May Day in Chicago, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) and their partners in the local SEIU decided that not only should they censor people who they disagree with during May Day, but that they own May Day entirely. When activists from the Moratorium on Deportations Campaign and the Industrial Workers of the World showed up to join the march, ICIRR and SEIU goons physically blocked them and had the police arrest them. A couple of immigrant activists are now facing the possibility of deportation as a result of ICIRR and SEIU's thug tactics. All because a few activists held signs that didn't fit well with their Democrat-centric platforms ("Solidarity Action" source). With solidarity like that, who needs fascism? With "progressives" like that, who needs the far right?

Self-absorption.

Some groups have become so insular that they don't even bother looking beyond their projects or little circles to observe the world around them. Last year the League of the South, a separatist hate group, held a march in Richmond outside of the state capitol. They were joined by the Council of Conservative Citizens and various (not robed) members of the Ku Klux Klan. They were upset about a federal judge's ruling that overturned Virginia's gay marriage ban. Dozens of antifascist protesters showed up to counter-protest, but they were outnumbered by the League and its friends. It didn't seem like it during the rally because the police made sure we couldn't get a good look at each other. It was smart of them because if they didn't, it wouldn't have taken much for the racists to come over and clobber us.

Meanwhile, several blocks away, a statewide LGBT rights group was holding a celebration in honor of their members' work and the recent federal ruling overturning the gay

marriage ban. I am told there were around 50 people at their gathering. The organizers of the antifascist counter-protest alerted the LGBT rights group about the hate groups' intentions days earlier. 50 people is actually pretty big for Richmond, and if they had marched over to the capitol to join us, then we would have outnumbered the bigots on the streets and shown everyone that Richmond won't stand for hate. Instead what did these staunch advocates of equality do? Nothing. Two of them came over at the beginning of the rally to say hello, but they didn't stay long. They stayed at their own little gathering and didn't care that hate groups had converged on the capitol.

The state LGBT rights group was so insular, so wrapped up in their own little world, that they couldn't be bothered to show up and support their allies and thwart their foes. Because of this, the League of the South and its friends are now talking about making a scene in Richmond again sometime. It isn't my place to give a critique of the gay rights movement, but so many of these groups are wrapped up in their own specific area of struggle that they fail to see how it connects to other struggles. Apparently some of them are also too far lost in their own little bubbles that they fail to realize when they need to confront their enemies. But the gay rights group isn't the only local group that deserves criticism for that day. At least two community organizations, the local IWW, and various anarchists clubs were also alerted. Surprise, surprise, most of them didn't show up. The majority of people who attended the antifascist counter-protest were students and representatives of student organizations. It was a weekend protest, by the way, it's not like they all had to work.

It is worth noting, however, that the hate groups did something right that day. They collaborated. They looked beyond their own little pet projects and were able to get their heads together. All while the leftists of Richmond said to each other "psht, you aren't us, who cares

what you're doing?" Left activists need to be a whole lot more collaborative and cooperative than they are now if we are to change what is wrong in our communities, let alone the world.

Lack of Respect for the Working-Class and General Public

Not too long ago I was having a talk with an old union "organizer." She was a staff member who had been peddling the member cards for years and she was approaching retirement age. Eventually she asked me what I had hoped to accomplish politically. I told her I wanted to build a grassroots movement of working-class people that not only empowers them, but leads people in my community to understand that working people don't need bosses or business tycoons and are capable of running the world and the various industries by themselves. If it wasn't so typical of the professionals, it would have caught me off guard. She said that such a concept was "over the heads" of the average worker. It wasn't over the heads of so many poor and illiterate people in Europe after World War I. It wasn't over the heads of thousands of Americans in the historical IWW or Socialist Party in the early 20th Century. This, dear reader, exemplifies the contempt that so many organizations and their staff have for the working-class.

In a somewhat similar way, the average communist party in modern America also thinks like my acquaintance in the previous paragraph. They claim to follow models set forth by the likes of Lenin or Luxemburg, and yet they behave more like a clique sitting by themselves in a high school cafeteria. During the (defeated) revolution in Germany, it wasn't uncommon to see non-members speaking at Communist Party (KPD) meetings or doing some organizing in support of the KPD. It wasn't uncommon to see people who were just regular workers before the uprising joining the various revolutionary organizations and playing a leading role (Kuhn, 2012,

chapters listed in citation). In today's communist parties, you won't see that. Supportive non-members are held at arm's distance, or simply ignored and shooed away, and the creativity and eagerness of new members are stifled. You must go in the direction the leaders tell you, or get kicked out. You neither have a choice nor other options.

For example, I have an acquaintance who was involved with the Socialist Workers Party in the 1970s. He wasn't a member, but he was very supportive and many of the members knew him well. He wanted to help them promote one of their major conferences, so he wrote to them requesting leaflets to pass around. They wrote back saying he wouldn't be receiving any leaflets because he disagreed with them on a few trivial things.

You will find just as many ex-members of the various communist parties as you will current members because of this behavior. Members are stifled and micromanaged under the questionable guidance of national and local leaders. In many parties, those who don't live near a chapter are disallowed to join. Others are welcome to join and pay monthly dues to the nearest chapter, but are denied the voting rights of those in actual chapters. New members must often go through a "candidacy" period that can last up to six months or more. The parties will say it's a security thing, or a helpful process to make sure a potential "full member" understands the party and feels comfortable committing to it and its members.

In reality, it doesn't take more than two months to understand the culture and positions of an organization. If they have weekly or bi-weekly meetings, it may not even take that long. The fact of the matter is that it's a control thing. Leaders in these parties are afraid of real radical elements coming in and doing more serious rabble rousing than tame protests, useless petitions, or newspaper pushing. Leaders are afraid someone might come in and challenge their knowledge of politics, Marxism, or organizing. Leaders are afraid that active and engaged workers might

enter the party and demand that dues money go to something that helps working-class people instead of to printing newspapers that don't say anything new and books that don't say anything that the party newspaper hasn't said a million times already.

Money in the Name of Justice

The Unions

Perhaps I should get a medal for being the ten billionth person to bash the purple bastards at SEIU, but it still needs to be done because too many people haven't seen their true face. The Service Employees International Union is known for a number of things to activists, including raiding smaller unions, cutting shady deals with management to the detriment of the workers and workplace democracy, and screwing over their own staff. Unfortunately, such abhorrent practices aren't limited to SEIU or the labor movement alone, but the purple shysters sure are good example.

In 2008, after the Puerto Rican teachers' union (FMPR) lost its recognition from the Puerto Rican government, SEIU attempted to raid the island and take over as the representative of the teachers. They attempted to act as a yellow union (one that colludes with management) and were very close to the island's corrupt governor, Anibal Acevedo Vila. FMPR still had 12,000 dues paying members and wasn't willing to let SEIU come in and be a puppet union. A campaign ensued, but SEIU was the only union on the ballot. The teachers' of Puerto Rico voted "no" and stuck with FMPR. SEIU also attempted to stifle and intimidate dissenters within their own ranks when their own members spoke out against the attempted raid on FMPR (Early, 2008).

Let me take a second here to point out that union bureaucrats intimidating their own members for dissenting is nothing new. Howard Zinn writes in *A People's History of the United States* that "AFL officials drew large salaries, hobnobbed with employers, even moved in high society...The well-paid leaders of the AFL were protected from criticism by tightly controlled meetings and by 'goon' squads - hired toughs originally used against strikebreakers but after a while used to intimidate and beat up opponents inside the union" (Zinn, 1980, p. 304) This intimidation, though much less violent today, still goes on inside the major unions when the rank-and-file dare to dissent and work for change within their union.

SEIU also attacked a Labor Notes conference in 2008 because they were angry that the head of the rival California Nurses Association would be speaking. Injuries were reported as SEIU heavies rushed the doors, body slammed people, and physically beat people (including women). All over a bitter rivalry started by SEIU's attacks on CNA ("Labor Notes Staff" source). The rivalry between the two unions has some history, and getting into it here would go beyond the scope of this essay. Much of it has to do with SEIU making a deal with hospital management and California politicians on hospital staffing ratios. SEIU sided with those that would decrease the number of hospital staff (decrease nurse to patient ratios) just so they could get preferential treatment. Every good capitalist knows that one good way to make a profit is to squeeze more labor out of fewer workers, and SEIU showed its true colors when it sided against the interests of nurses (Shaw, 2012).

So why would SEIU serve as the schoolyard bullies of the labor movement? Because there is money in it. If they can take over a bargaining unit from another union, then they will get more dues money and their overpaid officials like Mary Kay Henry can get a bigger house. If they can become close to management and business owners, they will have an easier time in their

campaigns to represent (or steal) a bargaining unit. That, again, means more dues money for pigs at the trough such as Henry, Sterns, and so on. Again, SEIU isn't the only union to carry out such abhorrent strategies. Raids are quite common throughout the labor movement because the overpaid leaders are putting money before the interests of the workers.

Another example comes from community organizer Michael Gecan's book *Going Public*. Gecan is an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation. In his book, he describes how his organization was building affordable homes for low-income residents in Brooklyn. He describes how a construction union (which he left unnamed) attempted to intimidate his organization into paying money into the pensions of imaginary workers! Not only that, the homes being built had nothing to do with the union that was threatening the IAF project with "accidents" for not giving them money for non-existent workers. Fortunately, the authorities had already been investigating this union for its intimidation of others in the city (Gecan, 2002, ps. 104-106).

Unions vs. staff unions.

On multiple occasions, union staffers have unionized themselves and gone on strike against union bosses who emulate the hierarchy, culture, and practices of the business world.

Union salesmen, or "organizers" as liberals still claim they are, are required to sell membership to a certain number of workers each week or be fired. These quotas aren't determined practically, but rather by bosses far removed from the workplaces and communities that their staff is working in. One organizer from the Fight for 15 campaign was arbitrarily fired around Christmas by SEIU despite having a family to support (Forman, 2013).

A good example, seeing as how I've already beat the SEIU horse to death, is the state chapters of the National Education Association (NEA is a union for anyone in the education industry). On multiple occasions the state associations have broke out the old union-busting techniques on their staff union. For example, Oregon Education Association offices were closed as retaliation for a lawsuit filed by the staff union against the OEA. The OEA had terminated secretaries in various offices, and the union demanded the secretaries get their jobs back. Instead of talking it out with their own employees, the OEA closed the offices of the former secretaries. It is also worth mentioning that OEA staff members went on strike in 2008 (Kullgren, 2014). In Virginia in 2012, there was talk of a possible lockout of, or strike by, VEA staff members (see the "Virginia Professional Staff Association" Facebook page). I was present at a staff meeting when someone brought up how VEA had hired what he described as "a union-busting lawyer" to deal with the internal labor dispute. In 2014, the staff union took the VEA to court over breaches of the collective bargaining agreement ("Virginia Professional Staff Association et al vs. VEA" source).

Community and Advocacy Organizations

Everyone remembers ACORN. In 2004, ACORN campaigned to raise the minimum wage in Florida. Considering the language and campaigns coming from today's labor movement, it is ironic that the AFL-CIO didn't support ACORN's campaign to raise the minimum wage (Rathke, 2005, ps. 59-61). Unions aren't the only ones betraying the interests of working-class people and putting money and politics before justice. ACORN itself is guilty of this as well.

In the documentary *Battle for Brooklyn* (2011), there is footage of ACORN holding demonstrations in support of the Atlantic Yards Project. This project was put forth by wealthy real estate developer Bruce Ratner in order to build a basketball stadium by kicking the residents of Prospect Heights out of their homes. Many underhanded tactics were used, including falsely declaring the neighborhood as "blighted" and using private security goons to intimidate residents who refused to move. ACORN, along with various unions, is shown supporting the gentrification of this neighborhood and supporting Ratner the real estate tycoon. The documentary ends with the residents being defeated, but still getting some hollow justice. Most of the development Ratner promised to carry out was never done, and the majority of the jobs he claimed the Atlantic Yards Project would create were never created. ACORN and the unions just sided with Ratner in hopes that he would hire their people. They didn't have a contract or any sort of agreement, not even a pinky-promise. ACORN just blindly sided against the interests of working-class residents and took the word of a wealthy capitalist without question (Galinsky & Hawley, 2011).

Many organizations claiming to work for justice, such as the PIRG-affiliated Fund for the Public Interest, act in manners contradictory to their progressive message. *In These Times* reported on the plight of one Fund employee, David Neel, who was fired for his union activism. 12 other Fund workers were also fired due to their efforts to unionize the Fund's call center in Portland. Neel's story gained the attention it did because he was able to prove to National Labor Relations Board officials and a federal judge that he was illegally fired for his work in the union. The courts ordered the Fund for the Public Interest to give Neel his job back with back pay, but they continued to try and weasel out of respecting this worker's rights. In the end, he caved in

and accepted a settlement of over \$26,000 from the Fund after a car accident left him and his fiancée severely injured (McIntosh, 2014).

Many progressive organizations contract out their organizing and fundraising work to staffing agencies like Grassroots Campaigns, Inc. and Work for Progress. These agencies treat their workers just as bad as any fast food chain or Amazon warehouse. Sometimes they outdo them when it comes to exploiting and cheating their employees.

As a former Amazon worker myself, I would like to compare GCI to Amazon. I don't mention my time at Amazon to defend its management practices or its exploitation. On the contrary, working at Amazon is like working in prison. The reason I make this comparison is to show the reader just how awful of a workplace GCI and its counterparts are. If places like GCI, SEIU, and others are comparable to, or worse than, a sweatshop with a high turnover rate like the Amazon warehouses, then what does that say about the state of organizing? What does that tell you about the organizations influencing, and in some instances guiding, grassroots activists, workers, and various movements? Think what you want, but it doesn't tell me anything good.

Amazon's temp workers are given at least six weeks to try and meet their impossible scanning rates (basically quotas). They're verbally abused and forced to work ridiculous hours in the process. Grassroots Campaigns, Inc., on the other hand, gives its new hires three days to meet the impossible fundraising quota. If they fail to meet the quota, they are fired within their first week or two. GCI has a turnover rate that would make any fast food manager cringe. The majority of workers are terminated within the first week. A GCI employee in Portland, Oregon told *In These Times*, "I've been in the office about three weeks; I'm one of the longest-term employees there now. I have seen over 70 [to] 80 percent of the people working there when I was hired be fired since then" (Burley, 2014).

GCI workers were also told that they had to opt out of the company healthcare plan if they wanted to be hired. Amazon and its temp agency Integrity Staffing never made me opt out of the health plan. Instead, they neglected to make an effort to inform me about it outside of a page or two in the new employee handbook (Burley, 2014).

Things became so bad at GCI and other “progressive and grassroots” contractors that workers sought to unionize as part of the Industrial Workers of the World. Unsurprisingly, management broke out all traditional anti-union techniques that you will find at fast food chains, warehouses, factories, and elsewhere. They refused to recognize and negotiate with the union (Burley, 2014). This is the true face of liberalism, and, as I hope you can see, it resembles its twin brother on the right.

What Organizing Should Look Like

The first half of this essay has described what is wrong with organizing today, so it is only fair that the second half of this essay should attempt to describe how to make it right. So far I have described the animosity, the prejudice, and the corporatization of various movements. I used the various organizations and movements as examples in the first half not because I want to rescue them, but because I want to rescue people from them with the hope of moving towards authentic, grassroots organizing. Authentic organizing is the opposite of what was described in the first half. It is democratic, it strives to be self-sustaining, it is engaging and striving to grow, and it is constantly reinventing itself in order to meet the demands of its time and conditions.

A Worthwhile Organization

Let me be clear right now, the ideal organization probably doesn't exist. Unless you were born into an organization and brainwashed into its ways and positions, no group will ever be perfect for you. Instead, serious people should focus on creating or finding a worthwhile organization. The difference between a worthwhile organization (or organizer) and one that should stop existing is that a worthwhile organization attempts to empower the common person. It comes from the ranks of regular people and struggles alongside them, and it not only educates those in its community, workplace, or campus, but is educated by its fellow workers and neighbors in turn.

Although far from perfect and deserving of its own critical essay, Occupy Richmond does provide a good example for one of the points this essay is trying to make. Occupy Richmond was different from the rest of the activism in the city at the time because it was composed mostly of people who were new to activism. It also contained a lot of people who weren't new to local politics, and who tried to use the occupation to further their own interests or the interests of their organization. Interestingly, the new people and the old people learned from each other in the process of doing battle with city authorities, corporate financial interests, and others. Ideas were exchanged, relationships built, and friendships formed. Not only that, Occupy activists made an effort to reach out to working-class and homeless people in the city. They weren't always successful in their outreach, but they didn't always fail either.

As a result of actually doing some listening, many people from Occupy Richmond became involved in local issues such as opposing school closings, opposing legislation that would close women's health clinics, and various issues facing the local black community. When

Occupy finally broke up and the activists went their different ways, many of them went on to work in various issues that they knew were necessary to address as a result of being educated by their fellow community members.

A worthwhile, authentic organization is one that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. It isn't guided by shadowy funders in distant cities. It isn't lead by staffers pushing people in this or that direction. A worthwhile organization is composed of people who come from among the ranks of those they are trying to organize. When people look at the organizers or elected leaders of the organization, they should be reminded of themselves. For example, why did the people follow Daniel Shays to arms in a rebellion against the government of Massachusetts in 1787? Shays came from the ranks of the indebted and the poor who were being crushed by taxes and losing their land. The rebels saw themselves and their cause in Shays, and Shays saw himself in them. They were one.

Any organization that is truly of, by, and for the people must be democratic. The specifics and details of the organizational structure should, understandably, change as the organization grows. The specifics will vary by situation, locality, type of organization, and size, so it isn't the purpose of this essay to really go into detail about it. To keep an organization responsible to the people, all of its officials should be elected and directly recallable at any time if the members so choose. There should be as few perks as possible. In other words, elected officials shouldn't quit their day jobs. If it ever becomes necessary to employ staff, they should be elected from within the ranks and subject to recall at any time by the members.

Authentic organizing never idles; it is always on the march. Organizers cannot just sit there and say "I don't know what we are going to do" when times get tough. If you need to step back and reevaluate, then do that. If you don't know where to go from here, then go back to the

drawing board. Get the members together and brainstorm, and always go in a direction that leads to respectful engagement with the grassroots. Remember that your cause is bigger than your organization and proceed to make alliances, be open to new ideas and methods, and, if necessary, dissolve and rebuild as something better suited to your struggle.

Away with dogma.

A worthwhile organization knows when its time is up. Dinosaurs become a roadblock to effective future organizing. I remember speaking with a community organizer friend of mine a few years ago. She was describing how people in Richmond are very stuck in the old ways. As an African-American herself, she had a wealth of experience organizing in the local black community. She gave the example of how people would always want to go to the old organizations like the NAACP and use the old methods like marches whenever something requiring immediate action popped up. People would march, but not in a direction that took them anywhere. At the end of the day, nothing changed. This dogma around how to mobilize and organize became a roadblock to current organizing and the development of tactics suited to the present conditions.

In much the same way, the modern radical left repeats what worked many decades ago and rarely tries anything new. In much the same way, people join the old, useless organizations that are big enough to warrant their own Wikipedia entry (it doesn't take much). People join these groups that are stuck in the ways of 50 or 100 years ago and often refuse to look beyond their narrow little club. I have seen so many good people join one of these parties or cliques and

change into closed-minded and arrogant people. In their mind, their stiff little cult is right and the rest of the world is wrong.

Never ask “what would our heroes do?” All of those people are dead and gone now and chances are good the conditions that they were working under have changed. Instead, ask why what your heroes did was so effective at the time. What was it about their actions that shook the system and frightened the powers that be? For example, when black people were marching in the streets during the Civil Rights Movement, it wasn't just symbolism. The very thought of the black masses gathering together and marching through the streets of segregated cities, or Washington DC itself, was intimidating to the racist system. The police, the politicians, and the upper class were terrified that all hell would break loose. Today, protests and marches have been worked into the system. They are considered protected speech. Yes, there are times when they are deemed illegal in America, but it is nothing like it was in the past. Today a protest is often nothing more than symbolism.

Dogmatic beliefs about what worked in the past or how great older, established organizations are have never benefited anyone. Such attitudes belong in the church, but even the Catholic Church has had to make some changes over the centuries in order to keep its following. Organizers must never be afraid to experiment with new ideas, nor should members be afraid to make major changes to the organization if the times call for it. On-the-ground conditions are never the same in different times or places. Authentic organizing involves the practice of adapting to your conditions, adapting to the situation on the ground, and constantly reinventing your organization or your strategy. This is political *science*, after all. Scientists experiment, scientists are constantly testing and retesting their hypotheses, and scientists criticize each other and themselves in order to progress towards new discoveries. If physics, biology, astronomy,

medicine, and engineering all had the dogma of politics, then we would still be living in the Bronze Age. Organizers must be more like scientists. We must break with the dogmas of the past and strive to be innovative in a world that is constantly, and often rapidly, changing.

In order to work towards an authentic model of organizing in this century, we must never be afraid to question the old icons. We must keep in mind that the historical figures organizers tend to look up to were only human. They weren't perfect and they weren't right about everything. As a matter of fact, they may have been wrong about a lot more than so many are willing to admit.

A Good Organizer

A good organizer possesses many qualities. An organizer must be a strategist, a psychologist, a sociologist, and an anthropologist all at the same time. A good organizer is considerate, respectful, and never afraid to admit when they're wrong. A good organizer works to understand the situation and the people they are trying to organize, never acts like they know better than everyone else, and is flexible.

I once had the misfortune of letting myself get sucked into an SEIU-lead campaign to organize a group of people to oppose, or at least put pressure on, Congressman Eric Cantor to do more to create jobs. I was unemployed at the time, so I figured it couldn't hurt. The lady the union sent down to organize this group was very pushy and maintained firm control over the direction of the group. I remember during one meeting there were some people who had a few ideas that would be good for a long-run approach, which is really where the group should have been focused given that it wasn't an election year anyway. The "organizer" sent down by the

union didn't like any of their ideas and shot them down, implying the group wasn't going to be doing any ideas that weren't the ones she suggested. She wasn't around long, but everyone who stuck with the group sort of felt like they were doing things for her instead of for their own benefit.

The union wanted to organize a big pro-jobs, anti-Cantor protest towards the end of the summer. In preparing for this, they reached out to a community organization with the hope of bringing out bigger numbers. A few days before the big protest, they held a meeting with members of our super special anti-Cantor group and the members of the community organization. The only problem was that it wasn't a real meeting. The union staff talked at us, not with us. They told their "community partners" how it was going to go, whether we agreed or not.

When this was all over, and the lady left to embark on her next big assignment, those in the group she supposedly organized went their separate ways. We liked each other enough, we could have stuck together, but we didn't because we really got the impression that this was just a temporary project to make our new friend from SEIU happy. To top it all off, Eric Cantor remained in office for another term after that.

A good organizer will do the opposite of what my "friend" from SEIU did. When I was the main guy representing SDS at my university, I was approached by a lot of people with different interests and ideas. I always encouraged them. For example, I had a few women join who really wanted to work on the issue of reproductive rights, which was big in Virginia at the time due to legislation targeting abortion and women's health clinics. Some of them were involved in the larger community protest movement regarding that issue, and others wanted to take a more artistic approach. I would always offer whatever help I could, and whatever

miniscule resources SDS had that would be helpful, to these projects. I would even put them in touch with other activists I knew with the hope of starting something bigger, even though myself and the organization would have little to no stake in it. As a result, people kept coming back to our meetings and many of the (thousands) of students on campus knew who we were, as well as many activists from the larger community, and were not afraid to approach us to propose a partnership for their projects.

I must criticize myself, however, because at the end of the day I was just a much nicer version of our SEIU friend. Myself and others in SDS were too busy pursuing activism around various issues that we neglected our overall goal, which was to build the infrastructure on campus to empower students, and to assist with building the same in the community to empower working-class people. While being involved in multiple projects and encouraging members with diverse interests and ideas is definitely the right thing to do (if the group doesn't spread itself too thin), such work should be undertaken with the ultimate goal of the organization in mind.

The lesson to take away from all this is that a good organizer is a good person who is open to new ideas and encourages the work of others, but at the same time the organizer helps to guide the organization in the direction of achieving its ultimate goals. It is good to have multiple projects, and we should participate in multiple struggles with sincere and honest intentions, but we should always ask ourselves, "How can we use our work in this project or struggle to build the infrastructure to empower those we are trying to organize?"

A Good Strategy

While it isn't my intention to lay out a full-fledged campaign strategy in this section, I do intend to give a general idea of the qualities a good strategy should have. As stated before, your cause is bigger than your organization. If your work becomes more about the organization than the cause, then you have become a business and might as well install a kitchen and open a McDonald's franchise. Your organization should never avoid cooperation with appropriate allies, nor should your organization become an exclusive club for certain types of people (old, young, punk rockers, etc.).

Much of the success of Anti-Racist Action (ARA) in the 1990s was due to its openness. ARA didn't attempt to build a wall between itself and the rest of the people who shared their goals of keeping neo-Nazis at bay. ARA started in 1987 in the skinhead music scene as a reaction to the Nazi presence in the genre. The goal was to build a larger movement to take on the Nazis wherever they go, but for its first few years of existence it was mainly a skinhead group. Its political openness, however, allowed it to grow pretty quickly over the next several years. They were able to build good relationships with groups of people who were often overlooked by much of the traditional (and arguably middle-class) left, such as working-class youths, street punks, and the Queer community. By the early 1990s ARA had grown into a much broader youth movement and became the largest antifascist organization in the US and Canada. Whether you loved or hated ARA, you simply couldn't ignore it (Key, 2006, ps. 45-46).

While traditional left organizing grew stale, ARA attempted to innovate. Most young people aren't attracted to fascism due to ideology, but rather through friends and the cultural scene (music, parties). ARA recognized this and established its own counterculture to combat the

neo-Nazi underground. This is where the likes of Rock Against Racism came into play (Key, 2006, p. 34).

Solidarity not charity?

Something that stands out to me is when organizations talk a big game about fighting various problems plaguing working-class people, but turn their backs when actual victims of the problem approach them for help. For example, my anti-Cantor “friend” from SEIU had a bunch of people in the group who were struggling because they were out of work. While it’s understandable that the main focus for such a project should be on organizing against Cantor, it may have helped the group in the long-run if she had used her union connections to at least try and get some of these people interviewed by a potential employer.

The reason I suggest this idea is because people become committed to a cause or organization through actions. Actions speak louder than words. They always have and they always will. The common refrain among too many people from the center-left all the way to the far-left is “solidarity not charity,” but are these things really incompatible? People are not won over by “organizing conversations” (sales pitches), and I have never seen a single script recruit anyone. People are won over by the deeds of the organizer and the organization.

Occupy Our Homes, for instance, not only works to block evictions and disrupt the auctions of foreclosed homes, it also finds homes for those without one by fixing up vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed homes and moving the victims of the housing and foreclosure crisis in (Christie, 2011). A search of the Occupy Our Homes website shows that these sorts of actions won over so many people to the vision of the organization. Is this solidarity or this charity? Take,

for example, the case of Tacco Cullins and her family. Cullins is a single mother who sought help from Occupy Our Homes Atlanta when she was tricked into substandard and dangerous living conditions by a fake landlord. Occupy Our Homes teamed up with local churches and activists and was able to raise enough money to get the Cullins family a safe place to live. Not only did this campaign get the Cullins family a safe place to stay, it pressured the Atlanta Housing Authority to end their freeze on section 8 housing (“Atlanta” and “Tacco” sources, 2012, and Ross, 2012).

Make whatever criticisms you will of the Black Panthers, but nobody can deny the impact that their free breakfast program had. They saw the hunger and poverty in their community and took it upon themselves to try and alleviate some of it. Their breakfast program was such a good strategy that it concerned FBI director J. Edgar Hoover:

The BCP (Breakfast for Children Program) promotes at least tacit support for the BPP (Black Panther Party) among naive individuals . . . And, what is more distressing, provides the BPP with a ready audience composed of highly impressionable youths. . . . Consequently, the BCP represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for (Mascarenhas-Swan, 2013).

At the end of the day, the organizing conversation is useless and meaningless if you don’t have a reputation of backing up what you say. The same goes for newspapers, websites, and speeches. Words are cheap. Words are meaningless. Of course, even a conversation can be a type of action, albeit a very small one, if you do it right. Too many professionals talk *at* the people they are trying to recruit instead of talking *to or with* them. You can’t just start talking about how great or beneficial this or that organization or project is, or how helpful it might be, because you will be viewed the exact same way as a television commercial or telemarketer. You need to listen to those you are trying to organize. Even if you are one of them, even if you are in the exact

same situation as they are, you still need to listen. It doesn't matter if they are young and you (wrongly) think you know better because you're older. It doesn't matter if these people seem apprehensive or timid. You must always be courteous, if not humble, and listen to those you are having an organizing conversation with. Listen to their concerns, listen to their ideas, listen to their problems and take what they say seriously. Try to learn from the people. It will have an impact and it will speak to them more than any "rap" because it isn't often that regular people are actually listened to, have their input sought and valued, and treated as if they are intelligent enough to know what they're talking about. The biggest impression can be made on someone by showing them that you value and respect them. Why do you think so many companies try to give you the impression that they value their customers? Because people will stick around if they think they're going to be treated like human beings for once instead of numbers, burdens, or fools. Remember that the people don't owe you or your organization anything. It is you who owes it to the people to prove your group is worth joining and to prove you practice what you preach.

Remember where you came from.

Too many people forget that they are a part of the masses. They build walls between their organization or themselves and the rest of the world. If people liked exclusive clubs, then country clubs wouldn't be just for rich people and sports teams wouldn't sell game tickets to just anybody. You and your organization are a part of the masses. You came from the people, and it would be wise to remember that.

The organization that left Occupy Richmond with the worst reputation was one of the local anarchist clubs. I won't name them here because I respect a lot of the things they do. They were so wrapped up in what they wanted that people wanted nothing to do with them. They were also quite confrontational at times. The sad thing is that so many people there had never been politically active before and it was a great opportunity to win people over to the radical perspective, but they blew it. In the end, people may have left Occupy talking like anarchists but they all became Democrats when the state elections came around.

Around 40 people walked out of SEIU's Occupy DC camp at the National Mall for almost the same reason. SEIU wanted to hijack and control the movement. They wanted people to give support and effort to them even though they offered nothing in return (Captain, 2011). Another example comes from New York City, when Workers World Party organized an Occupy Wall Street "general assembly" which consisted of party speakers belching out propaganda at the people and little to no space for the views of non-members (Schneider, 2013, ps. 12-13). While there are probably a number of reasons and problems that would lead an organization down such an awful road, one reason is that they thought they were better than, or at least significantly different from, the masses of people. Although forgotten by too many communists today, I believe Karl Marx laid out a great strategy in the *Communist Manifesto* when he said:

In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole?
The Communists *do not* form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. They have *no* interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They *do not* set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement (Marx, 1848, chapter 2).

We must remember that we are a product of the people and a product of the class struggle and *not* the other way around. Say what you will about identity politics (I certainly have my criticisms), but one of the reasons it caught on during the Occupy movement and after it faded is

because such politics were brought in and made easy to understand and relevant to the current struggle. You didn't need to be part of an exclusive club to embrace them. Followers of such beliefs mixed in with the people and worked alongside the people instead of building an exclusive organization and trying to lead or guide the movement. As a result, their politics seemed to be echoed almost naturally by the movement. I see no reason why others can't or shouldn't do the same.

When the masses of people do rise, they will not flock to the old activist cliques. They will, however, adopt ideas and beliefs that they can apply to the struggle themselves. They will adopt outlooks that can be reconciled and applied to their democratic practice. Radical ideas are democratic, just not when they are used in the name of dogma or some rigid organization or clique. We must make such ideas readily available, understandable and applicable to the current struggles, and true Marxists, anarchists, and others will do it while being a part of the combative masses and not a separate, walled off organization. We must always struggle as a part of the awakened masses, because we *are* a part of the masses, and *not* as some outside group set on "intervening," shaping, and molding whatever popular movement for our own benefit. If you instead take the approach of the Workers World Party or SEIU, then you might as well be preaching religion at people, and nobody likes that except on Sunday morning.

The Way Forward

Keeping in mind all of the problems and challenges described throughout this essay, the way forward is something that must be addressed. It isn't enough to simply act as a democratic body within the masses. It isn't enough to just be good organizers. We must work to build new

and innovative organizations that will do what the others can't or won't, and work to avoid falling into the same traps as the organizations that came before us such as the unions, the ex-grassroots organizations, the anarchist cliques, and the ten billion Bolshevik-esque parties.

As stated before, any new organization must be completely democratic. Its officials, and even staff (if staff is necessary), must be subject to direct and immediate recall if it is the will of the members. Anyone on the payroll of the organization must not be paid anymore than the average member or worker. It is worth mentioning that democratic organizations, rare as they are these days, already exist, so it isn't necessarily a completely inventive idea, but it is a good idea to start with.

Any new organization must strive to be self-sustaining. Of course, there are already such organizations out there. Off the top of my head I can think of many groups that are able to sustain themselves financially through monthly dues, yearly fundraisers, and annual pledges from their members. Many student organizations have mastered the art of kicking ass and taking names on a shoe-string budget. With that said, being self-sustaining isn't necessarily a revolutionary quality, but it is necessary if your organization is to maintain its full independence of thought and action. Learn to work within a budget, and remember that some of the most successful battles in history were won by actions and members' strong commitment not only to their cause but to each other. In other words, the people made history with little to no money in their coffers. Then remember how commitment to an organization is built. Also remember that the best propaganda is action, and efforts and money would be better spent on actions that actually make a difference and not on merchandise and downtown offices.

The way forward is not to recreate the organizations of the past. We don't need new labor unions and we don't need new political parties. We need entirely new organizations adapted to

modern conditions that will do what the existing organizations won't do or are afraid to do. Perhaps the words "entirely new" are misleading. Chances are it really has all been done and thought of before. After all, human beings have been around for thousands and thousands of years. As long as civilization has been divided into classes, into haves and have nots, there has always been organizing and class conflict. It is worth it to learn from history, but history is made by those who adopt the lessons of history instead of its dogmas. Start something new and unseen in recent years, even if someone already tried something like it before any of us were born. What it should look like, of course, depends on your struggles and your conditions.

This isn't to say that all existing organizations are horrible. There are a few worthwhile unions left in this country, though they aren't exactly gigantic or well-known. Organizations that refuse to bow down to the major politicians and businesses face such an uphill battle. I know a lot about the American unions, but I never considered myself an expert. When it comes to the multitude of locals across this country, it is impossible for anyone to be an expert. If you want to work within a worthwhile union, union local, or grassroots community organization, then it is up to you to find them if you so choose. For me to make that decision for you would be against the message of this essay.

Authentic organizing knows no boundaries because the oppression of class society knows no boundaries. We must organize in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in the community at large, in the high schools, in the universities, and anywhere else there is a chance to bring people together for justice. If capitalism colonizes Hell, then we must organize the minions and the lost souls. A worthwhile organizer or organization would at least try to fight everywhere. We must show each other what the power of an organized people can do and what the power of real democracy can do. Contrary to what the government and the corporations that own it would have

you believe, real democracy is not a once every four years thing. Real democracy doesn't stop at the beginning of November. Real democracy is an all day, all night, all week, every month, every space, and every location battle. Elections don't bring change. Politicians don't bring change. Collective bargaining agreements don't bring change. Regular, working people united and ready to fight the good fight no matter what the cost and no matter where the fight takes them are what make change.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

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