

**THE SEATTLE SOLIDARITY NETWORK:  
A NEW KIND OF WORKING CLASS SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Seattle Solidarity Network (SeaSol) is a small but growing workers and tenants' mutual support organization that fights for specific demands using collective direct action. The organization was founded by five members of the Industrial Workers of the World in December of 2007 who wanted to find a way to contribute to rebuilding a revolutionary working-class social movement by winning tangible victories despite having only a small number of supporters. As members of a revolutionary union they had little interest in organized labor in and of itself. Ultimately, they were interested in the potential of unions to serve as a mechanism to one-day overturn capitalist social relations entirely. However, more urgently, they wanted to find a way to put their anarchist ideas into practice by organizing people to take collective direct action to immediately improve their lives. As their idea of forming some sort of mutual support network began to take shape in late 2007 they decided that they should also include tenants' issues in their project. Their class politics prompted them to view tenants' and workers' issues as inextricably linked and they hoped that by engaging with both tenants and workers they would be able to ensure a broader level of activity for their new organization.

SeaSol's first few members knew from experience that it is simple for an employer to refuse to pay a worker's wages or for a landlord to fail to return a tenant's security deposit. They also knew that the existing legal remedies to these problems are tedious and ineffectual. SeaSol was formed to bring working-class individuals together to combat employer and landlord abuses of this kind using collective direct action instead. Despite the revolutionary ambitions of many of its members, SeaSol does not base its day-to-day activities on any grandiose vision of the future and does not have any official political program. SeaSol exists to achieve immediate material gains for low-wage workers and tenants in the here and now. Since its formation five years ago, SeaSol has successfully used direct action (picketing, posting leaflets, etc.) to resolve approximately thirty-five specific housing and job-related issues while growing to one hundred and twenty five members. In the absence of effective legal remedies and strong workers' or tenants' unions, SeaSol members try to protect one another when an employer or landlord abuses any given member of the network by carrying out escalating campaigns of public protest.

SeaSol's approach is especially notable because it defies prevailing ideologies surrounding social justice by operating outside the paradigm of progressive organizations today: SeaSol is all volunteer, has no explicit political ideology, does not rely on lawyers or other professionals, does not involve itself in electoral politics, is not a legally recognized non-profit, and is funded exclusively by small individual donations. This article shows how working-class people do not necessarily need to depend on lawmakers or non-profits to improve their lives. In Seattle, they are coming together as equals to directly improve their lives using only their own collective power and imagination. SeaSol's present activities are limited, but the wider implications of the organization's strategy for social transformation are boundless. This article uses historical comparisons

and interviews with SeaSol members to examine what is unique about the organization, why it is succeeding, and how its members are politicized as a result of their participation in SeaSol.

## **Chapter 2**

### **LABOR'S WINTER**

The labor movement in the United States has been crumbling for decades. In 2012, the percentage of wage and salary workers who were members of a union was just 11.3%— or 14.4 million workers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). This is down considerably from the peak of union density in 1955 at approximately 34% (Levi, Olson and Kelly 2009). Unions in the United States have but a shadow of their former strength, and the overwhelming majority of workers in the United States are unorganized. Few Americans would describe themselves first and foremost as workers anymore and the culture of solidarity that once fueled the American labor movement has all but disappeared. The unabated decline of unions over the past fifty years represents an unequivocal triumph for capital over labor and begs the questions: are unions in the United States going extinct? Might organized labor cease to be a significant social force in the United States forever?

The Seattle Solidarity Network exists to defy these possibilities. Their members wonder instead: might the United States see a resurgence of the popular labor and social movements of the first half of the twentieth century in the twenty first? Could the labor movement become powerful enough to once again be a significant social force in American politics?

### **Two Futures**

The winter of 2011 was an interesting time to examine SeaSol as well as to consider the future of working-class social movements in the United States at large. In Renton, Washington, SeaSol was in the midst a bitter campaign against a small Italian restaurant in an effort to recover a waitress' unpaid wages. At the same time, in Madison, Wisconsin, a Republican governor was trying to push through legislation intended to destroy public sector unions in the State while tens of thousands of people protested at the Capitol building. The stark contrast between the all but unknown conflict SeaSol was having in Renton and the much-publicized protests in Wisconsin at nearly the same time can be seen as parallel harbingers of two very different futures for working-class social movements in the United States: extinction or rejuvenation. The juxtaposition of these two specific events provides a useful starting point for understanding how SeaSol's approach differs from that of the mainstream political Left in the United States.

## **The Future From Madison**

On February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin introduced a new “budget repair bill” designed to strip Wisconsin’s 283,351 public employees (WTA 2011) of their collective bargaining rights and greatly weaken public sector unions in the state. The proposed bill was designed to eliminate the automatic deduction of union dues from union employee’s pay and mandatory union membership, limit labor contracts to one year, remove the right to collective bargaining entirely in some industries while strictly limiting it in others, and require public unions to run a campaign to be successfully recertified in a National Labor Relations Board election every year (State Legislature of Wisconsin 2011).

The proposed bill was a litmus test for the strength of public sector unions across the nation as much of the country watched and waited with bated breath to see what would happen in Wisconsin. Despite the number of workers involved, Governor Walker and the Republican Party seemingly felt confident that the unions and their allies would be unable to successfully stop the bill from becoming law. The rest of February was high on drama as Wisconsin’s public sector unions and their supporters struggled to prevent the bill from becoming law. Thousands of protesters occupied the Capitol Rotunda in Madison a day and night sit in demanding that the bill be scrapped. Wisconsin’s Democratic state lawmakers physically fled to Illinois in order to prevent the state senate from having the necessary quorum to vote on the bill, and a variety of private and public unions organized solidarity rallies at every state capital in the country (Bauer 2011, Haas 2011, Ramirez 2011).

The large public demonstrations were presumably designed to bring political pressure to bear on Governor Walker and the Republican Party. Perhaps by publicly shaming them in the national spotlight and in enough numbers the protesters hoped to fill Walker and the Republicans with enough fear for their own future careers that they would decide to back down. The problem with this strategy was that while it made good television, it gave the protestors no real leverage. After seventeen days a County Circuit Judge ordered protestors in Madison to vacate the capitol building overnight on March 4, and protestors complied without serious resistance (MSNBC 2011). Unions and their supporters continued to protest en mass in Wisconsin and across the nation, but eventually, even as Wisconsin’s Democrats continued to refuse to return to the State House, the Republican Senate passed the measure on March 9 (Davey 2011). Despite Democratic lawmakers insistence that the vote was illegal under the Senates’ rules regarding necessary quorum, Governor Walker signed the bill into law on March 11 (Bauer 2011).

On June 14 the Wisconsin State Supreme Court ruled that the Republican vote to pass the bill was legal (Mayers 2011). As a result, public sector unions across the country may soon be faced with similar measures—possibly marking another step towards the complete extinction of unions as a serious social force in the United States. Democratic lawmakers and union leaders promised legal challenges and a recall election of Governor Walker and other Republican politicians in order to block or reverse the measure, but approximately one year later Governor Walker won a recall election in June of 2012 and

kept his job. In the wake of this disaster for organized labor, Wisconsin's protesters and their sympathizers across the nation have been left wondering: is there anything else they could have done?

There is at least one compelling answer to this question: the unions and their supporters could have used sustained direct action tactics to put pressure on Governor Walker. The public demonstrations were certainly somewhat embarrassing and inconvenient for Wisconsin's Republicans, but strike action on the part of Wisconsin's public unions could have literally brought the state to a standstill. This would have placed considerable pressure on Governor Walker to resolve the situation and possibly would have caused him to negotiate. In mid-February, teachers from across the State called in "sick" to attend protests at the Capitol building in a brash wildcat strike. In Madison, forty percent of the districts teachers phoned in the sick, causing the entire school district to cancel classes (DeFour 2011). However, union leaders moved quickly to stop the strikes. The Madison Teacher's union, Madison Teacher's Inc (MTI), The Milwaukee Teacher's Association, and the State's largest teacher's union, the Wisconsin Education Council Association (WEAC) consistently issued statements urging union workers to continue to report for work and reassuring them that they had the situation well in hand (Bell 2011, WISC-TV 2011). Union leaders made it clear that determining appropriate strategies for resisting the bill was their purview.

Groups of angry workers and radicals from within and without the public sector unions, including the Madison branch of the IWW, relentlessly called for at least a one-day general strike to resist the measure, but their calls have been consistently ignored by union leaders. With the public sector union leadership unwilling to actively call for it, a strike of any kind was simply untenable. Instead, union leaders successfully funneled popular anger into more passive modes of resistance. They urged supporters to sign petitions outside the capitol and flew in speakers from across the country to condemn Republicans and extol the Democrats. The Reverend Jesse Jackson told protestors in Madison: "we have a great president. But he cannot do it alone. When we do not fight, we weaken him. We do not vote... if we had used our power to vote, we would not have Mr. Walker as Governor tonight." He then stopped to lead the crowd in a chant: "when we vote, we win! When we vote, we win! (Wisconsin Reporter 2011)" Powerful progressive leaders in Wisconsin were in complete agreement that Governor Walker's bill should be dealt with using only the proper channels—meaning legal and electoral processes.

Even when faced with a bill that was designed to crush them into dust, public sector unions and other progressive organizations in Wisconsin failed to take effective or creative action to stop the measure. Instead, they utilized the same tired strategies the Left has been relying on for decades: public demonstrations, legal challenges, and continued support of the Democratic Party. At the same time, divergent strategies were proactively suppressed as union members were urged to remain at work. These traditional approaches failed to stop the budget repair bill from being passed in Wisconsin and they have failed to slow the general decline of unions at large across the country.

Modern unions are unrecognizable when compared to many unions in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The greatest power unions have is the power of workers to take action on the job that directly disrupts business, yet unions fail to utilize this power time and time again. In its place, America's unions continue to languish in a willful state of institutional bondage. As the most historically significant form of working-class social movement, the obvious impotency of unions as demonstrated in Wisconsin has grim implications for the future. The reasons public sector unions did not bring actual material pressure to bear on Wisconsin Republicans speaks volumes about organized labor in the United States today.

First and foremost, it is illegal for public sector unions in Wisconsin to go on strike. The State has the legal right in Wisconsin to fire any public sector worker who goes on strike. Union leaders on the other hand would face heavy fines and possibly even imprisonment if they organized a strike. Secondly, to operate outside of the law is entirely outside the paradigm of contemporary unionism in this country. For over fifty years unionism in both the private and the public sectors has primarily meant a small group of union lawyers and bureaucrats negotiating under a contract system. Actual on the job action (such as slow-downs, sit-downs, sick-outs, and strikes) is almost always forbidden under contract. "Industrial action," as it is called, is primarily used only between contracts and usually only as a symbolic gesture to give union leaders better posture at the bargaining table.

The overwhelming emphasis on grievance procedure and legal contracts has worked to foster a passive relationship between union members and their unions. This transformation has greatly decreased the power of unions. Workers and unions in the United States have all but forgotten how to fight for improvements in their working conditions on the shop floor rather than in courts and conference rooms. Modern unions are unrecognizable when compared to many unions in the first half of the 20th century. As unionism has become less participatory and increasingly executive, unions' have generally not been able to mobilize the popular support necessary to stop corporate offensives at the bargaining table or in Congress.

The roots of this transformation can be traced to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935. The early 1930s and 1940s was a period of almost open class conflict in the United States. American workers were fed up with the economic hardship and dislocation wrought by the Great Depression and business' efforts to mitigate the crisis by speeding up work and lowering pay. At the same time US employers were still violently opposed to recognizing the legitimacy of unions and did not want to cede an inch to American workers unless they had no other choice. In 1934 a massive strike wave swept the nation. There were general strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. In the same year militant dockworkers in the International Longshoremen Workers Union shut down every major port on the West Coast and 800,000 textile workers went on strike across the South (Bernstein, 1970). Union membership continued to climb steadily during this time and strikes became increasingly common. It was this sort of labor unrest that eventually prompted the passage of the NLRA.

The NLRA was a reformist piece of legislation that contained many important provisions favoring labor. The NLRA recognized unions' right to exist as well as the right to strike, guaranteed collective bargaining, outlawed company unions, and established a national Labor Board to resolve worker's complaints. However, businesses were slow to accept the act and the labor unrest continued. Despite a wartime no-strike pledge from many prominent labor leaders, workers continued to go on strike throughout WWII. There was another series of strikes between 1945-1947 including hundreds of thousands of workers in a wildcat strike movement. Additionally, there were post-war general strikes in Oakland, Lancaster, Stamford, and Akron (Lichtenstein, 1982). After almost twenty years of especially widespread and bitter strike action business finally decided it was in its best interests to negotiate with rather than try to crush labor unions— at least for the time being.

By the end of the 1940s the conflict between capital and labor increasingly moved off of the shop floor and out of the streets. The bargaining table became the new battleground and the NLRA began to define the nature of labor relations in the United States. Although widely viewed as a favorable piece of legislation for organized labor, the NLRA has turned out to be a Trojan horse for American business interests. The nature of the new system of labor contracts and other laws mandated by the NLRA had a number of serious consequences that have greatly contributed to a transformation of the nation's unions. Contracts were typically negotiated every few years by a handful of union leaders, while union members increasingly became passive observers outside of elections. Even worse, social issues outside of working conditions at specific firms were suddenly considered outside of union jurisdiction— sympathy strikes became illegal. In short, any sort of class-based political action was forbidden under the new set of laws:

“Bargaining, however, meant a regime of contractual legalism, in which unions have become the guarantors of continued production rather than being the champions of their members' distress. Their guaranty position is ensured by sanctions—union officials face heavy fines and even jail time for failure to stay within the bounds of industrial legality. Strikes became prohibited except at the end of contracts, while slow-downs, sit-downs, wildcats, and sympathy strikes (the sorts of activity which best epitomize worker class solidarity) remain illegal. Grievances are to be resolved through legalistic grievance procedures, not by job actions on the floor, not by shop stewards persistently attempting to win every shop floor disagreement— and most worker complaints no longer receive any solution at all. Unions ceded to management total control of production, confining themselves to narrow economic issues. (Holt, 2007)”

Unions have since been allowed to advocate for improved working conditions only in certain ways and at certain times. The very type of solidarity that had helped to force the passage of the NLRA in the form of general strikes began to die out as it had become illegal and was therefore frowned upon by union bosses. With just a few union bosses doing most of the bargaining, Americans had less reason to identify as workers. The role of the union member under the new system was to pay dues and elect leaders, not to organize on the job. The strength of union bureaucracies simultaneously increased with the day-to-day organization of the union increasingly falling to paid union staff

rather than regular workers. Attendance at union meetings began to dwindle, but union rules regarding dues-check off ensured that union hierarchies maintained adequate funds. As a result of these changes in culture and organization, unions essentially became an institutionalized special interest group.

In light of this reality workers have little reason to place their time, energy, or hopes in America's unions. According to the 2012 Gallup poll 52% of Americans still approve of labor unions, but this slim majority is the second lowest approval rating for unions that Gallup has ever recorded (Jones). This low approval rating is especially stark when compared to the 72% approval rating Gallup reported in 1936 when the polling agency first asked the question (Jones, 2010). The bureaucratic nature and narrow focus of American unions has resulted not only in a failure to organize new workers on the job but has also contributed to this significant drop in public support over the years. America's unions continue to display a startling lack of creativity that leaves them in a state of institutional bondage.

It is clear that if the working-class are to improve their lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they are going to have to implement new and more effective strategies that will likely challenge the status quo. In Wisconsin, people were plainly unable to do this. Fringe organizations calling for a general strike did not actually command enough popular support to organize such a strike without the support of the mainstream unions' leadership. Like so many radicals across the nation often do, advocates of a general strike in Wisconsin were probably setting their sights to high. The militant working-class organizations that would be necessary to carry out a successful general strike will not be built over night. In contrast, SeaSol offers a practical method for slowly building up the broad base of support that would be necessary to supplant dominant institution's present monopoly on paradigms surrounding social change. By only taking on small issues they can handle without outside support, SeaSol is trying to gain traction in the margins.

### **The Future From Renton**

On January 19, 2011, I attended SeaSol's last picket outside of Bella Napoli restaurant in Renton, a suburb just south of Seattle. SeaSol was picketing the restaurant because its owner, Ciro Donofrio, had fired a waitress we will call Ramona and was now refusing to pay her for her last month of work. Ramona describes what happened to her in an article on SeaSol's website:

“For the entire month of September I worked for Ciro Donofrio at his Italian Restaurant in Renton, Bella Napoli. During this time, Ciro was verbally abusive towards his employees and even customers. He would throw temper tantrums in front of tables and claim we were out of things on the menu simply because he did not feel like making them. He would also hire different people to come in and help out on a weekend night with no prior experience and without training. This proved to be difficult, as I was the only server, bartender, hostess, food runner, and busser. I still had to pay rent so I continued to work for Ciro. Things got hairy when I had \$110 of my bank "disappeared" one night when only he and I were working. Also, I needed my check and Ciro claimed that he only paid his



employees at the end of every month. I thought this was strange, especially after I had seen him give a check to the cook, but I dismissed it. What was he going to do, not pay me? (The Seattle Solidarity Network, 2011)”

Refusing to pay her was exactly what Donofrio ended up doing after Ramona quit. Ramona repeatedly asked him when she was going to be paid and he continued to make excuses until finally admitting that he had no actual intention of paying her. Ramona decided to file a claim against Donofrio with the Department of Labor and Industries (L&I), but quickly became frustrated with the slow and impersonal nature of the process. As a result, when Ramona’s friend told her about a poster she had seen promoting SeaSol, Ramona decided to contact the organization.

After meeting with two SeaSol organizers she decided to join SeaSol. The group quickly voted at their next weekly meeting to initiate a direct action campaign against Donofrio. On November 17, forty SeaSol supporters marched into Bella Napoli with Ramona and delivered a letter to Donofrio telling him that he had 14 days to pay her the wages he owed before they would take further action. When he failed to pay Ramona’s wages after two weeks, SeaSol began an escalating campaign of public actions designed to compel him to pay. For two and a half months SeaSol distributed fliers, put up posters, and picketed Donofrio and his restaurant.

I had the opportunity to participate in one of SeaSol’s pickets of the restaurant on a cold and wet Friday night in January. I was surprised that roughly thirty people showed up for the evening picket despite the weather and the fact that the restaurant was a twenty-minute drive from Seattle. We paraded up and down the sidewalk in front of the restaurant carrying signs and chanting, “Work for Ciro, get paid zero!” while he eyed us angrily from inside his empty restaurant. After about half an hour, as it became obvious that no one was going to cross the picket line that night, Donofrio decided to close his restaurant for the night. After making sure that it was not some sort of trick, most of the people at the picket headed to a nearby Irish pub to celebrate the fact that Donofrio would get no more business that night. As it turned out, it would only be one more week before Donofrio closed his restaurant permanently.

In the week following the January 19 picket, Donofrio ended up spending a night in jail for confronting a group of SeaSol members putting up posters in his neighborhood and slapping one of them in the face. The campaign also received some public exposure on KCBS 90.3 FM’s, “One World Report,” and on the following Friday a SeaSol member who lived in Renton reported that Bella Napoli was entirely empty except for a few pieces of trash and a push broom. Ramona and the rest of SeaSol were ecstatic: Donofrio had refused to pay Ramona her wages, but his stubbornness had come at the expense of his restaurant. Ramona and the rest of SeaSol felt that successfully putting a permanent end to the abuse Donofrio was carrying out at his restaurant was worth more than Ramona’s \$478.

The fight was a milestone for SeaSol in many ways. Firstly, SeaSol had its largest picket ever at that time, with fifty supporters showing up at one point during the campaign to

picket Bella Napoli (SeaSol's has since held one picket with nearly one hundred supporters). Secondly, SeaSol had been put in a situation where an unusually stubborn boss was simply refusing to pay the few hundred dollars he owed despite the fact that SeaSol's pickets were costing him thousands of dollars in lost business. For the first time, SeaSol had the strength and numbers to force an employer to choose between paying what he owed or closing the doors of his business permanently. By absolutely refusing to pay Ramona's wages even though SeaSol's campaign was costing him far more than the meager \$478 he owed, Donofrio put SeaSol's resolve to the test—and SeaSol won. The amount of money at stake was small and the number of people involved was nothing compared to the tens of thousands who were protesting in Wisconsin at about the same time. However, despite the insignificance of the campaign on a grand scale, SeaSol's victory in Renton clearly demonstrated the organization's growing power.

Ramona did eventually receive a check through the Department of Labor and Industries for approximately half of the amount she was actually owed, but when she attempted to cash it the check bounced. Ramona remained unclear as to exactly why this was, but she said that after speaking with L&I it seemed to have something to do with the fact that L&I had not actually secured payment from Donofrio before issuing the check. SeaSol was also unable to secure payment from Donofrio, but when asked if she would remain involved in SeaSol anyway Ramona said:

“Definitely. It's just the justice, it's just seeing a group of people stand beside you and support you and tell you it's ok, I've been through this, it'll get better and we'll stand up to them and they won't win.”

SeaSol's support meant more to Ramona than her \$478. The sort of success SeaSol experienced in Ramona's campaign, small though it may be, proved that organized members of the working-class are capable of identifying and defeating their own enemies without legal or professional assistance. Of course, very few people knew about SeaSol's activities that winter. Instead, if they followed the news, most Americans were probably left with quite the opposite impression about working-class social movements after watching events unfold in Wisconsin that winter and spring. The following sections will explore in greater depth what exactly SeaSol's method consists of, how well it works in practice, and if this organization could actually foretell a brighter future for working-class social movements.

### **A New Kind of Labor Organization**

SeaSol's members come together as equals from across workplaces and neighborhoods to resolve small scale job-related and housing issues using only their own power and imagination— “no lawyers, no paid staff, just regular working people defending each other through collective action (The Seattle Solidarity Network, 2010).” This is a novel model for organizing workers and tenants because SeaSol members do not necessarily work for the same employer or live in the same building. Instead, SeaSol members support each other not just because it may be in their own interest, but also because they want to support other people in the network. In the absence of strong

workers or tenants unions, SeaSol members try to defend each other when an employer or landlord abuses any given member of the network.

In order to build the network until it gets large enough, SeaSol members put up posters on telephone poles and lampposts across Seattle in order to find people who are having problems with their boss or landlord and might be interested in joining the organization. When someone contacts SeaSol with a problem, a few members of SeaSol meet with that individual to hear his or her story, explain how SeaSol might be able to help, and ask if they would be willing to join the network. After some serious deliberation and discussion at SeaSol's weekly meeting, the group votes on whether or not SeaSol should take on the "fight." If the group decides to take on the fight, then every step of the planning is carried out at their weekly meetings and they rely entirely on their own limited funds to cover any costs that may arise. Once SeaSol has voted to take on a fight, they invite the individual to their next meeting and begin planning a public campaign designed to force the employer or landlord to meet a specific demand by using escalating amounts of social and economic pressure. SeaSol is directly democratic, has no central authority, and no regular source of funding aside from small individual donations.

SeaSol's internal organization and the tactics its members use are completely outside the prevailing paradigm of progressives in the United States because they do not rely on paid staff, grant money, non-profit tax status, lawyers, legal agreements, or lobbying politicians. Instead, SeaSol intentionally takes on struggles that they believe they can win using only their own collective strength and ingenuity. SeaSol's members care not only about achieving the desired results, but also about doing it in a way that builds people power.

Since its formation, SeaSol has grown steadily and now has approximately 240 people on its phone tree and over seven hundred supporters on its largest email announcement list. SeaSol has successfully used direct action (picketing, posting leaflets, etc.) to resolve roughly thirty-five specific housing and job-related issues. The organization has successfully taken on a variety of workers' and tenants' issues including wage theft, landlord neglect, deposit theft, unfair fees, and predatory lawsuits. In order to compel the employer or landlord to meet their demand(s), SeaSol members have undertaken a wide array of tactics including storming into offices en masse, putting up posters telling would-be renters or customers not to do business with the given company, picketing storefronts and public events involving the employer or landlord, passing out fliers at their churches or putting up posters in their neighborhoods.

SeaSol has had enough success in the past several years that it has not only continued to grow in numbers in Seattle, but has also begun attracting the attention of other labor activists across the nation and even internationally. Solidarity networks have begun to emerge across the country since SeaSol's founding. Every other solidarity network has been started after the Seattle Solidarity Network and as a result of learning about its activities. Presently, there are solidarity networks in the cities of Olympia, Tacoma, Santa Cruz, San Diego, Boston, Providence, New York, Iowa City, and Atlanta. Internationally, people have been inspired by SeaSol's work to start their own solidarity networks in Canada, Britain, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand. However, it is still

much too soon to say whether this model will grow into an actual popular movement in the United States or remain simply the obscure past time of a few scattered groups of like-minded radicals.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **NEW HOPE IN AN OLD IDEA?**

To begin understanding SeaSol it is useful to understand both the ideological and practical inspirations for SeaSol's activity: what is SeaSol trying to accomplish and how do they plan to go about it? The five men who founded SeaSol were all members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and advocates of revolutionary unionism. These five young men, all in their twenties, were frustrated with the impotency of the left wing of the labor movement in the United States generally and the IWW specifically. They wanted to find a way to contribute to rebuilding a radical labor movement by winning tangible victories despite having only a small number of supporters. As members of a revolutionary union they had little interest in organized labor in and of itself. They did not want to simply increase union density in the United States for its own sake. Ultimately, they were interested in the potential of unions to serve as a mechanism to one-day overturn capitalist social relations entirely. However, more urgently, they wanted to find a way to organize people to take collective direct action to immediately improve their lives.

As their idea of forming some sort of mutual support network began to take shape in early 2007 they decided that they should also include tenants' issues in their project. Their class politics prompted them to view tenants' and workers' issues as inextricably linked rather than as separate spheres requiring separate remedies. Both tenants' and workers' issues share the same ultimate solution in their view: the abolition of private ownership and the implementation of collective management. Furthermore, they believed that by working with both tenants and workers they would be able to ensure a higher and broader level of activity for their new organization. This was consistent with the most basic goal of starting SeaSol: to bring as many people together as possible to achieve tangible results using direct action.

SeaSol has no explicit political ideology as an organization, but its organizational principles and the ideas of its most active members are best described as anarchist. In the following sections we will briefly familiarize ourselves with the three general areas of background knowledge that are most relevant to SeaSol: 1) the theory of anarchist labor organizing, 2) the history of anarchist labor organizing in the United States, and 3) the plight of contemporary labor anarchists.

## Defining Anarchism

SeaSol was born out of frustration at the failure of the American labor movement—frustration not only with organized labor’s present failure to meaningfully improve the lives of America’s working class, but also frustration with the Left’s failure to provide workers with a meaningful alternative to mainstream unions. The five founding members of SeaSol are all active IWW members because they believed that an anarchist approach offers the best immediate hope for rebuilding a powerful labor movement that could also one day transform society completely.

There is no universally agreed upon definition of anarchism in the scholarship. The Oxford English Dictionary defines anarchism as: “belief in the abolition of all government and the organization of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion (2010).” This sort of general definition of anarchism has led various scholars to argue for the inclusion of almost every antiauthoritarian thinker under the sun in the broad anarchist family ranging from Lao Tzu to Leo Tolstoy. Numerous scholars such as Robert Hoffman, Marshall Statz, Terry Perlin, and Paul Eltzbacher have repeatedly tried to define anarchist ideas in abstract and contradictory ways (Schmidt and van der Walt, 2010). Typically, scholars have tried to define anarchism by grouping various thinkers together based on the commonalities they find in their writings.

This definition effectively isolates anarchism in the realm of philosophy and ignores the irreconcilable differences between several so-called “anarchist” thinkers. The worst scholarship, like that of Peter Marshall, has argued for the inclusion of people as different as the Buddha, Gandhi, Che Guevara, and even Margaret Thatcher in the “anarchist gallery” (2008). The better scholarship, like that of Paul Eltzbacher, has still seemingly found no problems with lumping extreme individualists like Max Stirner, revolutionary socialists like Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, and radical economic liberals like Murray Rothbard into a single tradition (2004). To take people with such significantly different ideas to be representatives of a single doctrine is not good scholarship. It is no wonder that such an approach has led standard works on anarchism to describe it as “incoherent.”

The disturbing generality of definitions of anarchism and anarchist thought in the literature has recently prompted some scholars to begin arguing for a more accurate and useful definition. More recent literature has made a convincing argument that anarchism is not a timeless abstract idea. Instead, some contemporary scholars suggest that examining the actual history of anarchist social movements instead of arbitrarily grouping notable anti-authoritarian intellectuals reveals a much narrower and more consistent definition of anarchism. Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt clearly demonstrate in their 2009 book, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, that anarchism is a distinct historical tendency that emerged out of specific social and economic conditions at a particular point in space and time.

Schmidt and van der Walt undertake a comprehensive study of the scholarship on anarchism and find that the term does not appear in academic or popular discourse until the early 1870's in Europe not long after the major split of the First International. The First International was an international organization of various revolutionary groups formed in 1864 to organize a united working class movement across Europe and around the world. The organization soon became torn by bitter disagreements between the state socialists led by Karl Marx and the libertarian socialists, called "Collectivists" at that time, led by Mikhail Bakunin. The core of this disagreement revolved around the Marxist belief that it was necessary to build a working class political party to seize control of the state. Bakunin and other libertarian socialists were opposed to participating in party politics. They wanted to focus their energies instead on building a stronger revolutionary trade union movement to take direct economic action against capitalism and not become mired in parliamentary politics. Bakunin characterized Marx's ideas as authoritarian and predicted that if a Marxist political party came to power it would become just as bad as the ruling class it had fought so hard against (Bakunin, 1873). This conflict climaxed in a split at the First International's 1872 convention in Hague.

The Marxists continued to try to organize a First International primarily to build political power in Europe in order to overthrow capitalism and establish workers' governments. Bakunin and others simultaneously formed a new group called the Alliance to focus on building economic power, primarily in the form of revolutionary trade unions, in order to overthrow capitalism and the state simultaneously. This split marked the clear emergence of a distinctly anarchist socialist tradition and it is at this time that the term anarchism began to appear in Europe. From then on, the Marxist and anarchist currents in socialism typically formed distinct organizations to work towards different ends. Anarchism then, is a kind of libertarian socialism that emerged in the 1870's and is rooted firmly in the work of Bakunin and the Alliance. Schmidt and van der Walt argue that in light of this history anarchism is best understood in the following way:

"The term anarchism should be reserved for a particular rationalist and revolutionary form of libertarian socialism that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Anarchism was against social and economic hierarchy as well as inequality— and specifically, capitalism, landlordism, and the state— and in favor of an international class struggle and revolution from below by a self-organised working class and peasantry in order to create a self-managed, socialist, and stateless social order (2009: 71)."

At a minimum, someone must believe in these things to be accurately considered an anarchist. It is inaccurate to consider someone an anarchist unless they advocate for the abolition of both capitalism and the state through non-hierarchically organized class struggle. This more specific definition still leaves room for a wide range of opinions and ideas. In anarchism's roughly one hundred and forty year history people have attempted to practice these ideas in a wide variety of ways. For example, insurrectionist anarchists have historically favored inspiring acts of violence, or "propaganda by the deed," such as assassinations, as the best means of inspiring massive revolutionary upheaval. However, far and away the most significant form of anarchist activity has been in organizing revolutionary trade unions. This emphasis on the potential of an organized

working class to combat capitalism directly in the economic sphere without the help of political parties dates back to Bakunin and the First International. Anarchists who believe organizing revolutionary trade unions based on anarchist principles offer the best means for overthrowing capitalism and establishing a stateless society are typically called anarcho-syndicalists.

There are many forms of anarchism, but historically, it has been anarcho-syndicalism that has had the most historical impact. At the height of its influence between the mid-1890's and the mid-1920's anarcho-syndicalism dominated the labor movements in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, and Uruguay (Schmidt and Van der Walt, 2009). During the same period, anarcho-syndicalists also had a serious impact on scores of other nations where they never attained majority status within the labor movement but still comprised a significant minority. These unions were interested in using direct action and direct democracy as the best means of not only improving the lives of the working class immediately but also as a means to build the necessary power to overturn oppressive social relations entirely. The full history of anarchist organizations generally and anarchist trade unions specifically is outside the scope of this article, but for our purposes it will be sufficient to examine the one organization that has had the most direct influence on the formation of SeaSol.

### **The Industrial Workers of the World**

In the United States, the IWW is the best example of the anarcho-syndicalist idea in practice. The IWW was founded in June of 1905 by a mixed group of radicals: socialists, anarchists, and revolutionary industrial unionists and miners. Nearly 200 delegates representing thirty-four distinct organizations attended the IWW's founding convention in Chicago, Illinois. All were united in their opposition to the conservative craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), or as they called it "the American Separation of Labor." AFL Craft unions at that time would regularly refuse to come out on strike in support of other workers who were not in their specific union, even in the same shop. The IWW's founders wanted instead to build a union that would foster class-consciousness and encourage solidarity rather than needlessly divide workers by craft and exclude others entirely. In the words of IWW historian Fred Thompson:

"The IWW wanted to arrange that all workers in the same mine, mill, or factory could bargain as one unit and, where it would help, bargain for an entire industry across a large area. They wanted to avoid long strikes and employer starve-out tactics by arranging for support from workers in all industries across the country as One Big Union" (Kornbluh, 1998:v).

Unlike any other union in the United States at that time, the IWW wanted to organize all workers— regardless of race, gender, origin, or industry— into one single union.

The idea was that by uniting all workers into one union, the IWW would be able to more effectively put pressure on employers by threatening to shut down entire plants and even industries instead of allowing strikes to become isolated and fail. The essence of

the IWW's politics are best summarized in the union's own famous preamble to its constitution:

“The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together as on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take hold that which they produce by their labor, through an economic organization of the working class without affiliation with any political party.

The rapid gathering of wealth and the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever-growing power of the employing class, because the trade unions foster a state of things which allow one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. The trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

These sad conditions can be changed and the interests of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries, if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lock-out is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one and injury to all.” (Kornbluh, 1998:12).

It is clear then, that the founding of the IWW was based on an acute sense of class struggle and revolutionary ambitions. In fact, once strong enough, the IWW hoped to see all of its workers lay down their tools in a massive general strike and overthrow capitalism by simply refusing to lift a finger.

It was this radical vision of worker power that fueled the IWW's organizing efforts beginning in 1905. The union organized metal miners in the Western Federation of Miners, lumber workers in the Northwest, and immigrant laborers like the textile workers of Lawrence, Massachusetts, who won the famous “bread and roses” strike in 1912. The IWW also included dockworkers in Philadelphia, migratory agricultural workers, and softwood loggers in the South where, extraordinarily, blacks and whites labored side by side even during the height of segregation in the first quarter of the 20th century. True to their mission, the IWW tried to bring all workers into One Big Union.

The IWW was unique not only because of its revolutionary politics, but also because of its militancy on the ground. In practice it was not the union's grand statements, but rather its boldness on the shop floor that worked to swell its ranks during its first ten years between 1905-1915. After some internal squabbling during the union's first few years, the IWW came to take a disparaging view of working-class political action and settled on a strategy of direct action. The direct-actionists discounted party politics for two main reasons. First, because it inherently excluded a large portion of the



working-class that could not vote, including women, blacks, migrant workers, and foreign aliens. Second, and more importantly, because, in the words of the celebrated IWW organizer Vincent “St.” John, capitalist government was simply, “a committee to look after the interests of the employers” (Kornbluh, 1998:35). The IWW refused to participate in a government they believed was designed to enforce the will of the employing class onto the workers. They had no desire to rely on the promises of elected officials, even socialists, and wanted instead to build working-class economic power themselves. There were always members of the IWW who were also members of the Socialist and Communist Parties and favored political action, but in practice as an organization the IWW relied solely on direct action— placing it clearly within the anarcho-syndicalist tradition.

An IWW publication once defined the term “direct action” this way:

“Direct action means industrial action directly by, for, and of the workers themselves, with-out the treacherous aid of labour misleaders or scheming politicians. A strike that is initiated, controlled, and settled by the workers directly affected is direct action. . .Direct action is combined action, directly on the job to secure better job conditions. Direct action is industrial democracy” (Kornbluh, 1998:35).

These tactics were effectively applied in a number of work stoppages. The McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, strike in 1909 is a good example of what this philosophy looked like in action. Here, over 6,000 employees of the Pressed Steel Car Company spontaneously went on strike for better working conditions and an end to a new speed-up system. A majority of the workers there were non-union immigrants and AFL union officials ignored their strike. So, the strikers readily accepted encouragement and support from IWW organizers.

A committee of strikers was formed to determine strike strategy. Pennsylvania state troopers, or “Black Cossacks” as they were called, repeatedly tried to break the strike. The troopers charged meetings and picket lines trying to beat the fight out of the striking autoworkers with clubs. The strike committee warned that they would fight back and that a “Cossack” would be killed or injured for every striker who was killed or maimed. The troopers killed a striker anyway, and after 5,000 sympathizers representing 15 different nationalities attended the striker’s funeral, unknown strikers made good on that promise. Ten days later a gun battle broke out between troopers and strikers after a meeting that left four strikers and three troopers dead. Shortly after that, troopers decided to stop interfering with the strike. With the “Cossacks” out of the way, the strikers were able to return to freely picketing the factories and they eventually won wage increases and an end to the new system of speed-ups.

The IWW was convinced that it was successful strikes like the one at McKees Rocks that truly built working-class power. The union viewed every shop they organized and every strike they won as bringing them one small step closer to building a revolutionary movement. The IWW’s class politics also guided their decision to refuse to sign a contract at the end of a strike. In their view, only temporary “truces” could be

effected on the “battlefield of capital and labor.” In his pamphlet, *The IWW: Its History, Structure, and Methods*, St. John wrote, “There is but one bargain that the Industrial Workers of the World will make with the employing class— complete surrender of the means of production” (Kornbluh, 1998:36). Additionally, the IWW did not want to open itself up to legalistic processes of contract mediation, and instead wanted workers to have the power to take action themselves whenever they felt it necessary as measured by a simple majority vote. In the eyes of the IWW, the workers of the world are wage slaves, forced out of necessity to sell their labor in order to attain the basic necessities of life: as long as this was the case there could be no peace until workers controlled production themselves. Moreover, the IWW knew that contracts often caused workers to let their guard down and become disorganized— which is all management would need to begin rolling back any concessions they were forced to make as a result of a previous strike.

The IWW continued to grow and flourish for just over ten years, from 1905 until the US entered World War One in 1917. During that time the IWW was able to win many impressive gains for the workers in their union and organized some of the most famous strikes in US history including the Lawrence, Massachusetts, strike of 1912 and the Patterson, New Jersey, strike of 1913. At its height in 1923, the IWW reported one hundred thousand card-carrying members (Siltonen, 2005). For a short time, it seemed that the union was on its way to realizing the dream of One Big Union. However, the IWW’s rhetoric, militancy, and staunch refusal to participate in contracts, mediation, or other traditional ways of controlling unions made the union some powerful enemies. The IWW entered a rapid decline during World War One when those enemies successfully capitalized on the union’s staunch anti-war position.

As early as 1914, the IWW had already declared its opposition to World War One in a resolution that stated: “We as members of the industrial army will refuse to fight for any purpose except the realization of industrial freedom” (Kornbluh, 1998:316). The IWW’s class politics led them to argue that war was simply when poor workers from different countries slaughtered one another in order to line the pockets of the capitalists who risked little themselves. The IWW continued organizing and striking as usual during the war, but their principled stand against the war provided a field day for the employers who were resisting their organizing efforts. It did not take long for the public relations men at major lumber and mining companies where the IWW was especially active at the time as well as moneyed newspapers around the nation to take advantage of the nationalist sentiment that was sweeping the US. The IWW was soon being painted across the country as German sympathizers, spies, and labor saboteurs, funded by German gold.

No evidence was ever produced in support these claims. The IWW did not spend its time actively opposing the war and did not even officially encourage its members not to register for the draft. However, the patriotic fervor surrounding the war provided the perfect cover for the government to crack down on the IWW. Throughout the summer of 1917 federal troops suddenly became widely available to help suppress IWW activity across the country and on September 5th, federal agents stormed IWW meeting halls, offices, and meetings and arrested 184 members of the organization on charges that the union was, “a vicious, treasonable, and criminal conspiracy which opposed by force

the execution of the laws of the United States and obstructed the prosecution of the war” (Kornbluh, 1998:318).

The September 5th raid was a green light from the federal government for States to begin cracking down as well. In California alone, over 500 members of the IWW were arrested between 1919 and 1924, and 164 were convicted. To make matters worse for the IWW, twenty-one states and two territories passed criminal syndicalism laws between 1917 and 1920 making it easier than ever to arrest members of the IWW. These laws made it a crime even to advocate anarcho-syndicalist ideas. The IWW resisted these new measures as best they could, but they were not strong enough to counter the public and government attacks on all radicals during the war and post-war period. The union did not dissolve, but it would never be the same after this time. In the words of famous IWW organizer “Big” Bill Haywood, the IWW had been shaken, “as a bull dog shakes an empty sack” ” (Kornbluh, 1998:325).

### **Anarcho-syndicalists in the 21st Century**

The early 1920s marked the peak of the revolutionary labor movement in the United States. No explicitly revolutionary union has ever boasted as many members as the IWW did before its decline after World War One. The IWW is still active, most notably trying to organize Starbucks workers in New York City and Jimmy John’s sandwich shops in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, but the union has only several hundred members. The truth is that the IWW is just about as weak now as it has ever been, and certainly much weaker than it was when it was founded in 1905. In many ways the union’s present problems are simply a reflection of the impotency of organized labor at large.

Unions have been in decline now for over fifty years in the United States. There is no consensus as to the reasons for this decline. Some theorists have argued that macro-economic factors such as globalization and the transition from a manufacturing to a service based economy are responsible (Lee, 2005; Kaupins, 2008). This body of work argues that the emergence of the modern global economy has fossilized the labor movement in the United States. Another explanation suggests that it has been the concerted efforts of an increasingly virulent anti-union business community that has successfully crushed American labor unions (Clawson, 1999). This body of work suggests that the decline of unions has more to do with anti-union legislation, corporate propaganda, and the emergence of the multi-million dollar union-busting industry than anything else. These theorists are especially likely to view the policies of the Reagan Administration as a benchmark, specifically president Reagan’s decision to break the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike in 1981.

A third group of theorists argue internal factors have also played a major role in the destruction of American unionism (Kaupins, 2008). Supporters of this theory argue that widespread union oligarchy and the emergence of “business unionism” has caused American workers to lose interest in unions. Although the causes are still being hotly

debated, the decline of organized labor in the United States is a fact that has been well documented from different points of view by various labor historians.

Regardless of the cause, the demise of unionism has stripped workers of their greatest source of power. Workers are now almost entirely dependent on the strength of the legal system for protection while they have no way to go on the offensive in order to make changes at their workplace, let alone in society at large. As for anarcho-syndicalists, the decline of unionism has rendered them practically irrelevant: what is the use in talking about the revolutionary potential of trade unions when there are so few? Anarcho-syndicalism is a tendency within trade union movements and without them it can only exist as an abstract idea. After all, the IWW did not emerge from thin air in 1905. It was founded by a coalition of like-minded trade unionists from across the country already representing tens of thousands of workers. There is no such movement for the IWW to pull from today. The question for anarcho-syndicalists then, and really for any one who wants to see a fighting labor movement in the United States, is: what should they do now?

### **The Emergence of SeaSol**

SeaSol offers an alternative strategy for how to begin organizing in an anti-union era. Its founding members realized that the IWW simply cannot organize workers at this point in the 21st century in droves as it did in the early 20th century. In fact, the IWW as well as most mainstream unions have been struggling for years to organize any new shops at all. Without a stronger labor movement, it is all but impossible for anarcho-syndicalist ideas to gain traction. SeaSol was founded on the premise that the labor movement needs to be rebuilt from scratch.

Its founders were not at all opposed to on-the-job organizing, and all remain IWW members, but they were motivated by an overpowering sense of pragmatism that pushed them to organize outside of the union. Most importantly, they wanted to reach people who were unwilling or unable to organize on the job, but who were willing to participate in direct action. They knew that this group was going to do something different from the IWW, but they wanted to take the union's core principles with them: direct-action, direct-democracy, and a strong sense of class struggle.

The founding members of SeaSol also decided that they wanted to include tenants in their organizing efforts. The IWW has no history of tenants organizing, but anarchists have always been opposed to landlordism, and anarcho-syndicalists in other countries have a long history of participating in tenants' struggles. The Spanish Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), probably the most famous anarcho-syndicalist union in history, helped to organize tenants in the early 1930s. The CNT's Construction Union organized a massive rent strike in Barcelona calling for a 40 percent decrease in rents. The strike involved as many as 100,000 people who went on to demand better living conditions and forcibly prevented evictions. According to Schmidt and Van der Walt:

“Rent strikes were a major feature of anarchist and syndicalist activity elsewhere as well. British anarchists organized a ‘No Rent’ campaign in 1891, while the

syndicalist Clyde Workers' Committee was involved in a major rent strike in Glasgow in 1915. Anarchists organized rent strikes in Havana, Cuba, in 1899 and 1900. In the Mexican city of Veracruz in 1922 anarchists and members of the CPM, which was markedly influenced by anarchism, formed a Revolutionary Syndicate of Tenants that 30,000 people—more than two-thirds of the total population—out on a rent strike. This inspired similar protests in other cities in the state of Veracruz..." (2009: 192).

Anarcho-syndicalists were also active in other tenants movements in the early 20th century in Panama, Argentina, Chile, and Portugal.

In keeping with this long tradition, and in hopes of bringing more people into their organization, SeaSol also purposefully tried to bring tenants into their organization. In the summer of 2007, they set up a website and a free online voicemail service, and began putting up posters telling people who had problems with their employer or landlord to call. The idea was simple: wait for someone to contact the number, meet with them, hear their story, and if it was compelling try to plan a direct action campaign with them around winning a specific demand from their employer or landlord. SeaSol tries to bring together the most militant people from across workplaces and neighborhoods to support each other as equals in these campaigns and in the past five years the organization has had notable success. It is still small and faces a wide array of challenges, but it is also growing and continuing to succeed on a greater and greater scale. SeaSol is drawing on the anarcho-syndicalist tradition in an effort to build a new kind of working class organization. Understanding whether or not SeaSol's approach is effective is instructive not just because it helps us to understand the organization, but also because it foretells what this organization may yet become.

## **Chapter 4**

### **SEASOL AS SEEN FROM THE GROUND**

I determined that the first-hand accounts of the people most involved with SeaSol were the best way to find out what SeaSol is trying to build and how effective the organization is. I conducted six interviews in the spring of 2011 designed to explore the effectiveness of SeaSol's strategy for rebuilding a popular revolutionary labor movement in the United States. From my own experience working within SeaSol I knew that the group is broken down into three main groups denoting three different levels of activity and commitment in the organization: organizers, members, and supporters.

An organizer is anyone who, at a minimum, has committed to regularly attend SeaSol's weekly planning meetings and to call ten to twenty SeaSol members every time SeaSol has an action. SeaSol's members include everyone who has agreed to receive a phone call and/or email about every SeaSol action and attend if they can, and SeaSol's supporters are those who have agreed to be notified by phone and/or email only about SeaSol's largest or most important actions. SeaSol's meetings are public and many members who are not organizers regularly attend, but it is far less common for a supporter to attend.

In addition to these three main groups, there are also those individuals who have been at the center of specific SeaSol campaigns. These are typically people who had never heard of SeaSol until they were having a problem with a boss or landlord and saw a SeaSol poster and decided to get in touch. They typically do not get involved with SeaSol for any ideological reasons, but rather because they are trying to resolve a specific dispute with an employer or landlord. This means they are likely to offer more of an “outside” perspective on SeaSol, especially when compared to SeaSol organizers with a considerable background in activism.

For the purposes of accurately understanding SeaSol, I determined that SeaSol’s organizing committees as well as the individuals at the center of specific fights comprise would be the most fruitful people to interview about SeaSol’s organizational strategy. This is simply because in order to fully understand SeaSol it is necessary to regularly attend SeaSol meetings. SeaSol organizers are the most heavily involved in SeaSol’s activities, so they are naturally the best choice for understanding how effective the organization is. The only drawback to focusing exclusively on SeaSol organizers is that they are primarily ideologically motivated individuals who are likely to share common biases.

To counteract this I decided it would also be a good idea to also focus on individuals at the center of specific fights. As outsiders to SeaSol who first got involved for very practical reasons they could reasonably be assumed to be free from the same biases that those who had already committed a great deal of time and energy into SeaSol could be expected to share. At the same time, they would still have enough experience in SeaSol, having been heavily involved in their own fight and at least attended SeaSol meetings during the duration of their fight, to speak knowledgeably about how the organization works.

SeaSol’s activities are best understood in the context of specific struggles. For the purposes of this article I decided to focus primarily on three recent SeaSol campaigns: one about a landlord suing a tenant, one about a landlord refusing to return a tenant’s deposit, and one about a restaurant owner refusing to give a last paycheck to a waitress. By focusing on these three specific and recent fights SeaSol had taken on I ensured fresh and well-grounded interview data about the effectiveness of the organization. I also knew that the organizers as well as the “victims” involved would be especially informative for my purposes, likely be available for an interview, and that the stories of the fights themselves would provide a well-rounded picture of SeaSol.

I ended up interviewing four SeaSol organizers and two SeaSol members who had been at the center of specific SeaSol fights. We will call the four SeaSol organizers I interviewed Bruce, Henry, Claire, and Simone. We will call the two individuals at the center of specific fights I interviewed George and Ramona. The third case that I wanted to highlight for this article involved a woman we will refer to as Ana. Unfortunately, I was unable to do an interview with her due to time constraints and difficulties locating a translator. However, I did interview the two organizers who were the most heavily involved in her fight. In order to provide better context for what SeaSol is really like it is

useful for me to give a little background information about the six individuals I interviewed for this article.

Bruce is a twenty-year old software programmer and was one of the founders of SeaSol. He has a background in union organizing, is a member of the IWW, and is one of SeaSol's most experienced organizers. I interviewed him specifically about his involvement in Ramona's fight. Henry is a twenty six year old restaurant worker and bar tender. He was born and raised in Seattle and graduated from Evergreen State College. He became increasingly involved in SeaSol after attending an action in the spring of 2009 and had been heavily involved for about a year and a half at the time of this interview. I interviewed him specifically about his involvement in Ana's fight. Claire is twenty-two years old, recently completed a degree in sociology from the University of Washington, and is currently looking for work. She became involved in SeaSol shortly after moving to Seattle three years ago from a small town and has been an active organizer for two years now. I interviewed her specifically about George's fight. Simone is thirty-four years old and has been working as a paid union organizer for the past year. She is a seasoned activist who was also in Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization in 1999 and began organizing with SeaSol after she heard about it by word of mouth in 2009. I interviewed her specifically about her experience working on Ana's fight. George is in his forties and is currently working as a handyman and painter. He moved to Seattle from Chicago about twenty years ago. He had no background in activism before contacting SeaSol about a conflict he was having with his landlord in the spring of 2010. I interviewed him about his experiences working with SeaSol on his own fight. Ramona is a twenty-eight year old waitress. She contacted SeaSol in September of 2010 to get help with some wage theft she was experiencing. She also had no background in activism before joining SeaSol. I interviewed her about her own experiences working with SeaSol in her own fight. Taken together, these six individuals have a wide range of experience with SeaSol and other types of organizing.

As I thought about SeaSol and looked over my interviews, I determined that any effective strategy for rebuilding a popular revolutionary labor movement would have to be one that delivers tangible results for the people involved, is growing in numbers, and is transforming how people think and feel about contemporary economic and social relations in our society. It was this definition of effectiveness that prompted me to examine three major subcategories of effectiveness in SeaSol: (1) SeaSol's ability to win fights, (2) SeaSol's growth as an organization, and the (3) personal radicalization of people who are involved with SeaSol. The subsequent sections will examine several significant themes that became apparent in my interviews related to these three types of effectiveness in SeaSol.

### **The First Type of Effectiveness: Winning Fights**

SeaSol's over all success rate is notably high. The organization has taken on thirty-eight fights and has won thirty-one of them in the past five years. Two of the three cases that were highlighted in my interviews were undisputed victories. In the case of George, the organization successfully pressured his former landlord to drop a \$1500 bill for damages that SeaSol believed was unjust. In Ana's case, SeaSol also successfully

pressured her former landlord to formally stop pursuing her for \$1800 unjust charges and additionally secured the return of her entire \$500 security deposit.

In Ramona's case, SeaSol was unable to recover her \$478 in stolen wages, but the organization did put her former boss' restaurant out of business. Interestingly, although SeaSol did not win its stated demand in this case, both Ramona and one of the most active organizers her fight, Bruce, reported feeling that putting the restaurant out of business was in fact a victory. When I asked Ramona how she felt about the outcome of her fight she told me that she was, "very pleased...just sadly seeing him in a financial situation that I was in and that he had put so many other people in...it was definitely a victory. Even though I didn't get my money I still won." We will spend more time exploring how Ramona felt about the outcome of her fight and what putting the restaurant out of business meant for SeaSol later in this chapter, but suffice to say that it would not be accurate to consider the outcome of this fight as a "loss" for SeaSol. Arguably, it was actually a greater victory for Ramona and SeaSol than just recovering her \$478 in unpaid wages would have been.

Even just a cursory examination of SeaSol's activities reveals that the organization wins the overwhelming majority of the demands it decides to make. However, my interviews also revealed something much more significant about SeaSol, and that is how that process works. My interviews revealed a notable consistency among SeaSol organizer's about how they consider which fights to take on and which demands to make. All four organizers I interviewed reported that it is no accident that SeaSol wins such a high percentage of the fights the group takes on, rather it is the direct result of one of the organization's core principles: "winability."

When I asked a given organizer why SeaSol had decided to take on George's, Ramona's, or Ana's fight they invariably told me in every case that one of the major reasons was because they felt confident that SeaSol could achieve the desired outcome. When I asked Bruce why SeaSol had decided to take on Ramona's fight one of the things he said was: "The fact that it was very winnable, we had a lot of leverage on the business, we had the power to put this company out of business- so we ought to be able to win this fight!" When I asked Simone why SeaSol had decided to take on Ana's fight she also told me, "It was winnable because you know we are looking at whether a fight is winnable. We're trying to find how we can put pressure on them [Nelson Properties]." Henry and Claire also said very similar things when asked the same question about the respective fights I was interviewing them about.

Claire was one of the last people I interviewed, so when I heard her bring up this concept yet again I asked if she could explain it to me in a little more detail. She told me:

"Winability is one of our basic principles. It is this concept that is really important and kind of straight forward and seems kind of silly to talk so explicitly about, but really I think it is kind of ignored by other activist groups generally and that is: can you win what you are trying to get? Can you get your demand? Could you do it? Is it possible? And while you can never know that concretely, you never know



for sure, but you can use rational thinking about what that person [the employer or landlord] values and how they've been acting in the past."

Claire explained that SeaSol only fights to win. The organization will not take on a demand that they do not believe they can win. As Claire says, she felt this is a very simple idea that is "silly to talk so explicitly about." However, as she is quick to point out, the simple truth is that winability is something many activist groups never seem to think about at all. Many activist groups simply select an issue they would like to address, such as globalization for example, but never take the time to honestly ask themselves: what would it really take to transform or dismantle the IMF and World Bank? What sort of popular movement would be needed to truly force the US to restructure how it conducts world trade? Do we really have the power given the present strength of the Left in this country to achieve this outcome?

It was clear from my interviews that SeaSol organizers think hard about these sorts of power dynamics every time before they decide to take on a fight. The organization is open about its unwillingness to take on fights they do not believe they can win and they discuss their concerns about certain fights winability openly at SeaSol's weekly meetings. Five out of the six people I interviewed mentioned being present at a SeaSol meeting when the group voted on whether or not to take on a given campaign and SeaSol regularly votes not to take on certain campaigns because they do not feel they are winnable. Claire told me that just recently the group had voted to take on a fight against a smalltime landlord who had stolen several tenants' deposits but then changed their mind when further research indicated that it was probably unwinnable:

"...she had stolen their deposit and we really wanted to take on the fight and we thought she had this moving company we might be able to target, but even when we took it on we weren't sure. Then after doing more research and finding out she actually isn't even in the State three weeks out of the month and she has no other economic targets and no vacancies and has no reputation in the neighborhood- it made it seem like a very unwinnable campaign so we decided not to take it on after all."

It is clear from Claire's story and others that pragmatic ideas about what the group can and cannot accomplish form a major part of SeaSol's culture. Multiple interviewees reported that this sort of pragmatism was part of what makes SeaSol distinct as compared to other groups they've been involved in. Simone told me that as compared to her work as a paid union organizer, "working with SeaSol has just kind of kept me sane...I don't really think that a lot of activism is really leading to anything whereas with SeaSol I feel it can be very empowering for people."

Simone's words call attention to the fact that SeaSol's pragmatic notions about winability are not rooted in a lack of inspiration or a broader vision for how they hope to transform society. On the contrary, Simone felt confident that SeaSol's approach is actually working to build a larger movement to one day actually "be able to tackle larger institutions that are incredibly oppressive to us." Multiple other interviewees reported that SeaSol's pragmatic approach was actually part of a conscious strategy to build a larger

and more powerful movement to accomplish bigger goals. Many of them were simply fed up with being demoralized by repeatedly trying to make sweeping social changes that the organizations they were a part of simply did not have the power to make. In my interviews I found that while organizers thought that it is useful to understand social problems on a systemic level, they also thought it was foolhardy at this point in time to think the Left can attack those systems directly with any success. To do that successfully SeaSol organizers felt that they need to work on drastically increasing their numbers through practical activity rather than by relying on propaganda. They felt that it is by putting their politics into practice in a tangible way they will be able to demonstrate the validity of their ideas and win more people over to their ideas.

Every SeaSol organizer I interviewed told me that this is why they thought that winning fights was so important. Every victory proves that SeaSol's approach really works. The theory behind SeaSol is that it is this sort of practical demonstration that will attract larger numbers of people to their ideas and eventually allow them to take on larger issues in society. All six people I interviewed, including George and Ramona who did not initially get involved with SeaSol for any sort of ideological reasons, reported that they wanted to see SeaSol continue to grow to successfully take on larger and more significant problems in society. When asked to describe what sorts of problems they would like to be able to solve someday interviewees had a long list including "Chase" bank, "capitalism," the "State," and even "industrial aqua-culture."

In SeaSol organizer Henry's words, "the basic motif of SeaSol that I know is we do what we can today so we can do what we want to tomorrow." We will discuss in greater detail in the next section how SeaSol hopes to transition from doing what they can to doing what they want, but it is necessary to touch on this element in the group's thinking in order to understand why the organization takes winability so seriously. My research indicated that SeaSol only takes on fights they believe they can win because they believe it is only by winning smaller victories in the here and now and becoming inspired that more people are going to become organized to win larger and more important victories in the future. To quote Henry again:

"The question, the difficult part, is how do you get from nobody to hundreds of thousands of people? How do you get that force so that it can operate well? So that it can operate sustainably and in a progressively better way? The answer to that for me, is what we're doing."

There can be no doubt that SeaSol is effectively winning the small fights they so selectively take on, but the more important question is will these victories actually spawn the larger movement Henry and every one of my other interviewees hopes for?

### **The Second Type of Effectiveness: Growth**

The three fights highlighted in my interviews all occurred during a substantial period of growth for SeaSol between the Spring of 2010 and the Winter of 2011. George's, Ana's, and Ramona's fights each set a new record for the most people SeaSol had been able to get out to an action. Claire reported that the largest action during

George's fight in the spring of 2010 included "twenty five or twenty seven people," Simone reported that the largest action during Ana's fight during the summer of 2010 included "thirty one people or so," and Bruce reported that the largest action for Ramona's fight during the Winter of 2010-2011 included between "forty and fifty people."

I asked Claire to describe when George and SeaSol delivered their demand letter to George's property manager and she told me, "It was one of the biggest mobilizations we'd had at that time- I'm sure everyone says that- because we continue to have bigger and bigger mobilizations every time we have a fight." SeaSol is still a very small organization but everyone I interviewed agreed that the group has been growing in numbers. Between 2010 and 2011 SeaSol's organizing committee grew from seven or eight members to sixteen and the weekly attendance at Seasol meetings also increased from the low teens to the mid twenties. Needless to say, these small numbers do not yet mark any kind of revitalization of a mass labor movement. However, the ways in which SeaSol has been growing are nonetheless noteworthy.

One of the most interesting ways SeaSol grows is based around the organization's concept of mutual aid. All four SeaSol organizers I interviewed reported that one of the major reasons they wanted to take on George's, Ana's, and Ramona's fights was because they thought the three of them were likely to stay involved in SeaSol and they all expressed a genuine desire to come out and support other people. A strong willingness to join SeaSol and a verbal agreement to continue to support the organization in the future is actually required before SeaSol will agree to take on a fight with someone who is not already involved in the organization. Simone's description of her first impression of Ana after their first meeting demonstrates this point quite clearly:

"She said, 'I don't want them [Nelson Properties] to do this to someone else,' which is something that is really important for me to hear from someone. There is some enlightened self-interest involved, or a lot actually, but the fact that she's thinking about other people and recognizes that she is connected to other people, that others are like me, is a really good sign. She just really wanted to fight back, so it wasn't just, oh, I feel sorry for this woman, it was like, oh, I really feel for her but I also have a lot of respect for her. She's ready to fight back against this huge company. She doesn't have any experience that I ever got out of her doing this, so I had a lot of admiration for that."

Simone's words are indicative of the very conscious effort SeaSol makes to distinguish itself from social service organizations. SeaSol does not want to simply provide direct action casework for someone only to have them move on with their lives once the campaign is finished. SeaSol wants to provide support for people to solve their own problems, but also wants to retain their permanent involvement in a reciprocal relationship. The fact that Simone heard Ana express such a strong eagerness to fight back against her property management company not just for herself, but also to help protect other people in the future made Simone think that she would make an excellent SeaSol member. Additionally, Ana's attitude made it clear that she did not want to have a passive role in the campaign as she might of if she had pursued her issue using a legal

strategy instead of direct action. It is clear from Simone's description when she describes how she did not just feel sorry for Ana that she was not trying to just be an advocate for her. Instead, Simone admired Ana and was clearly excited to work with her side by side.

In much the same way that SeaSol makes a conscious effort to only take on fights that it considers winnable, SeaSol organizers also try hard to only take on fights with individuals who they believe are going to remain involved in the organization. Of course this is hardly an exact science, but it is something SeaSol organizers take some time to consider. For example, if the person keeps insisting that what they really want is a lawyer or they mention that they won't be able to make time to attend their own actions, these are warning signs for SeaSol organizers that they are unlikely to become very involved. In addition to winability, when I asked a given organizer why SeaSol had decided to take on George's, Ramona's, or Ana's fight they invariably told me that one of the major reasons was because they felt confident that each of them would remain involved in SeaSol after their fight was over. It is also worth noting that it was only one year before these interviews were conducted that SeaSol decided to begin telling people that they would need to join the organization and come out and support other people if they wanted SeaSol to take on their fight. There is no way to know with any certainty, but it is possible that this change in how SeaSol approached new fights could be related to the organization's growth over the last year.

In all three fights I highlighted the organizers proved correct in thinking that the new people would remain involved after their fight was over. My interviewees reported that George, Ana, and Ramona all continue to come out to SeaSol actions on a regular basis. We will discuss in greater detail why this might be when we explore the third type of effectiveness in the next section, however, it is important to note that SeaSol appears to be successfully retaining the involvement of the people who's fights the organization takes on. Both George and Ramona told me in our interviews that they planned to remain involved in SeaSol and Simone reported that she still sees and hears from Ana (who I unfortunately did not interview) regularly as well. When I asked Ramona if she would remain involved in SeaSol, and why or why not, she told me:

“Definitely. It's just the justice, it's just seeing a group of people stand beside you and support you and tell you it's ok, I've been through this, it'll get better and we'll stand up to them and they won't win.”

SeaSol has clearly succeeded in retaining the involvement of at least the three people in the fights I focused on for this article. Again, we will explore in more detail in the next section why this might be so important. However, it is self-evident that a mass movement will never be built just by retaining the involvement of one person at a time who is dealing with a specific problem. In fact, this is not the primary way SeaSol has grown in the past few years.

SeaSol had only ever had twenty five fights at the time of these interviews after all yet the organization had somewhere close to one hundred members and five hundred supporters on its largest email list. SeaSol's success or failure at building a larger movement depends very much on its ability to get more than one person involved at a

time. My interviews with SeaSol organizers revealed that this is something they are acutely aware of. Henry described his thoughts about SeaSol's growth this way:

“When I say ‘gathering people’ there are sort of two things that go on with that in any given fight. There are the people that come into it because they are at the center of a fight and then there are the people that come into it because there is a fight going on and they want to help out. For that latter group, I have seen more people come on from that group in labor fights- because labor fights involve big actions that you want to have as many people as possible at and really landlord fights don't. The labor fights perform both tasks very ably. The landlord fights are kind of more appropriate to the internal training.”

We have already discussed how SeaSol tries to retain the involvement of people at the center of a given fight. Henry believes that the most new people are brought into SeaSol by participating in labor fights because they usually involve large pickets of a storefront and that can be very exciting for people whereas landlord fights tended to be more useful for internal training purposes. We will return to Henry's idea about internal training momentarily, but first it is important to talk more about how labor fights tend to bring more people into SeaSol. Bruce echoed Henry's opinion about labor fights when I asked him if he thought Ramona's fight strengthened SeaSol as an organization. He told me:

“It brought in Ramona and some of Ramona's friends, but mainly it was a great fight because it gave us a lot of picketing opportunities. It gave us opportunities for fun and exciting actions that lots of people can participate in and that had an immediate and powerful impact- and people could see the power in that it actually destroyed the business. It gave people an opportunity to come out and picket that was real, not just symbolic.”

All four organizers I interviewed mentioned that getting the maximum number of people involved was something they considered when deciding which fights to take on and what tactics to use. Claire and Simone also mentioned in their interviews that the more SeaSol takes on fights that required multiple mass actions the more the organization grows. Multiple interviewees described how SeaSol has learned to be more conscious of this fact. Claire described how while in George's fight SeaSol had relied largely on smaller groups informally heading out to put up “Do Not Rent Here” posters around properties owned by Lauren Rudd the organization adapted this strategy during Ana's fight:

“Everything in Nelson [Ana's fight] was just a better job of what we did in George's fight. By having different groups go poster around different neighborhoods as one big action instead of just informally mobilizing for it with George.”

In this case SeaSol intentionally adapted its strategy to involve more people not because it was necessarily more effective at getting the posters up, but rather because it was a way of making sure more people could get involved. All four organizers said that

SeaSol's continued growth is very much dependent on the amount the organization can find ways to effectively mobilize larger groups of people in a meaningful way.

The group is also experiencing financial growth. SeaSol is a very time intensive but low cost operation. However, having more financial resources is certainly useful. The organization is funded almost entirely by small individual donations. On their website, people can sign up on PayPal to contribute ten dollars a month if they desire. Between 2010 and 2011 the number of people signed up as PayPal contributors doubled from about ten to twenty. Additionally, SeaSol passes a hat to collect cash donations at every other public meeting. So far SeaSol has had no difficulties covering its limited expenses. At the time these interviews were conducted the organization was working towards getting enough people signed up on their PayPal account in the next year to be able to afford professional childcare at their meetings. Childcare and other things, such as a larger meeting space, would certainly be a nice thing for SeaSol to have, but income did not seem especially relevant to SeaSol's future success or failure.

A more significant threat to SeaSol's continued growth is related to the amount of time and energy people are willing to put into the organization. It was clear from my interviews that the SeaSol organizers I interviewed voluntarily put at least ten hours of work per week into SeaSol and probably much more. However, all of the organizers reported that they were happy to continue putting in this much effort because of how rewarding they felt the work was. Still, it is uncertain if the same organizers will be willing and able to put in as many hours as they are into the organization indefinitely. The future of the organization will likely depend heavily on its ability to recruit new people who want to become as involved as the most active organizers. In fact, SeaSol organizers viewed giving people more practical organizing experience as one of the most important elements of SeaSol's activities for a variety of reasons.

All four organizers said that one of the primary purposes of SeaSol was to give people practical experience in how to effectively fight back against their employers and landlords when they were abused. Simone described this kind of growth this way:

“Well in the short term, obviously, we have these very small issue based economic fights, and you know it's helping people tackle, engaging people in struggle in their own life and then helping them actually win. In the long term I see it as helping people develop themselves as organizers, develop organizing skills, both for themselves and then just for everybody that is involved because it is such a collaborative and cooperative effort.”

Every organizer hopes that SeaSol can provide practical training for people that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. This means training not only the individuals at the center of a specific fight how they can successfully face down their employer or landlord, but also giving everyone involved useful experience in how to collectively improve each others lives. Bruce described even more specifically what this might look like:

“My hope is that we can build it [SeaSol] into a stronger and stronger force and it can lead to having a large number of people who are competent and confident at organizing and doing direct action, we can hopefully branch out from the types of

fights we are doing and organize groups of workers in workplaces and tenants in apartment buildings.”

This sort of transition is vital to SeaSol’s future growth. All four organizers involved in SeaSol recognize that the organization’s present model is not going to be able to build a truly mass movement. Instead, they want to use SeaSol’s current activities as a springboard to expose people to direct action and inspire as well as train people how to organize on the job at work or as tenants in their buildings. This is consistent with SeaSol’s ideas about organizing mass actions that involve larger numbers of people. The organization hopes to continue evolving not only so that it can get even better at what it is already doing, but more importantly so it can increasingly transition to taking actions that involve larger and larger numbers of people as Bruce put it, “to serve as the foundation for a broader working class movement.”

### **The Third Type of Effectiveness: Radicalization**

If SeaSol continues to win fights and successfully expands its activities in new ways such as organizing workers on the job and tenants in their homes it just might be able to rebuild up a popular labor movement- but what about a revolutionary one? As if the organization’s task at hand wasn’t difficult enough already, SeaSol also hopes to one day create “a world without bosses or landlords.” As Claire put it SeaSol is ultimately trying to:

“...build up enough people who are serious about taking control of their lives and who don’t think bosses and landlords are necessary. To build up a militant, conscious, organized Left to take over, immediately, the sources of capitalism and that State that interfere the most directly in our own lives and to take control of our own lives in that way.”

What this means in the here and now is that SeaSol is not just concerned with winning fights and growing in numbers. The organization is also passionately concerned with achieving these goals in a way that transforms people’s opinions about society and empowers them to feel that we could one day actually overturn the power relations that so utterly define our lives.

First and foremost, SeaSol attempts to prefigure how such a society might work in how the organization is internally structured. All of my interviewees confirmed that the organization makes all of its important decisions at its public weekly meetings where anyone present has the right to vote. After some period of discussion the meeting facilitator takes a simple majority vote by show of hands. Additionally, there is no paid staff and the organization depends entirely on people’s voluntary participation in its activities. I found that there is little difference between the ideological and practical reasons for this. All four organizers I interviewed described themselves as anti-authoritarian and Bruce explained the importance of SeaSol’s decision-making process this way:

“To avoid authoritarianism is practical. It’s sort of an ideological way of putting it but it is a shorthand way of saying something that’s practical that’s much harder

to describe in words. If we got in a situation where some individual or clique who isn't accountable to anyone else was able to force their will on the majority, force other people to do things that they didn't want to do rather than being free and democratic, then I don't think it would be possible to pursue the type of organizing we are trying to do. I think it would change the organizing model because our whole model is based on encouraging people to take action on their own because they want to."

SeaSol wants to build a cooperative and egalitarian movement to do away with those who they believe exercise illegitimate and arbitrary authority over other people's lives- namely bosses and landlords. Bruce is simply saying that it would be impossible to do away with authoritarianism using authoritarian methods. I found in my interviews that not only SeaSol's decision making process but also in its entire strategic approach was intended to empower the people who become involved in the organization in a radical way. This is also why the organization relies on direct action instead of legal or political action. The organization is interested in demonstrating it does not need lawyers or politicians to improve people's lives, when people are well organized, they can actually solve their problems much more effectively themselves. The interesting question for me in my interviews was, to what extent does SeaSol actually succeed at transforming how people feel about contemporary society?

My interviews showed that the contrast between SeaSol's approach versus other options for workers and tenants who have been abused by their boss or landlord was immediately apparent at least for George and Ramona when they got involved. Ramona told me:

"I felt like to L&I I am just like another case number and it's very impersonal and with SeaSol I just met a lot of people that I just really related to, that made me feel welcome, that made me feel like my voice was important, and really supported."

George had somewhat similar reasons for choosing to get involved with SeaSol:

"I know a little bit about the legal system and I know that attorneys are expensive and the legal process is-unfortunately- the landlord has a lot of money and a mansion you know and I can't afford to put myself in court against this man. It ain't gonna happen, I'm not gonna win. I had no resources to fight someone like that."

Both George and Ramona felt that their legal options were entirely inadequate. In Ramona's case she felt that the department of Labor and Industries was too bureaucratic and was not going to be able to really help her get the kind of justice she wanted. George on the other hand felt that the legal system was stacked against him and that he could not possibly win against a very wealthy and powerful landowner in court. Both George and Ramona also mentioned in their interviews that they were unable to afford legal fees and felt they had little chance of success even if they could. This frustration with their "official" options is what made SeaSol's approach so attractive to them and



their subsequent participation in a SeaSol campaign had a major impact on their personal beliefs about their own position in society.

This does not mean that George or Ramona would now describe themselves as anarchists as many SeaSol organizers do, but this is not what SeaSol is trying to accomplish. The organization has no explicit political ideology. Instead, SeaSol's organizers operate from the belief that actually taking direct action is a much more powerful and radicalizing experience than talking about politics in the abstract. SeaSol's organizers do not think how other SeaSol members self-identify politically is nearly as important as their willingness to take militant direct action against employers and landlords. SeaSol wants to build a mass base of support that is consistent with certain principles, but which does not require that everyone share all of the same political beliefs. Three out of the four SeaSol organizers I interviewed described themselves as anarchists, but they all agreed that putting their principles into practice is much more important than trying to get everyone in SeaSol to agree on any sort of official political program. SeaSol's priority at this time is simply to build a collective culture around the idea of fighting back. Simone has confronted her own boss before as part of a union drive she helped organize at her workplace and she described the power of that kind of moment this way:

“I mean once you've marched on your own boss for instance, and I imagine it is the same for anybody who goes and confronts their landlord, it doesn't sound like a big deal handing this letter and saying, 'look, I demand what's right and I'm going to claim my right as another individual who should have equal power to you.' It's definitely transformative. It is scary as hell and it's a huge moment of growth for people and it stays with you. It really does stay with you forever.”

SeaSol is based on the idea that encouraging and supporting people to stand up to their employers or landlords in this way is in fact as transformative as Simone says it is. Fostering this willingness and ability to successfully stand up to power is the essence of SeaSol's activities.

I was very interested in my interviews to discover if there was any truth in this claim. Did George's and Ramona's experiences working with SeaSol actually transform them? It was clear that they were essentially first brought into the organization by their desperate circumstances and a willingness to try a different approach, but both of them reported that they plan to remain permanently involved in SeaSol. Ramona described her feelings about SeaSol this way:

“It's a really amazing organization that's really changed my whole perspective on things...it is like a family, I love it and I will always remain involved in SeaSol. I fell like I belong and I feel like it helps everyone feel like they belong, it's like a home. It's awesome.”

Ramona's experience trying to recover her stolen wages with the help of SeaSol was plainly a very positive experience for her. It is significant that even though the group was unable to deliver her the exact results she was looking for by recovering her stolen wages, that did not detract from her opinion about the organization. What was important to her

was how her participation in the group made her feel. It made her feel liked she “belonged” and like she does not have to face the injustices in her life alone. Ramona did not join SeaSol because she had read Bakunin or Marx and was inspired by their ideas. Ramona joined SeaSol because she had a specific problem with her former employer and thought SeaSol could help. She is not remaining involved with SeaSol because she has now become an anarchist or a Marxist, she wants to be part of SeaSol “forever” because she feels like she has a “family” of other people who are willing to protect her and she them.

SeaSol is based on the idea that these feelings of mutual support and willingness to take direct action to protect each other is incredibly more important than how individuals might describe their politics in the abstract. George seemed to have comparable feelings to Ramona about his experience with SeaSol. He told me the following in summation of his experiences working with SeaSol:

“It really saved my ass because the landlord would have sent it to collections- and it made me believe in other human beings in the world... I was very happy to get help from SeaSol and you know I feel like I can help and that’s the nice thing about Seattle Solidarity. They helped me and I’m trying to help, what I can, back, because I like what they’re doing number one and plus I feel like I owe Seattle Solidarity for the help.”

George will obviously never forget his experience with SeaSol and even went so far as to say that it made him “believe in other human beings in the world.” He did not describe his feelings about the organization as intimately as Ramona, but he expressed a crystal clear understanding of the basic premise of SeaSol’s organizing model: “They helped me and I’m trying to help, what I can, back.” George would certainly not describe himself as a “revolutionary” of any kind and he expressed serious doubts in our interview about whether someday creating a world without bosses or landlords is possible. However, SeaSol’s organizing model is based around the idea that that just isn’t terribly important at this point in time. George did express a strong willingness to take direct action to make life better for other workers and tenants in the here and now. Moreover, his lack of revolutionary politics did not seem to come from any sort of ideological conservatism, but rather from taking a pragmatic look at the world around him and finding it difficult to conceive of a society where he did not have to pay rent or sell his labor to others- and who can blame him for that?

I also asked Ramona if her involvement in SeaSol had changed the way she felt about bosses and landlords. She said it definitely had but she had some trouble articulating exactly how. She said that “it’s just opened my mind to all new sorts of possibilities,” and after struggling to explain exactly how in words she simply told me: “I feel like I know what to do now if my boss or landlord tries to fuck me over.”

Before George and Ramona got involved in SeaSol they did not know what to do because they felt isolated and were frustrated by the inadequacy of their other options. Now as a result of becoming involved with SeaSol, George and Ramona both know what to do when they or others suffer abuse as a result of their working class social position:

work together with other people in similar situations to fight back together, as equals, without becoming dependent on legal or other experts for help. That is what working with SeaSol means and this definition was confirmed in all six of my interviews. Regardless of how George or Ramona might describe themselves politically in the abstract, this simple idea is the very essence of anarchism and they both continue to help put it into practice on a regular basis.

A radical labor movement will never be defined by what it says. It will be defined by what it does. My interviews have demonstrated that SeaSol has had tremendous success at moving people towards taking radical action to better their own and other people's lives. The organization's ability to transform how a "regular" person who sees one of their posters feels about their own power in society after becoming involved with SeaSol holds great promise. By directly helping people solve problems in their own lives SeaSol ends up changing how people feel about society much more deeply and profoundly than selling them any number of radical newspapers ever could.

This sort of change is not reserved just for new people who become involved in SeaSol, multiple organizers I interviewed also told me that working with SeaSol has changed them in many ways. This is what Claire told me when I asked her about this very question:

"It [SeaSol] gives me a sense of something I've always been wanting...it's like we are making better lives for ourselves and immediately as possible and for people after us. To me that is meaning in itself and it's also a group of people who is also ready to be solid for you. I mean they will come out to fight your fucking boss, everybody will, to tell him to fuck off when he fucks you, tell your landlord to fuck off when he fucks you. To me building that up and making it more powerful is the most important thing I can think of to do to change what I think is wrong with the world. I think that interference and control of our lives on a daily basis is the most immediate manifestation of some very large and systemic problems."

It is difficult to describe what SeaSol does in a more straightforward way than that. According to the individuals I interviewed it gives people hope and makes them feel like they just might be able to actually change the things that can make their lives so much less than they could be. Whether Claire is right or wrong, there can be little doubt that SeaSol has greatly effected how she sees the world. The same can be said for all of the other five people I interviewed. SeaSol is not a mass revolutionary labor movement, but it is undoubtedly reaching new people and exposing them to experience that is making them begin to act like one- at least when and where they can.

## **Chapter 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

It is clear from the ground that SeaSol is quite effective. The organization is winning the fights it chooses to take on, growing in numbers, and successfully transforming how people think about American society. It is impossible to say at this point in time whether SeaSol is actually going to be able to rebuild a mass revolutionary labor movement. The group has a novel approach and has experienced notable success so far, but the fact remains that the organization has only ever affected a few hundred people in the Seattle area. Additionally, SeaSol has primarily only helped individuals who are dealing with problems with their former employers and landlords. A mass revolutionary labor movement obviously depends on being able to organize workers when they are still on the job and a strong auxiliary working class tenants' movement requires organizing tenants while they are still living in a given building. Ultimately, to grow into an actual mass movement it is clear that SeaSol is going to have to evolve.

After conducting research there are some good reasons to think that this is in fact possible. First and foremost, multiple organizers I interviewed seemed acutely aware of this fact. Bruce especially, who was one of the founders of SeaSol, told me that the organization is essentially a means to an end. In Bruce's words, SeaSol is trying to create an organization that can serve as a "foundation for a broader working class movement." In the contemporary United States, where class-consciousness and direct action are all but extinct, this means bringing people together to fight back where and how they can even if it's just to help one person at a time recover a few hundred dollars. No one I interviewed said they just wanted SeaSol to only continue doing what it is already doing. On the contrary, everyone said they wanted to see SeaSol take on bigger fights involving more people. The organization is successfully serving as a magnet that is slowly collecting people who share a common desire to protect each other from injustice using collective direct action.

There are many things that make SeaSol, but the single most encouraging thing for the organization's future is its seeming ability to engage and excite regular people. That is to say, to reach people like George, Ana, or Ramona who were not necessarily active in any sort of activist or leftist groups before joining SeaSol. SeaSol's ability to bring people into the organization based around practical activity rather than ideological motivations is extremely promising. The organization is not built around political posturing or launching public campaigns to stop government policies that it knows it does not have the strength to truly alter. Almost every socialist organization in the United States launches campaigns like these all the time, knowing full well that they are going to fail, but hoping to recruit people through the campaign. SeaSol on the other hand believes that real victories, even if they are small, are a much more honest and effective means of permanently recruiting people into the organization.

SeaSol is designed to find where people's everyday lives and radical politics intersect. SeaSol's organizers feel that it would be impossible to build a large movement that is not based around material improvements in individuals' day-to-day existence. The organization's approach to solving problems in people's lives, such as unpaid wages or stolen deposits, is not just intellectually exciting but also simply more effective than the legal system. SeaSol demonstrates the validity of the political philosophy that motivates many of its members daily through action rather than through rhetoric. My

interviews with George and Ramona demonstrated that SeaSol is actually quite successful at doing this, but is that enough?

We know that the organization's direct approach is effective and could potentially be popular with large numbers of people. However, the number one question for SeaSol moving forward is can the organization transition to actually helping groups of tenants and workers organize before they have already quit or moved? Without successfully making this transition at some point in time the group will never be able to rebuild a mass revolutionary labor movement. Still, at a time when an anarchist approach to labor organizing has gone all but extinct, SeaSol gives some reason to believe that a resurgence of a popular revolutionary labor movement is possible. The organization's practical approach and tangible results have also inspired people to start other Solidarity Networks across the United States and even across oceans. At a time when so many people feel helpless in the face of the massive institutions that control our lives, SeaSol offers an alternative approach for fighting back. If this idea continues to spread there is no telling what Solidarity Networks may yet be able to accomplish.

## **Chapter 6**

### **APPENDICES**

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### **Interview Questions**

1. What is your Name?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you lived in Seattle?
4. When and how did you become involved in SeaSol?
5. What is SeaSol?
6. What do you see as SeaSol's purpose? In the short term? In the long term?
7. Have you seen SeaSol make any decisions?
8. How did SeaSol decide as an organization, on those decisions?
9. What, if any, criteria does SeaSol base this (these) decision(s) on?
10. Do you think this is a fair way of making decisions?
11. Can you explain a bit more about why you think that?
12. Do you think this is an effective way of making decisions?
13. Does this decision making process promote active participation from everyone in the group?
14. Is there anything you'd like to change about SeaSol's decision-making process?
15. (SeaSol Organizer) Why (or based on what criteria) did SeaSol choose to take on this fight?
16. Why did you choose to involve yourself at such a high level in this particular campaign?
17. Could you describe the background details of the fight?
18. How did it start?
19. What tactics did you use during the fight?
20. Which tactics seemed most effective?
21. How did the landlord or boss react throughout the campaign?
22. How, or did that effect the campaign tactics?
23. What else stands out in your memory from this fight?
24. Were you pleased with the outcome? Why or why not?

25. Do you think this fight helped strengthen SeaSol as an organization? Why or Why Not?
26. Do you think you will remain involved in SeaSol? Why or why not?
27. How did you feel about SeaSol (as an organization) at the beginning of this fight?
28. How did you feel about SeaSol (as an organization) during or after this fight?
29. Has your involvement in SeaSol changed or altered the way you feel about bosses or landlords?
30. Has your involvement in SeaSol changed you in any other ways?
31. The tri-fold pamphlet about SeaSol says that the organization hopes one day to create a world without bosses or landlords. What do you think about that? Do you think such a world is possible?
32. How would you describe your political ideology?
33. What you would like to see change in SeaSol?
34. Is there anything else you would like to add about SeaSol or this fight?
35. Do you have any questions for me?