

IWW organising in the 1970s

An interesting account of attempts of organising Industrial Workers of the World union shops in the US in the 1970s, which contains useful lessons on the tactic of organising small workplaces.

When the IWW began its resurgence in the 1960s, it became mostly a student and counter-cultural phenomenon. But at the dawning of the 1970s the times seemed ripe for bringing the IWW back to the job. The radicalization of the sixties was beginning to be felt in industry and was expressing itself in wildcat strikes and tales of sabotage.

The Chicago Branch of the IWW decided to jump into the fray with a few organizing bids early in the decade. In the period from 1970-73 the Branch took on a manufacturer of counter-cultural artifacts called Hip Products; a move house (Three Penny Cinema) owned by an ex-commie; a small furniture factory; and even received a grant from some philanthropist to venture into organizing McDonalds restaurants. None of these efforts succeeded, except for the Three Penny campaign which did result in a short-lived contract which was lost when the workers quit en-masse in response to a new ownership's decision to turn the once-popular cinema into an exhibitor of pornographic films.

In analyzing these early campaigns, members of the Branch came to the conclusion that the IWW got involved in these struggles only when someone who worked in the place, usually someone involved in the local counterculture, contacted someone they knew in the IWW; therefore there was no real strategic or tactical planning done to carry on the fight. They concluded that what needed to be done was to target a particular industrial sector and prepare a long-term effort to "infiltrate" the sector and organize from within.

They conducted a survey of industry in the Chicago area and discovered that there were literally hundreds of small non-union job shops (of from 50 to 100 workers) engaged in the manufacture and/or finishing of metal products. As a result, several Chicago Branch members formed the IU440 Metal Workers Organizing Committee and, in the autumn of 1974, put out a call for all "footloose wobs" who would like to try their hand at organizing to move to Chicago and help out. The committee offered fellow workers who heeded the call free room-and-board and \$15 spending money a week for up to a month or until they found a job.

At the time yours truly was cooking pizzas in Bangor, Maine for a minimum wage, so I decided to pull up stakes and move to the Windy City in the autumn of 1975 to join the campaign. Several other wobs from around the U.S. also responded to the call. The plan was to get IWWs hired on in the designated sector, hopefully a few in the same workplace; get established on the job and begin the task of gaining the confidence of work-mates; find out what the gripes were; talk about and take direct action around these grievances; and, eventually, recruit fellow workers into the union.

Now, word on the grapevine was that if you couldn't find a job in Chicago, you couldn't find a job anywhere. Unfortunately, 1975 was not a good year employment-wise. Getting jobs in the sector was difficult, and getting established even harder. My own experience could illustrate the problem.

It took me a full month of pounding the pavement before I landed a job at an electroplating plant. While the plant was in the industrial sector we were targeting, it was not an ideal situation for our purposes in as much as the place was already a union shop. Secondly, I was the only gringo on the shop floor, the rest being black and hispanic. This could have made it more difficult, from a cultural point of view, for me to gain acceptance by my fellow workers. I say "could have" because I wasn't on the job long enough to find out - just four months. What happened was I brought to the attention of the union's business agent a particularly dangerous safety problem. (In electroplating, metal parts or tools are dipped in a plating solution of zinc or cadmium or copper or whatever and then placed in a drier. The problem was that the person who carried the bucket of wet-plated metal to the drier had to wade through a rather large puddle of water that had accumulated on the floor. The danger of slipping and falling was bad enough to warrant action, but the live electrical wires hanging above the puddle made the danger of electrocution if one of these wires should loosen and fall into the drink very real.) Surprisingly he called in OSHA which fined the company and forced them to correct the situation. In retaliation, I believe to this day, the company began a campaign of harassment against me, making life on the job unbearable. The AFL-CIO union, not surprisingly, did nothing to protect me and the IWW was in no position to intervene. After a month of hell I decided to chuck that job and seek another.

The next job I landed was at Dietzgen Corp., a manufacturer of surveying and drafting equipment. This place, too, already had a union - an old company union formed in the twenties which had been transformed in recent years into the semblance of a real collective bargaining agent for the workers with, it might be noted, the help of a few wobblies. On the plus side, there were already two wobs working there and the annual contract was coming up for renegotiation, so it appeared that there might be some opportunities for agitation. But, as these things do happen from time to time, one fellow wob got canned for alleged excessive absenteeism and, after I had been there ten months, the company decided to move to the 'burbs and I was out on the street.

This was the winter of 1976-77, jobs were becoming scarcer, and the drive was beginning to flounder for lack of direction. (What I ended up getting was a part-time job at IWW headquarters as a clerk. In the fall of 1977 I was elected General Secretary- Treasurer of the IWW and began serving my first of three terms in that position in January 1978.) Because of the inability to get jobs in the metal sector, the committee decided to expand its focus to the entire manufacturing and general production sector; renaming the committee the General Production Workers Organizing Committee. The expanded committee, which numbered 8 to 10 fellow workers employed in various jobs, continued to meet and discuss job conditions, organizing prospects, etc., but without much activity.

We were all active in General Membership Branch activity, however, which consisted for the most part in doing strike support work for a number of struggles being carried out by other unions. The one concrete product of the GPWOC in this period was the publication of a pamphlet, A Metal Workers Guide to Health and Safety on the Job. The pamphlet outlined a number of common hazards from electrocution to solvents to stress. Production of the pamphlet was no problem, but distribution was. It never really worked as an organizing tool, though we did get bulk orders from time to time from other local unions. (Several years after the committee had been dissolved, the GMB donated a box full of the guides to the South African Metal Workers Union.)

As indicated above, the drive was floundering in the winter of 1976-77. Then, in July 1977, the General Secretary-Treasurer of the IWW received a call from the president of a UAW local down near Springfield, Illinois, asking if the IWW would be interested in helping a small group of workers employed in a heavy road-building equipment shop to get organized. They had approached his local, but his superiors would not touch the place because it was too small a shop and, therefore, not cost effective. The GST asked the GPWOC if we wanted to take on the job. We agreed, and on July 23, 1977 sent an organizing team of three fellow workers to the small town of Virden, Illinois, located some 300 miles south of Chicago, to meet with the workers of Mid-America Machinery Company.

At this meeting the organizing team listened to the workers' grievances and explained what the IWW was and what it could and could not do for them. A majority, six out of seven shop workers, signed cards authorizing the IWW as their collective bargaining agent and joined the union. The one worker who did not join up turned out to be a stool-pigeon and ratted to the boss. When the workers turned up for work on July 26 they found themselves locked out.

The next day the committee presented the owner, Larry Jabusch, with proof that the majority of his hired hands were members of the IWW and demanded that he recognize this fact, end the lockout, and set a date to start negotiations for a contract. This he refused to do. The committee and the workers met to consider the options: strike for recognition or petition the National Labor Relations Board for an expedited representation election and file unfair labor practice charges (ULPs) with the Board. The workers chose the latter course.

This turned out to be a big mistake. While the filing of ULPs did convince the boss to end the lockout on July 30, it did not convince him to recognize and negotiate with the union. The union offered to drop the ULPs in exchange for recognition, payment of wages for the time of the lockout, and the reinstatement of a worker who had been fired in retaliation for bringing OSHA into the plant to assess health and safety conditions. (It was this firing that prompted the workers to organize in the first place.) Again the boss refused. It became obvious that Jabusch felt that he could outlast the union in a battle of attrition.

This strategy paid off for Jabusch in the long run. While the union did bring the pressure of direct action to bear, in the form of disruptive picketing at auctions where Mid-America sold its products, costing Jabusch thousands of dollars in lost sales, the long march through the courts allowed union membership in the shop to dwindle down to one by June 1978. By that time the courts had ordered Mid-America to recognize the union and to reinstate the fired worker, but Jabusch would not budge and was in the process of building a new site for his plant. The lone union supporter left in the shop decided to go for broke and went on strike. The GPWOC mobilized to uphold picket lines at both the old and new plant sites, but without the cooperation of the Teamsters Union and the AFL building trades unions which were erecting the new plant, the strike was largely ineffective. In September, the committee advised the striking fellow worker to offer to go back to work unconditionally (without officially calling off the strike). This would allow him to collect unemployment compensation if Mid-America refused (as it did) to take him back, as well as open the employer up for more ULPs.

Two years later, in the fall of 1980, with all appeals exhausted, Mid-America finally agreed to recognize the union and begin negotiations. By this time, of course, there were no union supporters in the shop and the GPWOC had dissolved in acrimony. The Industrial Organizing Committee, which was an outgrowth of the apparent need for coordination of organizing

campaigns union-wide in light of the Virden disaster, was asked to, and did, send letters to current Mid-America employees to brief them on the organizing campaign and to find out if they wished the IWW to bargain on their behalf. There was no response and the Virden campaign became history.

In the aftermath, some members of the organizing committee and the Chicago GMB got together to draw up a balance sheet of the whole Virden experience. Unfortunately, not all involved took part in this evaluation - most notably the workers directly involved in the whole process.

One of the main conclusions drawn was that there were major problems with the entire notion that small shops, which the mainstream unions ignored for being "not cost effective," could provide a proper niche for IWW organizing. The Virden experience showed that smaller shops tend to be more economically marginal and less able to "afford" a union. Owners of such places tend to be virulently anti-union and more willing to go belly-up than deal with a union.

The size of a workplace is also relevant with regards to the organizing campaign's time-line. In a small shop where one or two workers can make the difference between having a majority or a minority, time is crucial. Dragging the campaign through the NLRB and the courts can be demoralizing for the workers and cause enough of them to give up in disgust. Then even if the union "wins" legal recognition it loses its actual presence on the job. The big mistake in Virden was in not responding to the lock-out with a strike when we still had the majority in July, 1977. A year later it was too late.

Another lesson to be learned was to never take on a campaign unless the union has established some kind of base in the community in which the organizing target exists. The IWW had no presence in Virden, so mobilizing and maintaining informational and then strike pickets was very difficult. It is also important to educate pickets, especially support pickets, in what the struggle is all about and in how to deal with potentially violent confrontations with scabs and police.

On the plus side, however, we did discover that the IWW's program of class-struggle unionist was not all that alienating to your run-of-the-mill worker. We also learned first hand the power we collectively possess to inflict economic damage on a recalcitrant employer.

Perhaps the biggest lesson to be drawn from the Virden disaster was how devastating such a defeat can be on the organization that took up the cause. Relationships among members of the Chicago GMB deteriorated rapidly as some sought to find scapegoats for the defeat. Some Virden organizers refused to give assistance to an organizing project of the GMB's Health Workers Organizing Committee, while others looked askance at the formation of a construction workers' job branch. These poisoned relations spread outward from the Branch as they colored relationships within the Industrial Organizing Committee. but that's a whole other story in itself.

The Virden disaster marked the end of the MWOC/GPWOC and nearly destroyed the Chicago GMB. Throughout the 1980s, the Branch unsuccessfully struggled to define a direction for its activity. There were a few haphazard, unsuccessful organizing nibbles and some international solidarity campaigns, most notably around the Coca-Cola bottling workers in Guatemala in 1982-83, the British Miners strike in 1984-85, and the International Labor

Conference around May Day, 1986, but the Branch never regained its enthusiasm for on-the-job organizing.

But defeat in one battle does not mean that the war is lost. Perhaps we have become too tied up with the notion that collective bargaining is the end-all-and-be-all of unionism, and that the only possible role for the IWW is as a collective bargaining tool for small groups of marginal workers or, worse, a sort of junior chamber of commerce for worker-owned businesses. We need to find ways to participate on the bigger field of the class struggle and break out of the marginal ghetto into which we have fallen. As the IWW Preamble says, "Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world... organize as a class... and ABOLISH THE WAGE SYSTEM."