

We are all “amigos”



J. Pierce talks about expectations of white workers to accept racism and division in the workplace.

In most of my experiences in the working world, I have felt as if the bosses expected me, a college-educated white guy, to relate only to them. I’m supposed to want what they want and believe what they believe. Many of my previous employers, often despite their own backgrounds as people of color, were willing to express some pretty racist and anti-worker sentiments. They expected me to agree.

When they find that I have befriended co-workers of color on the job, they are usually dismayed. At the cafeteria, befriending Abraham, an older African- American, made Jean (the “hatchet lady” brought in to do the firing) quite angry. Soon enough, both of us were fired in the bosses’ quest to break up our informal control of the pace of work.

Before I got hired at the recycling yard, the bosses asked me, “Are you sure you can take orders from a Spanish speaker? These guys aren’t even from Mexico. They’re from, like, Guatemala!...[insert more racist blather].” But befriending all the Latinos (95 percent *Mexicanos*, by the way) made Ted, Andy, and Chaz pretty red in the face. After refusing a “promotion” to a supervisor position and building trust among my co-workers, management canned me after three months. Before that, because of our friendship, however, we enjoyed the only supervisor-free department and had some fun to boot!

“When we get bigger, and start to hire some *amigos*,” joked the widget boss, “I’m going to need you here managing them.” Eventually new people were hired and I treated them as *compañeros* and ignored the boss’s intended hierarchy. We enjoyed relatively stressfree working conditions, won expensive jackets, and orchestrated raises and equal pay—all out of our collaboration.

The thing I have learned from my time in the IWW is that I, myself, am an “*amigo*.” I am the cheap and vulnerable laborer who the bosses chase after. As a white guy, I have better access to jobs and I enjoy better treatment, relatively speaking. But if I don’t play their racist game, I quickly become the “lazy American” who wants more leisure time, safer and more meaningful work, and thinks everything ought to be free. (Wait ‘til they hear how the IWW intends to get it!) When the grocery bosses ask me to help save on “labor,” it is code for cutting back my hours so I can barely pay the rent. When the widget boss goes on an impromptu rant about how “the unions” screwed up the country, he’s scolding the people who comprise his “labor,” entreating us to expect a grim future for our children.

Every night before bed, the capitalists pray that we continue to identify with the rich instead of uniting with our fellow workers. They want us to continue on the path of racial segregation, exclusion (ostensibly) based on “citizenship” status, and delusions of joining the upper crust. But despite the bosses’ best efforts, IWW members in half a dozen countries insist on identifying with the oppressed ranks of labor. We insist on building links across color lines as we fight to bring the new society into existence. But that’s just what friends do.

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