

When organizing your workplace feels utterly impossible



A column by Liberté Locke on some of the hurdles and frustration one encounters in workplace organizing.

You've gotten your red card, attended several organizer trainings, countless branch meetings and union socials. You've gone to events where you have heard organizers tell their stories and have subscribed to their blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. You've read all the labor books you can find. You've signed every petition and attended every picket. All this and you still feel like everything is two steps forward and six steps back in your workplace organizing. You want to proudly work wearing that union label. You want success for the big reasons: capitalism keeps us enslaved. And for the smaller reasons that nag you in your sleep: people who matter to you think you're ridiculous for doing any of this. Sharing victories adds legitimacy.

We have to believe that we can do this work. We have to know that as fact. We all have our feelings of isolation in this world: feeling not good enough, that our bodies or minds aren't right, and that we made the wrong choices. We have lifelong battles to accept ourselves or to ignore how much we don't accept ourselves. Confidence is not something focused on in U.S. culture. This society relies on making you not feel good enough in order to push you into spending your last dime on something that you believe can make you stronger, prettier, smarter or sexier.

Then there's the very nature of subservient work: you're placed into a job with "superiors" that are younger than you (I'm 31 and have a 19-year-old supervisor) or have less experience than you. We're told that these people are inherently worth more than we are to the job and the world in general. We're supposed to follow work orders without question, often to the point of injury or death. You have been told that you are worth little but actually believe in your bones that you are worth something. You have contributions to make to the world through your community, your family, and your job(s). You can act against capitalism. It serves the bosses to hate ourselves.

In order to get our co-workers to fight together, we have to believe we can. The majority of your co-workers, like you, have had a lifetime of having their self-esteem chipped away at. We have been broken down by authority figures our whole lives, be they police, classmates, housemates, intimate partners, parents, teachers, social workers and our bosses. We're broken and molded into participating in this system that we never chose. We work ourselves to death in order to buy goods and services that we then use to keep ourselves functioning enough to keep working. Working students are working their way through school in order to get that next job, if careers even exist anymore. They are often disheartened to learn that all the crap that they went through at their old job exists at their new one. For folks that grew up poor, confidence is much harder to come by. We grew up watching our parents struggle. We promised ourselves and them that we would find a path out of this poverty and that we would take them with us. We feel guilty for not doing better by ourselves and by our families. We swear to everyone that we'll work hard and it will "pay off." We pull hard at our bootstraps to watch the system snip the line time and again and we keep pulling.

This cycle can end with us. We have to believe. We keep looking up for instruction when we should be looking to those at our side: our neighbors, our friends, and our co-workers. Their ideas, like ours, are worthwhile. If you don't believe you are capable of organizing then your co-workers won't believe it either.

When I came into the IWW Starbucks Workers Union I had some large shoes to fill. I was afraid. I felt alone and ill-prepared. For the first couple of years of organizing most of my actions were decided by asking myself what I felt could turn into a "badass story." Will I be the mouse or the lion? I don't care about how arrogant that sounds. I needed some arrogance to counter my low self-esteem.

I also don't care because it worked. I found myself shaking when talking to the boss. I was saying things I knew we weren't "allowed" to say and refusing to be mistreated. These showdowns with bosses led to getting what I wanted on the job. Once a busser overheard a district manager say that they needed to make sure the union knew "whose house this is." The shop committee then started declaring at work, "Whose house is this? This is our house." We made constant references to the bosses being "guests in our home." It was a huge confidence-builder.

Walk into your job like you own it. It can't operate without you. It's important to exude confidence, even if you don't feel confident. Try, even if it feels hopeless, because without the effort you've accepted defeat. And if you feel unable, then what hope do you have to offer your co-workers? Workers have been organizing in various forms for hundreds of years. Many of them haven't had the resources and support you can have access to in the IWW. If they could, and can, do it, then so can you.

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