

We have to remember most people face this world completely alone, and feel terror at grappling with all the threats to themselves and their families thrown at them at work. Even just to walk with someone down that path, and have someone listen to them and present alternatives can be powerful. We've been raised in a society that has socially engineered isolation and anti-social behaviours for decades, and we are swimming against the tide to try and build lived mutual aid and solidarity in our day to day activities. Any steps we can take to back others up can create tiny ruptures and open up new spaces for reflection and action.

Part of the problem is that our understanding of why people take action and what motivates them is often too simplistic. A popular conception on the left and in unions is that people will fight for better conditions, more material benefits, or their material interests. While it's not irrelevant obviously, people often say something completely different.

At a meeting of taxi drivers who had been involved in organising, one driver explained people's absence based on the economic crisis, the low season, and the rough state their families are in. His reasoning was that people were hard up, and couldn't afford to take the two hours off to get active and attend meetings. Another driver countered by saying that he will fight even if that means losing thousands of dollars and being expelled from the industries, because he can't let injustice stand. In fact this had some reality, as every driver in the room had lost out financially, personally, and in some instance criminally. Workers had been beaten, arrested, and harassed because of their work. The last generation of leadership literally was run out of the city. Any reasonable balance sheet would show that the workers had lost ground through organising in purely economic terms.

If you think about strikes, often workers lose more through striking than they win through raises with a successful strike. I was on strike for 3 months once, supposedly over a raise. If you calculate the amount of money lost through striking, it would have been decades in a high turnover industry before we recuperated our lost strike pay.

People are not typically motivated by raw economics. A sense of justice, dignity, and faith in their co-workers run deeper. If it was only about money, it's usually a better idea to hustle than it is to fight. Realistically the reformist options in the short term would likely help you and your family get wealthier, or at least not incur the penalties that are doled out for resisting. Yet it is in spite of this that people organise. Organisers are

conscious of what is at stake, but at a certain point accept those as part of struggling for what is right. That is crucial, because too often we're liable to think about organising as good marketing, with our option having the most benefits. People will fight and fight politically not because of the benefits they see, but because of their conviction and commitment to a different way of living their days out.

We can hone in on why workers fight, and build organisation on that basis. This really is a source of strength for us to understand these motivations, discuss, and promote them. In most instances this will mean building and integrating the social fibres that can hold us together when the bosses wage relentless war. After all this is one of the main things that brings us to the fight. We come to recognize that we can no longer cope with what is imposed on us as individuals, and need to graduate to a collective methodology.

1. Dolgoff, Sam. *The American Labour Movement: A New Beginning*. <http://recompositionblog.wordpress.com/2011/05/29/sam-dolgoff-the-american-labour-movement-a-new-beginning/>

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Moving to Action: Workplace Organising beyond Recipes

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When a revolutionary begins organising in a shop, the first step is typically to agitate one's co-workers. In our minds we see a step-by-step process wherein our agitation leads to other opportunities, recruitment, committee building, until we have power and an organisation. The problem is that for most workplaces, this way of thinking gives the wrong impression. In some workplaces, particularly in production, there's a state of constant agitation and actions burst out before committees ever get built. In other workplaces agitation just never seems to take hold. What do we do in these situations? What do we do when agitation takes years without much visible result, or in places where workers are clearly in the retreat or a passive state?

We must begin by seeing the bigger picture. Much of our thinking and historical reference points come from times where workers and communities had organisation, histories and memories of struggle, and there was a broad combative mood in the working class. We tend to overlook the periods before and after those struggles. So we look at agitating people as either teaching them or cheerleading. Often times though, fighting is unpleasant and people either perceive or have better options available than long protracted fights (which is what real organisation requires). It must be recognized that organising would bring its own misery and there's a social cost to this. Simply finding the right way to explain organising or having motivational wrestling isn't sufficient in many instances to bring people to action. To build a functioning, participatory and combative workers organisation would take a degree of social mobilization that isn't timeless or immediate. There are objective factors that must come into play that makes social class war a better option than settling our problems with the existing means of resolution.

This problem is poignant for new organisers hired onto a worksite. As someone new we come into a situation with the balance of forces given, relationships established, and we want to change the whole scenario. Without having respect, trust, and influence amongst your co-workers, it's irresponsible and dangerous to try and

organise. In fact you will endanger everyone else more than yourself. Coming into quiet shops where people accept the discipline they are given, resist fighting back, and are antagonistic towards organising poses a double challenge.

The reality is that in this situation you need to try and build collective fights, but you're unlikely to succeed in the short term. First you need to establish yourself, but also the mood of the workplace needs to change and it usually takes a spark either from inside (aggregious changes) or from the outside (industry or economic change, or other fights break out in the working class). Part of being new is going the extra mile for people, and sewing the seeds of solidarity in day to day actions. Do extra things for others that make their lives easier, be kind, participate in social gatherings, and come to be seen as someone who is reliable, dependable, and invested in your co-workers. As you become integrated into the informal workgroups and social map of the workplace, your activity and opinions will become more important, especially if you avoid trying to lecture people or spout off about abstract political opinions.

We need to move away from models of organising by lecturing people about why we could rule this world and capitalism is horrible, or believing getting people agitated will automatically lead to organisation because the workers are already radical. Instead we need to think about organising as a relationship, a back and forth between a revolutionary(ies) and their co-workers in dialogue and common struggle. While laying out your own ideas is appealing and often satisfying, simply depositing our ideas into people usually leads to a speedy withdrawal. Instead we want people to develop their own revolutionary ideas as part of their process about thinking about their experiences. As an organiser you try to get people to lay out their conception of their work, bosses, co-workers, and the world. Organisers work on what people want to work on, and the fights that they have interests in. It's on this basis that people learn and develop, and through struggle that they radicalize. Addressing their interests in the context of collective struggle gives us the space to re-examine their theories and ideas, and change them to fit new circumstances like workers imposing their power directly at work. That back and forth between ideas and actions is called praxis.

While this is a way to understand class-based workplace organising, it is also the model of liberatory or libertarian education of whom Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator and revolutionary, is the most famous proponent. In fact workplace organising with this model is a

better example of liberatory education than what usually passes for it, which is no more than lectures with clever activities and "popular" content. For us there are two pieces: (i) engaging people's ideas about how they understand their world and struggles, (ii) struggling around people's collective interests. These two happen simultaneously and go back and forth influencing each other as we build up our struggles. The organiser is a teacher, but not one in a classroom outside the struggle, but a participant vested in the struggles, and learning as a participant at the same time. It is crucial to understand that as workplace organisers and revolutionaries we are doing political work. Too often this is seen as a technical matter of doing "good organising". Good organising is preparing the field so that we can weather the storms that come not in 1 or 2 years, but in 10 or 30 years. This requires not just building actions, but creating new people, new protagonists in struggle. As Sam Dolgoff said:

"We must not be impatient. We must be prepared to work within the context of a long-range perspective which may take years of dedicated effort before visible progress will show that our struggles have not been in vain".¹

Many jobs won't give us the luxury of easily launching into collective fights. Management assaults', dominating legalistic grievance procedures and contract-environments, and false forms of management-led democracy can sometimes be successful in suppressing the will to fight as a group. It is consequently extremely difficult to get the opportunity to transform people in struggle, if we're forced into individualistic and isolated forms of struggle particularly if it's through alienating bureaucratic means.

Yet if our methodology of organising is not technical but political, and we are building organisation through building relationships and planting seeds, the field is somewhat altered. Revolutionaries should be people that others come to when they're having trouble they're unable to grapple with alone. That alone may be a significant step for someone. Once you have people's trust, and I mean genuine trust that you have their interests in mind like we would for loved ones, even individualized forms of struggle can be potential opportunities to build praxis. Taking action, even through ineffective methods such as informally talking to the boss to try and make small changes, can deepen the solidarity between co-workers and open space to further action.