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## **WORKERS' POWER AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS**

*(Ed Bruno [edmundbruno47@gmail.com](mailto:edmundbruno47@gmail.com) Southern Workers Assembly 2021)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Today's Young Workers Will Build the Future**

This pamphlet is addressed to young worker-activists, most of you outside of unions and without collective bargaining rights. It is in several sections so that you may take up for discussion various topics at various times. It is compiled in one package however so to offer a broad strategic view of the tasks ahead.

The South is big. 108 million people live here, making it the largest region of the United States. 55% of Black people and 45% of Latinx live in the South. Black, Brown and indigenous people total more than 40% of the Southern population. The 2020 census reports that 4 of the 10 largest states in our country are southern states – Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Georgia.

Any hope of organizing the southern working class must rest on a unifying strategy – a view of what must be done and how. But a strategic view that is also open to experimentation and trial and error. We think that the topics introduced in this pamphlet are worthy of your consideration. They draw lessons from both past social movements and more current experiences.

#### **No Progress Without Struggle**

They don't teach this in school, but they should. Active participants in a democracy need to know why and how social movements succeed in expanding democratic rights for all. Voting rights, increased working class living standards, the end of slavery and later of Jim Crow, public education, the end of the Vietnam War, LGBTQ rights, and more – all were a product of successful social movements.

Every social movement needs a strategy that begins with clarity: on the political/economic situation and on the type of workplace organization we intend to help build. From strategy follows a very particular organizing methodology.

We find ourselves today in difficult times. This did not happen by accident. Rather, various forces – rightwing ideologues, big corporations, ‘free market’ fanatics – have worked diligently to make working class lives and our country poorer, sicker, less educated and less democratic. It all started with destroying the unions and our right to engage in collective bargaining.

The political leaders of the rightwing “drew a conclusion that has shaped our age: that a modern economy cannot coexist with an organized working class...The destruction of labour’s bargaining power...was the essence of the entire (conservative) project: it was a means to all the other ends...not free markets, not fiscal discipline, not sound money, not privatization and offshoring – not even globalization. All these things were byproducts or weapons of its main endeavor: ***to remove organized labor from the equation.***”

(From Postcapitalist by Paul Mason)

We in SWA say the opposite – that a modern economy (and a modern democracy) CANNOT exist without an organized working class – organized to engage in militant, class conscious struggle and under the democratic control of its members.

**(LEARN MORE: [Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America](#), Nancy MacLean, 2017; [Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America](#), Kurt Andersen, 2020; and [American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise](#), Eduardo Porter, 2020; ‘Them and Us Unionism’ 2021, available from the UER&MWA (UE) and on the SWA website)**

## SECTION ONE BUILDING CADRE – FORMING NETWORKS – TAKING ACTION

***So, we need more and stronger unions, right?***

**Right. But easier said than done because the ‘Official’ Method Does Not Work Anymore.**

***Then what do we need to do?***

One answer to the question ‘how to start’ is to learn how NOT to start. The government-sanctioned way for private sector workers to win collective bargaining is through one-location-at-a-time NLRB elections, or through similar state or federal laws for public workers. After decades of erosion by hostile corporations, politicians and courts, we find ourselves in a terrible position.

Think of two steep cliffs divided by a very deep chasm. On one cliff are the 118,750,000 private sector workers without collective bargaining rights (93.5%) and on the other stand the 8,250,000 workers who enjoy those rights (6.5%). Connecting the two cliffs is a rickety tipsy rope bridge – the NLRB election process. Very few workers even try to cross this bridge. Of those few who try, many fall into the chasm. Only a few survive. Here are the facts –

- In Fiscal Year 2020, the Trump NLRB conducted 827 RC elections which covered only some 51,000 workers.
- In Fiscal Year 2016, the Obama Board conducted 1299 elections covering only some 74,000 workers.

Less than one-half of one percent of private sector workers in any given year participate in Board elections! It is worth noting that there is very little difference in results between the Trump reactionary Board (2020) and the Obama liberal Board (2016).

When it comes to southern public sector workers, the bridge to collective bargaining has been cut down (unless you work in Florida or in some cases in Virginia) and there is no way to cross over.

***So, we need to do something else, right?***

**Yup.**

The SWA objective is to build an infrastructure of workplace organizations from which will emerge a powerful social movement able to win immediate economic and social improvements, and full collective bargaining rights. This we believe is the path toward a happier, fairer and more democratic nation and a vital component for international worker solidarity capable of confronting the forces of domestic and global capitalism.

In other words: a better South, a better Nation, a better World.

*I guess that's doing 'something else', but is there a method to our madness..a guide for our actions?*

**There is. While the past will not repeat itself, it can teach. In our own past we find organizing methods that we can adapt and use in today's world.**

Worker organization is a human endeavor, built by countless peoples' energy and creativity. Successful social movements feature some common elements often combining in unexpected ways to lead to a breakthrough. They are –

- A Committed Core of dedicated activists;
- A Militant Minority of supporters;
- Networks that connect multiple workplaces and locations
- A dedication to collective action to win both workplace improvements AND society-wide improvements.

**These are the basis of SWA's organizing methods: every important southern workplace should have a cadre within it, building support for both immediate and longer-term improvements; the cadres are not isolated but connected. First through local worker assemblies, later in networks that extend along occupational, corporate or economic sector lines. Networks that put into practice the democratic and collective action norms that are required to win.**

### **The Committed Core – the 3.5% Rule**

The terms 'committed core' and 'militant minority' were used and understood by working class activists in years past. That is how they thought and planned about how to organize in the workplace. We should return to these methods today. Every social movement is built around a relatively small group of committed people who engage in thinking, planning, and developing the consciousness of the militant minority. They do this not just by talking but by *engaging in collective actions* to win improved conditions. This is our cadre, the **committed core**.

*Recollection of **Bud Simons**, one of a committed core of only 7 workers in the Flint GM works, in September 1936, 3 months before the sit-down strike: (we)...kicked this idea around with (other workers in the cadre). They followed the one in France and the one in Midland Steel. They got hold of those people, interviewed them, found out what tactics they used and everything. We had it all worked out in our heads of what to do...when we had the sit down...".*

*Account of the first African-American person to register to vote under the new Voting Rights Act, 1965: "On August 10, **Ardies Maudlin**, a nurse, and her husband, Thomas, a deliveryman for a*

*wholesale grocery company, rose early and headed for the federal building to register to vote...The fifty-two-year-old Maudlin had tried to register twice in recent months...but had been rejected both times...She was the first voter registered under the VRA. Fittingly, it happened in Selma.”*

How small a cadre is ‘relatively small’? Recent years have seen an increase in the serious study of social movements. This research tells us that *successful* social movements, over time, develop the active participation of about 3.5% of their constituency. While it is true that organizing is not just arithmetic, it is just as true that when it comes to power, numbers count. The 3.5% rule is a useful benchmark to assess our work.

Further, *successful* social movements connect individual cadres from multiple workplaces and locations thus forming a powerful presence capable of taking offensive and often disruptive action. Consequently the 3.5% rule not only must be applied to the individual workplace but also to the entire network of cadre.

**(Read More at: Organize! Wyndham Mortimer, 1971; The Many and The Few, Henry Krause, 1947; Give Us the Ballot, Ari Berman, 2015; This is an Uprising, Mark Engler & Paul Engler, 2016.**

### **Every Social Movement Identifies and Recruits a Committed Core Map It Out**

From the very beginning, movement organizers must be crystal clear about what we intend to achieve (the objectives) and how we intend to do it (the methodology). Here are a series of necessary questions that must be strategically thought-through and answered. We’ll take up each in turn.

- What is our constituency – an industry, a corporation, an occupation, a city, county or state?
- Is our target constituency large enough to make a big impact?
- What and where are the key workplaces within this constituency?
- What are the characteristics of this workforce?
- What is the production process and where are the profit-making centers?
- How will we contact likely recruits - is there a helpful technology/are employee lists or data bases available to us/ is direct workplace contact possible?
- What is our ‘calling card’ issue to inspire and mobilize our potential core?

## The Militant Minority

The **militant minority** is a little harder to quantify. 'Minority' means just that. In the early stages, majority support is a long way off. But we see the militant minority's existence in every social movement. They are the allies *directly recruited* by the core cadre. **They are almost always recruited on the strength of taking offensive action to win improvements.** They offer support, show-up at events, recruit new members, are occasionally active, but are not as deeply engaged as the core.

Their numbers are many times larger than the core. BUT IT IS ONLY AT THE END – WHEN VICTORY IS IN SIGHT – THAT SUPPORT REACHES MAJORITY LEVEL. Thus, our guiding slogan – 'Organize the minority to win the majority'.

*In mid-year 1936, the CIO militant minority was growing but still small compared to the total workers employed. UE reported 30,000 members of an industry workforce of 350,000; UAW, 25,000 of 500,000; SWOC, 15,300 of 505,000.*

Read more at: [Them and Us](#), James Matles, 1974; [The CIO 1935-1955](#), Robert Zieger, 1995

*This doesn't sound too powerful. The cadre is very small and the minority is only a minority. Where's the power?*

The power is in the NETWORK. We need to break the habit of organizing one workplace (or worse only one bargaining unit) at a time by relying on Board-conducted elections, and concentrate instead on building a network of workplaces ready to take coordinated direct collective action on a large scale.

### Building the Network to Take Collective Action: the 1 to 1 Rule

Newly recruited cadres, attracted on the promise of action, should not be left sitting around with little to do. After cadre in various locations have been recruited and perhaps have undertaken some easy tasks, we will want to knit together the separate workplace cadres into a network to begin to plan and undertake public collective action. The network should meet as soon as possible in some convenient way. *At its very first meeting the group should take its first public action just to set the practice.* We cannot underestimate the impact of

getting previously unconnected and unorganized but like-minded workers acting together in their own interest.

There are a variety of possible networks. The most basic (and easiest to form) is a local workers' assembly, based on your own location, usually a city or county. Other necessary networks might tie together all locations owned by the same corporation or doing the same kind of work or in the same industry/economic sector. The point is: *DO NOT isolate the organizing in just one or two locations!*

In fact, there is a rule discovered first in chemistry and biology and then in economics that surprisingly applies to organizing. It is this: to create a complex and dynamic system there must be *a minimum* one-to-one relationship between nodes (in our case workplace cadres) and the connecting links between the nodes.

### **Our Goal is an Organizing Sweep**

If our organizing constituency consists of 10 locations, then 10 cadre must be built. If we find 'union interest' in one of the ten locations and stop to deepen organizing in that one location, we have created a **simple static** situation. Even if we manage to get across the NLRB election-rickety bridge and negotiate a decent first contract (which often takes a year or two), our influence on the other nine locations will have dissipated and no organizing sweep will develop.

IF on the other hand, we link together the 10 cadre by a variety of links – by common industry, product, occupation, corporate ownership, or shared geography, and IF those links number 10 or more (10 nodes: 10 links, thus a minimum 1 to 1 ratio), we are on the way toward a **complex and dynamic** network.

### **The Network Became the First CIO Unions**

After the Flint sit-down strike, General Motors recognized the new UAW as the union for only its members at those locations which the union had members, for 6 months. General Electric recognized the new UE as the union for purposes of grievances and bargaining only for its members and only at locations where the union reported membership, also for 6 months. In other words, the corporations

were forced to recognize ‘the network’ of cadre and members that the unions had previously built.

### **Broad-based Collective Action Leads to the Breakthrough**

Even the most creatively challenged organizer can see the potential in such a Network to take coordinated public action on common important workplace and societal issues. The recent teacher strikes should prove a compelling example of the value of building a network of activists *in states without teacher collective bargaining rights*.

#### **Plan Ahead:**

At Network meetings intensive planning and training must be done, including

- How to apply collective action/collective rights both at work and in the public arena
- Recruiting additional cadre and the militant minority in the workplaces;
- Speaking publicly and effectively on behalf of our constituency
- Adopting offensive campaigns and escalation plans that slowly win gains in recruiting cadre and influencing public opinion. It is vital to understand that even though social movements may take a long time to win, we must reach **benchmarks** by everything that we do.

#### **The Calling Card Issue:**

We must open with an issue(s) that is compelling and meets these criteria:

- The issue is common to most everyone in the workplaces
- Its solution would make a substantial difference in peoples’ lives
- The problem is urgent, already on workers’ minds, and can gain media attention
- There exists a number of reasonable avenues through which workers and supporters can take action
- It is possible to win over public opinion on three counts: first that a problem exists, second that a solution must be found, and finally that the solution offered is the right one.

#### **Look for a ‘Bridge’ Issue:**



Often the very best issue will be one that **bridges** a pressing workplace issue to an equally pressing societal issue. A good example is inferior employer-provided health care bridges to the need for Medicare for All. Another example is ‘how the fast-food workers’ fight for \$15 campaign bridges to a \$15 minimum wage for all.

### **Strikes, Strife and Disruption...and then The Breakthrough**

Make no mistake that in the end victory will come only by significant disruption of the ‘normal’ order and by workplace strikes. There is not an example in history that tells us otherwise. It follows that the organization we build and the public support we win will have to be tested in a show of **non-violent** force in order to achieve a significant breakthrough.

- *In the 10 weeks following the successful civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham Alabama, 758 similar demonstrations broke out in 186 U.S. cities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 followed.*
- *In the year of the Flint sit-down strike, workers conducted 477 sit-downs and a total of 4700 strikes involving over 500,000 workers. Millions formed and joined unions*
- *Public employee unions and collective bargaining were created by (illegal) strikes: during the first 3 months of 1970, U.S. public workers struck government agencies at a rate of one every 36 hours. Over a 10-week period, strikes erupted in 24 cities and 28 school systems.*

**(Read more at: Parting the Waters: American in the King Years 1954-1963, Taylor Branch, 1988; Judgement Days, Nick Kotz, 2005; Strike Back, Joe Burns, 2014)**

**SECTION TWO**  
**GOOD TROUBLE BETTER SOUTH**  
**Workers' Collective Action Expands Democracy**

We build worker organization and political power through collective action. Workplace **cadres** build confidence and experience by taking on issues of wide concern in their workplaces. By doing so they attract and recruit a growing body of supporters, a **militant minority**. As cadres are formed in a number of important area workplaces, a **network** (the SWA local workers' assembly) concentrates worker capacity to take on broader class issues of vital importance to all workers (**calling card issues** like Medicare for All, Save Jobs Safe Lives, and All Hours Worked All Hours Paid).

At each step, built in from the very beginning of cadre formation, is collective action, the engine that makes organization go forward.

**Collective Action At Work**

Collective action ('Concerted activity' is a legal term that means involving more than one worker) can include any action, demand, protest or inquiry regarding any workplace issue, dispute, or proposed/opposed change in terms of conditions of work. It includes the following activities –

- Petition the boss to make changes
- Request the boss meet and discuss issues with the workers
- Picket, boycott and strike the workplace
- Propose improvements in pay, conditions and handbook rules
- Wear buttons and other insignia
- Speak to other workers (but not disrupt work)
- Post and pass out literature (but not disrupt work)

*Workers do not need a Union to engage in collective action.* In fact, these rights are unrelated to union organizing drives although they of course may be used to build union organization. Here is how these rights are explained in federal law (Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act) –

Employees may engage “(1) in self-organization, to form, join or assist labor organizations, (2) engage in other concerted activities for the purposes of collection bargaining, or (3) mutual aid or protection.”

(NOTE this particular law applies only to some private sector workers, but similar protections exist in various federal and state laws. *Workers should insist on these minimal rights regardless of law.*)

### **Collective Action About Work Issues**

The right to engage in ‘mutual aid and protection’ extends beyond the workplace as well. Workers may seek to improve their working conditions by appeals for public support, new legislation, and enforcement of existing state regulations.

### **Collective Action in the Community**

As workers and as members of our community we are free to engage in the following activities which are protected by the First Amendment –

- Speak and pass out literature
- Protest, rally and march
- Picket and boycott
- Propose or oppose legislation
- Support candidates for office
- Engage in non-violent disruption and civil disobedience

For those who are employees of a governmental body, the First Amendment directly prohibits the public employer from interfering with these rights. For other types of employees and all non-employees, the First Amendment protects against governmental interference (like police orders to disperse, arrests, injunctions or other court orders) initiated by private parties.

Here is the text of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution –

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the **freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.**”*

The exercise of First Amendment rights of speech, assembly and petition include association (to join or form organizations) and collective action to bring about political, social and economic change.

### **Solidarity**

Solidarity is learned in practice, by acting together on behalf of one another. Rights must be claimed and used, or they do not exist. These truths are hard-learned. As the Southern Workers' Assembly extends workplace networks through the South, solidarity and rights will take center stage once again.

### **SECTION THREE**

#### *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IS LABOR'S GOAL*

One way or another labor's over-arching goal is to redeem the promise of our nation's founding – "*...certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted...*"

The promise is that the government we form will assist us in our quest for happiness – a healthy, prosperous, safe and satisfying life, and a nation that respects the human right of all the world's peoples. The early labor movement was aspirational for the entire working class and for the nation – "The objects we have in view...is the finish of the glorious work of the Revolution." (Labor Party statement, 1829).

Early unions from 1840 demanded the shorter work week AND free public education so that workers and their children would have the time to learn and participate as citizens in self-government.

We once understood that in order to pursue happiness we need **organization** by which to do so. Collective bargaining is one vehicle, voting in free and fair elections is another. Remedying at long-last the original American sin of slavery and racism is a third. We expect our Government not to guarantee happiness but

to provide the means by which we might *attain happiness*, individually and collectively.

Thousands of striking women textile workers 1912 said it best – **We Demand Bread...and Roses Too**

## Appendix 1

### THE GREAT UPSURGE – THE RISE OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM LESSONS LEARNED

(Ed Bruno, [edmundbruno47@gmail.com](mailto:edmundbruno47@gmail.com) Prepared in 1998 for the Labor Party's campaign for workers' rights, revised in 2017 for SWA's School for Southern Workers in Atlanta Georgia)

During the period 1930-41 social turmoil resulted in mass working class organization and collective bargaining in major U.S. industries. But from the very start, the chances of success for the new unions were very fragile, uncertain, and fleeting. The new unions were a product of a historic moment that probably will not be duplicated. However, certain elements had to be present to turn social turmoil into union organization. In fact similar parallel elements were also present in other successful social movements – abolition of slavery, women's' suffrage, and civil rights,

**Identifying these necessary elements can give guidance to our efforts today.**

**1. A *COMMITTED CORE* of experienced activist organizers in major workplaces, linked by their political beliefs and with their communities, met with repeated organizing defeats but were able to apply the lessons learned to develop a breakthrough strategy of sit down occupations and mass picketing.**

- The **core** shared a common intent – to establish collective bargaining as a democratic necessity and thereby win a better life for the working class.
- The **core** totaled a surprisingly small number of dedicated men and women. For example, from first-person UAW accounts: in GM Flint a core of 6 backed up by 40 'key men'; in Kelsey Hayes a core of 9 backed by 200; in Chevy #4 a core of 7 with about 200 behind them.
- Try, fail, try again, fail again but learn. By 1935, 6 years into the Great Depression organizing efforts resulted in mostly lost strikes and the destruction of new unions. Through practical experience however **core** activists learned the value and use of sympathy strikes. of defying injunctions and of brief sit down stoppages to win grievances.

- The commitment of **core** activists was long-term and part of their daily working lives.

**2. A MILITANT MINORITY OF UNION ACTIVISTS LED FIGHTS THAT DIRECTLY CHALLENGED MANAGEMENT YEARS BEFORE WINNING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS AND UNION CONTRACTS.** Extensive steward systems, job actions, direct rank and file involvement in grievance settlements were common to the organizing upsurges in all industries, allowing the new unions to maintain worker loyalty and weather significant corporate attacks.

- The **militant minority** were recruited to take action right then to address the pressing problems of the work day, not to take a passive act of 'joining' in hopes of a future union.
- The **militant minority** was almost always recruited on the strength of taking offensive action to improve wages, rights and conditions rather than a defensive act.
- For example, independent grievance committees were active in the electrical industry by 1932, a successor to the defunct 1917-19 GE Union Conference. By 1935 Westinghouse South Philadelphia workers won grievance negotiating recognition but not full bargaining rights.
- By 1936 the **militant minority**, while growing, was still small compared to the total number of workers employed. For example: UE reported 30,000 members of whom 16,000 were paying dues in an industry of 350,000; UAW reported 25-30,000 members from a workforce of 500,000; SWOC (steel) showed only 3% in the union – 15,300 – in an industry of 505,000 workers.
- Prior to winning recognition and its first union contract, UE reported in-mid 1937 at GE's home plant in Schenectady N.Y. that 219 stewards were conducting department sit downs, holding 48 unit meetings with workers a month, and settling 5200 grievances a year.

**3. SHARPLY DEFINED CLASS POLITICS resulted in federal and state electoral successes which increased working class consciousness and confidence,**

***emboldened union organizers' plans, and created a brief 5-month window of political advantage during which sit downs and other strikes won union recognition and bargaining.***

- For example during the 1936 elections the incumbent President Roosevelt and New Deal candidates ran on programs of economic rights and improved living conditions for the majority of Americans.
- For example, the new Labor Non-Partisan League, formed in 1936, mobilized workers to support FDR and state New Deal candidates on a pro-collective bargaining and working class program, and swept the elections in the industrial states.
- **Core** activists timed their organizing strategies to the 1936 elections counting on political support (or at least state neutrality) during the coming battle with the corporations. It is important to understand that the breakthrough was a result of workplace and political/community organizing and pre-dated the Wagner Act which was ruled constitution later in 1937.

**4. *WORKERS' RIGHTS WERE TRANSLATED INTO NEWLY ENACTED FEDERAL LAWS that forbid the use of federal court injunctions and troops to break strikes, encouraged workers to join unions and participate in collective bargaining, and aggressively enforced individual rights by reinstating thousands of workers fired by the corporations.***

- Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act, 1932
- Section 7 (the right to self-organize and engage in concerted actions), National Industrial Recovery Act, 1933 which resulted in more than a million workers joining unions.
- Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Board, 1935 but not in effect until April 1937. An aggressive NLRB (pre-Taft Hartley) was crucial to the second CIO upsurge from late 1937 to 1941, ordering elections, hauling violating corporations into federal court, reinstating thousands of fired workers and ordering the abandonment of company unions.



**5. NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCES provided by a few top union leaders who broke politically and tactically with the AFL, refused to compromise militancy where it developed, and gave local organizing efforts a national voice and support.**

- While leaders' motivations were mixed, a common interest was to achieve industrial and political power for the broader class rather than narrow sector interest.
- Conservative AFL leaders failed to take advantage of millions of new members who joined upon passage of the NIRA's Section 7. Opposing national leaders began to advocate and encourage militant actions including disobeying court injunctions.

**6. ONCE A BREAKTHROUGH WAS MADE, ORGANIZATION SPREAD RAPIDLY GEOGRAPHICALLY AS WELL AS THROUGH WORKPLACES IN THE SAME CORPORATIONS AND IN THE SAME INDUSTRIES.**

- Once workers saw that victory was possible and how it could be achieved, organizing strikes sparked through many industries and cities. After the sit down victory at GM Flint led to union recognition and a members-only contract for the new UAW, there followed during 1937: 477 sit down strikes involving over 500,000 workers and a total of 4700 strikes during the year. Militant strikes and sit downs continued through mid-1941.
- It is important to know that initial recognition and contract coverage applied in most cases to only the members of the union and covered only those locations where the union had membership. For example the first UAW contract that resulted from the Flint sit down covered 17 GM plants. This same pattern was true for electrical (UE) and steel (SWOC).

## **OPERATION DIXIE LESSONS FORGOTTEN**

**(Ed Bruno, [edmundbruno47@gmail.com](mailto:edmundbruno47@gmail.com) Prepared in 2010 for field organizers on the eve of NNOC's organizing drive in southern states, Tampa Florida, revised in 2021 for the SWA)**

### **Factual Background:**

Operation Dixie was launched by the CIO in early 1946 and ended in 1953. The organizing covered 12 southern states and was initially funded by \$3 million dollars contributed by USWA, UAW and UE with another \$3 million (not all of it collected) from other CIO affiliates. The field staff operations (about 200 field organizers) were highly centralized, and field staff were screened for 'radicalism', even to the extent that Operation Dixie organizers had to resign from the CIO PAC.

The Operation Dixie strategy followed the 1937 CIO experience particularly in auto and steel – target the bellwether corporation of a dominant industry, create a transforming event (ie, the Flint sitdown strike) that would lead to the organization of the industry. The target industry of Operation Dixie was Textile. The transforming event was to be an 'elections only' one, rejecting any organizing tactics other than Board elections and intentionally avoiding the social/racial/political climate of the southern states.

The AFL opened its own southern drive in 1946 and ended it one year later, concluding that the results did not justify the expense (of about 1500 field operatives) and that the effects of the new Taft Hartley law could not be overcome. The AFL drive was based on offering itself as the 'anti-communist' alternative to the CIO, friendly to southern businesses and to the 'southern culture',

### **Results, in brief:**

By the end of 1946 Operation Dixie was stalemated. Its over-all strategy proved a failure. From May to December the TWUA-CIO won 21 and lost 26 NLRB elections in Textile. Included in the 26 lost elections were the largest plants involved in the election contests. The TWUA was unable to bring to election the largest plants of

the biggest corporations; only 4% of the Textile workforce were involved in these 47 elections.

The expected in-plant organizing committees did not form and could not be easily or quickly established. The first 6 Board elections were all losses. NLRB delays exposed the CIO's powerlessness in the face of an indifferent federal government. By 1952 only 15% of southern textile workers were covered by a union contract, down from 20% in 1946 before Operation Dixie began (8% by the mid-1960s).

It is ironic to note that Operation Dixie's demise, May – December 1946 is exactly reversed by the CIO upsurge, December 1936 – May 1937. In six months a lot of things can happen.

In 1948 and 1949 the Center-Right CIO destroyed by raiding many of the existing CIO unions in smaller southern industries – food, tobacco, wood, and metal fabrication. CIO and AFL raids on each other resulted in almost no net gain in the South for either federation: from 1946 to 1953 the CIO took 44,000 members from the AFL and the AFL took 40,000 from the CIO.

The U.S. social and political climate moved Rightward in 1946, culminating in the first GOP Congress since 1930. The South led the way with rising Rightwing election victories in the 1938 and 1942 elections.

### **What Lessons Might We Apply:**

Perhaps Operation Dixie could NOT have succeeded in 1946. Or perhaps an Operation Dixie even under Left wing leadership could NOT have overcome the objective conditions. Overall however, this was an unequal battle from the start. The CIO was no match for the combination of forces that it met in the South and that was in fact changing the political climate of the entire country.

**But, it is conceivable that a Left Operation Dixie might have established some union beachheads throughout the region.**

1. The conservative CIO leaders misread their own 'glory days', what really happened during the 1937 upsurge. Operation Dixie's leaders were ideologically opposed to the Left forces that helped create the original CIO

upsurge. Consequently, Operation Dixie leaders discounted some key elements that were present in the 1936-7 –

- The transforming events were made by a **committed core**, not by majority vote but through actions taken by a minority of the workers.
- By downplaying the role of the committed core and militant minority's willingness to risk **collective actions, strikes and mass picketing**, Operation Dixie leaders intended to downplay the importance of Left leaders and rank and file activists. **But, Labor Board elections proved no substitute for direct action, and was incapable of creating a mass movement of workers.**
- While the 1946 conditions would not allow the big transforming event and the resulting industry-wide organizing sweep of 1937, **smaller transforming events were possible and in fact did lead to functioning unions throughout the south in wood, metal, tobacco and light electrical apparatus and appliances.**
- By relying on a 'Board-elections-only, pure and simple unionism' strategy, **Operation Dixie made three fateful mistakes:**
  - 1. It isolated union workers from any possible progressive allies, stripping away support from other social movements, in particular the growing southern civil rights movement;**
  - 2. It de facto supported the existing Jim Crow system of segregation and oppression, furthering the divisions within the southern working class;**
  - 3. It became solely dependent on one-factory-at-a-time Labor Board-conducted elections and on the new anti-union Taft Hartley Act, the same Taft-Hartley constraints we face in 2021.**

The concentration on Big Textile further skewed the CIO's strategy. Since the industry hired overwhelmingly white workers, it encouraged Operation Dixie leaders' conservative tendency to **ignore the racial legacy** of slavery and Jim Crowism. Another was that the CIO's campaign centered on the north-south wage differential, ignoring the daily shop floor issues and grievances. In fact.

those unions that aggressively fought racism and led shop-floor fights to correct grievances were much more successful in establishing southern union locals.

### **The Final Lesson – 70 years Later**

**Most importantly we must avoid the trap of ‘one-at-a-time’ unionism by: grouping the Board elections within the same time frame to create a mini-sweep of organizing; coordinating the contract bargaining, within and across state lines; engaging in public actions that highlight the issues at stake. (NNOC successfully organized and won RN union contracts at 23 southern hospitals in 4 states, as of 2021)**

**Read More At: Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950, Rosemary Feurer, 2006; Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South, Robert Rodgers Korstad, 2003; Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers, Michael Honey, 1993; The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s & 1940s, Michael Goldfield, 2020; The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO, Barbara Griffith, 1988**

## Appendix 3

### **THE EFFORT TO BUILD A LABOR PARTY (What Might We Learn)**

(Ed Bruno, [edmundbruno47@gmail.com](mailto:edmundbruno47@gmail.com) Prepared in 2016 at the request of the UE General Officers In re to the 1996-2005 attempt to establish a Labor Party)

**“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme” – Mark Twain**

Twenty years have passed since the most recent attempt to form a Labor Party in the U.S. The particular conditions and characters of those years will not come back around again. There is no sense in trying to repeat the specifics of the LP experience, but there may be a rhyme or two from which to learn. Here are a few observations and one recommendation.

The Labor Party was founded in 1996 and continued for 9 years. It was preceded for five years by the Labor Party Advocates which was intended to be an organizing transition to an electoral party. The LP convened three national conventions that were attended by thousands of mostly union-organized activists and leaders: the Founding convention in June 1996 in Cleveland and two Constitutional Conventions, 1998 in Pittsburgh and 2002 in Washington DC. Hundreds of thousands of union members ‘belonged’ by virtual of their unions’ affiliation and thousands more joined as individual at-large members.

The Party had no outside funding beyond its dues, affiliation fees and in-kind contributions primarily from Unions. UE was a founding union (the second behind the initiating OCAW). For six years from 1996 to 2002 I was assigned on behalf of the UE to assist the LP in this effort.

**A Working Class Economic Program:** This carefully crafted program stands the test of time. Its adoption required much effort, was not without its contentions, and adhered very strictly to working class needs. It remains as relevant today as it was twenty years ago – universal healthcare, free public education, a guaranteed job and wage, fair not free trade, racial justice, environmental protections and so

forth. It is worth paging through the issues of the 'Labor Party Press' (published 6 times a year) to see its full scope.

**Structure, Recruitment and Action:** These three elements are entwined and need to be considered together in the very early stages of Party formation. The LP was founded as a membership-based organization that would recruit and mobilize thousands for non-electoral action *first* and engage in electoral action *second* (the LP resolution 'A New Organizing Approach to Politics' does a nice job of describing this). This presented some challenges to the LP, as it will to any new political formation that intends to be membership-based:

1. Recruitment was class-wide (union members and non-members) and continuous. Therefore a structure has to be provided that is easily accessible by the average worker, is a reasonable vehicle through which members can make decisions and take political action, but lends itself to coordination for maximum impact. **It took us too long (2 years) after the Founding Convention to resolve structure, and it absorbed very significant effort and time to do so.** The resulting structure was approved by the 1998 Convention. It provided for state parties, subordinate city and regional chapters, and a base of 20-member neighborhood committees or union clubs. Criteria set out the minimum number of members and affiliates for each level of Party organization.
2. **Non-electoral Action:** Selecting for action a few program items that offer a mix of possible intermediate success, urgency for the working class, and also suggests reasonable activities that members and the public can do **makes member recruitment simpler and faster.** The Party began with its 'calling card' issue of a constitutional amendment that guarantees a job with a \$10 wage. While this provided a fine long-term vision for the Party, it suffered from a lack of urgency and from the difficulties of amending the U.S. Constitution. By the 1998 Convention, three program items were selected for Party-wide action: Just Healthcare (universal single payer), free public higher education, and workplace rights. This provided a good balance among the various Party constituencies and lent themselves to a wide variety of non-electoral actions that members could do to move the issues forward. (including the very successful non-binding ballot

referendums that the Party waged and won on healthcare and free public education in Massachusetts, Maine and Florida).

**3. Electoral yes, but with tight criteria:** Here too we resolved the issue too late, after 2 years (1996-98) of needless confusion and contention. The LP rightly was adamant on avoiding the twin dangers of acting the spoiler and winning powerless local offices that 'prove' the impotency of the Party. By 1998 a set of strict criteria was adopted by the Convention. This will be tricky business for any new political formulation.

**4. The LP effort was resource-starved.**

**And a recommendation: If there is to be a new working class political formation, its operational control should be in the hands of younger leaders (as seasoned and experienced as possible) and not by the grey-haired.** Folks my age will have a tendency to 'fight the last war' and will not be able to bring to bear thinking that reflects the new conditions.