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WORKERS' POWER AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS
(Ed Bruno edmundbruno47@gmail.com Southern Workers Assembly
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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**