

Worker Solidarity and Unions

Unions are mass organisations of the working class whose primary role is to achieve the common demands of their members. They are fundamentally *defensive* organizations. A good union can not only improve workers' lives, win more leisure time and a better standard of living, they can also change governments and make very significant changes across society.

Capabilities of the Union for the worker: A union sets goals for itself in tune with the aspirations of its members, but it can only accomplish what the majority of its members *are willing to support*. The goals of the unions are generally confined to the following areas:

1. *Issues of Respect:* Workers are often mistreated by the boss through verbal or physical abuse: from constantly degrading remarks to sexual harrasment and assault to a complete lack of empowerment: never listening to workers suggestions, advice, comments, etc.
2. *Wages & Benefits:* The vast majority of workers are not paid according to the full value of what they produce — if all workers in a workplace were paid this full value, then the boss would have nothing to survive on, since labour is the source of all value! Further, as inflation eats into the value of their wage, workers are constantly having to fight for increases in pay and benefits. Workers who don't get these annual raises are in fact being paid less money (even though their wage remains the same) since the value of money is continually decreasing.
3. *Hours Worked:* The vast majority of workers in the world are over-worked: required to put in more hours than is socially necessary in order to create profits. Unions can force the boss the hire more workers, instead of constantly increasing the burdens on existing employees. The union can also ensure that in emergency cases where someone must work over time, they are fairly compensated for (contrary to popular understanding — overtime compensation is compulsorily only for unskilled workers in a handful of countries). Further, if the union can grow strong enough a command a role in society, they can take the next step

in limiting the amount of wasteful labour — work for the military industrial complex or writing endless reports for the boss that are never used, for example.

4. *Working Conditions*: Many workers do not work in a healthy or safe work place environment. There is sometimes little prevention of potential dangers, protective gear is often old and ragged, there can be various factors (high stress) leading to psychological problems, etc. Occupational health and safety is the most unifying issue a union can pursue: even the most conservative worker can become totally irate if they believe their health and safety is being threatened. Legally binding standards can often result from such struggles, which means that when they are enforced a union delivers real benefits for their members while winning to its ranks people who would otherwise never join a union.

5. *Job Security*: In most countries (including the US) a boss can fire workers at will, for no reason at all. A few countries however have laws against firing workers without due cause, and some countries don't allow firing to take place based on discrimination or union organising -- but that doesn't stop the boss from firing that same worker for any other reason. With a union, any disciplinary action taken against a worker may be subject to a procedure negotiated with the union, which guarantees a level of natural justice through union representation.

Capabilities of the Union for the working-class: A Union *is* capable of greater victories than simply winning concessions from the boss for a particular group of workers who have bargaining power. While the immediacy of the workers' own needs are the real basis for creating the union, strong unions *can* achieve greater victories for the working class.

1. *Spreading the solidarity*: Unions can spread the word about their victories, inspire, teach, and lead other workers to similar victories in their work places. Solidarity cannot be taken for granted; it has to be built in struggle. Building this means effectively using things like publicity, public statements, embarrassment, acts of defiance or humorous demonstrations. All these things are mostly harmless and communicate the issue without being too confrontational (who isn't tired by those who scream bloody murder at this or that offence?) You have to convince people to listen, and usually that won't happen when all you have to talk about is awful misery and despair.

2. *Organizing the unorganised*: Unions can help create a more militant working class; they help foster **class** consciousness and establish pride in labour. This creates politically active workers; a necessity for revolution. This is a necessity for unions because no organised workplace is safe so long as there are non-unionised workers ready to work for worse conditions. Organising new workplaces ensures the supply of non-organized labourers is shut-off and raises the general standard of living for everyone.

3. *Hiring Halls*: Unions can create a situation where the employer must post all job openings to the union; thus making the jobs available only to unionised workers. This can go as far as forcing the boss to agree to a "closed shop", where the boss agrees to never employ someone unless they join the union. The union can even win the right to hire new employees, though this is very rare at the outset of the 21st century.

4. *Firing the Boss*: Unions can create an organisation that is capable of running an industry by the workers, from the bottom up, without the need for the bosses. Unions can use their model of democratic operation not only for the defence of the workers, but for the progress of the workplace itself— so that union democracy, not top-down appointments by the board of directors, is the order of the day. Naturally, this sort of arrangement requires a revolution.

5. *Legal Reform*: Unions can lobby government organisations and intervene in election campaigns for better labour laws, put union members into parliament to represent the interests of union members, and pressure for anti-discrimination laws, public health and education and other social changes which benefit the whole working class.

Tactics of the Union: All these capabilities sound bold and impressive, but how can a union achieve them? The simple fact that workers on a job site agree to work together to make these gains is no guarantee of success! The boss has to recognise the needs of profit, *not* the needs of workers' democracy! So what is the union to do?

0. Communication: The first basic thing that a union worker needs to understand is that their own consciousness about an issue is not necessarily the same as their fellow workers. The first steps in an industrial campaign are aimed principally at communicating with one another about the issues and achieving a consensus about what has to be done. The later steps are aimed at demonstrating that united action can achieve what needs to be done. Once the entire workforce in a company clearly understands an issue in dispute with the boss and is firmly committed to resolving it together (believing it is possible to win), the boss can either ignore the workers, or negotiate with the union in "good faith". Negotiations with the boss do not always go well, and sometimes, the boss outright refuses to recognise the workers' demands. In any case, when the workers' have found that the boss will not meet the demands they require, it is time for action.

1. Direct Action:

a. *The Slowdown [Go-Slow]*: Unionised workers take their time doing the job. Products are built at a slower pace forcing the assembly line to slow down, items are served more slowly so customers have to wait in line longer and longer, drivers slow down on their delivery routes, etc.

b. *Following the Rules [Work-to-Rule]*: Workers follow the exact letter of the workplace rules: no less, no more. Every company has a maze of rules for how to do things to protect them from this or that law, but in practice, we all (as well as the bosses) ignore many of these rules to get the job done in the best way possible. No longer. We follow them to the letter.

c. *Help the consumer*: If you are driving a bus, is it really necessary to collect the fares? Running a register -- is it so important that all goods are paid for? Working a hospital -- do you really need to write up bills for treatment? Serving food -- you don't want people to go hungry by giving them such small helpings, do you? This galvanizes public support in a fantastic way. :)

d. *Ignore the boss*: Institute the changes you want in the workplace without the bosses approval. Pay checks not arriving on time? Have the union take the money out of the register, and distribute it appropriately. Dangerous, old equipment laying around that the boss forces you to use? Use it for "parts"; move it yourselves to a place where it can't be useful.

e. *Irritate the boss*: Practices which make life miserable for the boss, such as everyone forwarding their phone to the boss, and so on. Use measures which humorously make the point, such as bringing the kids into work to support the demand for child-care.

f. *Sabotage*: Violence against the machinery, not the boss. This is an illegal tactic, thus no union "officially" supports it. Sabotage thus has a tendency to be carried out by individuals in an un-organized fashion, which can be very problematic. Workers who commit this can be held personally liable for damages, and getting the support of other workers for such action is always difficult — many workers would resent such a tactic because it is destructive. The word originates from the French sabot (meaning boot); after workers jammed their boots into their factory machinery in a united action. Union Workers employing this tactic may "misplace" critical items, spill coffee on critical documents, if in a restaurant, bring some "pets" to work (a.k.a. mice), and give the health board a call. Worried about scabs breaking the strike? Bring some "souvenirs" from work to your home, those convenient little things that seem to be so crucial for the smooth operation of the workplace.

2. Withhold Labour: Unionized workers can be on the job, but choose not to work.

a. *The Stop-work meeting*: Call your fellow workers to a meeting during working hours to discuss the issues in dispute and collectively decide on the next stage of action. This helps build solidarity and commitment while only losing pay for one or two hours - it will cost the boss more to deduct your pay than to pay you.

b. *Sit down strike*: These strikes are usually short and immediate. At a critical time in the business day, sit down for a "break" -- on the assembly line, sit back and watch the product move on down the line. Performers on stage sit down during the show, or in some way passively block the entrance/exit of leading members, to ensure the play does not go on simply by being immobile. Another method is the "mass grievance", where all workers go to the boss' office to discuss some problem. Another variation is the "sick-in" (used often by workers for whom a "strike" is illegal) -- where union members all call in sick on the same day. Lastly, workers can occupy the work place, in the event of a closure for example.

c. *Selective ["Guerrilla" strike] strike*: Why strike every day? Strike today, come to work tomorrow, strike the next two days, and so on, without letting the boss know what's going to happen next. Don't give them a chance to hire scabs, and force the bosses to work for a change to fill in on those "off" days.

d. *Rolling strike*: A different section of the workforce strikes each day or week, in rotation, so the whole place is stuffed continuously, but no-one is losing more than a fraction of their pay. Bosses usually respond with a "Lock-Out", by stopping the pay of all workers until the action ceases.

e. *Bans*: Ban work on just one task (one that people feel most pissed-off about), but otherwise work normally, and pass the buck endlessly when the boss tries to get that one task done.

f. *Short-duration strike*: Refuse to work for x number of days, and then return to work; as the dispute rolls on, the length of the withdrawals of labour get longer and longer. Picket lines are essential so that the effectiveness of the strike is not undermined by non-unionists going into work.

g. *Indefinite Strike*: The old-fashioned, hard-nosed, walk-out. Workers leave their jobs and set up a picket line outside the job site to discourage strike-breaking scabs and galvanize public support, refusing to return to work until an agreement is reached.

Note: No effective union action, whether simple face-to-face chatting in the tea-room or full-on strike action, is possible without a corresponding expression of working class discipline. Any unionist who calls a strike without organising picket lines to stop reluctant workers from going in to work would be better off doing nothing at all - a failed strike can break a union forever. The boss has enormous resources, mainly the pay-check and the right to hire and fire. If the workers are going to stand up to that and force the boss to do something the boss doesn't want to do, the workers have to be disciplined enough to actually walk out and stay out, while also being prepared to put up picket lines and physically stop people from passing. This is not a pleasant task. After the strike is over it may

take months or years to heal the bad feeling and bitterness resulting from what took place on the picket line. So strikes should not be called lightly; nor should they be called indecisively. When the strike is over real efforts must be taken to mend the wounds.

3. Legal Action: Blow the whistle! Unsafe work environment? Is the boss breaking rules about dumping trash or workplace safety? Is the cook putting that "special sauce" into the food again? Let the government know! Take the boss to court for unhealthy working conditions, violations of labour law, etc.

4. Tarnish Reputation: Branding is extremely important for large co-operations who rely on consumer revenues. Companies attempt to make their brand a culture in it's own right: instead of beer being at a party, the beer creates the party environment. Bring customers back down to reality!

a. *Publicize the struggle*: Let people know about the real operations of the company, and how it clashes with the image they douse on the public.

b. *Boycott!* Galvanize public solidarity with the struggle by asking consumers not to patronize the business — change their logo from being the life of the party to a symbol of the particular kind of oppression they practice.

c. *Ad Busting*: If the company uses public billboards, notices, etc, use graffiti to twist the message of the ad into something closer to reality.

How to build Union: Now that we have the scope of union objectives clarified, and the tools the union can employ to achieve these objectives have been made clear, the question becomes: how are unions built? Naturally, every union has different methods, every culture demands different requirements, and every industry operates in a different way. Regardless, some basic aspects can be laid out.

1. Unions must be built on an immediate, common need of workers. In building a union, workers stick their necks out for notice, they make it clear to the boss that they recognise the principles of class. No one wants to rock the boat and endanger their livelihood without a very good reason.

2. The leaders in the work place must be identified; these include 'natural' leaders as well as good workers who others look up to. A budding union needs to gather up diverse representatives in the job, from all major departments and shifts, reflecting the real racial and gender diversity at the job. This group of workers will be those who organize the union, and winning as many of them as possible over to the union is imperative.

3. Mapping the company then takes place, where the organizing workers lay out the structure

of the workplace, changes in shifts, establishing an understanding of where the boss goes and doesn't, which workers see each other, etc. Collecting employee information is also necessary, and information about the company (finances, locations, etc). Finally, the group must identify informal cliques and social networks in the company.

4. The organizers then determine the common needs of the workers -- which issues every worker will be able to connect with and is willing to fight for. They also need to decide the general strategy for union recognition. The typical union will try for card checks (signed union authorization cards by 50% plus one workers on the job site), while militant unions will simply use Direct Action (or threats of it), Withhold labour, or any one of the tactics discussed, since legal recognition is fairly meaningless in most countries.

5. Workers must be enlisted. Setting the tone with the workers is very important: being positive, talking about what the union will do and what the boss will do, before the boss feeds in their perspective. Thus, make the boss be the negative one: talking about the evils of the union, etc. The organizers must deal with workers one on one in this manner, with the objectives of:

- a. Agitating (identify issues at the work place),
- b. Educating (information about the union, etc),
- c. Inoculating (talk about the boss's reaction to the union), and
- d. Organizing (give the worker tasks so that they feel they are a part of the union).

6. Once there is a strong enough group of workers who have joined the union, actually negotiating union demands or creating a contract of work can occur. Almost all union action is aimed at bringing the boss to the bargaining table where the union represents the workers and negotiates an agreement to settle the issue in dispute to the satisfaction of the employees. The various agreements which unions negotiate over the years, (as well as laws and regulations introduced by the government in response to union campaigns) constitute a kind of system of regulations governing the workplace. These regulations operate from year to year protecting workers' rights. Because they represent a kind of "peace treaty" which brought about an end to warfare at earlier time, both sides will be reluctant to break them. However, just like international diplomacy, if there is a change in the balance of power or other factors affecting the agreement, then one side or the other is going to want to break the agreement. Unless a union remains strong, everything that has been gained in the past will be lost. If conditions remain good at the workplace, then it may be difficult for workers to see why they need a union, because with a won contract, the union isn't making it's presence felt every day, and the appearance can become that the boss treats workers very well.

The effect of union action over the years is very often the continuous build up of rules and regulations, which act to protect workers, but often everything gets tied up with red tape and even the workers who the rules were meant to protect get fed up with the resulting bureaucracy. This in turn can become a good argument from the boss for tossing it all out. This "red tape" is a symptom of the weakness of the workers and their dependence on paid officials and legal protection rather than their own militancy and initiative. Union activists must always have confidence in workers to protect themselves. If workers rely on their own judgment and participation to protect their rights rather than regulations imposed on the bosses by legal documents, then they will be more conscious of what is involved, more empowered and more willing and able to change things in ways that benefit everyone without calling in lawyers. All this emphasises the need for unions to always take the struggle further — when the demands are won at the work place, win them for other workers. As that happens, start to change the whole of society by replacing the boss and implementing real worker's democracy. Without this evolution, unions will stagnate and fail.

7. With demands won, it is time to expand the union, unite with a [political party](#), and start making gains for the *working-class* as a whole!

See also: [IWW Organizing Manual](#)

Fixing the problems in Unions: There are many critiques of unions, based on many different types of ways unions can function, and from different perspectives: the bosses have their critiques, and workers have different critiques.

1. *Unions will hurt the company:* Unions hurt the company by "hurting" profitability -- workers get more money, so obviously profits are being used to make that possible. The only people being hurt are the company owners, and the biggest of the share holders. In some rare cases however, unionised workers win pay greater than the value of what they produce. Such a victory can have the impact of negatively affecting consumers: costs are raised as a result. If prices aren't raised, then other, non-unionised workers in that company will be exploited further to keep the bosses running, or the company will go out of business!

Further, the tactics that a union must use if the boss refuses to negotiate, and the workers refuse to capitulate, have the potential to damage, not just the bosses and their profits, but the whole company; nation-wide action has the capacity to affect the whole economy. In general, so long as workers are locked out of having a say in running their workplaces, there is not a lot of choice here, and workers who are totally alienated by their work won't have much difficulty with this: when you're treated like shit, why bother if the boss's obstinacy and determination to rub your nose in the dirt ultimately brings the whole company down?

Many professional workers are far better off and do feel they have some stake in their work, even if they are mistreated, underpaid and devalued. For example, health-workers and teachers are going to be reluctant to take action which damages patients and pupils, and professional workers even in ordinary manufacturing businesses will be reluctant to take action which permanently damage their firm's prospects.

Union activists must take these kinds of concerns seriously. A management which pushes their workers into a position where they cannot get genuine grievances attended to until the firm is really hurt, must bear the responsibility; but a unionist who simply dismisses concerns workers express about this is mistaken. Sometimes a boss may behave so badly that workers will deliberately bring about the bankruptcy of their employer knowing full well that they will be out of work as a result - "good riddance!". But that is rare.

This is also an important example that the union must grow to realize that there is more to this than simply winning workers demands, the union must recognize and negotiate with the needs of the working class as a whole. The boss represents the needs of profit, so the union needs to shift that point of negotiation — yes the union is hurting profits, but the union has to have a mind to the welfare of the whole working class. To accomplish this unions need to unite with a political party (whose purpose is to represent all workers) currently in power, so that the needs of society are balanced with the needs of workers.

2. *Union workers are inefficient:* This is a function of the type of union and the contract won. Further, trade unions have the problem about being righteous in terms of the work their trade does -- no worker can do a task other than the assigned worker. These kind of regulations are an attempt to protect the worker, but sometimes they've run amok and cause more damage than good, both inside the union, and resulting in a very poor picture of the union for non-organized workers.

3. *Unions are corrupt:* This depends on the type of union. The less transparency, the less democracy, the more bureaucracy -- the more corruption! A union worth its salt must constantly strive for maximum transparency, democracy, and reducing bureaucracy.

4. *Unions protect lazy workers:* Sometimes one worker can be such a poor contributor that not only does the boss want to sack them, all their fellow workers would like to get rid of them too, and it can be very galling when the union steps in and defends them. If the union is very strong, then they can deal with problems like this very effectively, but most times the boss has such power that the union has to prove that it is willing and able to defend anyone. Usually a union does this simply by insisting on the boss following agreed procedures

disciplinary procedures and giving workers fair representation - just like in the legal system. Nevertheless, people can even resent such fairness if someone is particularly disliked. In the long run, however, workers should appreciate the need for natural justice and it is part of the job of a union to ensure that everyone gets a fair go. Ultimately, when the union becomes strong enough, then it can become much more pro-active and not only limit the bosses' power, but replace the boss with workers' self-management. *See Also:* [Wage Hustling](#)

5. *Unions force others to unionise:* This differs from union to union. Some unions have strong-arm contracts where no non-union worker can come to a given job site -- thus, workers who come in to the job are forced to join the union and pay union dues. Being a union member gives people a chance to get information about what's going on and participate in deciding union policy. A union is no more able to force a member to do something that it can force non-members to do anything they don't want to do. People who refuse to join a union can be seen as freeloaders who enjoy pay and conditions won by the union, without making any contribution.

6. *Unions hurt the consumer:* A union is all about making a deal with the boss; a deal that both the boss and the workers can accept. Those not at the bargaining table however — the consumers and the non-union workers — oftentimes bear the brunt of such agreements. This exemplifies the utmost importance of unions uniting with political parties -- so the interests of the masses can be represented in balance with the union members. When this happens, the terms of the negotiation can switch from worker and boss to worker and society as a whole.

7. *Unions Strike!* Striking is always a last resort. No-one wants to go without pay. But just as a shop-keeper can refuse to sell their produce at too low a price, workers have the same right to refuse to work. When workers go on strike, picket lines will be used to make sure that other people (scabs) don't take advantage by taking over someone else's job while they are on strike. It can be very difficult to pay the bills when no pay-check is coming in; thus, there is always the danger of workers picking up another job in the meantime, which can have the effect of breaking the unity and purpose of the union. The boss characterise picketing as preventing worker's from the freedom of labour — the right to work wherever a worker is accepted by the employer. After all, they would argue, the worker is not entitled to a particular job. This claim is accentuated by workers whose class consciousness is in the gutter — a position which stems from pure opportunism (scabs are sometimes very well paid) to utter desperation — scabs are workers too, and need to earn a living! While these things are valid truths, the needs for workers to have power, to have democracy in the workplace, far out weighs such critiques that seek to keep power away from workers.

8. *Professional workers?* Many better-off professional workers, such as doctors and lawyers, don't belong to unions. This is bound to be the case where the workers in question are well-paid and are self-employed or have a relationship with their employer which is more like partnership rather than employer-employee.

In the 19th century, only manual workers belonged to unions. Clerical workers, teachers, even railway clerks, let alone doctors and nurses, did not belong to unions. As capitalism has grown, wider and wider sections of the workforce find themselves plunged into the status of menial wage-workers and lose their self-perception of being "above" unions. Wave after wave, sections of "professional workers" become "proletarianised" and join unions. At the same time, brand new trades and professions appear as the productive forces develop, and the people working in these new areas start off with a high social status and great "bargaining power" (like the machinists of the 19th century or computer workers of the late 20th century). They are often the trend-setters for social change and reform. Teachers at the turn of the 21st century for example are usually very highly unionised, as are nurses. Nevertheless, this process corresponds to the changes taking place in the labour process and consequently in the working class itself. The kind of unionism practiced by teachers and nurses today is very different from the kind of unionism that grew up among car-workers and truck-drivers in the early part of the 20th century. Most of the basic ideas about union organising were developed by blue-collar workers. Newly-unionised professionals and especially women workers do their unionism very differently and are a modernising and dynamic force within the union movement. Union militants must be very sensitive to the kind of people they are working with and be prepared to try new things and work out new and more appropriate methods of struggle corresponding to the consciousness of the workers involved.

9. *Limitations of Unions as Vehicles of Socialist Consciousness:* Unions are basically used by workers to get more money for less work, to have more leisure time, to be able to become consumers rather than producers. Trade unionism by no means automatically leads to socialist consciousness. In fact, trade unions are invariably the site of bureaucratism, corruption, self-seeking and petty-squabbling. They are also the well-springs of solidarity, class-consciousness, and emancipation. In short, trade unions are an arena of struggle. Marxists, as class-conscious, militant members of the working class have a responsibility to work to transform the unions, to fight bureaucratism, to foster solidarity, to build links between unions and militant political parties, to widen workers' horizons, to promote social and environmental issues, to bring the workers to the side of the youth, the poor and encourage workers to oppose militarism and racism.

Government protection of Workers: What about the government? Don't they protect some worker's rights? This depends on the government in question, of course. In the United States, workers have very few protections. Essentially, the bosses aren't allowed to fire workers because of union activity, or on the basis of discrimination. Some states enforce rules about lunch breaks: typically, for 8 hours of work a 30 minute break is required. Beyond this, there is very little in worker protections.
