

HOW TO CLEAN HOUSE WITH UNION ELECTIONS

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Unions have been in the past and can be in the future powerful instruments in the hands of working people. But today we face the problem that the leadership of our unions is not in the hands of the rank and file, but rather is controlled by a labor bureaucracy.

These leaders of the major international unions are tied by both their outlook and their high salaries and privileges not to the workers but to management. They preach a trade union philosophy of collaboration with the bosses at the expense of the rank and file. This labor bureaucracy with its philosophy of class collaboration has tied the labor movement to the apron strings of Big Business.

They have sacrificed the hard-won gains in the area of working conditions to help the bosses raise "productivity" which translates as just more speed-up for us. They have cooperated in Big Business sponsored wage controls while prices have continued to spiral. They have failed to fight the company's practices of discrimination against minority workers and women. They have poured our dues money into the coffers of the capitalist politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties, in exchange for a few crumbs of legislation. And to make matters worse, they have weakened union democracy by limiting the right to strike and making effective challenges to their leadership more difficult.

In response to this situation, workers in unions throughout the country have begun to organize to regain control over their unions and turn them into organizations that will genuinely fight for the overall interests of all working people. The main expression of this movement is the rank and file caucus, an organized group of workers within a union that aims at changing the policies and leadership of that union.

These caucuses differ greatly in terms of their aims and programs. Some really have no program, and just come on sounding more militant than the union leadership. These groups represent one set of leaders that seek to play on the discontent of the rank and file in order to unseat another group of leaders.

Other caucuses base themselves on a clear programmatic alternative to the present brand of union leadership. These more advanced caucuses generally stress the need for the union to militantly defend the economic interests of the workers, to take up the fight against racial and sexual discrimination, and to restore union democracy. They represent, still in beginning forms, a class struggle brand of unionism.

The most advanced caucuses also stress the need for solidarity not only with other workers in the US, but with workers throughout the world. Finally, the class struggle brand of unionism calls for independent pol-

itical action by labor instead of relying on the politicians in the Republican and Democratic parties.

It is this rank and file caucus movement that represents the future hope of the labor movement. The path forward to transforming the trade unions is a difficult one that poses all kinds of difficult choices. This article is devoted to the problems presented by union elections. THE ORGANIZER will be running more articles of this kind that analyze the strategy and tactics necessary to win the fight for class struggle unionism

In almost all unions today the bureaucracy is firmly entrenched at the international level. The rank and file movement is too small and disorganized to mount a serious threat to ousting them. The struggle today is concentrated primarily at the local level. Most locals are controlled by leaders loyal to the persons and philosophy of the international leadership.

In some cases, local leadership is more responsive to the rank and file, and can grow in understanding as the movement grows. In still other cases, local leaders will change their tune when the rank and file movement poses a more serious threat.

But in any case, the rank and file caucus must present its alternative, its program, to the union membership. Part of what this means is running candidates for union office based on the rank and file program. To be serious about challenging the policies of the union bureaucracy practically means that leadership committed to these policies must be ousted from office.

SHOULD WE BOYCOTT ELECTIONS?

There are some well-meaning workers in the rank and file movement who oppose getting involved in union elections. They see the role of the caucus as simply a pressure group to keep the officers in line. Often this view is rooted in the belief that the privileges and "easy life" that goes with holding union office inevitably corrupt union leaders, so it is useless to try and replace them.

For the caucus to get its people elected to leadership and have them become corrupted and sell out the membership would discredit the caucus, these workers argue, so its best to refuse to become involved in the election struggles. This view, understandable enough given that the workers have been sold out many times, leads to the abandonment of the union to the labor bureaucracy. The corrupt bunch now in power -- or any careerist element trying to get in power to get a free ride.

While a rank and file caucus can accomplish quite a bit even without holding any union offices, its leverage to advance the cause of the rank and file is greatly increased by capturing key positions in the local union.

It is only by directly challenging the bankrupt union leaders who now dominate our trade unions in local elections that the rank and file can proceed to transform the unions into genuinely democratic, militant organizations. It is only through the removal of leadership under the spell of the bureaucracy that the rank and file will come to see, through their own experience, that a real lasting alternative to class collaboration is in fact possible.

If a caucus is not strong enough to run a full slate of candidates for union office, then the most effective action is to focus on those positions that can be converted into real levers of struggle. What are these positions that can most readily advance the interests of working people?

WHAT ARE THE KEY POSITIONS IN MOST LOCAL UNIONS?

The actual structure of our trade unions differs in some degree from one union to another. Yet there are general similarities which make it possible to identify those union posts which are most important. There are usually three centers of power in the union that are decisive in determining the overall character of the local and its ability to defend the workers' interests. The steward's post is one of these critical areas.

A steward has the most direct day to day contact with the ranks. He is the union representative who should be most conscious of the real grievances and problems on the shop floor. The steward is usually responsible for taking the first initiative in defending the workers' rights.

But it is also true that while a steward is one key post in a local union, he is in a somewhat vulnerable position. The steward's ability to lead struggles is often curbed by legal restrictions in the contract (no strike clauses). The real decision-making power on grievance normally lies higher up in the union hierarchy. In short, the company and higher union officials can erect a thousand roadblocks against a militant steward.

In order to assist a militant steward, a caucus should aim its sights on the grievance apparatus and attempt to win a key position within it. In most locals, the chairman of the Grievance Committee or Chief Steward determines the fate of most grievances.

A class conscious worker holding this position can exercise enormous amounts of power in the interests of rank and file unionism. The Chief Steward or Grievance Chairman is in a position to give leadership to the entire in-plant representation. Not only will grievances filed by militant stewards have a better chance of being satisfied, but the entire body of stewards, whether elected by the caucus or not, could be compelled to do their jobs more effectively.

A strong Chief Steward could shake up all of the dead wood so that they will either have to shape up or find themselves out of office the next time around. In situations where the stewards are sincere and dedicated but lack the skill or knowledge necessary to do a proper job, the chief steward can teach and train these individuals to do effective work in their departments.

The third center of power in most locals rests with the bargaining committee and includes the president or Business Agent. This position is the most powerful in many locals and is the most difficult to win. The bureaucracy which dominates our trade unions at the national or international level does everything in its power to prevent a real militant from occupying this post. In the UAW, for example, retirees are allowed to vote for president in local elections. Since the rank and file has little access to these members, they usually vote as a bloc for the existing leadership.

Difficult as it may be to win, every caucus must aim at isolating and then defeating a bankrupt President or Business Agent. The President is all too often the most formidable obstacle to unleashing class struggle unionism at the local level. A do-nothing President, by relying on the might of the international bureaucracy, will repeatedly attempt to thwart a class struggle policy.

A militant President, on the other hand, could give enormous impetus to the rank and file movement by providing leadership to the entire local on all pressing issues facing the class. A militant president would be in a position to rally allies for the local from other unions and other rank and file caucuses. Such allies are essential to class struggle unionism; without them the local could be isolated and defeated by the combined might of the company and the bureaucracy.

WE NEED A PRINCIPLED ALTERNATIVE TO OUR PRESENT UNION LEADERSHIP

Defending the importance and the obligation that rank and file caucuses have for running in union elections does not mean that one is blind to the real dangers that do exist. It is quite true that many times in the past workers ran for union office, promised they would do a good job, but eventually drifted away from their principles and became just another labor sell-out.

However, a rank and file group must take steps to see that this will not happen with their own candidates. They must at least take steps to reduce the likelihood of a sell-out. What are examples of such measures?

First of all, candidates put forward by a caucus must stand publicly for a program or platform agreed upon by all caucus members. The caucus must make sure that all its candidates speak openly and frankly on the issues, explaining to the ranks specific changes that should be made in the union, the shop and the contract. A rank and file candidate must be selected on the basis of his or her commitment to and understanding of the principles of class struggle unionism.

The slate of candidates should be representative of the racial and sexual composition of the workforce. If some of the principles of the caucus are "controversial" the candidate must not be allowed to side-step or evade discussion during the campaign. This is a favorite trick of opportunists in union elections.

An example of such a practice would be around the issue of racism and discrimination. One of the central

tasks of the trade unions is to combat racial and sexual discrimination -- practices which can only enrich the companies and divide the workers. Many workers may not understand the importance of this issue (they may even be under the mistaken notion that racism "benefits" them).

The candidate of a rank and file caucus must make the election an opportunity to educate his fellow workers on this problem, and not hide his position for fear that he may lose some votes. Working people have had enough of those who are afraid to take a clear stance and are afraid to speak directly and clearly on all vital issues.

Secondly the caucus should put forward as part of its program for reform demands that make union representatives subject to the democratic control of the ranks. All salaries of union officials should be reduced to the level of the wages of the average worker. This would tie the interests of the representative directly to his performance at contract time.

All terms of office for union leaders should be reduced to one, but no more than two, years.: whichever is more practical. The rank and file should be given the right to recall any representative who fails to perform his duties to the workers. Procedures for recall must be written so as to exclude any possibility of bureaucratic delays through red tape. Union officers should not be allowed to use union funds or resources to aid them in an election campaign.

Finally, in the event a few individuals whom the rank and file caucus sponsored win office, these people must still be responsible to the caucus, which, after all, is the only genuine organization of the rank and file in most plants. Responsibility to the caucus is accountability to the rank and file. If a successful candidate is allowed to go off on his own, he will eventually come under the influence of the bureaucracy or the company.

Therefore, so long as the local union is still dominated by class collaborationist forces, and while only a few militants hold office, *under no circumstance should the caucus break up and disband.* It should never be forgotten that the best insurance policy against a sell-out is an organized and conscious rank and file.

ARE COALITIONS AND ALLIANCES OKAY?

Should a rank and file caucus decide to participate in a union election, it may find itself in a position where alliances with other candidates are in the best interests of the workers. One such case would be when three candidates are seeking the same office. One candidate may be from the caucus, another an independent, and the third a union bureaucrat. If the independent candidate takes progressive positions on important issues, the votes for change could be split, resulting in the re-election of the worst candidate.

If such a situation should arise, the caucus should try to sit down with the independent candidate, discuss the issues and any differences that may exist. The caucus and the independent should try to determine who is the best candidate and support that one individual for office. If the independent cannot come to accept the most essen-

tial and fundamental principles of the caucus, then the caucus should run its candidate anyway, making its differences with both other candidates clear throughout the campaign.

Another possibility is that the caucus may not want to run a candidate for every office, but instead may support individuals outside the caucus. In this case the caucus should try to win the candidate to their program for change as far as possible, and encourage the person to join the caucus. If the worker does not want to join the caucus, but rather wants to form an alliance for mutual support, the caucus should campaign for the person critically, that is, always preserving its independence where important differences are involved.

An example of this kind of alliance would be to support the more progressive of two candidates running for president. The caucus would want the more progressive candidate to win, but in the course of the campaign for him, it must also point out his weaknesses and point out the differences that divide him from the caucus. The guidelines for an effective alliance in an election are to pursue a course that advances the interests of the rank and file against the bureaucrats, but *makes no concessions where the basic principles of class struggle unionism are at stake.*

THE RANK AND FILE CAMPAIGN

A well-planned and well-organized campaign for union office is essential if the election is to fulfill its potential as a means of advancing the interests of the rank and file movement. Most union elections lack substance, because the candidates rarely represent a clear alternative to the ranks. The most common methods of electioneering are to pass out cards or buttons asking the workers to "vote for so-and so, he's a great guy, very honest and dedicated."

A rank and file caucus entering a campaign must transform this period into a day to day arena for education; for discussion of real issues and problems. It should produce literature explaining the caucus's conception of what class struggle unionism is all about.

Every candidate should defend the platform advocated by the caucus and explain each point to the ranks, while soliciting their opinions, suggestions and criticisms. A rank and file caucus should make sure that it conducts a "mass" campaign so that it does not limit itself to one-on-one raps with only a handful of workers. Literature should be circulated to every worker; candidates should speak to large groups of workers about what's at stake in the election -- at shop gate rallies, or in the cafeteria during lunchtime.

An election campaign, if properly organized, can be of great value in educating and organizing the ranks into the caucus. Therefore, even if the caucus candidates should lose, the rank and file movement would still be strengthened, and better able to carry through the struggle until the next chance comes to oust the labor misleaders from their posts in the trade union movement.