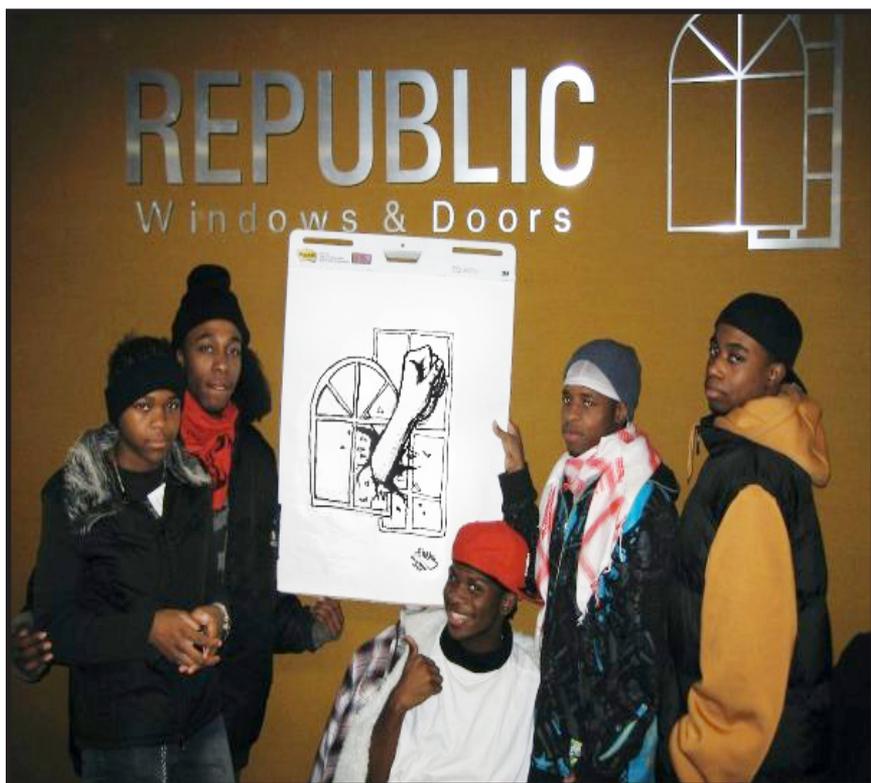


# Build a Fighting Workers Movement

by the Labor Commission of

★ Freedom Road Socialist Organization ★





Students who attended The People's Thanksgiving Dinner in Chicago, hosted by Fight Back! Newspaper, made their way to Republic Windows and Doors to show solidarity with the workers of union UE local 1110.

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Members of union UE Local 1110 celebrate a victory for the working class outside Republic Windows and Doors, in Chicago.

*"I think the system is basically sound, I truly do..." President Bush,  
July 14, 2008*

*"We are in the midst of a serious financial crisis..." President Bush,  
September 24, 2008*

## Hard Times

While the rich and their mouthpieces at first tried to convince us otherwise, even George W. Bush now has to recognize the truth of the worldwide economic crisis.

Of course, working people had known the pain of hard times for a while. For years already, our wages were not keeping up with rising costs. Many workers have had to work two jobs just to put food on the table and a roof over their heads.



An unemployed worker shows her frustration at a California Employment Development Department.

Now we're being hit with a blinding number of attacks:

-The slowing economy is putting millions of people out of work.

-Housing foreclosures cost two million people their homes in 2008, while four million more are facing the same fate this coming year.

-The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drag on, having cost the lives of nearly 5,000 US troops, mostly working class men and women, in addition to the hundreds of billions of dollars spent, not to mention the one million Iraqi deaths.

-Now the costs of the massive bailouts, on top of Bush's tax cuts for the rich, and the decline in tax revenues from the slowing economy, means cuts in social services are looming just when we will need them the most.

All workers are affected by the crisis, but Black, Chicano/Latino and immigrant workers have always suffered the most when there is a crisis in the economy. Looking around the country, in city after city we find that the predatory loans were targeted at these communities. One report has revealed that the mortgage crisis has caused the greatest loss of wealth to oppressed nationality people in modern US history.

When it comes to employment, immigrant workers have been forced to take the jobs with the lowest pay and benefits, and employers call the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to keep them at the bottom rung if they try to improve their conditions – that is, if they complain. And while unemployment at the end of 2008 is overall at 6.7%, for Latinos it's 8.6%, and for Blacks

its 11.2%.

The millions of people that do the work to make society run should have control over society. But that's not how things work under capitalism. Capitalism hasn't worked for working people -- it has worked only for the very rich -- the multi-millionaires and billionaires - who continued to get richer by squeezing more and more out of the workers, here and around the world.

## Fighting Times?

Economic crises hit capitalism regularly. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, and throughout history, workers in this country joined together in unions to defend their interests. They united to fight for better wages and working conditions.

Today the working class needs the same thing to happen -- a new union movement to achieve good wages, job security, and a decent life for our families. But there's another hard reality we have to face. For the most part the unions in the US don't use their power to truly fight for the interests of the working class, and they don't build the independent power of workers to fight for bigger changes in society. Most of the leadership of US unions promotes class collaboration -- they think that workers are an amorphous 'middle class' that shares common interests with their bosses. These union leaders try to work together with the capitalists to 'keep the peace'. And in exchange they hope the rich will reward us with a few crumbs to keep us quiet and allow their system of profit-making to chug along unchallenged. There are countless stories of union leaders selling out the workers they're supposed to be representing, and union leaders actively working to prevent workers from organizing to fight for their interests.

Recent examples of business unionism or class collaborationism include:

## SEIU

The union that has received the most news coverage is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). President Andy Stern provoked a split in the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in 2005 because its president, John Sweeney, was unable to stop the decline of union membership in the country. Stern led the creation of a rival federation called Change to Win (CtW).

In the period since the split, Stern has promoted an even worse strategy than that of Sweeney. He declares that unions have to stop being “problems” for business, and to become partners in ‘adding value.’ This has led him to partnering with Wal-Mart’s CEO to find a mutual answer to the problem of workers having no health insurance. Stern’s starting point is that the solution should put more money into the pockets of Wal-Mart’s owners.

Stern’s deal making frenzy led to an organizing method of seeking neutrality agreements with employers. These involve selling the companies on the idea that they will gain something if their workers are unionized. Followed to its logical conclusion, this led to offers to nursing homes in California and Washington State to help them avoid legislation to protect patients. When Sal Rosselli, president of SEIU’s United Healthcare Workers West in California rejected these despicable arrangements and posed a challenge to the direction of the union, Stern’s response has been to punish him. This fight has led to a bigger rebellion against SEIU leadership as it attempts to impose trusteeship and to take 65,000 members out of the local against their will.

## Teamsters

James Hoffa, president of the Teamsters, took the union in a concessionary direction in 2007-2008. The Teamsters are a major transport union representing workers at UPS, in freight and in car haul employers. Instead of mobilizing workers to fight for better contracts, the Hoffa team sold members short.

A big example of collaboration with the bosses is the Teamster deal with UPS. The Teamsters allowed the company to pull out of its long standing defined pension plan, Central States Pension. The company was allowed to sway workers into thinking this was a good deal. In truth, the deal weakened the pension for all UPS workers and sent a strong signal to the big trucking and car haul bosses that the Teamsters would make deals. This collaboration gives away years of hard fought bargaining and gains won during the 1997 UPS strike.

## UNITE-HERE

When the historic immigrants rights movement erupted in the mega-marches of March 10th, March 25th and May 1st, 2006, a number of unions, including UNITE – HERE (Union of Needle, Industrial and Textile Employees – Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees) supported “guest worker” programs in the debates over legislation. While millions of Mexican and Latino immigrant workers were marching for full democratic rights, these business unionists were supporting deals that would have resulted in a second class of citizenship. These compromise proposals were strongly criticized by the coalitions in the immigrants’ movement, the very workers that the unions hope to organize.

## AFL-CIO

Criticizing Stern and Change to Win doesn't mean the AFL-CIO holds the key to building the union movement. When Sweeney came to power in 1995, his program included a plan for coordinated campaigns in cities and regions to challenge the power of the anti-union corporations and the politicians they controlled. These plans included a call to create a "Sunbelt Organizing Fund" to organize the South and the Southwest, where national oppression of Blacks and Chicanos has resulted in lower unionization rates. The ambitious plans largely disappeared. Instead, hundreds of millions of dollars have continued to flow into the coffers of the Democratic Party.

In foreign policy, the AFL-CIO worked hand in glove with the Bush administration in an attempt to overthrow the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 2002. Chavez was targeted by the US because he stood up to the US corporations that have bled the people there into poverty for a century. The corporations that set US foreign policy objectives are our enemies here, but the Solidarity Center, the AFL-CIO's international arm, says it exists to help further US foreign policy aims.

## UAW

In the once heroic United Auto Workers (UAW), long before the recent financial crisis, the international officers have been giving up the gains made by past generations. In fact, concessionary approaches to bargaining have characterized all the unions among industrial workers since the 1970s. The UAW was and still is the most important of the industrial unions.

The automobile companies, as well as parts industry firms like Delphi, and large equipment makers like Caterpillar - corporations that have pocketed hundreds of billions in profits from their workers - have demanded from the union permanent two and three tier wage systems; in auto, an under funded health care system for retirees, elimination of pensions for new hires; and more. Over and over again, the union leaders have conceded, usually with little or no fight at all.

Rank and file workers have resisted these demands from management. For example, workers at Delphi auto parts, along with other autoworkers formed the Soldiers of Solidarity, and in 2007 had the bosses nervous about the prospects of a strike. UAW's leadership responded by attacking shop floor leaders like Gregg Shotwell. It has reached the point today where UAW President Gettelfinger has conceded that future autoworkers will live on less than half what the current generation has earned.

## Class Struggle Unionism

Class collaborationism dominates organized labor. Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) sees the need to fight within the unions to change all that. We want the unions to adopt a class struggle perspective. There is a class war going on in the US against working class and poor people. We want unions to recognize the basic truth that, as Karl Marx said so many years ago, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." By recognizing that we live in a class-divided society, and that workers' interests will always be under attack in capitalism, unions could develop a strategy to mobilize their full power to fight back and win. This is what we work for.

We think workers should join unions and be active in them. But just joining the unions is not enough. The unions need to be transformed. *Our strategic task in the trade unions in this period is to place them on a class struggle basis.*

How do we do this? To start with, *our immediate task is to build a fighting workers movement.* The center of gravity of the struggle today is the economic battle. By this is meant the struggle around wages, working conditions, and jobs, whether taken up by workers in workplaces with existing unions, or those struggling to unionize. We must build the workers movement on these matters.

For those that are already unionized, workers should get involved in their union: read and become acquainted with their contract; become a steward; attend union meetings; mobilize for better contracts. The unions are the most basic form of organization of the working class, and it's better to be in a union than not.

From the first step of putting up a fight against management, workers then need to see that their battles are fights against the rulers, not just a bad boss. Class conscious workers and revolutionaries proceed by uniting with the felt and urgent needs of the masses. We help them to get organized, help lead them into battle, and in the process help weld together a core of active workers. These militant, rank and file workers are where the solution lies to the problems in the unions today.

## What to do about the class collaborationist union bureaucrats?

Workers are under attack; workers need to fight back, and to organize the unorganized as part of that; and many of the current officers of the unions are not up to the task of leading the struggle against the bosses. So, does that mean that the first order of business is to get rid of those trade union bureaucrats (TUBs)? While some militants in the labor movement argue for this, we don't think so.

We think the main contradiction today is between the workers and the capitalists, not between the workers and the bureaucrats. There has been an all-around and intensifying attack on US workers' standard of living for decades now. There is a desperate need for fight backs. But the size of the capitalists' attacks on the working class is not being met by a corresponding level of resistance. While the TUBs aren't adequate to the job, neither are the masses of workers militantly confronting the bosses. Without a strong leadership, most attacks go unchallenged.

To repeat, the first order of business is to *build a fighting workers' movement*.

## What about organizing the unorganized?

The percentage of unionized workers in the US is very low. This is especially true in the South and the Southwest, the national territories of Black people and Chicanos. The history of oppression of Blacks and Chicanos has included the denial of the right to unionize.

Across the country, unionization is at its lowest point in 100 years. In the union movement today there's a widespread idea that this is the main reason workers in the US are taking such a beating. Coming off the Democratic Party's victories in the November 4th elections, labor unions are placing great hopes in the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). This law would change the path toward unionization, simplifying it in the interests of the unions.

Since the 1930s, unionization involves a majority of employees in a company or government agency signing cards to unionize. Then the Labor Board sponsors an election. In the past 30 years, with anti-union campaigns, including intimidation and firings by the employers, most of these elections result in losses for the union side.

The EFCA would grant card check for any group wishing to unionize. Card check means that once workers sign cards, the employer would have to recognize and bargain with the union the workers have chosen. Unions hope that the EFCA will bring millions of new workers in.

We support organizing the unorganized to raise the level of unionization, and we look forward to the passage of the EFCA. However, we think the view is wrong that says new organizing is the magic bullet to raise wages and improve working conditions for the working class. It lets the bureaucrats off the hook.

In our view, *the main thing that accounts for the losses suffered by workers in the class struggle is the class collaborationist nature of the trade union leadership.* While unionization has resulted in some gains for workers in public sector and healthcare, there has been a 30 year history of concessionary bargaining by the indus-

trial unions. Just organizing more workers into unions, outside of a context of struggle, and without transforming the unions, is not enough to turn around the decline in workers' conditions of life.

Saying that the collaborating leadership is responsible for the losses we've suffered is not the same as saying that the main contradiction or first task is to get rid of them. Overthrowing the bureaucrats and setting the unions on a class struggle basis is going to take some time.

## The Militant Minority: Key to the Rank and File Fight Back and Transforming the Unions

US unions have to be transformed into class struggle organizations. This is not just a matter of getting good people elected into union office. It is a matter of fighting from within, and employing the methods and strategies that will turn the existing unions into the organizations that workers need them to be.

Those of us who stand for unleashing workers' potential for class struggle need an approach to the task of transforming the unions. For FRSO, the method we employ and argue for is the militant minority approach. The militant minority are those workers who want to fight management and who see that the trade union bureaucrats are sell-outs. They are the key to mobilizing their fellow workers to fight against the attacks by the bosses and to step-by-step transform the unions into class struggle organizations. We must root ourselves among this section of the workers, to build the class struggle from within the unions, in order to bring about change in the nature of the unions.

A good example of the militant minority approach took place at the Frederick Cooper factory in Chicago. The owners of the company announced they were closing the plant in 2004. There was no pension, and no severance pay. The old-guard sell outs in Teamsters Local 743 told the workers there was nothing that could be done.



Frederick Cooper workers march outside their factory, summer 2005

The workers had a militant minority that had been part of the reform 743 New Leadership Slate. They had run for union office and had their election stolen by the gangsters earlier that year. When the business agent and officers from the union told the Frederick Cooper workers that nothing could be done about the company's plans, the workers called their own meetings. They organized a picket line, reached out to community allies, and prepared to strike just before the company's close-out sale. The company was

forced to give \$2000 for each worker, their vacation pay, profit sharing and two months of health insurance paid for by the company. Also, when the parking lots around the factory were sold, the workers would get a portion of the money from the sale.

Some of those workers stayed involved after the closing, and went on to finally obtain office in a government supervised election. Their example – both the negative example of the nature of the sell-outs, but also the positive example of what can happen when your union is a fighting union – helped to rally workers throughout the local to continue the struggle to defeat the criminals.

The militant minority is more than just “uniting the advanced” in the struggle against the bosses. It means that there are two fights in the trade union movement: against the boss and against collaboration. In this approach, the fight against the capitalists helps to put the unions on a class struggle basis.

The unions are dominated by class collaborationism; the militant minority stands for class struggle unionism.

The goal of trade union renewal is not just electing rank and file militants. There is a conservative nature to trade unionism that has turned many insurgents into new bureaucrats, and this is something to always be aware of and guard against. But this doesn't mean that we don't want to contest for leadership. On the contrary -- to transform the unions, the militant minority must fight for leadership of the unions.

## Building Class Consciousness

Related to this problem of insurgents turning into bureaucrats, FRSO knows that the union movement is not just about better wages and working conditions. Earlier generations of communists have been reduced to economism - limiting the workers' fight to the immediate, economic battles. What is needed is for the political level of the workers to be raised to the point where they are fighting the class enemy, not just for a more equitable distribution of overtime pay. We have to go from fighting management to fight against mortgage foreclosures; for extensions of unemployment benefits; to oppose Free Trade agreements; to reverse the flight of jobs out of the country; or to defeat Right to Work laws that prevent Blacks and Chicanos in the South and Southwest from unionizing.

In every struggle, we must aim to conclude with a higher level of consciousness among the active fighters. Then in the next round, we are more prepared for the battle.

In the labor movement we must avoid promoting the interests of labor-management cooperation. Our slogans must target the enemy, and help to bring out the nature of the enemy. We must help create class consciousness among the active workers, and work with them to spread class consciousness more broadly. Class consciousness means workers seeing themselves as a class with interests opposed to the rich.

To build class consciousness, we need to have a correct approach to tactics and slogans. Correct tactics involve the masses in struggle. Therefore, we must proceed from what the masses want; combine that with our understanding of the needs and

the overall political situation; and do our work to mobilize the workers into active struggle. We call this method the *mass line*, as it was termed by the great Marxist Leninist, Mao Zedong.

The correct way to carry out our work is in mass campaigns. We unite workers - first the advanced, and then the masses, around the mass line. In the course of the struggle, we help workers sum-up their experiences. In every battle, there are actually two battles: the fight over the contested concerns (wages, jobs, union recognition) and the fight for summation of our experiences in struggle. We cannot let the bosses sum things up for the workers.

Building class consciousness is not just a matter of building the immediate, shop floor struggles. Generally, advanced workers also need to see their struggle in its relation to the struggle of other sections of people. That's why it's important to bring workers to other fronts, and bring those issues to the shop floor. Examples include poor communities resisting gentrification; the struggle for immigrant rights; supporting unemployed workers' right to welfare and supporting the fight against 'workfare'; and fights against police terror. The struggle against war has given us an enormous opportunity to show workers that we should stand with the workers and oppressed people in Iraq, and not with the US corporations in whose interests the war was launched.

## The workers movement and the struggle against national oppression

The working class is multi-national. The white section, speaking generally, is better off and has more rights. To build multi-national unity, the workers movement needs to wage a consistent fight against national oppression. White trade unionists need to take a

stand against racism, and class conscious oppressed nationality workers have the responsibility to oppose narrow nationalism among workers of their own nationality.

We must uphold, unite with, and promote struggle against national oppression and racism within the working class. Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Latino, Asian and Native American workers suffer as workers and as members of oppressed nations or nationalities. The struggle along national lines and the struggle of class on class are blows against a common enemy.



Union workers in SEIU Local 73 fought for years to end racist pay disparity at the University of Illinois - Chicago

Forms of struggle by oppressed nationality workers include defending affirmative action, forming caucuses, or raising issues like language rights or premium pay for bilingual work in the workplace or the unions. This is our work as much as filing grievances or negotiating contracts.

We must also struggle with all workers to support the struggles of the oppressed nationalities. For example, when struggles arise like the immigrants' rights movement, we must win all the workers' support for them. When Black or white workers say "Immigrants take our jobs," we have to struggle with them to see that it's the corporations that have taken our jobs. And that those same corporations took the immigrants' livelihoods, too, which is why those immigrants had to come to the US.

A majority of white workers voted for John McCain against Barack Obama. The economic crisis in the US is widely blamed on the Republicans, and Republicans champion a host of policies that harm working people. Racism is the main reason that white workers vote against their own interests. This serves to drive home the point of the need for the workers movement to fight racism.

# Women Workers, Lesbian/Gay/ Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) Workers and Trade Unionism

Unions must struggle against the oppression of women and LGBT workers. Unions should support equal pay for equal work and the rights of LGBT couples to domestic partnership benefits. However, in the work places, male supremacy isn't limited to the bosses. Many working men sexually harass their women co-work-



University of Minnesota workers, mostly women, have struck twice since 2003 in their struggle for a living wage. (Fight Back! photo)

ers. For LGBT workers, the level of homophobic harassment in sections of the working class can be akin to terrorism. Rank and file workers and their unions face defeat if these problems are not addressed and these behaviors stopped in the future, for how can workers unite when one section – straight men – behave this way.

Women and LGBT workers should participate fully in all levels of the union movement. To achieve this, union activists should oppose discrimination by the employers and sexism and homophobia by co-workers. Today unions continue to be heavily male-dominated. Women are often the backbone of union locals, but men are too often the “leaders.”

The workers movement needs fighting women and LGBT workers – and transforming the unions has to include making them organizations where women and LGBT workers have full equality.

## Conclusion

FRSO believes that the working class has an historic mission. We're not involved in the unions out of charity for the poor workers, or to pressure the system for reforms. We believe that the multi-national working class and the capitalist class have only one thing in common: a future of conflict. The workers and the bosses will fight each other until the workers and their allies achieve final victory.

Ultimately, FRSO organizes in the working class and especially the trade union movement because we see that the workers movement needs to develop in the direction of socialism. We want to win over the leaders of the class to that cause. Today, the struggle in the unions is to put these organizations of workers on a class struggle basis. In turn, this will position the working class for a final settlement of the conflict with the capitalists.

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