

Building radical unionism

Providing services without creating service unionism

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In the IWW many of us have a critique of the service unionism of most of the large, mainstream unions. This is where the union is seen as a service that workers pay for with dues. The service the union offers is representation with and protection from the boss.

On the Organizing Department email list a small debate arose over how services relate to our organizing. How do we not become the service unionism we criticize? Opposing service unionism is an important critique about unions and social movements in general, but whatever we may call them, services can play a useful role in building radical unionism and social movements.

We need to understand what service unionism is. It is usually defined as a passive relationship where workers expect union staff, outside representatives or even shop stewards to “fix things” for them. The model is prevalent throughout the US labor movement and can even occur in professed radical unions like the IWW. Unions promote this type of thinking through offering services such as credit cards, discounts or similar benefits. Slogans such as “Union membership pays!” suggest that the benefits of being a union member are like the advantages of signing up with Bank of American instead of Wells Fargo.

The part of service unionism we are trying to avoid is a relationship of expert and worker who needs help or leadership. What we want to create are services that are member to member and build leadership of workers. Such services play a role in integrating members into the larger union and the theory and practice of class struggle. Our consciousness around class struggle provides us with an important contrast to the mostly apolitical service unionism. We are trying to build a different world than the adherents of service unionism are. We try to make a concrete link between our ideas and the way we fight the bosses.

Service unionism creates vertical relationships where workers look to politicians, the government, lawyers, experts and even the bosses to get what they need. What we are trying to create are horizontal relationships between workers where workers look to each other, people in their communities or other workers around the world to address their needs. We often use terms like “solidarity” or “mutual aid” to describe this. This also doesn’t mean we will never use labor lawyers to support our fights. We will use them to support our organizing but we do not rely on a legal strategy and courts to do our work for us. Some of our fellow workers won’t take on leadership or expert roles. We seek to ensure that these roles do not become permanent and try to teach skills to as many people as possible. We want everyone to become a leader.

An example of this is the IWW's Organizer Training Program, which is somewhat based on an expert-like relationship. What doesn't make this service unionism is that we encourage participants to share their experiences. We build on those experiences during the trainings. Overall goal is that participants take these tools, put them into practice and they become the future trainers.

There are a number of other examples in the union. Many of our campaigns actively recruit workers sympathetic to our goals and help them with their resume and references to get a job in the industry they are organizing. In New York, Spanish speaking immigrant Mexican members working in food warehouses meet with English speaking members and they learn each others language from one another. Also recognizing that the fight of immigrant workers is the fight of all workers, New York members are referred to local immigration support services. The Chicago Couriers Union has a program that allows members to borrow a loaner bike if their own is suddenly damaged. The defunct South Street Workers Union in Philadelphia would organize clinics where the workers they were organizing. This allowed low wage retail and service workers without health insurance to get health screening and a check up by a nurse. They even had a member who was an accountant showing them how to get a rebate on their taxes many low-income workers do not know about (the Earned Income Tax Credit).

There are countless other examples of these currently throughout the union but also in history. The influence of late nineteenth century anarchist mutualists on the workers movement in Mexico is very strong. North of the US border, small towns made up of Mexican workers were run through various associations. Also practiced throughout the Mexican labor movement are worker run savings programs, banks, discounted food stores and health services. These can be important programs that help workers in the short run, reduce their dependency on capitalist institutions and allow them to gain experience with cooperatively run institutions.

The choice between providing services as a union and not providing them is a false choice. We need to keep the critique of service unionism. But we also need to provide services for our members by developing member-to-member relationships, building leadership and supporting programs that meet our needs. This will integrate workers into the union and connect them to the class struggle.

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