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Labour and Direct Action in America

The Seattle Solidarity Network

Collective Action

July 26, 2014

In 2007 a group of activists from Seattle decided they needed to try a new approach to help working people stand up to their bosses and landlords directly and personally. The result was a network called “Seattle Solidarity”; a directly democratic, mutual-aid network of working people. “SeaSol” is an inspiring new strategy of networking that is neither a union or a party; they exist to support individuals to overcome hierarchical barriers, encouraging and backing them up in direct actions against their employees or landlords. The model has been largely successful, winning most campaigns, and inspiring similar networks around the globe.

Antonio became a member of SeaSol who joined after learning about some of their past victories. His issues regarded his employer: ‘Working regular 6-day, 72-hour weeks, Antonio received no breaks, no overtime pay, and was paid less than \$7 per hour (far below Washington State’s minimum wage)’. Together, Antonio and SeaSol voted and agreed to ‘fight for 30 weeks of back wages, or \$6,710.’ In an example of group direct-

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action, SeaSol (consisting of roughly 50–100 members) and Antonio walked into the store he worked at and delivered their letter straight into the hands of his boss- requesting that he meet their demands. The boss contacted a lawyer and made some attempt at bargaining for less than their demands, but after only one more direct action from Seasol and Antonio, the boss caved and paid on the spot!

Not all actions are as straight forward, however, and many campaigns have had to escalate and continue for a long time. The democratic approach means that when someone approaches SeaSol with an issue, the group votes on whether they deem the issue reasonable and worthwhile undertaking. If so, the approaching person decides on what actions SeaSol are allowed to undertake around their issue. For example, if an action might result in unreasonable retaliation from a persons employer, and the worker is unwilling to face that, then SeaSol will not proceed with that action. However, there is a 'level' based system of actions in order to avoid such conflicts. The first action sees the group delivery of a letter of demands to the landlord/boss, giving them two weeks to meet their demands. If these are not satisfied, the second action involves a more public approach. Seasol will distribute leaflets and letters to the neighbours/ investors, and organise pickets outside the establishment/housing block. In these actions they try to use as little political language as possible in their interaction with the public, sticking to plain and simple language to highlight the essence of the matter. A typical leaflet might read 'Did you know that this restaurant pays its employees less than minimum wage?'

A frustration with traditional unions and NGOs, especially in the case of small-scale issues in the workplace or with landlords, led to the idea of building a network that could take on such issues in a more personal and straightforward way. According to one member the drive behind SealSol 'originated from frustration with symbolic and ineffectual anti-war and

anti- globalisation protests and anarchist propaganda groups that had limited relevance to most people's lives.' The organisation does not have an explicit political mission- they do not exist to overthrow capitalism, there is no clearly defined political project, and the organisation has had to learn-as-they-go regarding issues around the various ism's of discrimination. As a consequence, the organisation is changing, learning and adopting processes to help better themselves, and in the meantime, is doing an amazing job improving the lives of many people. SeaSol helps to educate workers and tenants, teaching people that demanding dignity and fairness from an employer or landlord is not 'causing trouble', but is instead standing up for basic rights. Actions undertaken help put the working class back on the offensive, rather than scrambling to defend the few rights they have through traditional institutions.

SeaSol has proven to be an inspiring example of direct democracy, direct action and class-organisation outside traditional organisations, entirely capable of engaging in battles and winning. There may be limits to the organisation's political capabilities, but it certainly does what it sets out to do - inspire, and win victories for working-class.