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Two Conceptions of Unionism

Jon Bekken

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The ongoing struggle to unionize the giant U.S. bookstore chain, Borders Books (operating under the Borders, Brentano's, Planet Music and Waldenbooks names), illustrates two utterly incompatible ideas of unionism. While the United Food & Commercial Workers holds to the AFL-CIO model of business unionism — seeing the union as a social service agency, relying on a professional staff to 'service' workers who buy its services through payroll deductions — the Industrial Workers of the World adheres to a more traditional model of unionism, one which sees the union as a body of workers coming together to gain through their collective action the better conditions they can not hope to win alone. Under this model, which has long since been abandoned by the vast majority of labor organizations, a union does not rely on government certification or Labor Relations Board proceedings. Rather, unions rely upon workers' own power, recognizing that government "protections" are at best a means of compensating workers long after the fact for the violation of their most basic rights — when after the union itself has been crushed. (More often, they serve to frustrate workers' efforts, and to divert them into endless bureaucratic channels.)

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Unfortunately many workers have fallen for aspects of business unionism, even within revolutionary unions such as the IWW. Thus, Wobblies at one retail outlet in the San Francisco area recently decided that while their fellow workers were ready for a union, it would be too difficult to win a majority to the IWW. So instead they formed an organizing committee of IWW members and tried to organize their fellow workers into the UFCW. (Bay area Wobblies have also mounted several organizing campaigns in their own right in recent years, including an ongoing campaign at the giant Wherehouse Entertainment music and video chain.) Leaving aside the fact that the UFCW is a particularly disgusting example of business unionism with a long history of selling out its members and signing sweetheart contracts with the bosses (it is so ineffective at defending its members' interests that the first pay hike tens of thousands of UFCW members saw in recent years came with the recent increase in the federal minimum wage), such tactics are incompatible with basic union principles. (They are also ineffective; UFCW bureaucrats and the Wobbly committee inevitably dashed on strategy and the drive was defeated.) For these tactics are based on a faulty premise — that a union exists by virtue of government certification.

The result of such mistaken premises are disorganizing campaigns urging workers to vote for union “representation,” meanwhile setting their grievances aside until their representatives are certified to deal with them. When, as in this case, the election is lost workers are left defenseless (ideologically and organizationally) against the bosses. Yet in this workplace there were several Wobblies committed to fighting for better conditions. Had they had the courage of their Wobbly convictions, they could have established an IWW branch on the job and begun mobilizing their fellow workers to fight for better conditions. At first they would have been a small minority, of course, but as they agitated and organized they could have established a living, breathing, fighting union presence on the job — one much stronger because it was based upon the workers

themselves, rather than a scrap of paper from the government or a bunch of high-paid bureaucrats in an office across town.

In contrast, the IWW drive at Borders culminated years of IWW organizing efforts among low-paid service, educational and retail workers in Philadelphia. And at least some Borders workers turned to the IWW precisely because of its broader social vision. But the Borders campaign, too, was afflicted by symptoms of business unionism. Although this drive was conducted under IWW auspices, Philadelphia Wobs sought the “easy” road of government certification eventually trimming their sails in a desperate scramble to hold on to a majority of voters as managers chipped away at their initial majority with threats and promises. They narrowly lost that vote and, barred from going back to the National Labor Relations Board for another year and without any apparent realization that the 20 workers (of 45) who had voted for the IWW could act as a union regardless of government certification, the workers lapsed into depressed apathy.

Management seized on the situation to crush not only that drive, but also fledgling IWW efforts at other Borders stores across the country. Suspected union supporters were interrogated, threatened and harassed and on June 15, 1996, Borders fired Miriam Fried, one of the most active Wobblies in the Philadelphia store.

By then, most Wobblies in that store had despaired. Some were looking for other jobs, others turned to the UFCW. When FW Fried was fired there was no organized reaction from the Wobblies on the job. But an IWW organizer who had been working with the Borders drive put out word of the firing over the internet and it was quickly picked up by Wobs. On June 17th, two members of the Boston IWW Branch entered the downtown Boston Borders and demanded to speak to the manager. When she insisted that Borders’ firing of a worker for supporting the union was none of her concern Wobblies set up a picket line in front of the store and began leafletting customers and passersby. Picketing continues to

this day, and has been taken up by Wobblies at dozens of Borders outlets across the country (including in Philadelphia).

While the UFCW responded to the firing by promising to file a piece of paper with the government begging it to protect workers' rights to organize, the IWW responded with direct action — hitting the bosses where it hurt. There is no evidence that the paperwork has had any effect on Borders, but Borders managers have been frantically working the phone lines and spreading corporate disinformation to counter the IWW's efforts. Far from defending workers' rights against Borders' flagrant intimidation the UFCW has asked Wobblies to take down the picket lines in several cities, and has even taken to calling people and urging them to cross the picketlines and patronize the union busters.

Nearly 40 Borders stores from Portland, Maine, to Los Angeles, and from Miami, Florida, to Tacoma, Washington, were picketed December 14th and 15th in a national protest to increase the pressure on the chain. Tens of thousands of leaflets have been distributed to Borders customers informing them of the dispute. Sales reports since the campaign began show that Borders is losing ground to rival Barnes & Noble.

Whether or not the campaign is able to build an IWW presence at Borders or get Miriam Fried her job back, it has shown that the IWW's relatively small membership is fully capable of mounting a solidarity campaign that puts much larger unions to shame. Within a few days of the firing, IWW members were sharing leaflets on the internet, creating web pages about the dispute, picketing Borders stores across the country, and putting the company on notice that it could not act against workers with impunity. While it continues to threaten and intimidate workers, Borders has not fired any union activists since the campaign began and has retracted and apologized for a warning issued to another IWW supporter for discussing working conditions and the need for a union with her fellow workers. Workers across the country have seen evidence that the IWW is still fighting the bosses.

The campaign has provided a nationally visible focus for IWW activities — the first time in many years that the IWW has organized around a common project. In the early stages of the campaign, an IWW member was quoted by a newspaper saying that the IWW was too small to take on a national campaign and so would have to defer to the UFCW. But while a few IWW members have followed that defeatist logic, more have recognized that numbers only count if they are mobilized; that a huge membership disorganized into a business union can not begin to match what can be accomplished by a genuine union, one which turns to its members to act for themselves in accordance with that venerable principle, An Injury to One Is An Injury to All.