

Some Good Material on Labor Issues

Kevin Carson

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Presto has an excellent post on the potential of worker co-ops. There's also some great discussion in the comment thread on ventures into cooperative production by the Knights of Labor (a practice which, I believe, was actually pioneered by Owenite workers in the UK).

I'm still pissed at the neolib at QandO Blog for misappropriating the term "New Libertarian," but this post by Dale Franks is too good to pass up.

Franks mocks the *Wall Street Journal* editorial on the crash and burn of the AFL-CIO, whose "friendly advice" to organized labor is "a lot like hiring a fox to give self-defense training to chickens." The *WSJ*'s advice, as Franks characterizes it, is "become Republicans":

Yes, forget about all that tedious labor action, and striking. Does no one any good, you know. You know what American workers should get involved in? School vouchers. Yes, that's right. Don't worry about your fellow working people. Their jobs are toast anyway, so you might as well write them off. Oh, and while we're on the subject, if you could help deliver us, your employers, from the responsibility of providing health care for you—maybe by, you know, buying it yourself—that would be nice, too. The stockholders would be pleased by the jump in earnings. And you know how you could be a really good "partner" with your employers? Take a pay cut. That'll really help keep us afloat, too. I mean, we gotta pay for that Gulfstream V that we take to Barbados for our corporate retreats somehow, am I right?

Franks continues, in his own voice:

...expecting organized labor to roll over like weasels and expose their softest parts is just a fantasy. It would kinda obviate the entire point of organized labor, and I'm just not sure we want to do that.

Oh, sure, I gotta admit that unions irk me. There are high-school dropouts making \$22.50 an hour slicing deli meats at Safeway, and getting full medical and dental. That's a pretty good gig, no matter how you look at it. And, let's face it, it isn't Safeway that's paying for it, I am. Union-boy is making it harder and more expensive to feed my family.

But—and this is an important “but”—I don’t like the power of corporate America, either. Being a good libertarian, I distrust aggregations of power. I distrust them in the private sector, and I distrust them in the public sector.

Power corrupts, no matter who gets it. Give power to gentle, meek, God-fearing Churchmen, and the next thing you know, they’re burning lonely old ladies at the stake for talking to their cats. Give power to corporations, and before you know, they’re dumping gallium arsenide in open pits that soak into ground water, because it’s cheaper than having the stuff hauled away to be disposed of properly, and then Lake Erie catches fire. Give it to unions, and in short order, high school dropouts will be slicing luncheon meats for \$60 an hour, with options to put unlimited cocaine and hookers on their corporate expense accounts, and a head of lettuce will cost \$15. Aggregations of power are bad.

Unionized labor can serve as a very useful counterbalance to the power of corporations. That might just be worth something, even something intangible, that we shouldn’t want to give up, because corporations are not our kind benefactors, no matter how warm and fuzzy their TV commercials try to make them seem.

The trouble is, we’re kind of limited in our ability to watchdog corporations. We can either do it through private organizations, like unions, or we can do it publicly, through government. There are plenty of advocates for both methods. But one notes that the politicians who would be responsible for regulating corporate America also tend to need political donations, often from corporate executives. Do the math.

If given a choice between organized labor watchdogging corporate America on a private basis, and the government doing it on a public basis...well, then all other things being equal, I’ll choose unions every time.

I would add that unions are only in a position to get \$22.50 wages for deli meat-slicers (if that actually happens) when the employer is in a cartelized oligopoly market that can pass its cost-plus markup on to the public. You see that kind of upper-middle class income for blue collar workers only when there’s collusion between monopoly capital and the labor bureaucrats.

And there’s another reason, besides the one Franks gives, for those assorted service unions to stop being “connected to the Democrats at the hip.” Organized labor’s position as a captive constituency gives the Democratic head of the One Corporate Party With Two Heads an excuse to take it for granted. It was only when the Teamsters threatened to bolt to Nader in summer 2000 that Al Gore started appearing in organized labor venues, looking for the union label, and talking about “the people versus the powerful.” And even then, he had Holy Joe Lieberman, that paragon of integrity, quietly reassuring the WSJ that it was all just election year rhetoric.

The business union bureaucracies are an integral part of the corporate liberal coalition because they have an interest in common with the corporate players in that coalition. That interest is to impose order on the rank and file, and let the bosses manage without interference. That’s not so bad when there’s a large manufacturing sector that’s willing to pay comparatively high wages in return for stability, as was the case before 1970 or so. But when most corporations decide that cutting a deal with the unions is no longer in their interest, and they prefer union-busting instead, that old Taylorist-Fordist bargain is a recipe for suicide. Wagner and Taft-Hartley, between them, domesticated the revolution that had been taking place on the shop floor in the early ‘30s, and

brought the rank and file under the control of odious bureaucrats like George Meany. The NLRB regime essentially outlawed all the stuff that worked, and left unions with what's regarded today as the conventional strike as their only weapon. But when management no longer sees unions as a useful ally, the conventional strike amounts to a mass resignation. When a union declares a strike these days by the conventional NLRB rules, management reaction is likely to be "O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

Unannounced one-day wildcats at random intervals, on the other hand—and work-to-rule strikes, open-mouth sabotage, boycott and sympathy strikes—these things are a lot harder to resist. Especially when they can be carried out by a union that doesn't bother to jump through all the NLRB certification hoops, but prefers to play by its own rules of what the I.W.W.'s Alexis Buss calls "minority unionism."

The old manufacturing unions are dinosaurs. Their only interest is in maintaining the privileges of their members in the handful of surviving plants, and being the last to be closed down—and the workers whose plants are already being closed down, and the non-unionized unskilled workers in the service sector, can all go to hell. For that matter, every union local in the country could be decertified, and if Sweeney and his cronies at the AFL-CIO headquarters continued to get their NED money from the government, they probably wouldn't raise a peep. They feel more threatened by rank-and-file challenges to their authority than by downsizing and offshoring. The last union job I had, the by-laws included a provision that nobody belonging to another union not affiliated with the AFL-CIO was eligible to run for any office in a local. I'll give you three guesses who that was aimed at (*cough* two-card Wobblies *cough*), and the first two don't count.

The future lies with service workers, in fast food, retail, hospitals, etc. And the way to victory is not NLRB certification and by-the-rules strikes, but unconventional warfare.

As an individualist anarchist, I should add that I see unions useful mainly as revolutionary weapons against the state capitalist enemy. They are a form of defensive force against organized capital and its state, which have initiated aggression by invading the peaceful sphere of market relations. The need for direct action will disappear as soon as the state ceases to intervene in the market on behalf of landlords and capitalists. Although I am a proud Wobbly, I do not see the free market as something to be transcended by militant unions—but rather, something for them to fight for. "Abolition of the wage system," for me, does not mean an end to the sale of labor (after all, according to Tucker, that labor should be paid is the whole point of socialism); it means an end to state-enforced separation of labor from ownership, and labor's resulting tribute to the owning classes in the form of a wage less than its full product.

There might well be a role for non-radical unions in a genuine free market society, as an ordinary means for ensuring contractual stability and predictability (as Tom Knapp argued), in the interest of both employer and employed. But the main thing is to eliminate the kinds of state intervention in the market which create privilege in the first place, and thereby force workers to sell their labor under conditions of unequal exchange. Do away with the money monopoly (which keeps capital artificially scarce and inaccessible to labor, and forces labor to pay a monopoly price for access to means of production owned by others), and the state's enforcement of land titles not founded in occupancy and use, and labor relations will take care of themselves. The increased bargaining power of labor in such an environment, with jobs competing for workers instead of the other way around, will ensure that labor's wage is its full product, and labor has the last word on its working conditions. Indeed, Gary Elkin claims that such a labor market

would result in the transformation of even nominally capitalist-owned enterprises into de facto workers' co-ops.

It's important to note that because of Tucker's proposal to increase the bargaining power of workers through access to mutual credit, his so-called Individualist anarchism is not only compatible with workers' control but would in fact promote it. For if access to mutual credit were to increase the bargaining power of workers to the extent that Tucker claimed it would, they would then be able to (1) demand and get workplace democracy, and (2) pool their credit buy and own companies collectively. This would eliminate the top-down structure of the firm and the ability of owners to pay themselves unfairly large salaries. Thus the logical consequence of Tucker's proposals would be a system functionally equivalent in most respects to the kind of system advocated by left libertarians.

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