

Thomas L. Knapp Joins the One Big Union

Kevin Carson

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Free market libertarian Thomas L. Knapp, who has already sinned against vulgar libertarian pro-landlord orthodoxy by embracing the quasi-Georgist Democratic Freedom Caucus (“What the f-k, Knapp. Are you going commie on us or something?”), is now going wobbly on labor unions as well. That last horrible pun is quite intentional, by the way: he’s eagerly awaiting the arrival of his little red card from the I.W.W. (he’s not the only advocate of markets in the Wobs, either). This isn’t Tom’s first transgression against anti-union dogma, it turns out; not too long ago, he questioned the visceral reaction many libertarians have to organized labor.

The hostility is actually sort of odd, assuming the person feeling it is motivated by free market principle rather than a zeal for the aggrieved interests of big business. The Libertarian Party platform, Tom reminds us, is not exactly a rabidly anti-union document. It simply states that labor-management relations should be governed by free contract. And it expressly calls for a repeal, not only of Wagner, but of Taft-Hartley’s prohibitions on sympathy and boycott strikes and of state right-to-work prohibitions on union shop contracts. It also condemns any federal right to impose “cooling off” periods or issue back-to-work orders.

In my own opinion, it was probably easier to build unions by means of organizing strikes, getting workers to “down tools” and strike in hot blood when a flying squadron entered the shop floor, than it is to get workers to jump through the NLRB’s hoops (and likely resign themselves to punitive action) in cold blood. Even the AFL-CIO’s Sweeney, at one point, half-heartedly suggested that things would be easier if Congress repealed all the labor legislation after Norris-LaGuardia (which took the feds out of the business of issuing injunctions and sending in troops), and let labor and management go at it “mano a mano.” I’d sure like to see what would happen if unions could plan strikes like a general staff plans war, as CIO activists did in the early ‘30s: sympathy strikes all the way up and down the production chain, boycott strikes of distributors, transport strikes against scab cargo, etc., effectively turning every strike into a general strike. As Adam Smith suggested, when the state regulates relations between workmen and masters, it usually has the masters for its counsellors. So here’s the deal: we’ll give up Wagner (such as it is), if you’ll give up Taft-Hartley, and then we’ll see who’s left standing afterwards.

Tom was also impolitic enough to observe, in a commentary on some union-bashing by “Pacificus,” that contracts are something free market libertarians are usually in favor of. In response to Pacificus’ complaint that “With unions you’ve got an absurd, nearly upside-down and backward situation where employees are encouraged to be forever at odds with their employers,” he wrote:

Unions, as such, are an instrument whereby employees can deal with employers on the basis of express, detailed, binding contractual language. Contract is the basis of the free market; yet the non-union laborer's "contract" is an unenforceable, malleable verbal agreement which can be rescinded or modified at any time, called "at will employment." There's nothing philosophically repugnant about "at will employment," but I find it odd that Pacificus does not likewise decry written, enforceable, binding contracts between other entities — suppliers and purchasers, for example.

Far from putting employers and employees at odds with each other, dealing on the basis of explicit contract minimizes misunderstandings. Each party knows what he or she is required to do to execute the contract, and each party knows what he or she can expect as a benefit under it.

Worse yet, Pacificus went on,

The state says that if you're a union member you can go on strike, potentially shutting down the company you work for, not to mention all the other companies, branching in every direction, with which you conduct business...

It's decidedly perverse that a professed libertarian would need to be reminded, as Thomas Knapp had to remind Pacificus, that "Nobody needs 'the state' to decree that they can walk away from their job." I never realized there was a major contingent of libertarians in favor of industrial serfdom.

Murray Rothbard, especially in *Power and Market*, expressed considerable hostility toward labor unions. The natural tendency of a free market, he wrote, was for labor to receive its marginal product as a wage. Unions simply interfered with the mobility of labor and the competitive labor market. Similar views are expressed regularly in such paleo venues as Mises.Org and Lew Rockwell.Com.

Leaving aside the differences between the Austrians' utility-based theory of "marginal product," which differs fundamentally from individualist anarchism's socialist understanding of the labor-product, the important point to remember is that *this is not a free market*. First of all, Rothbard himself had suggested the treatment of state capitalist industry as "unowned," and its seizure (or "homesteading") by the labor force operating it. Seems to me that syndicalist unions are a pretty good way of bringing this about. Certainly better than using nationalization as an intermediate step toward worker control, which Rothbard hinted at one time.

Second, so long as the capitalists' representatives in government intervene in the labor market to make sure that labor is sold on terms of unequal exchange, so that workers do not receive their full product (whether you define it in Austrian or mutualist terms) as a wage, I agree with Benjamin Tucker in considering capital the aggressor in any violent confrontation between it and labor, and view militant labor action as a legitimate form of struggle with state capitalism.

It is not enough, however true, to say that, "if a man has labor to sell, he must find some one with money to buy it"; it is necessary to add the much more important truth that, if a man has labor to sell, he has a right to a free market in which to sell it, — a market in which no one shall be prevented by restrictive laws from honestly obtaining the money to buy it. If the man with labor to sell has not this free market,

then his liberty is violated and his property virtually taken from him. Now, such a market has constantly been denied, not only to the laborers at Homestead, but to the laborers of the entire civilized world. And the men who have denied it are the Andrew Carnegies. Capitalists of whom this Pittsburgh forge-master is a typical representative have placed and kept upon the statute-books all sorts of prohibitions and taxes (of which the customs tariff is among the least harmful) designed to limit and effective in limiting the number of bidders for the labor of those who have labor to sell...

...Let Carnegie, Dana & Co. first see to it that every law in violation of equal liberty is removed from the statute-books. if, after that, any laborers shall interfere with the rights of their employers, or shall use force upon inoffensive “scabs,” or shall attack their employers’ watchmen, whether these be Pinkerton detectives, sheriff’s deputies, or the State militia, I pledge myself that, as an Anarchist and in consequence of my Anarchistic faith, I will be among the first to volunteer as a member of a force to repress these disturbers of order and, if necessary, sweep them from the earth. But while these invasive laws remain, I must view every forcible conflict that arises as the consequence of an original violation of liberty on the part of the employing classes, and, if any sweeping is done, may the laborers hold the broom! Still, while my sympathies thus go with the under dog, I shall never cease to proclaim my conviction that the annihilation of neither party can secure justice, and that the only effective sweeping will be that which clears from the statute-book every restriction of the freedom of the market...

[“The Lesson of Homestead,” *Liberty*, July 23, 1892, in *Instead of a Book* pp. 454–55.]

Certainly quite a few left-Rothbardians have expressed sympathy for unions like the Wobblies. Sam Konkin, of the Movement of the Libertarian Left, for example,

...free-market and pro-entrepreneur as we are, MLL supports genuine anarchosyn-dicalist unions which consistently refuse to collaborate with the State. (In North America, that’s the IWW and nothing else I know of.) Second, if you look at the bottom, you’ll note the abhorrence of the IWW to politics and party; they split with the nascent U.S. Socialist Party [actually SLP] on the same grounds that MLL split with the formative USLP – rejecting parliamentarianism for direct action.

If you have to have workers, they ought to be all IWW... I wouldn’t have any other kind.

Third, Rothbard’s hostility toward the “economic illiteracy” of workers who voluntarily refrain from crossing picket lines, and consumers who boycott scab goods, is quite uncharacteristic for a subjectivist. It’s certainly odd for adherents of an ideology that normally accepts no second-guessing of “revealed preference,” to get their noses so out of joint when that preference is for respecting a picket line or buying “fair trade” coffee.

And finally, as Tom suggested in his pro-union piece, contracts introduce long-term stability and predictability for everyone: something free-market libertarians consider to be a fairly non-controversial benefit, when anything but labor supply is involved. Had Rothbard held down a blue collar job, he might have understood the incredible feeling of relief in knowing you’re

protected by a union contract against arbitrary dismissal and all the associated uncertainty and insecurity, that comes with being an “at-will” employee. If we had a free labor market in which jobs were competing for workers, and the bosses were terrified of offending us instead of the other way around, it might be different. But when every industry is cartelized between a handful of firms with the same pathological organizational culture, and most corporations are run on the basis of middle-management featherbedding and Orwellian levels of internal surveillance, there’s not much economic penalty against arbitrary and insane behavior on management’s part.

Anyway, if he keeps this up, it looks like Knapp may be winding up in that cage at Gitmo sooner than he expected.

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