

Common Struggle Workplace Position Paper

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The struggle toward libertarian communism must be brought about by the whole of the working class, the workplace and labor unions are an essential point of agitation and struggle. Anarchist-communists must organize within the ranks of labor unions, active in this struggle as both advocates of social revolution and as fellow workers in a collective battle against exploitation.

Class struggle is by no means confined to workplace. Class conflict occurs everyday in neighborhood-based battles for decent housing, the fight for welfare, the battles for access to quality education, the struggle against prisons and police brutality, in the arena of popular culture, and especially against racism, sexism, and other oppressions that stratify and divide the working class. However, as anarchist-communists, we have a particular strategic interest in workplace struggles due to the ability to directly challenge the material interests of the capitalist class

Independent rank-and-file tendencies within existing unions, coupled with workplace resistance groups, solidarity networks, and, eventually, workplace assemblies and coordinating councils, provide a glimpse at the kind of self-managed workers movement needed to not only effectively challenge the employers, but also develop the unity and revolutionary class consciousness needed to overthrow the capitalist social order.

INTRODUCTION

As anarchist-communists, we want a radical reorganization of the workplace. We want workplaces that are run by directly democratic federated workers' and community-based councils. We want the highest decision-making body to be general assemblies of workers held on the shop floor and in the communities where they live. We want to abolish the wage system, end the alienation and division of labor, and usher in a new society of libertarian communism.

To achieve this society, we engage in a struggle against the bosses; a struggle between the working and the employing classes; a revolutionary class struggle that will only end when the class system itself is destroyed and everyone controls and shares in the wealth that we as working people produce.

We believe that the struggle toward libertarian communism must be brought about by the whole of the working class, and see the workplace and labor unions as an essential point of agitation and struggle. Labor unions represent the largest organized grouping of the working class. For this reason we feel that anarchist participation within the unions is essential. Anarchists must be involved in workplace struggles, because we are both workers, as well as revolutionaries. As we fight the bosses with our fellow workers, we also fight the mediation of our struggle.

We anarchist-communists must organize within the ranks of labor unions, retaining our specific praxis. We become active in this struggle as both advocates of social revolution and as fellow workers in a collective battle against exploitation. We choose participation over authority and solidarity over isolation. It is through the process of collective struggle that people become radicalized and more open to anarchist ideas. To win the battle of ideas, we fight for direct action, mutual aid, and direct democracy in our unions and more importantly in the workers' movement as a whole—in short, revolutionary anarchist praxis.

CLASS STRUGGLE

At every stage in the historical development of society -- from ancient times through feudalism, to present-day capitalism -- there has been a division between those who produce goods and services, and the small minority that expropriate. This division has led to the development and irreconcilable interests of the two primary social and economic classes, resulting in an ongoing class struggle between them.

Class struggle is by no means confined to workplace. Class conflict occurs everyday in neighborhood-based battles for decent housing, the fight for welfare, the battles for access to quality education, the struggle against prisons and police brutality, in the arena of popular culture, and especially against racism, sexism, and other oppressions that stratify and divide the working class. It is not simply the fight for better wages and working conditions, but a daily struggle for the direction of society.

However, as anarchist-communists, we have a particular strategic interest in workplace struggles due to the ability to directly challenge the material interests of the capitalist class. Capitalism is, above all, a social relation; but it is also an economic system with real material weaknesses at the various points of production, communication, and distribution. Our greatest strength as workers is in the collective refusal of our labor. An organized working class is a force that has the potential to shut this system down and re-create society in our own interests.

The workers who produce the wealth under capitalism differ from all previously oppressed classes. Firstly, we now have the productive capacity to create enough wealth to provide the basic necessities (food, shelter, clothing, education, health care) for everyone and still have plenty to spare for science, culture, luxuries, etc.

Secondly, and more importantly, our everyday life as workers prepares us to eventually self-manage our society.

UNION BUREAUCRACY AND REFORMISM

Although we realize there are some exceptions, the reality of the labor movement today in North America is one of compromise, and often collaboration, with capitalist exploitation. Unions serve as a mediator between the working class and the bosses, often playing the role of business organizations that negotiate the sale of their members labor power to employers (and, in exchange, they offer workers material benefits: job security, health care, better wages). They seek a fairer form of exploitation under capitalism, rather than an end to exploitation itself.

As the labor movement has failed over the years to mount a fundamental challenge to the power of the bosses, the unions became increasingly top-down in their structure and integrated into the system. The officials who run these organizations work to contain workers' struggles within the framework of their longstanding relationship with employers and politicians.

While there are variations amongst the unions (some of which are more democratic and militant than others), most are dominated by a hierarchy of paid officials and staff, who control bargaining with employers, the handling of grievances, and tend to have a social service relationship to the rank-and-file (with whom they remain unaccountable to). This bureaucratic stranglehold, along with years of regulatory labor legislation, has led to unions often becoming

roadblocks to serious working class power in North America, rather than fulfilling their historic role as effective vehicles for class struggle.

It is important to understand how this bureaucratic leadership emerged. Successive waves of union organizing, often involving militant tactics such as wildcat strikes and occupations pressed a tactical retreat on the bosses and the capitalist state, leading to the extension of new rights to workers' organizations. In place of open class warfare, a process of limited and uneven concession granting was established. This truce regulated and compartmentalized workplace struggles to keep them below the level of serious disruption. A new layer of union functionary emerged to broker and execute this deal. These union executives needed to placate membership with regulated contract gains while simultaneously ensuring labor force stability and an environment suited to accumulation for the bosses. While limited outbursts were permitted, union leaders were obliged to police the deal and maintain order in the ranks. The bureaucracy developed centralized structures and methods of control and direction that fit its role and function.

Beyond bureaucracy and internal hierarchies, most unions that are officially recognized by the state are unable to act outside of existing labor laws, and often limited in their ability to take effective action against employers. This means that they can support only the most moderate action, and they are typically unwilling to risk even this. Local unions that pursue a more independent, militant stance against employers are likely to run up against roadblocks of officials to effective action. In the worst cases when AFL-CIO or CLC affiliated locals are deemed too militant, national or international unions use their power to impose a dictatorship called a trusteeship, tossing out their elected officers and seizing control of the local with appointees of the bureaucrats.

Anarchist workplace militants must become revolutionary opponents of the union bureaucracy, refuse the terms of compromise with the bosses, and directly challenge those who seek to enforce it. It is necessary to build a rank-and-file movement which understands how this bureaucratic hold has entrenched itself, and which can actually work to break both the union bureaucrats and the bosses' hold over workers' struggles.

As the existing unions are not suited to overthrow the capitalist class (or, often times, even capable of taking effective action against employers) a workers' movement that can transform society needs to be built independently of the existing union hierarchies, both inside and outside of the union bodies. As workers move towards more militant action and more widespread solidarity, self-organization becomes a more realistic possibility.

Independent rank-and-file tendencies within existing unions, coupled with workplace resistance groups, solidarity networks (flying squads, workers' centers, student-labor action groups, etc.), and, eventually, workplace assemblies and coordinating councils, provide a glimpse at the kind of self-managed workers movement needed to not only effectively challenge the employers, but also develop the unity and revolutionary class consciousness needed to overthrow the capitalist social order. These are the areas where Common Struggle seeks to be actively involved in the workplace.

DIVISIONS WITHIN LABOR

We recognize the exclusion that many workers face within capitalism due to certain forms of discrimination (such as racism and gender discrimination). These forms of divisions prop up cap-

italist isolation tactics between sectors of the workforce, as well as reinforce reactionary attitudes between various sectors of the working class.

We must recognize the vast divisions in the world of labor between people of different language, “race” or ethnic origin, which fuel racist, xenophobic and reactionary attitudes amongst workers. We must struggle against these divisions, by acting autonomously and building internationalist and anti-racist alliances. Through class organizing in the workplace, workers can develop strategies that break down racist and xenophobic divisions inside as well as outside of the workplace, demonstrating that racism is a social construction that serves to maintain ruling class power (divide to rule). By making an internationalist and anti-racist class struggle possible, we live a social alternative enabling worker’s from different back ground to meet and learn from each others.

We must defend undocumented immigrant workers from attacks by capitalist exploitation of their “legal status”. We must defeat racist and xenophobic attitudes amongst sectors of our class, by building solidarity between rank-and-file workers of “legal” and “illegal” status. Our most powerful argument against these racist attitudes is by organizing for common goals, so that capitalists can’t take advantage of immigrant worker status to push the standard of wages and conditions down for all workers. By organizing defense of immigrant workers within the workplace we expose the relationship between capitalist organization of national boundaries as a relationship that serves the interests of the capitalist class, and not for selected sections of the “legal” workforce within artificial geographic boundaries. This activity also weakens the statist control of national and ethnic distinctions.

We must recognize the specific oppression of women under both capitalism and patriarchy. A long time before industrialization – and long after that – the place assigned to women was one of the “queen of the home”, a place pointed out as their first and natural vocation. When the massive participation of women in the workforce occurred, opposition came out from all sides, from religious groups to the unions, saying that female work was against the natural order of things. But since society could not afford to develop itself without the work of women, essential to the development of capitalism and above all to the survival of working class families, we saw a great range of laws orienting the work of women towards jobs fitting better with their “nature”. This has caused the creation of large female job ghettos in which the professional qualification of women was not recognized since it was “natural”. If the work of women was not recognized as the fruit of diverse learning and special aptitudes, but rather as being part of their innate qualities, it was not worth a particular remuneration. In this way women’s’ jobs were, and still are today, paid much less and not valorized. The capitalist reality of the “double day” of work – social reproduction labor (such as housekeeping and childcare) in addition to this undervalued wage labor – forces women to stay home in a private sphere and contributes to their isolation. We must therefore fight against the economic and social inequalities that women live in society and in their workplace by struggling against the wage discrimination towards women and the low union rate of jobs worked by women, as well as their precarity and bad working conditions. The solidarity of the workers’ movement must be extended to all workers, no matter if their labor is recognized, waged, and legal or not. We also must support and defend autonomous women’s organizing around their material conditions and militantly defend all the gains made by our class, including those that provide advancement for women.

We don’t believe that by simply abolishing capitalism, that racist and patriarchal attitudes in the working class will be destroyed. Class struggle is a struggle against all forms of oppression;

therefore the class system must be brought down by a cross-gender and inter-racial mass workers' revolution. By organizing against these forms of discrimination inside the workplace we connect the dots between capitalist exploitation and social oppression, how they are linked and how we can draw these struggles together into one united class struggle for the liberation of all workers. Through rank-and-file action we must organize against these divisions by building campaigns and workers' organizations that are anti-racist, pro-immigrant, and anti-sexist. By agitating and acting in defense of these excluded sectors of our class in the workplace, by supporting and encouraging the autonomous organizing of all oppressed groups in all areas of society, and supporting leadership and activity within these struggles, we participate in creating class-based, internationalist, feminist and anti-racist organizing strategies that are capable of developing into a more advanced class struggle movement.

RANK-AND-FILE AUTONOMY

If society is a vast interlocking network of cooperative labor then those networks of cooperation provide a good starting point, if only a starting point, towards throwing off the bonds of coercion, authoritarianism, and exploitation. It is in these relations of cooperative labor, which encompasses millions of daily acts, that one can find the real basis for social life. Without these networks, often unrecognized and unpaid, society would collapse. We believe that for workers' struggles to move towards anarchist-communism, that they must provide within them the social basis for the re-organization of production into a libertarian communist economy. This social basis necessitates that workers' struggles be cooperatively run on the shop floor, while expanding and generalizing not only to other workplaces, but also outside the workplace to the community that the workplace is located in.

Sometimes this struggle formalizes itself into groups of workers that act outside and in opposition to not only the exploiting class, but also the union bureaucracy. Some names that these formations have taken in the past are workers' committees, flying squads, resistance groups, action committees, etc. Other times, this is expressed through unofficial spontaneous collective action, such sit-down-strikes, occupations, slows downs, sabotage, and wildcat strikes utilizing informal networks that exist between workers. What matters is not the name or even the specific organizational form they take, but rather the way that the unmediated class struggle of these workers' formations starts the transformation of the organization of production.

COMMUNITY-LABOR ALLIANCES

This brings us to the importance of building active links between the grassroots popular struggles in the neighborhoods and the labor struggles taking place inside them. We call this the community-labor alliance. Community-labor alliances are best built by a mutual reinforcement of ongoing struggles in the communities and workplaces. It is for this reason that Common Struggle advocates workers' and people's organizations actively support each other, build solidarity, and end the artificial division between the workplace and community struggles.

ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS

The labor movement once put a great deal of energy into building more permanent forms of alternative institutions. An expanding variety of mutual aid functions were provided through workers' organizations in the early days of labor. Long before the government monopolized social services, many workers' organizations created a network of cooperative institutions of all kinds: schools, daycare, summer camps for children and adults, homes for the aged, health and cultural center, insurance plans, technical education, housing, credit associations, etc. While we recognize that, in the past, working people have won significant victories that have forced the government to provide these services; we actively fight for self-managed social services that are controlled directly by the workers themselves.

While on their own such institutions can and are absorbed into the capitalist system (and do not constitute a strategy for revolutionary change), we take a position in favor of creating workers' owned and run services that operate, as best they can under capitalism, on the basis of the need for the entire working class with the participation of the communities that benefit from the services. We believe that such institutions and programs open up space for experimentation of a limited form of self-management under capitalism.

WORKERS CENTERS

Today one expression of this need for alternative workers' institutions, as well as the previously mentioned community-labor alliance, is seen in the development of workers' centers. Workers' centers provide a location and organizational support for campaigns in defense of precarious workers such as immigrant workers, workers in small shops, and non-unionized industries. Common Struggle takes a position in support of workers centers and encourages participation and utilization of them as part of our extra-union strategy.

GRASSROOTS SYNDICALISM AND INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZING

We support industrial organizing over organizing by trade or craft. Industrial organizing brings together all workers in a workplace into a common union organization. Trade unionism — which allows each location, profession, or sector to be represented by different unions, weakens class identification and solidarity. With the aim of creating a workers' movement on a class basis, Common Struggle supports the goal of eventually building grassroots syndicalism, which would incorporate all workers regardless of skill, trade, industry, or even current employment.

THE GENERAL STRIKE

A central part of our program is the call for the general strike. It serves as a bridge between demands for reforms and the ultimate goal of revolution. The old method of each union fighting for its own gains, striking one at a time against a particular boss, is of limited use. The capitalists help each other against the unions. Companies have grown in size, through mergers and expansion, on a national and international scale. A multinational company uses the profits of one part of its business empire to make up for losses due to strikes in another part. The bosses

have their own “union”, namely the national state. Through the state, they have outlawed the most effective methods of striking, such as mass picketing, sit-down strikes (occupation of work sites), and cross-union strikes (sympathy strikes). They have given the courts the rights to limit strikes, and some workers are legally forbidden from striking at all.

We think the answer is to increase solidarity among unions, as well as among unions and the community. As many workers as possible should be prepared to strike together. Most useful would be for a large number of workers in an area to strike at once, effectively shutting down production in the whole area. The area might be a city, a country, multiple countries or global. Such general strikes would be very difficult to break.

Rather than just walking out of the factories, offices, and other work sites, the workers should occupy them. This would make it harder for the capitalists to bring in scabs or to assault the strikers (since such assaults could destroy their property). Locking out the bosses, the workers could decide to restart the workplaces, to produce goods and services on the basis of the needs of the community.

There have been general strikes in many countries at various times—in the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Most of these strikes were for limited gains. But a general strike poses the possibility of revolution, especially if it is over several cities or even nationwide. To have the workers running a city or region, even for a while, to have workers councils instead of the state, to have the workers patrolling the street instead of police, to have work sites producing for the needs of the workers—these suggest a different form of society. They ask the question, ““Why not get rid of the capitalists and the state?”

Right now the workers have suffered many defeats and only a few victories. They do not trust in their power. More than all the radical rhetoric, a successful general strike would show in practice that we have the power to change the world.

REVOLUTION

Any popular movement for working class power must be prepared to defend itself. The working class already has one source of power; it has the ability to shut down the economy and to start it back up on another basis. This is not enough to resist a persistent reign of physical terror by the state. Working people must be able to resist with weapons in hand. Workers’ defense squads must grow from defense of pickets from scabs and goons to popular militias. Armed defense must be combined with a political appeal to the ranks of the armed forces sent against the workers. The ranks of the armed forces consist of the working class and can be reached. They are more likely to do so if they feel that the workers are prepared to fight to the end, until they win (it is no light matter to defy military orders and soldiers will not do so unless they feel they will get away with it). The more prepared the working class is for serious self defense, the less violence there is likely to be.

Violent revolutions in the past have resulted in new rulers. We, however, are building a movement for the self-rule of the working class, where the armed people are democratically organized and the economy is a communist one based on the maxim: “From each according to ability to each according to need”. We wish to smash the state, to dismantle capitalism and all authoritarian institutions, and create a lasting freedom of libertarian communism.

We want a social revolution, literally a “turning-over”, so that those on the bottom of society overturn their masters and manage themselves. If society is to survive, the workers must replace capitalism with a federation of self-managed industries and communities with production based on needs, not profits.

Under capitalism, workers are a component of producing an ever-accumulating surplus of value that is stolen from our labor. In an anarchist-communist society, production will be organized on the basis of need where there is no surplus of value. This anarchist-communist production can only be realized by the cooperation in production that takes place in the community as a whole. There can be no isolated anarchist-communist workplace; the reorganization of production by its nature requires the elimination of division between the workplace and the communities in which we live.

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