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OurWalmart or Their Walmart?

Prairie Struggle

2013

In recent weeks the American labour movement has been boosted by strike actions at Wal-Mart and various fast food corporations—all of which have historically been near impossible to organize into business unions. It is hardly a secret that the campaigns, OurWalmart and FastFoodForward, are in collaboration with the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Service Employees International Union and several community groups. Moving forward past the days of action, and the successes they brought, members of the Prairie Struggle Organization offer the following reflections on these unique strike actions, and this new turn as a whole.

First, we think this is a great development in the labour movement. Wal-Mart workers worldwide receive poverty wages and struggle to survive while six Waltons are worth more than 1/3rd of the entire United States. Fast food workers are in a similar position, where any effort to speak out often results in job loss. Yet, there have been very few reports of retaliation for the OurWalmart strikes, and when one Wendy's worker was fired in retaliation for their strike, immediate occupation, and blockade of the restaurant in question immediately reversed the firing. Thus, it is

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progress when the “formal” labour movement has realized the values of community organizing and the true power of solidarity en masse, which they seemingly have.

However, we must also make calls on the workers participating in these campaigns. Prairie Struggle, while an ally to unions, recognizes the affect bureaucracy can have in taming worker self-organization and action. Therefore, we call on workers at Walmart and in the fast food industry to continue taking ownership of these campaigns. While it remains to be seen if UFCW, or SEIU will push to have these workers formally join their unions, workers should proceed on any route remembering why unions have failed to organize their industries in the past, and why these unions have involved themselves in such non-typical organizing methods now.

Business unions are legally bound to laws that severely limit when strike actions may occur. This is critical when dealing with the largest retailers, and corporations that are insulated from other kinds of action. Even if unions weren't restricted in these ways, turnover rates in these industries are so high that the organizing capacities of business unions likely cannot meet the challenge alone. Hence, unions have embarked on this new path hoping to maintain sustained pressure. Workers must maintain leadership in these alliances because the workers' interests are what holds this alliance together. When our interests become intertwined with those of large organizations, these organizations can co-opt our interests for their gain. Sadly, this is always a risk with business unions, where many bureaucrats resist giving workers decision-making power in fear of losing their pontoon boats. Therefore, workers must be vigilant because our partners benefit from helping us in our risks, but this can quickly transform to us taking risks for the benefit of our partners.

Related to this is our concern about the dedication of these unions to these campaigns. It appears unions have organized with these workers, and community allies to use solidarity to make chain-wide demands, establish mass strikes, and fight back

against retaliation. However, will this continue when business escalates retaliation? Recent studies have found that up to 12% of the food preparation workforce was “undocumented”, do these unions and community partners have a plan to protect these workers too? Will unions confront government over immigration policies in a substantive, meaningful way? Do bureaucrats even have the knowledge of how to fight these kinds of retaliation?

Union organizers, community partners and foremost, the workers involved in these campaigns have hopefully realized they are confronting head-on the relationship between the ruling class and working class, and that successfully challenging this relationship will require more than one-day strikes, and solidarity rallies. It will require nothing less than workers uniting as a class, and expressing the class antagonisms that exist regardless of race, migration status, gender... in continuous solidarity, and escalations of action.

This new combative spirit within union bureaucracy is a sign of a long-awaited change needed within the labour movement. But not to be fooled, we must recognize that this new spirit was mostly brought on by union bureaucracy being directly attacked by the Boss' and government. Our position on unions should be clear. What we collectively strive for within the labor movement is the workers gaining leadership of these unions through organic democracy, and struggle. By leadership we mean collective control of the union by the workers. A union built on dedication to the class struggle, not privileges afforded based on position, salaries or loyalty to political parties. A minimum bureaucracy in service of the union, not in control of it. We support the workers leading the OurWalmart and FastFoodForward campaigns but advise that militant democracy and solidarity guide whatever path this struggle takes.

Direct action gets the goods!

Always in solidarity!

Towards a combative, democratic labour movement!

Prairie Struggle Organization