

What is Union Action? Bust the Myths!

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SAC Demonstration in Gothenburg 2013. Photo: Adam Ihse/TT

This piece is written from a Swedish point of view. I've been active in various forms of union work for more than 20 years. In the Swedish labor market, there are certain myths about union action that are very widespread. I am thinking of six myths in particular that are devastating to union work. My impression of the US labor market is that the same myths exist there. If my perception is correct, then the following words might be of value to US readers too.

The six myths are the following:

(1) The first myth is that the union negotiator is the savior. This is the notion that skilled negotiators can land big victories for the collective of workers. It's kind of like a football team sitting in the stands hoping the coach will win the matches. The pressure from shop floor workers will result in tangible gains for those workers. Without pressure from the floor, there will be little or no results.

(2) The second myth is that you need to have a Superman on the staff. This is the notion that union fighters are middle-aged macho men who bang their fists on the table. But union strength is not based on individual "toughness," but on good relations between colleagues. Everyone is vulnerable, which is why unions are needed. We become strong when we build community and trust at work.

(3) The third myth is that union work should be run by paid professionals – or by activists who sacrifice all their free time. No, you and your colleagues are the real experts. You know your job, know the workplace and can find ways forward. Union education and training is for all employees, not something that a clique of activists or professionals should have a monopoly on.

(4) The fourth myth is that the Law is a magic wand. As long as you know the Law and throw lawyers at the employers, good working conditions can be ensured. No. Labor law is basically a protection of the employers' superior position. Laws can in some cases be used as protection against employers' attacks, but it is above all the workers' collective pressure that moves the frontline forward.

(5) The fifth myth is that the biggest union = the best union. No, not necessarily. The biggest union can be an empty shell or a dead bureaucracy. We do not get strong just by having the numbers. We become and stay strong by having many co-workers who are engaged and act together as the union. The best union is therefore the organization that promotes workers' cohesion and collective action. It's an organization based on member democracy, solidarity at work and independent action. Then the members have the union behind them and the decision-making power in their hands.

(6) The sixth myth is that strikes are the workers' only or best weapon. The argument is that strikes damage the finances of business owners. Consequently, union action in the public sector is largely meaningless. It is true that strikes affect the revenues of private employers, but don't affect public employers in the same way. However, workers can put pressure on public employers even if they don't strike at the managers' private wallets. An example could be sit-in strikes inside management's offices. Creative workers also find alternatives to striking. The larger the union toolbox, the better.

I want to encourage all union organizers and stewards to clear their workplaces of the six myths. The primary source of union strength is that colleagues stick together and act together. Of course, it is valuable to have skilled negotiators and lawyers, paid comrades and supportive activists. But these resources are a complement to (and not a substitute for) the workers' own struggle.

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Hästbacka is the author of the book (free online) Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. More articles by the author in Anarchist Library can be found [here](#).

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