

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



From Self-managed Solidarity Unionism to a Self-managed Society

Tom Wetzel

Tom Wetzel
From Self-managed Solidarity Unionism to a Self-managed
Society
15 June 2009

Retrieved on 2 March 2024 from znetwork.org.
Contribution to the **Reimagining Society Project** hosted by
ZCommunications.

theanarchistlibrary.org

15 June 2009

For the Union makes us strong.

hand, there are also aspects of decision-making about the use of workplaces that do have a broader impact on society. To achieve accountability of the worker self-management organizations to the larger society, we shouldn't try to do this by setting bosses over workers — a result that would tend to follow from centralized planning. The decentralized participatory planning advocated by Robin Hahnel and Michael Albert offers a solution here.

Freedom in a real sense means positive freedom — people gaining actual control over their lives and gaining access to the means to realize their potential. At the end of the day, the oppressed and exploited will have to achieve this freedom through their own organization and activity...”in union” with each other. Ralph Chaplin’s lyrics still have their point today:

All the world that’s owned by idle drones is ours
and ours alone.

We have laid the wide foundations; built it sky-
ward stone by stone.

It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own,
While the Union makes us strong.

They have taken untold millions that they never
toiled to earn,
But without our brain and muscle not a single
wheel can turn.

We can break their haughty power; gain our free-
dom when we learn

That the Union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater than their
hoarded gold;

Greater than the might of armies, magnified a
thousand-fold.

We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes
of the old.

Contents

1	5
2	6
3	7
4	9
5	9
6	10
7	15
8	16
9	17
10	18
11	19
12	21
13	21

where they live, elaborated through their assemblies and regional congresses, without need for a state. A self-managed socialism may inherit inequality of investment and opportunities between different communities or regions and transition funds may be needed to work to overcome this inequality.

12

A society governed by the market tends to under-develop social or public goods. The neighborhood assemblies and regional congresses are the appropriate venue for development of plans for the kinds of social goods we want to provide — free education to develop people’s abilities, protection of human health on and off the job, social provision of free child care, a democratic media system, stewardship of the environmental commons so we aren’t polluted on and to ensure a future for our progeny.

The “participatory budgeting” experiments in Brazilian cities show how planning for public goods can be developed through neighborhood assemblies. However, a member of the secretariat of the Federacao Anarquista Gaucha — a largish activist group in Porto Alegre — told me that the plans developed through the neighborhood assemblies were filtered by the mayor and other city officials. Officials weren’t required to stick to the priorities decided at the base. To ensure direct popular power, we’d need to remove the state bureaucratic layer and use the grassroots congresses to empower the base.

13

Popular power needs to be rooted in both assemblies among residents and among people in workplaces. There are many decisions in workplaces that affect and govern the lives of workers far more than others in society. On the other

During the revolution in Spain in the '30s, the program of the libertarian syndicalist labor movement called for both industrial federations — based on worker assemblies — and assemblies of residents in city neighborhoods and rural villages as the twin building blocks of popular power.

Village assemblies have played a role more recently in struggles of indigenous communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca. Mass popular assemblies of residents also were at the center of the successful struggle against water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

This direct form of democracy can be extended over broader regions if assemblies elect delegates to grassroots regional congresses. Proposals that have been discussed and approved at the base assemblies can be brought to the congresses by their delegates. These congresses should not be made up of full-time professional politicians. We should try to avoid creating a new "political class." People can be remunerated for their work here while continuing at least part of the time to work in the job they had before election. Even more important, there should be rules to the effect that controversial or important proposals are referred back to the base assemblies for discussion and decision there.

Thus it is possible to replace the state with a form of popular power rooted in the direct democracy of the assemblies. This is a form of political power in that the assemblies and regional congresses would have the power to make and enforce the basic rules in society. Instead of an elite judiciary, disputes or criminal accusations would be adjudicated through juries and popular tribunals. An element of coercive authority is inevitable. A society may have recourse to force at times to protect itself — for example against criminal gangs or external attack. For this purpose the congresses can have at their disposal a people's militia.

Self-determination for oppressed ethnic or national groups can be achieved through their popular power in the areas

When Marx drew up a draft set of principles for the first International Working Men's Association (the "First International") in the 1860s, he began with the statement:

"The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves."

Capitalism is built on various forms of oppression and structural inequality. But the subordination and exploitation of the working class remains at the heart of the system. A liberatory program and strategy for a remake of society needs to explain how workers can escape the class cage.

1

The unfreedom of workers begins with the fact that we are forced to rent out pieces of our lives to employers, to pursue ends they define. Liberal ideology was designed to deny there is unfreedom here. The liberal idea of freedom is "negative" freedom — freedom as the absence of coercion or restraint.

Since an employer isn't putting a gun to your head when you get that call offering you a job, it's a free relationship, they say. But if you're about to be tossed on the street and are facing destitution, you may have no acceptable alternative. As we say, you're forced to take the job. The concentration of ownership of the means to making a living in the hands of a small minority puts the working class (roughly three-fourths of the population in the USA) in this situation. And once you're on the job, coercion is rife in the capitalist workplace. If you or your co-workers object to unsafe conditions, arbitrary changes in your job or anything else, managers can threaten to fire you, or the company can threaten to move elsewhere. This is coercive authority.

Managers and investors, working with their professional advisors, control decisions about where to invest, what tech-

nologies to use, what products to make, how the jobs are defined, how the work is organized. Workers sometimes organize to gain a bigger piece of the pie, but we don't own or control the bakery. Firms have an incentive to shift costs onto others as this is a basic profit strategy. They can try to shift costs of production onto workers by intensifying the pace of work or exposing people to unsafe chemicals or other dangerous conditions. Or they can shift costs onto us in the areas where we live through toxic air and water pollution.

Capitalism tends to remove skill and discretion from workers and concentrate this into a hierarchy of managers, engineers and other professionals. Skills and training are a public good. If a firm creates programs to develop skills in employees, they can then go to work for another company...and thus the firm has trained the workforce of its competitors. Transfer of expertise and decision-making authority to a hierarchy is not just about costs but also about control. The upshot is that the system systematically under-develops the skills and capacities of the working class and also builds a bureaucratic control layer, or coordinator class, to which workers are subordinate.

2

"Positive" freedom gives us a richer idea of what freedom is. An essential part of this is self-management. Escape from the class cage requires that we evict the corporate hierarchy and replace it with workers self-management.

Self-management is an inherent capacity and need of humans. People have the capacity to foresee future courses of action, for ourselves and for groups we are a part of. We can plan...think out in advance...the steps to achieve our goals. We can learn through doing and develop the skills we need to be effective at self-managing our activities.

could help to link struggles from various spheres and develop a common agenda through dialogue and through assemblies of representatives of the various movements. Community, tenant, women's, environmental and other organizations contribute social depth and their unique outlook and concerns.

If a change in society towards self-managed socialism is gaining support, there may also be people elected to office during such a period who talk about radical changes. The independence of the movement from the politicians and political parties in such a period is essential to securing changes that go farthest in the direction of liberation and self-management.

As solidarity unionism grows through a series of struggles and a popular alliance has developed, at some point people will have had it with the existing system...the corporate/state system's legitimacy will have reached low ebb. From a libertarian syndicalist point of view, it is through a transformative general strike that the building of a different social arrangement begins. Workers can only liberate themselves through a mass process of taking over the management of the workplaces and this needs to include workers in the public sector. But the change can't rely solely on the worker organizations but depends on the work of the people's alliance throughout society. Defection by the rank-and-file personnel of the state enables us to dismantle the state and organize political control of society on a more authentically democratic basis.

11

A more authentic democracy requires direct self-management of public affairs by the population. The direct democracy of assemblies of residents in neighborhoods or villages has at times been proposed as the way to create direct popular power. The assemblies can also elect an administrative council to ensure that decisions are carried out.

of the state from real control by the people. States have an inherent tendency to defend the interests of dominating classes, and the state's separation from direct popular control is needed for it to carry out this function. We see this on the world scene where the American federal state is focused on protecting the regime of corporate profit-making.

The mythology surrounding the alleged "democracy" of the U.S. constitution and American institutions is one of the things that ties people to capitalism and the imperialist American state. We need to critique this myth.

I'm not saying people shouldn't vote. Preventing your worst enemies from gaining control of the state is a question of self-defense. But this is not going to ever get us beyond "the lesser evil."

I'm not against fighting for reforms. Building social movements is done by fighting for changes. But it is important how reforms are fought for.

We do sometimes gain concessions from the dominating classes via the state. But these come about more from disruptive social protest than quiet lobbying and electing Democrats. The concessions won in the late '30s — the Fair Labor Standards Act, Social Security, the Wagner Act — were responses to the massive worker rebellion of the '30s general strikes, workplace occupations, mass protests. The mass protests that destroyed Jim Crow in the '60s won additional concessions. This is possible at times because maintaining social peace is important to the state's veneer of legitimacy.

10

Instead of a political party, we should envision a people's alliance of labor organizations and other social movements as the vehicle for bringing together the various strands of struggle to develop unity and a shared program. A people's alliance

Some decisions affect mainly you. These are decisions about how you conduct your own life as a distinct person. Being self-managing means you get to control these decisions yourself.

But many spheres of decision-making that affect or govern our lives are social. They affect not just one person but a group of people. Many of the decisions that govern work are social in this sense.

We can think of workers self-management of industry as a layered structure of spheres of decision-making. Where there is a group of people who are mainly affected by a certain area of decision-making, the face-to-face democracy of assemblies provides a foundation for their control of these decisions. Some decisions affect an entire factory or a large supermarket or some other facility and there are general assemblies of the entire workforce to control those decisions. Other decisions affect mainly people in a particular department, and they have their own assemblies for those decisions. If a decision affects only you, you get to call the shots in that area. Collective self-management doesn't mean that all decisions are made in meetings or that no delegation of tasks or responsibilities can occur. But direct democracy is the essential foundation for collective control.

Workers self-management should not be confused with weak notions of "worker control" (such as Lenin's proposal of workers having a veto or check on management) or systems of "co-management" — schemes that leave management hierarchy in place.

3

A formal structure of "workplace democracy" is not sufficient for authentic self-management. The Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque area of Spain exhibit the problem. Sharryn Kasmir's study of these cooperatives shows that, despite the an-

nual assemblies and formal democracy, workers in these coops are in reality subordinate to a coordinator class hierarchy — managers, engineers, etc. If a person works 40 hours a week on a machine or doing cleaning, when do they have the time to learn about engineering and financial analysis? When plans are presented at annual assemblies, workers have not had the time and training to be able to challenge what the managers and experts present. Kashmir points out that there is a higher percentage of managers in the Mondragon coops than in comparable capitalist firms in the Basque region. Coop rules prohibit workers from hiring outside consultants to guide them. These are symptoms of coordinator class domination.

Authentic self-management requires that people have the skills and knowledge to enable them to participate effectively in decision-making. Jobs would have to be re-organized to facilitate skill development. Jobs would need to be crafted so as to re-integrate conceptualization, design, and decision-making tasks with the physical doing of the work. Instead of the deskilling that has been a constant tendency in capitalism for over a century, there needs to be a system that tends to re-skilling and democratic sharing of skills and knowledge. The people who do the physical work and the people who make the technical decisions, design work flows, and do the planning should not be separate groups of people. We might call this the *re-integrative* approach to work. A re-integrative re-organization of work is a necessary condition for the liberation of the working class from subordination to dominating classes.

Workers need to control research and development to ensure that the techniques being developed are safe for workers and facilitate democratic sharing of control.

9

Socialists have often proposed the creation of a political party that would unite behind it the various oppressed and exploited segments of society. This party would try to achieve an electoral victory and gain control of the state (or if necessary, replace the existing state with a new one). It would then implement its program through the hierarchies of the state. I call this strategy *partyism*. Partyism has been the main strategy of state socialism in both its social-democratic and Leninist forms.

Partyism is incapable of liberating the working class from subordination to a dominating, exploiting class. The hierarchies of the modern state are based on the same sort of relative monopolization of decision-making authority and expertise that we find in the big corporations. The cadres of the coordinator class are empowered through this sort of hierarchy. Public workers are thus subordinate to bosses, and often face laws denying them the right to strike. Concentrating authority and economic power in the state is a means to coordinator class empowerment this is a lesson of the Communist revolutions.

An orientation to electoral politics tends to focus authority and power onto party leaders...particularly educated, articulate leaders who can win elections. Politicians tend to favor statist programs because this builds their own power. Electoral politics encourages people to look to saviors to do things for them. Electoral politics doesn't encourage the direct collective action that builds class-consciousness and rank-and-file initiative.

Candidates are not considered "viable" without oodles of cash that flow from the capitalist elite. The corporate media are another filter that skims off candidates not acceptable to the elite. We may vote for candidates every few years but this doesn't give us a way to control what the politicians do.

The state's hierarchical control structure and the limited control we have on the politicians are part of the separation

create a grassroots planning system to ensure a "fit" between self-managed worker activity and the benefits desired by the population.

During a period when a fundamental challenge is being mounted to the dominating classes, there is likely to be significant economic and political disruption and conflict. We need to have a strategy that can ensure people's material well-being in that situation. An advantage of the syndicalist strategy is that the workforce itself possesses the skills and knowledge needed to keep production flowing.

8

Cooperativism is the other historic source of the idea of workers' self-management. Some activists propose a strategy for changing the society by creating alternative institutions within the cracks of the capitalist framework — housing cooperatives, community gardens, community land trusts, battered women's shelters, community social centers, worker schools as well as worker coops.

Worker coops can be used to provide jobs and needed community services, and illustrate the possibility of a society based on self-management. Cooperativism doesn't contradict the libertarian syndicalist strategy. The Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil has conducted many takeovers of land...an approach that any syndicalist would applaud. Once the land is occupied, an occupying community is formed and decisions are made through assemblies. Often the land is run through a cooperative. The cooperative thus becomes the means to self-manage a gain won through struggle.

But a strategy of building alternative institutions has its limits. Coops lack the expansionist dynamic of the capitalist firm and are unlikely to defeat the massive power concentrated in the big corporations and the state.

4

A third aspect of positive freedom is roughly equal access for everyone to the means of developing and sustaining one's capacities. This is necessary for ensuring everyone's ability to participate effectively in decision-making that affects their lives. This would include free access to education not just when you're young but throughout your life. This is pre-supposed by the re-integrative approach to work.

Social provision of free comprehensive health care is also a part of this because maintaining your health sustains the capacities you need to lead your life to the full. Each of us is vulnerable to injury or disease. Ensuring that everyone has access to the health care they need is thus justified by positive liberty as well as by solidarity, that is, compassion for the suffering that others may go through when they are sick or injured.

5

Racism is another structure at odds with positive liberty. In the history of capitalism, racism has always been linked with the class structure. The British colonizers of North America initially imported large numbers of enslaved workers from the British Isles as well as west Africa. Joint rebellions by white and black plantation laborers eventually led to the creation of a legal system of race oppression. The European settler state built in North America was also created through the displacement and extermination of the indigenous peoples. Racist ideology took hold to justify these practices.

Nowadays conservatives discount the continued reality of racism by looking only at overt prejudice and legal status. But racism is a structure that persists through patterns of inherited disadvantage as well as widespread discrimination. Vast disparities in school funding and differences in the wealth, knowl-

edge and connections of one's family affect the prospects people have in a competitive capitalist society. The race- and class-biased War on Drugs and discriminatory treatment by police and courts have stuffed the prisons with huge numbers of black and Latino men (and women and white working class men as well).

Because of the way racism pushes black and Latino people and other people of color to the bottom of the working class, often struggles have both a class and race dimension, such as over immigration or against gentrification.

Discrimination in employment persists in part because employers have no incentive to eliminate it. Discrimination and playing favorites creates resentments among employees, and this makes solidarity between workers more difficult. This weakens the bargaining power of the working class in society. All working people ultimately lose from this.

Groups who are subject to a specific form of oppression such as racism will have concerns that derive from that. Through a process of dialogue, concerns of the various oppressed and exploited groups can become a part of an alliance of social movements that can develop the solidarity needed to challenge the system as a whole.

6

From the 1860s into the 20th century the vision of workers' self-management of industry was developed by radical worker activists as part of a political tendency in the working class — libertarian (or anarcho-) syndicalism. Syndicalism is both program and strategy. Libertarian syndicalists see a self-managing socialism as a creation of "the workers themselves." This is seen as emerging from a mass worker movement where a widening solidarity, mass participation in actions, and direct worker control of the mass worker organizations expresses the growing

ican federal state, and work to develop an alliance with other social movements.

As the working class evolves toward a labor movement of this kind, we can expect that there would be greater support for replacing capitalism with worker direct management of the workplaces. The creation of a libertarian socialism based on worker's self-management needs to become an aim of the labor movement if the labor movement is to be a force for liberation from the class cage.

7

The aspiration for direct worker management of industry has been expressed in many takeovers of workplaces at various points in history — expropriations of hundreds of firms by the Russian factory committees and assemblies in 1917, the mass occupation of industry by hundreds of thousands of workers in Italy in 1920, the direct worker expropriation of most of Spain's economy in the summer of 1936, the takeovers of workplaces in Chile in 1972-73, and the hundreds of "recuperated" workplaces in Argentina from 2001 on.

From a libertarian syndicalist point of view, this movement needs to be generalized throughout the society. Syndicalists look to an eventual rupture with the existing system through a generalized taking over of management authority in workplaces and industries by workers, in both the public and private sector — expropriating the capitalists and evicting the management hierarchy from power.

The idea is not to create collective private ownership of workplaces by the workers there. Rather, the land and other non-human means of production would be "owned" by the entire society and workers would conduct the work on behalf of the society. Because production would be for direct human benefit, not for private profit, the mass of the people would need to

The tendency of mass action to develop broader connections among people was illustrated by the general strike in Puerto Rico in 1998. That struggle began as a strike of the telephone workers against privatization of the island's phone system. When riot police were unleashed to attack strikers, the protests grew, and transport and water and electric utility workers struck in sympathy. This led to a process of coming together, with 5,000 delegates from labor, women's, student and environmental organizations attending an assembly. This assembly approved a mass general strike which paralyzed the island for two days.

Working class people are also women, gays and lesbians, black and Latino folks, immigrants. To have the sort of cohesion needed to challenge the dominating classes, the non-class forms of oppression need to be addressed and linked to the labor movement. There needs to be a way for people from various situations and backgrounds to get together and discuss their concerns. The concerns of various segments of the working class need to be addressed...to develop a movement that works on the principle, "An injury to one is the concern of all."

Many of the issues that working people are most concerned about deal with situations they face outside the workplace and struggles against exploitation also take place at the point of consumption, such as tenant struggles. Organizations can be developed in a grassroots way in these areas of struggle as well, and can contribute to worker/consumer alliances.

From a 21st century libertarian syndicalist point of view, the kind of labor movement that is needed would be controlled by its members, work to widen solidarity, look out for the interests of the working class as a whole, extend a hand across borders to coordinate struggles with workers in other countries, oppose racism and sexism, reject "partnership" with the employers, remain independent of the political parties and professional politicians, reject the imperialist policy of the Amer-

working class aspiration for control over their lives on and off the job. Worker-controlled — "self-managed" — mass worker organizations, rooted in direct democracy, provide the vehicle for workers to create a new economic system in which they are in the driver's seat.

To understand why the libertarian syndicalist strategy makes sense, we need to look at the tension between the two historic forms or expressions of worker unionism. When workers group together in workplaces and act "in union" with each other, to defend their dignity and to bend the will of the employer, this is basic unionism. There is a certain rebellion inherent in doing this.

Once workers imposed unions on the employers and forced governments to grant legal rights to organize, another tendency emerged. After World War 2, the general strikes, workplace occupations and pitched battles of the '30s were a fading memory. Bureaucratic business unionism became entrenched.

The problem here starts with concentration of power in the hands of paid officers and staff. The paid staff accumulate information and skills needed in dealing with management and running an organization. Members are encouraged to depend on the staff and come to regard the union as an external service agency. Full-timers don't suffer the indignities and conditions of the job. The often high pay of union officials creates further separation from the members. Worried about risks to their organization, the paid hierarchy at times act to "discipline" members when rebellion breaks out, such as trusteeships imposed from above.

Bureaucratic business unionism works through routine collective bargaining, accepts narrow limits imposed by the state on unions, promotes the illusion of common interests with the employers, and asks workers to seek solutions through the politicians and political parties. Collective action is discouraged in part because this puts the emphasis on what

the rank and file are doing and deciding, and takes the focus away from the paid hierarchy.

The shrinking of unionism in the USA over the past three decades has occurred not only because of an aggressive employer offensive, union-stomping consultants, and restrictive labor laws, but because bureaucratic business unionism creates a demobilized membership and is incapable of prosecuting the class war in an effective way.

But the grassroots, rebel spirit of worker unionism doesn't disappear. It resurfaces in struggles, and in conflicts inside the unions. The grassroots unionist spirit lies in workers initiating and controlling struggles themselves and reaching out to develop a broader solidarity among the oppressed and exploited. The ability to secure greater working class power in society depends on the revival and growth of grassroots solidarity unionism.

The tension between the two competing forms or expressions of unionism isn't just about the form of control. In the early 1900s there was a conflict between competing visions of the strategy and aims of unionism. Radical workers associated with the "new unionism" of that era — most clearly worked out in the Industrial Workers of the World — advocated a solidarity or class unionism in contrast to the craft elitism of the American Federation of Labor. An ambitious agenda of "workers managing the industries" went hand in hand with a strategy based on wide solidarity.

A strategy of this sort has to confront the reality of racism. The IWW's largest and strongest local union in its heyday was the Philadelphia longshore union — a multi-racial organization built through mutual respect between longshoremen of European and African descent. The founders and leaders of the AFL, on the other hand, had rejected a strategy of broad class solidarity in favor of narrow sector-by-sector organizing — partly due to their accommodation to racism. A labor movement limited in this way can't develop the power to challenge the capitalist

elite. It is no wonder that the AFL simply accepted capitalism and the American imperial state as a given.

Limiting the focus to narrow sector-by-sector bargaining limits the challenge to the system and helps to solidify bureaucratic control. Thus bureaucratic domination and a narrow focus of bargaining tend to go hand in hand.

The alternative to domination by a paid hierarchy starts with direct democracy of worker assemblies, both as a means to control the organization and as a forum for mobilizing people in struggles and reaching out beyond an existing base. Elected shop stewards councils can help in mobilizing resistance in workplaces.

Rank-and-file "self-management" of unionism has to go beyond formal democracy. To avoid the movement becoming dependent on a small group of people, there needs to be a systematic approach to training rank and file workers, to encourage people to acquire the knowledge, self-confidence and skills needed to do organizing, negotiate with employers and participate effectively in decisions.

If staff are needed, unions can create part-time staff positions where a person doing work for the union is paid at the same rate they receive on the job. They continue to work the job with their co-workers part of the time and thus share their conditions.

When working people participate in collective action, they gain some sense of having more power to affect their situation. In times and places when this takes on a very large dimension, as in general strikes that confront the power of the dominating classes as a whole, this encourages more ambitious ideas of change. Through collective action people learn more about the system, develop a commitment to change, and are more open to a more ambitious agenda of change. For the same reason, mass organizations also provide a space where radicals who have an ambitious agenda for replacing capitalism can connect with the aspirations and grievances of ordinary people.