

“The Rank and File Strategy”

A Syndicalist View

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Kim Moody’s writings on “the Rank and File Strategy” have gained a broad hearing within a variety of socialist groups, such as Democratic Socialists of America and smaller socialist groupings. His original pamphlet from 2000¹ talks about the strategy in terms of both rebuilding socialist influence in the labor movement and as a way to build a more worker-based socialist movement in the USA.

Recently Moody encapsulates the point to building rank-and-file worker organizations in the context of the unions this way:²

“Building rank and file power to fight for the independence of unions from capitalist influence, in part transmitted by the bureaucracy, is an important task in building a class-conscious workers’ movement—something without which socialism remains only a set of ideas.”

Why is worker control of the union organization important? Here I think it is important to look at the process of class formation — the more or less protracted process through which the working class overcomes fatalism and internal divisions (along lines of race and gender for example), gains political insights, and builds the confidence, aspirations and organizational strength needed to pose an effective challenge to the dominating classes. When workers develop power through disruptive collective action, this encourages the sense that “we can change the society.” To the extent workers control their own struggles and organizations, this develops confidence and skills among the rank and file. Control of unions by the paid officials and staff doesn’t do this. Self-managed worker mass organizations — not only unions but other kinds of organizations as well — provide a bridge where radicals in the situation can connect the grievances of their coworkers to the more ambitious agenda for change that socialists offer. Developing stronger class-wide solidarity is important to the process of building a force for social transformation because the working class needs to “gather its forces” from the various sectors of struggle to form a united social bloc with both the power and aspiration for change. In this way the working class “forms” itself into a force that can change the society.

The way the paid bureaucracy of officials and their staff organization act as a roadblock to the development of the struggle against the employers presents various barriers to the development of worker struggle that builds a sense of rank-and-file worker power and tends to cut off the process of class formation. The bureaucratic layers in unions and electoral parties tend to keep the working class captive to capitalism. In this framework it makes sense to build worker organization independent of the bureaucracy of the unions — networks and committees of activist workers who can work to develop struggles on the shop floor and push for a more aggressive and coordinated struggle against the employers.

No Interest in Building New Unions

A characteristic feature of Moody’s “Rank and File Strategy” is the lack of any interest in trying to build new unions outside the inherited AFL-CIO-type unions — even though Moody recognizes their highly bureaucratized character. This has been a common feature of Leninist

¹ <https://solidarity-us.org/rankandfilestrategy/>

² <https://spectrejournal.com/the-rank-file-strategy-and-the-new-socialist-movement/>

and “democratic socialist” approaches to the labor movement since the Popular Front era of the late 1930s. Given that only 6.2 percent of workers in the private sector belong to unions, why hold that unionism can only be regenerated from within the highly bureaucratized AFL-CIO-type unions?

For Leninists, this mindset has its origin in the approach adopted by the Communists in the 1920s, via William Z Foster’s Trade Union Educational League (TUEL). Moody refers to the TUEL as “the first experiment in the rank-and-file strategy.” Even though as many as a million workers between 1915 and 1921 built grassroots industrial unions outside the bureaucratized (and often racist) AFL, Foster was intensely hostile to these moves. He believed that a revolutionized labor movement must be generated from within the inherited AFL. When he became a communist, Foster adopted a theory that the limits of the AFL was not in its top-down structure or control by the paid officials at the top. Rather, he believed it was the “reactionary ideology” of the leaders. This implied that the solution was to change leaders.

The role of “militant minorities” in unions had been a common theme of anarchists, syndicalists and other labor radicals in the early 1900s. The “militant minority” would be the more active workers who do organizing, have influence due to their experience, and are more committed to the struggle, to building unionism, and often are motivated by ambitious ideas of radical change. However, syndicalists did not see the role of the “militant minority” as substituting themselves for the rank and file but as people who help to build the worker democracy that allows the rank and file to control the union. Foster’s view was different. Foster believed that a “small number” of “live wires” among a passive herd were the “brains” of the labor movement. Thus Foster’s strategy for the labor movement was to get the vanguard into a position of control. The strong emphasis on the control of the top positions was echoed by Foster’s associate Earl Browder:

“As for the TUEL, Browder believed that “a compact, well-educated Communist minority in the great mass organizations, united upon a clear program of practical action, can obtain the strategic positions of power in organized labor.” It was a curiously “managerial” proposition, couched in the phraseology of non-ideological manipulation, control, and administration of workers.”

Moody acknowledges Foster’s elitism:

“[Foster] had a certain elitist view of this work as well as a tendency to maintain personal control of the operation. In 1922, he wrote that most rank and file workers were ‘ignorant and sluggish.’ In 1924, he told the socialist Scott Nearing, ‘Revolutions are not brought about by the sort of far-sighted revolutionaries you have in mind, but by stupid masses...goaded to desperate revolt by the pressure of social conditions...led by straight-thinking revolutionaries who are able to direct the storm intelligently against capitalism.’”(37)

Given Foster’s hostility to the new unionism of the World War 1 era, he had to come up with a different solution for the ineffective craft union divisions in the American labor movement. The TUEL’s solution was to propose “amalgamation” of craft unions to form industrial unions. The TUEL’s strategy for “organizing the unorganized” was to use these amalgamated industrial unions to carry out this task. This was a completely unworkable solution. The campaigns for amalgamation by the TUEL throughout the 1920s were a complete failure.

The Communist International had given marching orders to its industrial base: “Conquer the unions!” Foster’s strategy was to do just that — by using the TUEL movement to capture leadership of the AFL unions. Nowadays advocates for “the rank-and-file strategy” do advocate “going for power,” as they call it; that is, building union caucuses to gain control of the union apparatus through elections. As with William Z Foster, this approach is based on a mistaken theory. The basic problem with AFL-CIO-type unions isn’t explained as “bad leaders” or leaders with “the wrong ideas” — even though that is often true. The problem is more systemic.

If a militant is elected as president of a local union, they may favor a more combative stance towards management at first. But they will also find that they are embedded in a situation where there is a whole “system” with pressures and limits. They face a contract with no-strike clauses and stepped grievance systems that remove fights from the shopfloor. They also face the “international union” constitution and the power of the International Executive Board — such as its power to trustee local unions and toss out elected leaders if they view the local leadership as endangering the position of the union bureaucracy. Over the past four decades there have been various cases of local union officers tossed out when they pursue a stance too militant for the national union leaders — from the case of UFCW P-9 in the 1980s to the leaders of SEIU United Healthcare Workers West in more recent years. There may be a weak day-to-day presence in workplaces of that union — rotted out by years of transferring beefs up the ladder via the stepped grievance system. And workers may look to the union as a service agency that does things for them. Weak worker participation and weak shop organization means less of a sense of power among workers.

Kim Moody is aware of this problem.³ As he says, “the new leaders” will “confront the same problems, pressures and enemies as those they threw out.” The new leaders “will fail,” he tells us, if they “do not democratize the union, change its approach to collective bargaining, activate the members as much as possible, educate the members, develop broader alliances, and...improve workplace and stewards’ organization — that is, enhance the self-organization of the workers themselves.”

So far, so good. Local unions are a setting where workers can participate and may be able to use the union’s democracy to make changes — including a change in who fills the top positions. At times rank-and-file insurgent movements have taken over local unions and adopted a more combative and participatory stance. But what is the end-game? Local unions are legally just administrative agencies of the International Executive Board. This is why International Executive Boards can simply toss out elected local officers and appoint dictators to take over the union. This is the AFL tradition and this is how the courts have ruled. The “international unions” are the realm of the top bureaucracy of the union. The only chance for rank-and-file participation here are in the infrequent conventions. In practice conventions are often controlled by the paid leaders and staff — including the various fiefdoms that run local unions. I think there is not much chance that national unions like UAW, SEIU or UFCW will ever be transformed into self-managed, combative worker organizations, or a base for building self-managed socialism.

Democratic Centralism and the Federalist Alternative

Even when the local unions are reasonably democratic, national unions are structured as a form of “democratic centralism.” This means that power is concentrated in the paid officers

³ <https://jacobin.com/2019/06/rank-and-file-strategy-kim-moody-labor-unions>

at the top, to run the organization. Even if the delegates at an international union convention are elected rank-and-file delegates, the International Executive Board is empowered to actually run the union between the infrequent conventions. “Democratic centralist” structures tend to empower the paid bureaucratic layer in the unions. There is a problem similar to that with the so-called electoral “democracy” of capitalist states. After the posters are cleaned off the walls and the election is over, the citizens really have no way to control what the politicians do once they’re in government office. And this often leads to a disconnect between their decisions and what the working class majority in society would prefer. A problem of this sort also exists with “democratic centralism” in both union and political party organizations. Both Leninists and social-democrats historically have favored “democratic centralism” in unions and political parties.

The problem with “the rank and file strategy” is its commitment to an internal reform strategy that doesn’t really challenge this centralist character of the inherited AFL-CIO-type unions. Before World War 1 the “democratic centralist” structure of the social-democratic European trade unions had already built up a bureaucratic layer that preferred to limit the degree of conflict with the powers-that-be. So it was no surprise when they fell into line behind the mobilizations for war of their various governments. Concentrating control in paid bureaucracies at the top creates a separation of life circumstances between the paid officials and staff and the rank-and-file workers who stay on the job. The officials come to be focused on the safety and survival of the institution they are managing. There is no reason to think that this reformist approach to unionism will have a different result going forward if there is a change in leaders. The problem with that form of unionism is structural. The commitment to the “democratic centralism” of AFL-CIO-type unions makes “the rank and file strategy” internally inconsistent.

The syndicalist alternative is to build unions that do not put power in a “national executive board” to manage the union top down. Rather, the idea is for the local unions and city-wide federations of local unions to have a horizontal relationship to the other local unions and local federations of unions in other cities and regions. This type of horizontal federalist unionism was a feature of the Spanish CNT and other syndicalist unions in the 1920s and ‘30s. This approach was hit upon by the P-9 strikers in the mid-1980s after the UFCW “international union” had done everything it could to stymie the rank-and-file packing plant worker struggle against employer concessions. The strikers proposed to form a new national meat-packing industry union that would be a horizontal federation of local unions. To engage in struggles company wide, they proposed chain committees made up of delegates from the local unions. In a similar way the whole union would be a horizontal federation of local unions, coordinated by a coordinating council made up of delegates still working in the plants. They put it this way:

“North American Meat Packers Union is a federation of locals — controlled by locals...The last thing we need is a new bureaucracy dreaming up new ways to feather its nest at “headquarters.” If your local decides to go its own way — even to go back to the UFCW, that will be your privilege. Rank and file control means rank and file control.”

Of course, there are no guarantees that a self-managed union will avoid degeneration or conservative tendencies in the future. Power grabs by opportunists remain a possibility. To the extent workers see the struggle as a fight over fundamental change in the society, this provides a motivation for participation and commitment. Thus the aspirations, “class consciousness” and commitment of the workers are important to preserving the combative and self-managed character

of the union. And this brings us back to the issue of revolutionaries in the unions and workplaces, and the ability of radicals to form a bridge from the grievances and experiences of rank-and-file workers to the ambitious agenda for transition to a worker-controlled form of socialism.

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