A Brief Introduction to the Saga of the Labor Movement for Emerging Militants

written by Michael Hirsch | December 20, 2019

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The picture on the right represents the Haymarket Riot, Chicago, May 4, 1886, when police attacked a labor demonstration demanding the eight-hour day and protesting the May 1 disruption of an earlier protest march. The massacre was one of many attacks by police against labor initiatives.

I have ten minutes to present the briefest of introductions on some few salient points pertaining to a history of workers' struggles in the U.S. Good luck to that! Offering a systemic view of the nearly 200 years of domestic labor struggles, triumphs, tragedies and legacies in just one sixth of an hour is akin to tackling the briefest histories of the Roman Conquests, resurrection in the fractured Holy Roman Empire and its homicidal if not its farcical reiteration in the Nazi Thousand Year Reich that mercifully lasted just 12 years. But like a centurion, I shall soldier on.

What follows are some basic if necessarily sketchy assumptions.

First, we need to understand that most if not all of labor's key breakthroughs, including the huge industrial union upsurges that followed immediately after World War I and then repeated so magnificently in the 1930s, were not primarily the product of either progressive politicians such as FDR and his brain trust or even talented, foresighted labor leaders like John L. Lewis, but were initiatives originating at the base.

We can thank the late former seafarer, longshoreman and talented socialist writer, Stan Weir, for developing the idea of informal work-groups that in the worst of times for labor maintained a militant resistance on the job to capital's many plans, especially for slowing down production and asserting workplace rights. It was their solidarity at work that was the seedbed for future breakthroughs. To put it simply, it was a centuries long battle over workplace control.

Even from the heights of wisdom of a Eugene Debs, who presciently said "I would not lead you to the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else could lead you out," to the depths of the mendacious Dave Beck, the corrupt leader of the 1950s Teamsters Union, who bragged that "unions are big business. Why should truck drivers and bottle washers be allowed to make big decisions affecting union policy. Would corporations allow it?" I would argue that the key to union success is less the talented perpetual leader and more the recognition and nurturing of rank-and-file

working class self-activity. For DSA work in labor, even more than the recognition and lionizing of a scattered, precious few sublime labor leaders—and such did and do exist—it is working class self-activity that ought to be our socialist lodestone

Even prior to the three huge, radically lead strikes in 1934 that preceded and were catalytic in forming the mass unionization drives of the 1935-42 period –those being the Toledo Auto-Lite Strike, lead by independent radicals, the Minnesota Teamsters Trotskyist militants successes in organizing over-the-road drivers and the Communist-led San Francisco General Strike—was the prior growth of those informal work groups that determined the real pace of work and became the shock troops for effecting mass actions in the face of business and government opposition.

Working people were their own emancipators when it came to halting such malign corporate practices as upping the speed of the line, promoting the discriminatory tyranny of the "Open Shop," using invidious race and gender discrimination to divide workers, and encouraging vigilante and private police attacks. Theirs was in great measure if not exclusively a movement from below, and much ensuing labor history was a struggle not just between unions and management but just as today between rank-and-file workers and an increasingly bureaucratic trade union leadership counter-intuitively comprising even former shop-floor militants doing management and government's job of tamping down shop-floor militancy, all in the name of labor peace and contract unionism.

The term of art used to describe the goal of workers enfranchisement was "industrial democracy," meant as the corollary to "political democracy" and itself understood by socialists as far more subversive than were such palliatives as German-style "co-determination" and "labor-management teams" expressing an alleged but bogus cross-class interest.

Industrial democracy was always about control of the workplace. The early strategy for achieving that control goal was to form industrial unions, that is, unions representing not just skilled workers, the modern equivalent of artisans, but *all* workers, be their skills and/or payment high or low. The early Knights of Labor, formally the Order of the Knights of St. Crispin, was an industrial union. It couldn't survive police and military repression or one of many economic downturns. The unions that emerged in the late 1930s to become the core of the Congress of Industrial Organizations were at long last industrially based, though entire histories are now being written showing that even these unions were laggard in enfranchising women and people of color into leadership positions.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886, was a coalition of existing craft unions representing skilled artisans and journeymen—yes, exclusively white, non-immigrant men—that eschewed not only semi- and unskilled workers, but for the most part refused to admit women, blacks and new immigrants. Its saving grace over earlier union efforts was its ability to survive a series of economic collapses, the first U.S. labor organization to do so. Its fault, as socialist saw it, was practicing "business unionism" in contradistinction to a much preferred and necessary "class struggle" unionism.

An exception to the rule of AFL affiliates abjuring the unskilled was the Mine Workers, established on industrial lines and who organized every worker it could involved in bituminous (or soft coal) and anthracite (or hard coal) extraction.

But for radicals, the sterling example of organizing across craft and unskilled lines was the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW, the Wobblies) who stressed direct action and not contracts to win what workers needed. (And note the IWW's correct name. I wish I had 100 dollars for every time I saw the name rendered as *International* Workers of the World; I'd have retired earlier than I did.) The IWW's strength, as you'd expect from syndicalists, was in leading direct-

action struggles. Their weak point was an aversion to signing *any* contracts, no matter how fine-tuned the package, an expression less of ideological rigidity than a reflection of their origins in the American West, where work was seasonal and employers rapacious.

Unlike the Wobblies, socialist trade unionists sought to "bore from within" the AFL in an effort to make it representative of all industrial workers, not just the skilled; their intentions were anti-capitalist. A sterling example was the post World War One Trade Union Education League, led by former Wobbly and sadly later Stalinist hack William Z. Foster, who in his better days was a key organizer of the massive but ill-starred 1919 Steel Strike. As an ex-Wobbly professor of mine once joked, "boring from within means you can only bore half way."

Another point worth stressing in trying to get a handle on labor history is distinguishing between strategies and tactics. The two are not the same, though they are commonly rooted, and they bear understanding in current DSA discussions about industrializing comrades into union jobs. The effort to do so is indeed tactical, but that doesn't minimize its importance. A tactic is what enables a strategy to succeed. It is the workable adjunct of an overarching strategy. If as I would argue, the left's strategy regarding labor is to assist its worker members and allies in forming a militant minority in the workplace—a strategy best if not only exemplified by the militant shop stewards' movements in both Britain and Germany post WWI—the process of implanting young radicals as catalysts into key union work-sites is the tactic most likely to build a coherent, fire-breathing opposition in workplaces. Salted as they will be, they can come to understand that the fight is not just for wages, hours, and health care and retirement benefits, but is just as viscerally to challenging the employers' right to manage. From the imposition of time and motion studies (Taylorism) to maximizing a workers' output unto exhaustion, including today's battle with the predatory Amazon over turning workers into adjuncts of robots, the battle for control over the pace of production and distribution is ongoing still.

That's a key reason why I believe the "rank and file strategy" much bruited about in DSA makes sense. It's a mistake to write it off, as some have, as "fetishizing" a tactic at the expense of strategizing. If any fetishizing goes on, it doesn't so much come from advocates of industrializing as from academicized and literary Marxists who sadly view our class in the abstract. It means at bottom that militants have to fight on two fronts. The first is the widely understood need to defend and advance labor interests against employers. The second is no less important: to build militant oppositions capable of turning unions into democratically run, fighting organizations against entrenched, compromised leaderships.

Spend any time in a unionized or non-unionized job and any romantic notions are replaced with some hard if countervailing facts. Working people are exploited, abused, and in a key position to be their own liberators. Nothing in that vein at least has changed for centuries.

Case in point as to what's really missing on the left: I spent two hours at a Verso event recently. The topic was Bernie, whom all the speakers supported. So far, so good. The use of "working class" was also much cast about by panelists, but with almost no specificity. Ditto labor. Unions in that discourse didn't exist, even as targets for needing to get aboard Bernie's bandwagon, which to date they have not. Even the ostensibly pro-worker Working Families Party has opted for Elizabeth Warren. No mention by panelists even of the exemplary if sparse cases so far (ex: the National Nurse United, the United Electrical Workers and especially how the huge UTLA teachers union in Los Angeles county is the sterling example of getting Bernie right, despite its parent union the AFT tops' aversion to the left and the mainstream twaddle that dominates the Teachers union here in NYC, which recently honored Joe Biden). The Verso meeting's exchanges were all inside the beltway politics, though thankfully of a better and more thoughtful kind at least than the pap routinely exuded on CNN and MSNBC.

The reality is that the left will never be a force against capital so long as key sections of its proponents are not largely at the point of production and distribution, both leading *and* learning. As Sean O'Casey once put it to a young radical miner looking for advice on how to become a writer, "A Communist [for that was what he was] has to know how to talk to a shepherd about sheep." But most of all, O'Casey added, "he has to know how to listen."

To my mind, helping to build a militant minority in the workplace is in many ways even more important than electoral work, if dealing a death blow to capital is the long-term goal, though the two needn't be counterpoised. Bernie himself knows this, as when he says "I can't do this alone." The old socialist isn't just calling for more door-knockers, nor should we DSAers.

Today's labor movement shows signs of reviving, even though much needs to be done. In 1955, when the AFL and CIO merged, slightly more than one in three workers was organized. Today less than one in ten are represented by unions, with the largest number being public sector employees. Growth since the 1970s has been largely in the public sector; private sector workers comprise just some six percent of the total.

A late 1940s effort to organize the South, "Operation Dixie," in a section of the U.S. notorious for stymieing union efforts, is explainable in part due to the unions' failed efforts to bridge the racial divide along with its purging of Communists and assorted radicals from union positions—in effect crippling the organizing effort by expelling some of its most talented organizers. A post-1998 effort to create a more robust trade union alliance, lead by the Service Employees International Union, the Teamsters and a few others went nowhere, while seriously disrupting long-needed organizing efforts aimed at growing the movement and ginning up the bulk of the remaining AFL-CIO affiliates. The effort was then sold as building "union density," which in practice meant selling out present workers, forcing through inferior contracts, trusteeing dissident locals—all to acculuate new if ill-served members, in effect a zero-sum game.

SEIU's then president, Ivy League graduate Andy Stern, is gone from the labor movement and now a prime adviser to the nefarious, privatizing Broad Foundation, a billionaire-backed charter-school group. The renegade Stern sits on other corporate boards, advocating for a universal basic income in contradistinction to empowering a resurgent labor movement.

Without necessarily buying into the conservative argument that explains such selling out as part of an "iron law of oligarchy," it is worth noting that it's what the class does as a whole and not the depredations of individuals that is key. Without discounting setbacks, from the routinization of the talented and innovative William Z. Foster to the once seemingly sparkling and now despicable Andy Stern (how naive we were!), or today's emerging scandals attaching to top leaders in the United Auto Workers and American Federation of Government Employees, to name a few, it's what the class does in the main that matters most. Anything we Reds can do to advance that insurgent control agenda by the base of our working class needs doing now.