

Betrayals in Social Movements

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For the last two years, Dan La Botz has provided an annual roundup of social struggles in the US. These have been useful, especially insofar as we on the Left are often quick to forget explosive events like the protests against the George Zimmerman verdict, which erupted seemingly spontaneously during a period that we might remember as being otherwise quite docile.

But every time we consider these actions, we also need to ask why they are so few, so fleeting and so often ineffectual. We also need to look back not only at the events that inspired us, but also the failures, especially those that need not have been. When we wonder why many working people are cynical about mass action leading to change, we need to provide an analysis as to why social struggles fail—not just because they are repressed by the police and by the Right, but because defeats are imposed on movements by their leaders. These betrayals occur on a regular basis, including many times over the past few months. They are all around us and as far as the eye can see.

Sometimes these occur as the betrayal of a union's members and their democratic rights, at other times these are betrayals of principles that an organization is supposed to be fighting for. Often they are carried out by professionals—media personalities, union bureaucrats or non-profit staffers—seeking out a compromise nobody wanted in defense of the legitimacy of their organization or career, or simply crushing the spirit of workers who expect something more, as so often happens in labor. Either way, we cannot only blame the Republicans, or even the Democrats, for the failures of social movements when our “leaders” so often betray the very people and issues that we are all supposed to be fighting for.

This will be a partial list, not nearly as thorough as La Botz's overviews. Hopefully, this can at least provide a warning about the limitations and even self-imposed defeats that our struggles face so that we can avoid them in the future.

The US labor movement has been rife, for decades, with leaders whose deals with employers have discouraged and even obstructed working-class struggles. One of the worst recent cases comes from the Teamsters. In April, 2014, 94 percent of the members of Local 89 in Louisville, Kentucky, voted down a UPS contract, among other things in opposition to a requirement that workers wait unpaid for 30 minutes to an hour to take a shuttle to work. Teamster leaders James Hoffa and Ken Hall used a technicality in the Teamsters' constitution to override this vote and impose the contract on the workers. “I feel let down,” one of the workers told the local media. “I thought we had a strong union, but by what they just did, I don't know. . . . What good is a union if they're not going to represent you?” A brewing rejection and fight against the contract was turned into a demoralizing rout.

Undemocratic moves like this are not always carried out in such a brazen manner. Last year's Boeing contract in Washington State saw members of the International Association of Machinists vote down a contract that would transfer their pensions to a 401k plan and increase their healthcare costs with minimal raises over eight years. “Because of the massive takeaways,” Local 751 President Thomas Wroblewski told his members, “the union is adamantly recommending members reject this offer.” After the members voted down the contract by 67 percent, Washington State found \$8.5 billion in tax breaks for the company and International President Thomas Buffenbarger stepped in to carry this corporate sweetheart deal through the last mile. With Boeing threatening to move the assembly of the new 777X passenger jet to another state, the International demanded a re-vote and the intimidated membership agreed to the same deal they previously rejected. The collusion of a multinational corporation and the state in transferring billions of dollars of wealth from working-

class people into the hands of the rich could hardly have been possible in this case without the assistance of the International leadership. Boeing workers got to keep their jobs—but the fight that they may have been prepared to have with their employer was swiftly shut down.

Last year, SEIU organized a campaign against the greedy healthcare industry, holding rallies outside hospitals and collecting signatures for ballot initiatives that would limit costs and cap CEO pay. All of this, it seems now, was just a public relations ploy to bring the hospitals to the negotiating table. SEIU has since dropped these campaigns and is now working *with* the hospitals to funnel more Medicaid payments into their coffers, costs and CEO pay be damned. In return, the hospitals agreed to a “code of conduct” to help SEIU organize hospital workers into the union. Such codes of conduct and neutrality agreements are all the rage in labor-management cooperation circles, where collecting members’ dues is the goal toward which fighting the employers is actually an *obstacle*. Meanwhile the people who attended the hospital protests and collected ballot signatures might be forgiven for thinking they were being used by SEIU to cut a deal with the people they thought they were fighting.

In late May, SEIU along with several pro-immigrant groups called on President Obama not to issue a moratorium on deportations but precisely the opposite, insisting he take no executive action to alter his deportation policy until House Republicans had time to work out a deal. “We believe the president should move cautiously and give the House leadership all of the space they may need to bring legislation to the floor for a vote.” That is, they demanded that Obama *not* unilaterally change his policy that has led to the deportation of 2 million immigrants so as not to antagonize the Right. How any progressive or liberal can continue to think that House Republicans will play nice so long as we bargain in good faith is a mystery. One might conclude that some lessons will never be learned by those who have a strategy of looking for a seat at the table above all else. In the end, it took merely two days for Obama to agree to their demand to maintain the status quo, just as 21 immigrants were being rounded up in Milwaukee. The results were harshly criticized by immigrant rights groups such as the Chicago-based Immigrant Youth Justice League. “Organizations that have provided political cover for the President’s political maneuver by asking him to delay relief,” they wrote, “have demonstrated their lack of commitment to immigrant communities and their willingness to use the suffering of these communities for their own gain.”

On a local level, union leaders have been at war with other each other, falling over themselves to win the approval of political leaders to promote their own organizational legitimacy. This April in San Francisco, the Labor Council’s annual fundraising banquet was picketed by the Building and Construction Trades Council. The two groups disagree primarily over which Democratic Party politician to elect to the state assembly. If only they could use these tactics to fight for their members, like a group of rank-and-file construction workers did when picketing against the anti-union two-gate rule on May Day, only to be denounced by a union business manager, then labor might get somewhere.

A similar case occurred last fall when Port of Oakland truckers, who are not legally allowed to form a union, went on strike to protest against repressive work rules. The President of ILWU Local 10 helped the police break the picket line and directed his own members to cross, complaining without a hint of irony that the truckers were “trying to use the port as an economic tool.”

In a similar incident in May, locked-out Teamsters and Construction workers who had not agreed to work rules enforced by the Philadelphia Convention Center watched as Electricians, Laborers and Stagehands crossed their picket line.

Selling indulgences

Labor is rife with betrayals, dirty compromises and leaders pushing unpopular contracts down the throats of their members. But unions are not the only organizations whose leaders compromise their members and their principals on a regular basis. There are any number of non-profit progressive organizations which, along with organizing protests—or sometimes instead of doing so—dedicate their resources to helping the enemies of their cause justify themselves. Rather than resisting their opponents, they absolve their supposed enemies of their sins by cutting deals that promote the legitimacy of both parties.

For several months, Oakland officials discussed establishing a Domain Awareness Center (DAC), which would be a central command post for all of the city's surveillance initiatives. One of the groups opposed to this effort was the ACLU—until the City Council began considering a smaller DAC dedicated to the Port of Oakland, a pivotal location for labor protests in the Bay Area. At this point, the ACLU staff lawyer increased her lobbying of the Council—in support of the Port DAC. Not only did she encourage the new plan to go forward but she even sent the City Council language for a proposed resolution. In the end, after helping the City Council usher in the Port DAC, the ACLU was able to declare victory and the Council and the Mayor could save face by insisting they did everything in a responsible manner—even the ACLU said so. Of course, a small DAC may have been the real goal all along. If you are a pro-police Councilmember, how do you get a small DAC? Propose a big and scary one, of course, so liberal groups like the ACLU can declare “victory” by supporting a scaled back version. The ACLU could congratulate itself for its efforts, but many Oakland activists in this campaign were against police surveillance altogether and did not want any DAC, big or small. “I am just really disappointed,” one protester told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “I guess I have higher expectations” than the ACLU. Of course, we now have a situation where the DAC can begin slowly expanding once the protests have died down, which Mayor Jean Quan told the *Chronicle* was her plan. “We’ll bring them back one at a time,” she said, referring to the pieces of the DAC that were temporarily abandoned.

Fighting to scale back a reactionary initiative is one thing. Supporting the scaled back version, though, is a betrayal when the scaled back version does exactly the same thing *just not as much*. This sort of thing is a strategy for the ACLU. For example, they are currently working with the drone manufacturer Olaeris to help them sell drones in North Carolina. The two approached the legislature to propose the Preserving Privacy Act which would require warrants to be obtained before drones could be used for surveillance. Of course, this guarantees that drones *will* be used for surveillance, and with the declining fortunes of the Fourth Amendment we can be certain that this privacy policy will be stretched to the limit or even broken outright once drones are in the air. The ACLU should know that no law or policy can protect us from police abusing their powers. Furthermore, this law would allow the police to waive the need for a warrant if they felt that a crime was imminent. But they *always* think a crime is imminent—the point of restraining the surveillance state is that we do not trust the judgment of law enforcement or politicians because they have consistently proven themselves untrustworthy. A right-wing libertarian group in the area even referred to the bill as “The Preserving Privacy Act that Doesn’t” because of this and other loopholes. Sweetening the deal, Olaeris is discussing moving their operations to North Carolina and we should not be surprised if tax breaks are soon rolled out to encourage this. “Drones could mean thousands of jobs and billions pumped into the economy if the state becomes the industry leader,” according to WNCN News. So the politicians can boast about all the new jobs, Olaeris will be assured a contract, and the ACLU can brag about how they are guaranteeing our rights. Win-win-win. Except that once the police have this shiny new toy, they will certainly abuse it *because that is what they always do*. Warrant or not, people of color and political dissidents will soon be in the crosshairs of drones. But thanks to the ACLU, Olaeris and the police have a valuable fig-leaf without which they might not be able to expand drone use at all.

While some betrayals require entire organizations, Al Sharpton is often able to manage several all by himself. Last August, he organized a March on Washington to commemorate the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's historic 1963 march. The march was billed less as a battle against racism and more as a parade in memory of times past. At the last minute, Sharpton announced that the speakers list would include Attorney General Eric Holder, the man who oversees the criminal justice system that warehouses nearly 1 million Black men in prison. In his speech, Holder credited the 1963 march for putting himself and President Obama in office, though he made no mention of the fact that more Black men are caught up in the legal system today than were enslaved in 1850. With politics like this coming from the stage, we can imagine why so many people are cynical about the possibility of social change.

Not to be outdone by himself, Sharpton later held a tribute in Harlem to the late Nelson Mandela, inviting newly-elected New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and newly re-appointed NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton, historically one of the most prominent advocates of the department's racist stop-and-frisk policy. "There will be freedom and equality for all," Bratton told the audience, "and my commitment to you is that your police force, in your city, will be respectful. It will practice what Mandela preached."

By far the most egregious example of a social justice organization betraying its principles and supporters, though, is the Los Angeles NAACP's planned lifetime achievement award to Donald Sterling. This was to be Sterling's *second* lifetime achievement award in only five years, such were his efforts in support of African-Americans. It turned out that Sterling had donated money to the LA NAACP, who offered these awards even though his racism was well documented before his recent tirade came to light. The LA NAACP eventually canceled Sterling's award and the chapter president resigned in disgrace. The ceremony went on without these two, with awards given to the Mayor of Los Angeles as well as executives at Federal Express and Wal-Mart—and Al Sharpton.

This pay-to-play effort may have been surprising on the outside, but it highlighted the role of opportunist organizations who fight for themselves first and their constituents later. The planned award to Sterling was no different from the Catholic Church's old habit of selling indulgences, wiping out the sins of the sinful for a hefty fee. The sinner receives absolution and the priest gets not only the payout but a seat at the table with the rich and powerful—and the prestige of granting their absolution. The NAACP has even taken money from Occidental Petroleum and in return supported the resumption of nearby oil drilling. The Sterling affair was not a momentary gaffe but rather business as usual for institutional liberalism.

The role of the Left

This is only a partial list. No doubt, scouring the local newspapers of cities around the country would reveal dozens of union leaders and non-profits violating the trust of their members and supporters by cutting back-room deals. This problem will never go away so long as there is a capitalist system which provides a niche for organizations and individuals to make a career of claiming to represent the oppressed and exploited. Any future upsurge in working-class struggle will not dispense with these problems. On the contrary, every mass movement will always see the Sharptons and the Hoffas stepping in to take credit for any gains while redirecting everything into negotiations and symbolic actions, if not shutting it down entirely. If the Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements, the liberal social movement leaders are their undertakers.

It is important that the Left not mimic these tactics by seeking out symbolic victories which we can use to promote ourselves. Instead it should be our role to prepare for the inevitable sellouts, remembering how militant struggles are cut down and compromised for the benefit of those who want to promote their careers and organizations instead of further strengthening the independent

power of the movements.

Of course, union workers cannot just organize around their leaders, who will play a role in every contract fight, but need to be prepared for the betrayal that lies ahead. Whenever there is a Hoffa or a Buffenbarger, there is often an opposition slate or even a group of rank-and-file truckers or construction workers taking their own direct actions without some highly paid figure taking credit for their sacrifices. These efforts are often small and may seem unimpressive, certainly to the mainstream media who are looking for a spectacle and a sound-bite from an important spokesperson. Yet these small, militant campaigns are far more radical than a mass march with no demands, which can be turned off like a spigot by those directing it from above. As for the large non-profits, we need to be prepared for them to get involved and take credit for cutting a deal, rather than expecting they will lead the way. They do not jump on board to radicalize a moderate struggle, rather they jump onto a radicalizing struggle in order to manage and moderate it for their own ends.

It is always easier to enjoy a momentary upsurge than it is to organize against its eventual shutting down. But if we on the Left do not insist on a radical and principled agenda for the movements we are involved in and resist back-room deals by our self-appointed leaders, we should not be surprised when nobody else does either.

The struggle of the radical Left is not merely just against the Republicans and the Democrats, but also against the undemocratic union officials and the career media stars who moderate struggles in order to present themselves as responsible negotiating partners. It is against the civil libertarians who in the end are perfectly willing to help the state erode our civil liberties rather than resist the attacks to the end. It is against the non-profits who put their own funding above the causes they claim to support. When the leaders of social movements have such different goals from the participants, we should not be surprised when the movements fail.

None of the betrayals mentioned above could have been easily beaten back, but that must be our goal unless we are willing to accept more of the same. Ultimately, the true power of a social movement is not merely its size or its goals but whether it can be easily put back into a box of moderate protest that threatens nobody. It is precisely the ability of a movement to push the boundaries of acceptable forms of resistance and dissent that makes it radical. But in the future, when the inevitable betrayal comes and the movements successfully reject them, then—and only then—will we have a true mass radicalization which cannot be easily corralled and intimidated.

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