Janus and the Rank-and-File Strategy: A Reply to La Botz

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Dan La Botz's article “Trump and the Labor Movement” in the Winter 2018 of *New Politics* is based on an oral presentation, with the limitations that go with oral presentations. For example, La Botz simplifies the plaintiff’s argument in Janus to the point of missing what is key and unique in it. He states, “The conservatives argue that the union forces workers to financially support political causes with which they may disagree, and so violates their free-speech rights.” This was the issue in the 1977 Abood case.

At that time, the Supreme Court ruled that unions in the public sector could not use dues to support political candidates or causes. They also ruled that workers who were covered by a collective bargaining agreement but chose not to join the union could be required to pay their 'fair share' of the cost of administering the collective bargaining agreement and providing representation. That's the part the rightwing wants to overturn via the Janus case.

What’s new about Janus is the argument that, in the public sector, a union’s contract demands *are* political speech. Improved wages and benefits, pension fights, merit pay versus across the board raises, etc., all involve questions about how public resources will be spent. Therefore, the plaintiffs argue, unions should not be able to require anyone to support that kind of speech if they don’t agree with the union’s position. Or, as I’ve put it to stewards in TWU, Mark Janus might say he does not want a raise because he would prefer the money that would go for his raise go to paving his street. (More likely, he wants a raise for himself, but not for the person working next to him.)

This is different from what “political speech” is commonly understood to mean and needs to be teased out. (Teachers in West Virginia have just shown that there is some validity to the argument that demands for a raise are political speech. Validity to the argument, not to the solution the right seeks.)

Will a ruling against the unions lead them to become more independent and militant? Don't count on it. In a post-Janus world, a likely response for public sector unions in many states will be to bind themselves even more closely to the Democratic Party. They’ll figure that electing friendly Democratic governors and state legislators is the surest way to protect themselves from loss of dues check-off, limits on what they can bargain over, etc.

Rank and File Strategy

La Botz wrote:

The left's program for labor for many years has been the building of a rank and file movement to transform business unions into democratic and militant organizations. Many leftists entered the unions in the 1970s with a variety of strategies, everything from working with "progressive" union officials to trying to create a revolutionary alternative to existing leadership. The rank and file strategy aimed at organizing workers to challenge the existing union leadership and transform the union into a class-struggle organization. One group, the International Socialists, had a goal of uniting rank and file groups in different unions, as well as in the social movements, into a small, mass revolutionary socialist party. This strategy—though subsequently disconnected from building a revolutionary organization—was carried by the IS when it merged with other socialist groups to form Solidarity. Not only Solidarity, but also the International Socialist Organization and more recently the Democratic Socialists of America have also sometimes adopted this strategy.

The rank and file strategy existed precisely to overcome the union bureaucracy and to make it possible for workers to come together to fight the employer. That meant taking up shop-floor grievances, organizing contract campaigns, and running for local and national office, always with the goal of a more democratic and militant union. Building up such a labor movement was at the center of a conception of building a socialist labor party. As Kim Moody, who most articulately explained the theory, writes, "The notion of a bridge between rudimentary class consciousness or trade-union militancy and socialist consciousness is the cornerstone of transitional politics and the rank and file strategy."[20]

I was a member of Solidarity (or a predecessor group) for about 30 years. I think this is a good thumbnail statement of the rank-and-file (R&F) strategy as practiced by the IS and later Solidarity. La Botz makes the important points that the strategy had become "disconnected" from party-building AND that it remained connected to the development of socialist consciousness. (Looking back, I don't think we had a decent theory about how that transition from trade-union militancy to socialist consciousness happens.) I'd like to add an element the summary leaves out.

The R&F strategy as I understood it (and worked to apply it in the Transport Workers Union in the 1980s and 90s) was about building the capacity (organizational and political) of workers to fight the boss *regardless* of who the officers were. Our focus was not on winning control of the union in order to pursue the fight so much as it was on building the networks on the job, and a membership caucus, that could enforce some control on the job and take the initiative to push back against management — whether the union's officers wanted to or not. That said, we learned that we couldn't avoid trying to win office and control of the union. Our supporters among the rank and file expected it of us. So, the strategy became one of "here's the best way to reform the union and make it more democratic and militant," but that's not where we started. It seems to me that there might be some value to the "build organization to fight the boss," as opposed to the "build organization to win control of the union to fight the boss" approach in the right-to-work economy we are heading for.