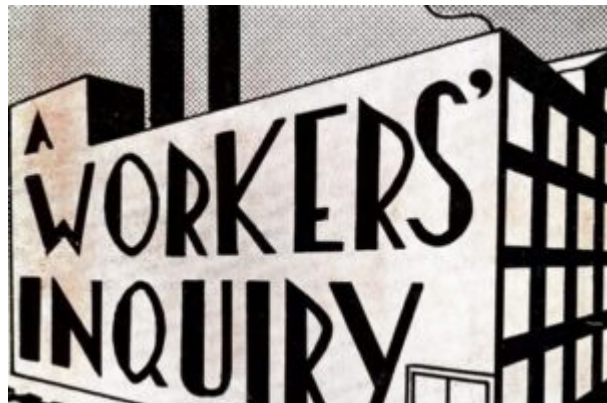


Using Worker' Inquiry to Organize and Fight the Boss

written by Robert Ovetz, Kevin Van Meter | March 24, 2026



In late December 2025, tech, legal, nonprofit, education, and café workers and union organizers, gathered in the East Bay Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) office to talk about their working lives and organizing on their jobs. There have been one-on-one conversations and other workplace organizing workshops in that space, but this training was a little different.

“Using Workers’ Inquiry to Organize and Fight the Boss” takes its inspiration from Karl Marx’s last published article “A Workers’ Inquiry” that appeared in 1880, and has motivated projects such as *Notes from Below* publishing inquiries in the UK with a UK and sometimes global focus, *Long-Haul Magazine* in the US, and others ever since.

“The workshop opened a space for workers to take stock of their productive lives and ruminate on their own knowledge of and ideas about their experiences working and surviving in the Bay Area,” Althea, a union organizer from Oakland, CA shared. “These conversations were cathartic and generative, deepening our collective understanding of our shared struggle against wage slavery and the diverse class composition.”

While often associated, at least in the United States, with Italian Operaismo, workers’ inquiry begins with Marx and has divergent histories. A new form of “proletarian literature” later emerged in the United States in 1947 with the publication of *The American Worker* pamphlet, and has considerable impact in France and Italy where it’s translated in 1949 and 1954 respectively.

“What workers’ inquiry seeks to accomplish is to understand production and the experience of work from workers’ own perspective,” we shared on a recent episode of *Economic Update with Rick Wolff*. A workers’ inquiry allows workers to identify how work is organized by the boss to adapt the tactics and strategies of their existing struggles.

Workers’ inquiry seeks to understand the class composition—that is, workers’ power vis-à-vis boss in their workplace—that workers can use to foster their own class consciousness, advance organizing efforts, read and circulate these struggles, and “to understand what the workers are thinking and doing while actually at work.”

As a conceptual tool we can use class composition to understand how work is organized, or the technical composition, and how workers can adapt their strategies and tactics to it, or the political

recomposition. These can help workers identify and transform their struggles in response to the boss and the state's attempts to decompose its power and reimpose work. Using workers' inquiries will allow us to overcome the limits of the labor movement so that we can widen, expand, circulate and amplify existing class conflict. The objective is not just a first or better contract, stronger unions or higher union density but organizing the refusal of work that can disrupt production so that workers can control and democratize work to organize a society beyond capitalism.

As with *Notes from Below*, we see class composition as a "framework" to understand the political power of the working-class as it confronts capitalism in the workplace and across industries to build collective power. As British militant and translator of Italian movement texts Ed Emery famously wrote, there is "No politics without inquiry!" This is echoed by the DSA Communist Caucus which argues in its founding Statement that "inquiry is necessary for building collective power."

Practicing workers' inquiry adds to the tools and skill sets already deployed by Left labor and union organizers, socialists and militants in the United States today by encountering workers where they are rather than where we want them to be. surveys, interviews, and worker-to-worker organizing are essential parts of an inquiry that can help workers understand and analyze the production process from their own perspective.

As workers' inquiries circulate they complement reports and stories of organizing found in the labor press by focusing on how workplaces operate, formally and informally, prior to an organizing drive. They serve as strategic interventions to grasp power in the workplace and identify informal work groups and divisions within the class, forms of mutual aid and informal organization, "organic" leadership that aid organizing efforts.

Workshop participants had the opportunity to practice a workers' inquiry to understand the position of their work in the current capitalist economy to develop new tactics and strategies to build our power. As Robert Ovetz noted, this will "provide a model for workers to emulate in their own struggles elsewhere" and build working-class power to take on fascism.

Participants met in small groups based on the industries in which they work. They co-interviewed each other asking, "Can you tell us a little about your work: what do you do all day, how was the work divided up, what are working conditions like, and what is going to work every day like for you?"

A legal worker shared how they never catch up on work tasks because their bosses assigned more and more cases which resonated with a nonprofit worker in their group. Both shared how they were concerned about their working-class "clients" and the services they endeavor to provide them.

The lack of worker control over work tasks, specifically in education and café work, took on deeper meaning for participants. They discussed the questions "Describe how management manages. Describe how your work is organized, work rules, processes and procedures, etc."

Identifying widely felt issues is a core component in workplace organizing conversations covered in trainings by *Labor Notes* and Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee. Participants inquired as to "Which issues at and away from work are most widely effecting your co-workers and why?" These questions allowed them to understand their workplaces as to share their findings and stories with other workers in an attempt to recognize common problems across workplaces and industries.

Tech workers using Bay Area Silicon Valley company shuttle buses taking them back and forth from

home to work recognized it as a space to organize a #NoTechForApartheid campaign against the use of their work products in Gaza. One tech worker talked about how these shuttle buses served as a basis for “recent meetings, communications, cooperation, or organizing about these issues.” Following the firing of Independent Workers of Great Britain members at Rockstar Games in November 2025, those outside the sector have noted the uptick in organizing, although those in the sector have been building “worker power” for some time.

Workers’ inquiry is increasingly being used by organizers. Kevin worked with cafe workers who carried out their own workers’ inquiry of the sector which they published as “Class Composition in the Café Sector” in 2025. Robert authored the forthcoming *Rebels for the System: NGOs, Capitalism and the Labor Movement* that does an inquiry “from above” of the non-profit/NGO industry. A grocery workers’ inquiry was just launched with support of members of Trader Joe’s United and New Seasons Labor Union-UE Local 1010.

Workers’ inquiries in the US and across the planet are identifying working-class self-activity in various sectors, understanding the class struggle from the working-class point of view, and allowing workers to develop their own knowledge of who their work is organized in order to identify vital new tactics and strategies that can allow them to push their struggles forward.

A Marx declared, workers’ inquiry is by and “for the class to whom the future belongs.”