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Precarious & Pissed Off

Lessons from the Montpelier Downtown Workers'
Union 2003-2005

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that will bring about a federated, democratic, and free society of self-managed communities and workplaces.

If we, as the majority of common people, are going to do this, we will need to build confidence as a class, and to learn how to work together for our defense and for the advancement of our common interests. Revolution, it is said, is learned upon the barricades. That is to say, we do not learn how to build popular power by reading it in a book or having someone patiently explain it to us. Like riding a bicycle, we have to learn by actually doing it. So it is that we learn how to build the new society in the shell of the old by engaging with others in mass struggle. Anything less leaves us ill-equipped for the tasks and trials ahead.

even more union drives before attaining success. If organizing at work is truly important to you there are plenty of unorganized places to organize. So don't let one failure get in the way of continuing to fight and eventually winning. We didn't.

David V. went from the downtown union into freelance journalism. He is on the board of his Central Labor Council, and is a member of a writers' union. Kristin W., Dougen, and I all went on to pick up skills and win battles for hundreds, even thousands, of workers as staff organizers. Nick R. is taking a staff job with a group that organizes WalMart workers, and Amanda L. went on to get a union job and become a chief steward. Steve R., while currently traveling, is going to settle back in Philly – anybody who knows him knows he'll be giving the status quo hell in the "215."

There are also a number of people who didn't jump from this fight right into another. But there may still come a time when they use the hard lessons we learned when they have a problem at work. As Joe Strummer would say, "the future is unwritten."

Persistence, humility, a willingness to learn from our mistakes and to listen to our comrades and mentors, and overall stubbornness are the keys to fighting the class war on the terrain of the workplace.

Anarchist Aspirations

What I have described above for the most part is simple unionism. Some would say it's merely reformist activity.⁶ Is it? Revolutionary socialist anarchism as a political philosophy is based on the fundamental hope that the majority, the working class and all oppressed people, can be the agents of change

⁶I will be the first to say that the lessons above are far from comprehensive, and by themselves, do not go over the bulk of successful organizing strategies and lessons. More needs to be written by other organizers on this subject.

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political capital. (Oh, and "liquid courage" might not always be the best thing to mix with union actions!)

Run Issue-Based Campaigns in the Workplace and in the Community:

One thing we can be proud of as a union, without a doubt, is that we never bought into the artificial divide between class issues in the community and at work. When local liberals tried to institute a "Local Options Tax" that would have increased the tax on food, services, and goods in our town, we ran a campaign against it and held a public forum. While the opposition to the tax was much broader than the MDWU – many merchants also opposed it – we brought our issues to the table. After all, downtown workers often ate downtown on their lunch break, or bought goods for home after the end of a shift. We were underpaid as it was, and an extra tax would adversely affect us.

We should have done more of these public campaigns. Along with our work with the Citywide Grievance Procedure, we should have run a "No firing or discipline" public campaign, getting workers and community members to sign on to a petition demanding representation at any disciplinary meeting. We did discuss the idea of creating a "Montpelier Standards" campaign, which would have outlined standards addressing an array of issues for downtown workers, but we never followed through on it. If we had narrowed it down to the issue which workers were most concerned with, unfair firing and discipline, we could have had followed through and might have won.

The Point Is To Win, So Failure Is Never An Excuse To Give Up.

We lost the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union. And the fact is, most organizing drives fail. The cards are stacked against us. At many facilities, workers will go through 3, 4, or

Stacey⁵, was tending bar, and they would put stickers on their beer bottles that said "Bring Back Dave." To apply additional pressure on the manager we called for a "Tip Strike" against her alone. We found that people at a going-away party for two other ex-bartenders were willing to rally their friends to participate. Things went wrong. Before people got into that bar and participated, we should have had clear guidelines for what the action consisted of and what it didn't. Instead, we used the party as our earliest opportunity to launch the action, with few guidelines of what was appropriate and what wasn't.

Toward the end of the action, an ex-bartender who had her own gripe with Stacey threw a pint glass at her head. (It missed.) While we might have smiled at the thought of an asshole manager almost getting her just desserts, the political hangover drained our energy and time, and cost us support among our allies, which would make later grievance fights more difficult to win. What was the biggest shame of it all? The "violence" instigated by the "disruptive union action" overshadowed real collective action taken by the majority to highlight David's unjust firing.

You can't substitute the militant action of one person for the collective action of a group. If we had organized people in a more disciplined manner, the sticker action and the tip strike could have led to an escalation of tactics. Instead, the campaign was derailed. One good friend said to me after the episode, "If you guys got twenty other workers, and not just lefty ideological workers, to throw pint glasses, it would be a different story. But you didn't, and so you have totally lost the moral high ground the original action created."

In short, when you're going to take an action, whether it be a picket, a leafleting, or something more creative, you need to have discussions with all the participants beforehand and decide on appropriate ways to deal with bosses, anti-union workers, and anti-union customers. Not doing this cost us a lot of



Beginnings and Endings

In June of 2003 the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC), an affiliate of Jobs with Justice and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), launched an ambitious and unique model of worker organization, known as The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union. The union was based geographically in Vermont's capital city, among workers in the restaurants, retail outfits, and non-profits. Any worker, whether or not they worked in a shop that had union recognition and a union contract, could join, participate, and engage in the grievance procedure if they had a problem at work. By the summer of 2005 the union was gone: dead in the water, so to speak.

I could tell you the blow-by-blow story of how this organization rose and fell. The story would be comprised of tales of workers sitting down "eye to eye" with their employers, alongside stewards, and winning grievances; of a fierce and vibrant debate in the newspapers, coffee shops, and pubs of Central Vermont; of a dedicated group of downtown workers reaching their wits' end pulling together newsletters, holding long meetings, handling grievances, and talking endlessly with other workers; of marches in the middle of blizzards; of public forums; of acting like a union without any legal union recognition; of successful actions and mistakes; of asshole bosses, obnoxious lawyers, and workers who found their own voice; and of all the many ingredients that went into the ultimately unsuccessful two-year-long struggle to forge a lasting institution to defend downtown workers and advance our interests.

However, the more I look back on it all, the more I realize that this story is not what is important. Dave's article, "The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union: Building Work-

¹Northeastern Anarchist #10 (Spring/Summer 2005), pg. 11-18. This article deals with most of the history of the MDWU, but was written before its end.

Of course, there are exceptions to this. For example, if someone was facing sexual harassment, racist or homophobic bigotry, or similar discrimination, it might have been appropriate to take action as outsiders, on moral grounds alone. However, the question that should have been at the core of our thoughts at every grievance should not have been, "How do we win this grievance?", but "How do we build the union, at this shop, through winning this particular grievance?" Our failure to get the grievants' co-workers to be the agents carrying out and winning their grievances with them became our Achilles' heel. Down the road when the bosses wised up and got lawyers involved, we were served with papers prohibiting us to speak with them, and with "no trespass" notices. If the first step of our strategy had been to help the grievant organize their co-workers to do the investigation and put forth the remedy, we might have fielded fewer grievances, but they would have resulted in more than wins for the individual grievants: they would have laid the groundwork for the union at entire shops.

Direct Action Involves Collective Discipline and Accountability:

When and if you get to the point where you're taking direct action, always remember that it involves planning, guidelines, and accountability to the union as a whole. I will provide one example of a good action that went awry. Union member David V., a local bartender at Charlie O's, was unjustly fired by his notorious scumbag boss. The patrons rallied around him and complained and were generally pissed off, because he was a good bartender and a great storyteller, and because they liked him. The union we felt we needed to take action quickly. We devised a plan: people would go to the bar the night the manager,

⁵On Labor Day of this year, Stacey was fired. Reportedly, another ex-bartender ran into the bar that night and yelled "The Wicked Witch Is Dead," and the entire bar applauded. Dave got his, finally, and on Labor Day no less!

ical mass of union shops downtown came to a halt, we regrouped and surveyed approximately 100 downtown workers about their concerns at work. (We should have been signing them up for the union at the same time.) The conclusion of the survey was that the number-one concern for downtown workers was unfair firing and discipline, so at one of our quarterly Downtown Worker Town Meetings, we voted on creating a grievance procedure for all downtown workers and went to work. Stewards were trained, a chief steward was elected, and we assigned territory based on the different streets and shops in Montpelier. The Citywide Grievance Procedure, as we called it, was fairly innovative, and in its beginning we won a considerable number of fights – more than we lost, for sure.

The procedure was fairly routine. A worker would contact a steward, the steward would proceed in conducting an investigation which would consist of interviews of the worker and possibly some co-workers, an information request would be sent to the boss, and then a remedy would be suggested by the steward. If the boss didn't accept the remedy, we would get a respected member of the community to try to resolve the dispute. Finally, if there was no getting through to the boss, we would involve our Downtown Workers' Defense Squad, which consisted of dedicated union activists and supportive community members.

Sounds great on paper, but here's the problem: we didn't organize workers in their shops to defend each other, and therefore didn't build the union in the particular shops. Our system was mostly based on other downtown workers from other shops intervening on the behalf of workers in a particular shop. To get our assistance in the first place, workers should have had to convince at least 4 or 5 of their co-workers to be willing to take public action to defend them. Why? Because winning small battles is not enough. We needed to build the union by getting co-workers to act with each other.

ing Class Democracy One City at a Time," gives a fairly detailed point-by-point history of the project.¹ What is more important now is that we draw some lessons from the experience of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union, so that other workers, especially those in the non-unionized retail and restaurant occupations and the service sector more generally, who attempt to gather co-workers together to build self-organization, concerted activity and collective resistance – in short, a fighting union – have an idea of what did and didn't work for us in the MDWU.

However, before I go into those lessons, I should note some objective factors, both within the retail and service sectors in general and in Montpelier in particular, that conspired to make organizing a union among retail and restaurant workers and advance our interests an uphill battle, and ultimately one we would lose.

Challenges Organizing Within the Retail and Restaurant Sectors

First and foremost, there is the obvious: retail and restaurant workers have not been organizing in vast numbers across the US and Canada in recent history. Nor are they now. If they were, almost every union in the respective countries would have retail and service sector branches, and would be eagerly initiating organizing projects to bring new members from this sector of the economy into their dwindling ranks. The reasons for the lack of self-organization in this sector are many.

One is that we generally feel powerless and vulnerable. In this sense resistance at work in restaurants and retail in the US and Canada becomes highly individuated. Instead of collaborating to defend each other against unjust disciplines or to fight for better wages or conditions, we as workers often protest in our own individual capacities: quitting rather than

confronting an obnoxious boss, stealing to make up for the fact that we don't make much money, calling in sick rather than dealing with aggravating conditions of the workplace or obnoxious customers, and of course doing petty sabotage to feel like we're getting back at the customer or boss who just scolded us. This is the everyday reality of workplace resistance for most in the service sector. We might confide in our co-workers that we are resisting, if we resist at all; rarely, though, do we engage in collective, concerted, public activity together. At the end of the day this individualized resistance might feel good, but it does not solve our problems at work in the long term.

Two other leading factors that make self-organization at work difficult are the twin burdens of high turnover and a low sense of entitlement among workers on the job. High turnover is widespread in retail and restaurant work. In 2005, 44.9% of workers in the leisure and hospitality trade, and 32.6% in the retail trade, voluntarily quit their jobs.² If the workers at your workplace are constantly changing, they tend to have low investment in changing the workplace. This makes it difficult, but not impossible, to organize with them.

The decision to quit instead of demanding more is in part a result of a low sense of entitlement. People often feel like these are "dead end jobs" that they can do nothing about. Instead of asking for a raise, workers will often just look for a better-paying job. Instead of demanding that working conditions are changed, they will find ways to work around the daily humiliations and difficulties of the workplace. The dishwasher throws out a few dishes to lighten the load, the retail worker doing back-room inventory doesn't bother counting a box of items that is hard to reach, and the servers at the local diner joke with each other about the obnoxious customers they are serving with a smile. We do these things simply to retain a sense of dignity.

²Statistics quoted from the Employment Policy Foundation, www.epf.org/

Go To Where People Are People Are At, and Take Baby Steps to Organize The Majority:

People need to be on the same page. They need to find common ground, develop trust in each other, and build confidence before taking more risky action together. This begins with the obvious. Find out what the majority of your co-workers are ready to do and push them to get to it. For many of us, signing on to a public statement, especially one which makes demands of our employers and mentions the dreaded word "union," is a pretty risky and militant step in the first place. If a supermajority of your shop wants to go on strike to get demands met and secure recognition, that's great. For most of us, that won't be the case, at least at first. We need to start small and build from there. Getting people to sign a union petition might be a step that, once a majority are on board, can lead to co-workers openly wearing union buttons or stickers around specific problems at work, to leafleting co-workers outside of work, and eventually to a whole host of appropriate escalations in your fight. When you take action, take majority action.

This is mass-based organizing at its core, the point of it all. We wield power together as a majority. As a small group, we can wear buttons supporting a union, but then we look like a weak group to the rest of our co-workers, which may make them be hesitant to join. We can leaflet with a handful of individuals by our side, or we can leaflet with many, to show that we aren't fucking around. When you're organizing, always make sure that you and the other gung-ho folks who are pushing things forward don't outpace and therefore alienate your co-workers. Get them to take the actions, no matter how small, alongside you.

Don't Substitute Your Core Group for Collective Action on the Shop Floor:

This leads nicely into a lesson that we in the MDWU learned all too well. You can't substitute yourself for collective action on the shop floor. After our first strategy of securing a crit-

”I didn’t want people to think we were running some sort of scam, so I was hesitant to ask people to join the organization.”

This fear is common among the best of organizers, and you need to get over it. Want to know how? Ask people to join the union, and keep asking, until you get over it. Indeed, we learn as we walk. We become comfortable by immersing ourselves in what is not comfortable. It’s as simple – and aggravating – as that.

Build First-Tier and Second-Tier Leadership:

Steve R. adds another important insight on his organizing work in Philly: ”I don’t think we pushed people enough to take on responsibilities in the union.” This, if anything, was the ultimate downfall of the MDWU. We had a dedicated core of activists, but no one to step up to the plate when we needed a hand or were burnt out. Building a second tier of leaders – that is, a group of people who take on light responsibilities on a regular basis – is invaluable to your efforts.

How do you do this? Regularly make sure that people who don’t attend all the meetings or are not at the front of the line take on tasks and invest themselves in the organizing effort. Involve them in a routine of doing something for the organizing effort. If someone shows initiative, enthusiasm, and energy, don’t just encourage them or pat them on the back. Push them to the front, and get them invested in regular union responsibilities.

Got Militancy?

So you’re a militant. You want to put up the barricades, seize the workplaces, institute popular assemblies, and throw some molotovs while you’re at it. Here’s the good news: As militants, we have the fighting spirit that it takes to commit ourselves to the tasks ahead of us in the class struggle. Here’s the obvious, bad news: We’re not there yet.

In short, these positions in the economy breed a high sense of social insecurity, or precarity. There is low (if any) job security, low wages, and an awareness that we are easily replaceable. We work from paycheck to paycheck, so instead of having ”nothing to lose but our chains,” we have nothing to lose but our housing, groceries, heat, electricity, phone, internet access (if we have a computer), health insurance (if we have that), luxury of going out for a drink or to the movies, car (if we have one), car insurance (if we can afford it), and the numerous other things that give us a sense of stability, place, and continuity in the modern shit-hole that is capitalist society.

Challenges of Organizing in Montpelier, Vermont (or: The Plight of the Petit-Bourgeoisie)

If you take a glance at the retail and restaurant outfits of Montpelier you will find very few corporate outfits. (I worked at one of them, Brooks Pharmacy, but that was more the exception than the rule for employment downtown.) As you walk down Main Street you’ll find coffee shops, bookstores, clothing shops, and so on: all independently owned. Turn the corner onto State Street, and you’ll find more of the same. When you look down Langdon Street, you’ll see an independent record store, an independent sporting-goods store, numerous boutiques, and of course Montpelier’s only worker-run enterprises, the Langdon Street Cafe and Black Sheep Books.³ In short, the bulk of the market share of the retail and restaurant sector in Montpelier, fueled by the purchases of tourists and state work-

pubs/factsheets/2005/fs2005317.pdf

³Yes this is a shameless plug for these two worker collectives. When in Montpelier go buy books at Black Sheep Books and have food and coffee from Langdon Street. Ohhh, and did I mention they sell beer and wine?

ers, is owned by sole proprietors who are often seen working alongside, or at least around, the workers they employ.

Running a business in the retail and restaurant sector can be a challenge for the small bosses. The whims of the market take small business on a roller coaster ride that often has the locals talking over a beer about which merchant is rumored to be in dire financial straits, or which enterprises are weathering a particularly bad business year well. As a result, what most of the small business owners we faced in the Downtown Union struggle lacked in fiscal capital, they made up for in "social capital." The merchants are not only a hub of local information, but are also seen as the public face, and the custodians, of downtown Montpelier.

They are organized into an association, The Montpelier Downtown Community Association, and they can be found in the local bars after hours along with everybody else. More important than the MDCA, they form an informal social network of people who, though they might not always like each other, share a strong commonality as a class of small merchants. Their woes of a bad business year and their lamentations about the need for more parking occupy more space in local newspapers than the challenges faced by the working poor in their shops. Most of the public – working class, middle class and elite alike – has some degree of sympathy with their plight. From the beginning, they were in a better position to win the battle of ideas concerning unionization.

When we went public in our organizing efforts with the MDWU, with majorities in five different shops, not only did the particular merchants of those shops quickly erode union support by having one-on-one meetings with the workers about why the MDWU would be bad for everybody, but they quickly organized themselves in opposition to the union and began to organize their workers in opposition. The small merchants' messages against the union quickly outpaced ours in the media and in public discourse. The only thing that kept us up and

could mean the difference between the boss scaring the shit out of a union supporter (who you worked hard to get on board), and the boss listing talking points against the organizing effort only to have the unfazed union supporter reply, "I knew you would say that!"

Last, set TASKS. What will your co-worker do to advance the organizing effort? Ask them questions about other people in their department: who would they be willing to talk to about signing a petition or union card? Will they come to the next organizing committee meeting? As always, it's important to emphasize that everybody has to do something to move the effort forward. Do whatever you can to not let your co-worker off without taking on some responsibility that you can follow up with them about. Everybody must do something, no matter how small.

The ISIT outline by itself is completely inadequate for the purpose of organizing. Having these conversations is as much an art as it is a science, and nothing can replace talking with an experienced organizer about your "rap" with co-workers. What I hope I have provided is a framework to think about how to carry out organizing conversations. Ultimately, you'll have to find out what works for you.

If You Can't Ask Someone to Be Part of Your Revolution, They Probably Won't Join It:

This is simple but cannot be overstated. You need to ask people to join the organizing effort. I can't count how many times I had organizing conversations with my co-workers at Brooks and didn't ask people to join the MDWU, so I wouldn't come off as a missionary or something. In hindsight, this was wrong. Every worker deserves the right to be asked if they want to join a workplace organization. To not ask them is to insult their ability to make up their own minds to a very simple question. Steve R. of the South Street Workers' Union expressed a similar fear:

For the purpose of this section I'd like to steal a little bit of wisdom from another healthcare organizer I worked under, named Christi. Her point-by-point method of having a conversation with workers was summed up by the acronym ISIT (Issues, Solutions, Inoculation, and Tasks): When first conversing with co-workers, find out what their ISSUES at work are. They may not have "problems," or they may not feel comfortable telling you right off. So keep the conversation going. Ask them what they like at work. Ask them what it's like to do their particular job, and what it's like to work with their co-workers. Keep asking until you find out what they care about and what they want changed.

The next part is SOLUTIONS. Organizing together with your co-workers is the only way you can ensure that the things you like at work stay the same, and the things you detest get changed. Ask people how they've tried to right wrongs in the past. How would they deal with management arbitrarily taking away something they like on the job? Have they had a friend who was unfairly fired or disciplined? When people answer these questions, this is your window of opportunity to hammer home that the long-term solution is to organize together with the majority of their co-workers into a union, able to make demands of management, deal with grievances, and win concessions.

INOCULATION means going over the typical things that management will say in an attempt to dissuade people from organizing, and how to respond to them. The best guard against the anti-union message of the boss is the power of prediction. Tell people what they can expect the boss to say and do, and they will be much less likely to get scared by the boss's "anti" message. I'm not going to go over all of the typical things that a boss or administration will usually say. A little research at a local union hall or on the internet will provide you with pamphlets and lists to your heart's delight. However, I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this step in a conversation. It

running in the PR battle was that there were enough workers at enough businesses who were willing to remain publicly strong and vocal about the issues they faced, and about the union drive.

To these ends, the MDWU did much to dispel myths the business owners spread. Amanda L., a worker at La Pizzeria⁴ at the time and now chief steward at the local co-op grocery store, Hunger Mountain, was insistent about this fact:

I remember one thing: all the business owners, and even the mayor, were saying that these were just transitional jobs for young people. I tried so hard to get people to understand that if you go into Shaw's [a supermarket], yes, there are young people working the register, but there are just about as many older people working there. You can't say this isn't a career. Many of us don't want this to be a career, but you don't have this choice.

It was a decisive victory that we were able to create a dialogue about service workers in downtown Montpelier that was able to dispel certain myths, but the business owners always had the edge in the public discourse. They bought ads in the newspaper, were ever-present downtown, and had the luxury to talk, while at work, to inquiring members of the community and workers about their thoughts on the union drive. "After all," many shop owners would say, "I treat my workers just like I would want to be treated, and if they don't like it here, they can always go and work somewhere else."

While this dynamic is fairly common among all organizing drives, the bosses in this case had faces that one would see everyday on the streets of Montpelier. They were not an administration that was detached from the everyday public, nor

⁴It's interesting to note that of the five business where we originally demanded recognition, three (La Pizzeria, Karma Imports, and State Street Market) have since closed. Another shop where we had a contract, Mountain Café, has also closed, but only after viciously busting the union. Fuck you, Chu!

were they a faceless, heartless corporation removed from the "community" of Montpelier: they were a social class within the town. They were seen as stewards and leaders of community life, and we were painted, quite successfully, as a thorn in their side, trying to make trouble in an already equitable community. Our success was that at times we were able to dispel this illusion: to show how workers were being mistreated, to highlight the class divide in Montpelier, and to ask the simple question: 'If this is an equitable community, what's the big deal of workers having their own organization?'"

Lessons for Organizing From Your Humble Author and Others

So here are some lessons culled from The Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union and beyond. Beyond, you ask? Well, yes. The people I interviewed for this article have since had numerous experiences beyond the MDWU, and some were never involved. I went on to organize nurses in a healthcare union in NJ, and am now an organizer for a community-labor alliance. Amanda L. went on to become the chief steward at Hunger Mountain Co-Op in Montpelier. Kristin W. is organizing healthcare workers in Nevada. Nick R. attempted to start a project to organize chain store workers in Vermont, and is now moving to Florida to help organize WalMart workers with a group that has been at it for several years now. Steve R. was never part of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union, but was involved in a similar campaign: the South Street Workers' Union, based along the South Street business corridor in Philly and affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World. Dougen was a salt with the Ironworkers in Vermont while the MDWU was active, and is now a healthcare organizer.

Take these lessons and use them as you will. Some might be applicable to your situation, and some might not. These lessons

job as a workplace organizer is to figure how this social puzzle fits together.

You need to map out the different departments and work spaces within your work. You need to find out which employees are looked up to, and who co-workers go to when they have problems. What cliques exist, and who are the informal leaders of those cliques? Who respects who in a department, who doesn't get along, and why? Who trusts who? How long has each person been there? Ultimately, you need to figure out who people look up to and follow. Doing this early on, and on a regular basis, will make it possible for you to figure out which people you need to get on board so the rest of their clique, or others who respect them, will be willing to join. We may not like to think about informal social hierarchies, but they exist, so this is a matter of making good use of limited resources. If you don't win over the natural leaders first, management will.

A major failing of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union was in not regularly mapping out the social dynamics of different workplaces, or of downtown Montpelier as a whole. In a sense, we were a ship with no map, constantly drifting in the social seas and occasionally being lucky enough to find land upon which to dock.

Ask Questions, Learn How to Move People:

Ask questions first, shoot later. You need to learn what's going on with people-what their issues are at work, what their personal interests are, and what they do in their off hours-in order to be able to bring them on board. If a conversation with a co-worker hits a dead end, often the best way to keep it going is to ask them other questions and get more of an idea of where they are at. And once you have assessed them, you have to move them to join your efforts to change conditions at work. "If we had a training on how to have a basic, point-by-point conversation with other workers, it would have been invaluable," said Kristin W., former chief steward of the MDWU and current healthcare organizer in Nevada.

Work Smarter, Not Harder: Learn Proven, Time-Tested Organizing Methods

“You need to learn the ins and outs of organizing from others who have done it successfully,” says Dougen, an organizer for a healthcare union in Nevada. “Rarely do people organize spontaneously and successfully without building the skill sets needed to get the job done, day in and day out. Look at Rosa Parks. The history books would have you believe she just sat down on the white man’s seat one day, but in actuality she was trained in non-violent civil disobedience, knew exactly what she was doing, and was part of a strategic campaign to end segregation.”

Dougen is, for the most part, right. You need to utilize methods of organizing that win. In this section I’ll attempt to outline some methods for organizing your workplace. However, nothing is more valuable than having mentors that can teach you methods of successful organizing face-to-face. For some of you, an internship with SEIU or some other organizing union may be a good way to learn some skills. For others, activists in your local Central Labor Council or Jobs With Justice chapter may be able to give you pointers. For others still, perhaps there is an active IWW chapter that has veteran organizers who have won union fights in their time. Whatever the case may be, my best advice is to seek out people who have real-life experience organizing and winning to teach skills, mentor you in your organizing efforts, and let you bounce your ideas off of them.

Here are some very basic things you’ll need to do if you and your folks want to get organized:

Map Out Your Workplace:

Every workplace and community has social contours that ebb and flow beneath the surface. There are cliques, family relationships, friendships, personality clashes, history, etc. Your

are culled primarily from the experiences of workers who were unorganized seeking to organize.

Some lessons might be applicable to workers who are already organized to do some internal organizing in their workplace and union, perhaps against your boss or bureaucrats who stand in the way of you fighting your boss; some might not. Hopefully this will start a dialogue about the practical organizing lessons we’ve all learned. Above all, keep your head up, listen to your co-workers and fight the good fight. While as a class we might be “born to lose,” our aim is to “fight to win!”

Organize.

If you work at a retail and restaurant outfit and there are common issues that need to be resolved, it’s up to you and your co-workers to do something to remedy the issues. The best way to do this is to organize together into a union that is appropriate to your industry, and fight to win a legally binding contract that strips the boss, manager, or administration of the power to make arbitrary changes to your working conditions, wages and benefits.

This will entail getting a majority of your co-workers on board to wage a protracted battle to force union recognition or secure it through an election or card check, and then go on to win a decent contract that deals with your issues. Of course, the fight never stops at the contract: it is a continual struggle to enforce the contract (i.e. make it more than a piece of paper), to keep your co-workers organized to deal with the day-to-day issues that arise on the job, and to fight for more control over your working conditions. This is not self-management, nor the classless utopia which is our ultimate goal; it is simple self-defense. The point is for you and your co-workers to build confidence, class pride, and power on the job. From this point of

power you can do a number of things to expand your organizing efforts on the shop floor and beyond into the community.

While the above traditional method of workplace organizing might work for some, it might not work for others. Steve R. of the South Street Workers' Union recalls attempting to connect with a grocery store workers' union while working at Whole Foods: "They told us they were organizing at every Whole Foods store in the area and that they would get back to us. They never did." As an alternative method, Steve and some of his co-workers adopted a model of Solidarity Unionism, and went to the IWW for assistance. In this model, he and his co-workers "acted like a union," filed Unfair Labor Practices charges when the company would trample on their rights, and generally made it hell for shop-floor managers who tried to mess with anybody. (They successfully dispatched a number of them by making conditions so unpleasant that they quit.)

The MDWU workers had a similar experience of shop-floor solidarity, and while many grievances were won across town it led to a very heavy burden on the union leadership and ultimately to burnout. In the high-turnover retail and service sectors, this is the downside of what is sometimes referred to as "Minority Unionism," when a minority of workers act together on the job to deal with issues and grievances without formal union recognition or a contract. Much of your energy and power went into day-to-day fights around particular issues and grievances, rather than the bigger picture of forcing our administrations and bosses to concede to our power and deal with issues and grievances across the board.

There are, however, other alternatives. If you work in a shop and there is no union body that is willing to back you up in your fight, you can form your own independent union. You will need to sign up a majority of your co-workers on a union petition, secure union recognition through an election or a concerted campaign of pressure, and bargain out a contract.

Other methods of worker organizing that might be useful in your circumstance include, but are not limited to, "Workplace Resistance Groups," informal groups of workers which can act outside the bounds of legality without the repercussions that unions face, and "Flying Squads," groups of workers in a particular department, shop, or region acting as teams in solidarity with each other and other groups of workers. And then there is the good old-fashioned "crew," where you and co-workers that you're friends with watch each others' backs. This is probably the most organic, informal and widespread form of workplace organization, though it is limited in the long term, because it is rooted in friendships and therefore excludes a large number of co-workers.

In the end, whatever method you employ, the point is to win. What does "win" mean, to organize successfully? It means that you and your co-workers are able to leverage your power (on the shop floor and in the community) against your boss or administration. It means leaving them no choice but to recognize you, the union of organized workers, as a force that cannot be ignored or snuffed out, whose concerns and issues must be addressed if "business as usual" is to continue.

The legally binding contract is so far the best way to solidify the gains that workers win in this process. But your union, like anything in life, is only as good and powerful as you make it. If you don't organize co-workers to be an active part of the struggle and union life, it's easy for bureaucrats or sectarian activists to take over your union and run it in your name. So build your union from the bottom up, listen to your co-workers, get the majority involved and active around issues that are important to them: this is the best protection against those who would seek to co-opt your workplace organization.

So how the fuck do I get there, you ask?