

An Anarchist Program For Labor

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Today there is a general unrest and anger among working people, even though most workers continue to hold usual “American” views (support of capitalism, the two parties, racism at some level, patriotism, etc.). This unorganized discontent has resulted in a change in the heirarchy of the unions, a move toward a more liberal, more active group of bureaucrats, under John Sweeney. The new leaders are worried about their loss of membership (bureaucrats who cannot even keep their dues base are pretty pathetic). They have managed to link up with college activists (especially on the more affluent campuses) to oppose sweatshop labor, in the U.S. and abroad, and to include environmentalism.

But a conscious movement of worker radicals will develop, in opposition to the union officials (not the unions) as well as the capitalists and the State. It is important that the most radical, militant activists link up with each other, as a nucleus of broader oppositional work. Anarchist workers should not leave the union leaders alone in a mutual non-aggression pact. Union officials, even the most decent and honest, are a layer within the workers’ organizations which represent the interests of the capitalist class.

More precisely, the bureaucracy balances between the workers and the capitalists. It needs to get something for the workers (or it would be out of business) but it seeks to keep class conflict within limits. Anarchists should constantly challenge the union officials, criticizing their actions from below. While working as much as they can with others on specific issues, anarchists also must make clear that their program is different from all others. It stands for the complete self-organization of society. If anarchist militants make their program clear, they will rarely be elected for union office above the lowest levels of shop steward or factory committee. Running on a radical program, anarchist militant workers will only be able to unseat the highest level of reformist union boss in times of upheaval and stress, when the ordinary, conventional-minded, workers will take their full program seriously.

While a full program for all of the unions – recognized and as-yet unrecognized – cannot be laid out here, some principles can be suggested. Such general principles include militancy, democratization of the unions and the workplace, and solidarity.

Militancy includes a willingness for civil disobedience (breaking the law) when needed. By no accident, many of the most effective tactics of labor are either banned by law or denied by the courts. Even simple strikes are illegal for almost all public employees and frequently banned by court injunction for many other workers. If a strike is permitted, pickets may be allowed for

informational purposes — but mass picketing to prevent strikebreakers from entering is illegal. A struggling union may call for boycotts of the bosses' products — but it is illegal to organize other workers to refuse to handle or transport the products or to refuse to bring in necessary goods for the products. These are "secondary" or "sympathy" strikes and injure other bosses (as if the capitalists do not support each other in the event of a strike). In between contract negotiations, local complaints in a particular department must be handled by grievance arbitration, not by mini-strikes or "wildcat strikes." Strikers may picket a plant but must not occupy the plant, because this violates the owners' private property. As if the great industrial unions were not formed in the 1930's by such sit-down strikes!

Workplace occupations are particularly effective because they prevent scabs from being brought in, they prevent machinery or offices from being used or even removed, and they limit violence since the capitalists are reluctant to damage their mechanical property.

So anti-authoritarians should urge such tactics as public employee strikes, mass picketing, sympathy strikes, and, especially plant occupations. None of these should be done lightly, of course. They need careful preparation beforehand, to confront the state and the bosses with the greatest possible show of strength.

Discussing sympathy strikes already raises the issue of solidarity. The willingness of workers to stick together, all of those in a plant, or an industry, or a city, is the greatest strength of the working class. It is the counter to the main weakness of the working class, namely its divisions: racial, sexual, occupational, and so on. "An injury to one is an injury to all" must become the workers' slogan. The workers (as workers) must also support struggles of all oppressed people and win the support of every community. This includes opposition to all racist practices within the workplace, including support for "super-seniority" for Black workers' advancement, for example, and opposition to all racism outside of the workplace. Faced with multinational corporations, unions need to organize internationally, and to be prepared to strike internationally.

An especially powerful tactic is the general strike. If most of the workers of a city (or region) go on strike at one time, then the capitalists are severely weakened. The workers can decide what to allow to still run (perhaps the firefighters, food to shelters, or hospitals for emergency. This does not include police unions, since the police, although "public employees," are not workers and will be used against the workers. They should be replaced by worker and community patrols!). It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to enforce court injunctions or no-strike laws. Middle class white-collar working people would come to terms with the organized working class, as public transit stopped, bridges were raised, telephones stopped, and truck deliveries ceased. Computers would stop without the support of the rank-and-file keyboarders. Electricity might be turned off.

Such militant and united tactics as workplace occupation and the general strike are potentially revolutionary. They raise the possibility of the workers not only stopping production effectively, but of the workers starting it up again under their own control. The workers in an occupied factory can decide to start it up, making useful things that people need — but first arranging with other plants to get the necessary materials for their factory, and then arranging for distribution of the product. In a general strike with factory occupations, the workers can decide how to run the whole city or region, economically and politically. It could be the beginning of a revolution.

For such reasons, the capitalist class and the State would not peacefully accept mass picketing, plant occupations, or general strikes. It would attack them with police, the National Guard, and private company police. All these have been repeatedly used in U.S. history. The workers must be

prepared to defend themselves in an organized and effective manner. This would be the beginning of a popular militia.

All this raises the issue of democratic organization. General strikes and international strikes will require a certain increase in centralization of unions, which must be balanced by increased local democratization. No strikes should be done without careful planning and organization (with the possible exception of wildcat department strikes which may happen on the spur of the moment). If we are discussing potentially taking over factories and cities, we are considering a lot of organization. Anarchists should want both democratization of the unions and of industry.

Anarchists need to demand democratic control of union locals and of the national (or international) unions, with direct election of all officials, instead of appointment from above. They should call for the end of the single-party system, whereby union oppositions are, at best, shut out of political life in the internal publications of the unions, and, at worst, face violent suppression. They should call for rotation of offices (a different president every year or so — as is usually done in professional organizations of doctors or psychologists). During strikes and even negotiations, they should advocate the election of workers' councils at each workplace, with local decision-making powers, and contacts among the councils. All contracts should be voted on by the membership. If the union bureaucracy does not accept such democratic ideas, the workers should go ahead anyway to elect local councils, support the rights of oppositoinists, elect local officials, etc.

The union bureaucrats and bosses usually negotiate lengthy, several-year, contracts, with no-strike clauses. The union then serves to enforce workplace conditions upon the workers. It would be a mistake to return to the historic IWW opposition to all contracts; contracts can register gains for workers. Instead militants should insist on one-year contracts, with the right to strike over local conditions. When the bosses drag out negotiations past the expiration of the contract, radical workers insist on 'No contract, no work.' Contract negotiations should not be seen as business-as-usual deals but as campaigns for which the workers are mobilized.

Specific issues around which unions are organized or strikes called will depend on conditions in each workplace and each industry. There is no magic formula (such as the Trotskyist 'transitional program' or Maoist 'mass line') for sliding from the concrete needs of ordinary people to revolutionary demands. We just have to keep working at it.

Of course anarchists should be for higher wages, better benefits, and shorter hours. In principle they call for a sliding scale of wages and hours. That is, as inflation increases, so should wages, automatically. Further, as unemployment increases, work hours should decrease, without lose of pay. This is, in principle, the basis of a socialist economy: dividing the amount of work needed by the number of workers available. This is a demand on all of society, including on the state, for public works for the unemployed.

But anti-authoritarians should also raise demands implying worker control of the workplace: demands about working conditions and quality of life. These demands challenge the right of management to decide as it pleases about the working life of its employees. They raise the question of how people are forced to work and how they might work differently, more humanly. Issues include assembly line speed, health and safety on the shop floor, restroom breaks, number of immediate supervisors, and even demands for better products (safer, longer lasting, less polluting, cheaper). The peace movement has offered to work with weapons manufacturers and their unions to plan for a transition to peacetime production. This can be generalized, as unions work with public groups to plan for a transition to a peacetime, nonpolluting, "post-industrial" economy.

Unions of “professionals” (teachers, nurses, or librarians) are the opposite of most blue collar workers in this regard. The blue collars feel it is right to negotiate wages but usually accept that working conditions are “management’s prerogative.” But “professionals” often feel uncomfortable about demanding higher wages, yet feel it is right to demand more control over “working conditions” (smaller class sizes, control over textbooks, a better nurse- to-patient ratio, etc.). Consider the slogan of the American Federation of Teachers: “Teachers demand what students need.” Why not “Steelworkers demand what the community needs”?

The demand for workers’ control of industry does not mean endorsing the various “equality circle” or “team” approaches of management. These are methods for workers and management to “work together.” They deny that there is a conflict of interest between workers and bosses. Activists should participate in these “teams,” in order to demonstrate to the other workers that these are devices to increase their exploitation.

Instead, we can advocate the collective contract. Rather than hiring individuals, the capitalists hire a “gang” or group, perhaps through a union hiring hall. The bosses provide the capital, the machinery and raw material, and the goal of so many cars or widgets. The workers divide up the tasks among themselves and set their work schedule. The group may include technical specialists, or the specialists (but not bosses) may be provided by management. Workers choose “supervisors” (coordinators) and discipline themselves. Unlike the “team” approaches, there are no management supervisors on the shop floor. Finally, the capitalists pay a lump sum to the group and the workers divide up the pay among themselves by whatever scale they have decided on.

Such methods have in fact been used occasionally (for example, among autoworkers in Coventry, England), and elements of it have been used in the U.S., such as the union hiring hall. In theory it is not incompatible with capitalism and would increase productivity, but it is hard to imagine capitalists adopting it widely. The collective contract directly exposes the unnecessary role of capitalist management. Who needs them? Just for this reason, anarchist workers should publicize the idea and demand steps in that direction (such as election of foremen or of a rank-and-file safety committee, or the location of factories, decisions to open or close plants, the type or price of products).

Questions arise about whether anarchists should be for making demands on the State. Anarchists do not believe that the solution to capitalism’s problems is for the capitalist State to take over the economy — and history has supported this opinion. But what if unions’ campaign for public works for the unemployed or for public ownership of certain industries (such as the Tennessee Valley Authority or the British coal industry)? In recent years there has been an ongoing battle over “privatization.” The right wing has advocated selling off (or giving away) services run by government, such as schools, transportation, sanitation, maintenance, postal services, etc. This is being presented as ways to increase “efficiency.” Since there is no magic alternative way to teach school or clean the streets, the only way the private firm can be more “efficient” is to cut workers’ pay and increase their work-loads.

Anarchists should oppose privatization and should make demands on the State. The State claims to represent the community. People should demand that it live up to its claim. Since it cannot, it will stand exposed as what it is, the bureaucratic-military agent of an oppressive minority, the capitalist class and other oppressors. Anarchists should say that workers should not trust the State, and say why, but support the movement against privatization as a struggle in defense of the community and workers’ rights.

Most workers in the U.S. do not support proposals for government takeover of new industries, even in areas where it might make sense. The argument that public ownership is inefficient is pretty much accepted by U.S. workers. But they may accept the idea of taking away industry from the rich and powerful (expropriation), to be democratically run by the workers and local communities. There have been a number of instances where failing local industries have been taken over, or tried to be taken over, by unions, or local employees, or local communities. These efforts have often received a lot of public support, unlike calls for nationalization.

Wherever possible, anarchists should raise non-State programs. For example, it is right to support “single-payer” health care programs, which are usually interpreted as government-run health (“socialized medicine”). But anarchists can call for health care run by a national federation of health consumer cooperatives (perhaps with state subsidies). Local health centers could be democratically run by patients (everyone) and medical personnel.

The issue of the State also arises in considering union democracy. Faced with a thoroughly entrenched union bureaucracy, liberal oppositionists have often turned to the courts or government agencies to try to enforce democratic rights. Generally these attempts have gotten nowhere. The government does not like to intervene against established union officials, and when it does, it is so biased, and works at such a glacial pace, that little is achieved.

However, there have been instances where the lack of democracy was so exceptional, and the political climate was right, that the State did intervene in union struggles to increase democratization. One well-known case was in 1972, when it intervened in the United Mine Workers. The incumbent was Tony Boyle who had his rival murdered right after the 1969 election, along with members of his family. As a result of government oversight of the union election, Arnold Miller, leader of the reform group, Miners for Democracy, became president.

Similarly, in the 1990s, the government pressed racketeering charges against union officials of the Teamsters and decided to oversee elections. A decent reformer, Ron Carey, was elected, with the support of the reform group, Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

It is a mistake to call for or support state intervention in the unions. Despite apparent advantages, it means letting an agent of the ruling class make internal decisions about the workers’ organizations. The union bureaucracy is also an agent of the capitalist class and the State, but the union is one of the few organizations still “owned” by the workers. Their aim should be to get rid of the bureaucracy, not to increase State intervention. Rank-and-file organizations should be built to fight the bureaucracy, rather than relying on reformist labor lawyers.

If the State does intervene, anarchists must decide how to relate to the union reformists. The reformists’ willingness to use State intervention is one issue but not the only one (considering that the incumbent bureaucracy is also an agent of the capitalists). Often we may support the oppositionists, in order to open up the union and make room for more militancy and democracy — which should have been done in the miners and the Teamsters’ elections just mentioned. But anarchists must warn of the limitations of the reformists’ program (including its support of the State, as well as other limitations).

The danger of relying on the State was demonstrated in the Teamsters’ Union. After helping Carey get elected, the government overseer of elections banned him from running in the next national election, even though he may have been the most popular candidate! The excuse was his use of some financial tricks to aid his re-election — not nice, but not remarkable in the unions. This guaranteed the election of James Hoffa, Jr., the candidate of the conservative bureaucracy. What the State gives with one hand, it can take away with the same hand.

In conclusion, from their beginnings the unions have had two potential directions. One is to integrate a minority of the working class within the capitalist system. It is to build up a weighty bureaucratic layer which lives off the struggles of the workers and which cooperates with the ruling class to maintain social stability. In return they get a certain amount for the ranks, of better job security and a better standard of living, even if within the confines of an oppressive society. However, the bosses regard these business unions as necessary evils at best, to be crushed when times are difficult. Workers' gains are to be beaten back whenever possible. We are seeing just such attacks on the unions now as they are defeated again and again.

On the other hand, the unions may be seen to be examples of the self-organization of the working class. Potentially they are mighty weapons of the workers. Even to workers who have never read a word of anarchism or Marxism, the unions have political implications. The formation of unions imply that the capitalists and the workers have different and conflicting interests. Their existence implies that individuals cannot do it alone, making personal deals with the boss, but need to cooperate together, to stand in solidarity. By no means are the unions the only forms of popular resistance. Nor are they inevitably revolutionary. But they will play a major part in the North American revolution. And if not, there will be no revolution.

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