

**DIRECT**

**UNIONISM**



**A DISCUSSION PAPER**



## **Introduction: Process and Product**

This paper, Direct Unionism, grew out of a few places. A group of us became friends through working together on IWW projects. We had three basic things in common – some experiences of local struggle and organization in different places, participation in the IWW beyond our immediate locations, and a common set of ideas which we had mostly picked up through things we had read. Our experiences were and are powerful and the memories of the past struggles remain powerful ones that we will always carry in our hearts. The IWW is dear to us, we work hard to build it, and we know it is not yet what it could and should be. The ideas we've picked up are also dear to us, we don't know how to think without them, and yet their clarity is sometimes misleading. What we've lived has been messier than what we've read, and things seem to rarely move in straight lines in the way we have expected. None of this added up together neatly, in part because we hadn't done enough serious reflection and put the effort in to make it all make sense. This paper is an attempt to make all of those things fit together better. We don't get all the puzzle pieces in place, but we are clearer than we were. We hope that this paper can help others similarly put pieces in place, and we look forward to learning from others in discussion in response to it.

### **Process**

This is a discussion paper that has been sitting for a while now. Over a period of a year and a half or so several of us read drafts, suggested revisions, and discusses many ideas that came up along the way. It was an incredibly productive discussion that changed people's minds and helped us develop our ideas.

While several people had a hand in this, most of the actual words here were written by one person. XX took up the challenge and took the time to try to put clear words to a vision of union organizing. A lot of us believe in this vision, but it's vague. XX tried to make that vision more concrete and the results had lots of benefits for everyone who was part

of the conversation. The process that this piece came out of was very valuable and clarifying.

We're putting this piece out now in the hope to create further discussion. We hope people talk about this and write responses to it. This is not because any of us want to be the center of attention, it's because we have gotten so much ourselves from this sort of discussion and we think others might benefit from having similar conversations. We would especially love if this sparked additional written responses. Writing is hard, and it's worth the challenge. More people should do it.

That's another reason we put this out, because we think in general we need more in-depth discussion through sustained reflections and arguments – through writing, rather than just writing emails and internet forum posts and so on. The early IWW had several publications that regularly put out long pieces, sometimes serialized over multiple issues. This helped the organization think. So in addition to the contents of this paper, we offer this paper as an example of the kind of thing we want to see more of.

### **Product**

Enough about the process, let's talk about the product for a moment. Direct Unionism tries to give a clear and straightforward vision for building unions in the workplace where the workers recognize themselves as the union. There are some other terms for this – solidarity unionism is one that we use a lot in the IWW. People should check out Staughton Lynd's book *Solidarity Unionism* and his book co-written with Daniel Gross called *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer*; the pamphlet *A Union On Our Own Terms* and the columns *Minority Report* by Alexis Buss, and the *Workers Power* column that runs regularly in the *Industrial Worker* newspaper and online at [forworkerspower.blogspot.com](http://forworkerspower.blogspot.com).

These pieces mentioned and some others have tried to lay out some of the basic concepts and principles for this vision of unionism. Direct Unionism does so as well. Direct Unionism tries to go further, though,

and lay out a more practical or imaginable vision. Sometimes discussions of this vision of unionism only stay at the level of principle, or worse sometimes they stay only at the level of rejection: “noncontractual” unionism, for example, which defines itself entirely by what it is not and what we want to void rather than offering a positive vision of what we actually want to see.

Part of the problem with remaining at the level of principle is that principles are hard to imagine. Principles matter a lot. We also need stories, though. We need to be able describe in specific and concrete detail what we want to do in response to our principles. We need to be able to have detailed scenarios we can visualize – for actions, ways of organizing ourselves, and above all for how we will spend our time concretely in organizing day to day, week to week, and month to month. We need models and plans. There is much more that could be said – as we said, we would love to see more pieces of writing in response, this is the start to a conversation rather than the last word – but we think that what is here is worth engaging with.

We look forward to further discussions. You can contact us at

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*Yours for the revolution,*

*Direct Unionists*

## **Part 1: Organizing the Direct Unionist Way**

Part one of *Direct Unionism* will lay out one way the IWW can move forward in our organizing and do so free of the restraints of labor law, bureaucracy, and contractualism. As with the rest of the pamphlet, part one is written in a ‘question and answer’ style that is designed to be both thought-provoking and easily understandable. To achieve this, we’ve attempted to avoid long boring sentences, academic language, and jargon that may be unfamiliar to newer members.

### **Section 1: What would a direct unionist campaign look like?**

In a nutshell, we are proposing that instead of focusing on contracts, workplace elections, or legal procedures, IWW members should strive to build networks of militants in whatever industry they are employed. These militants will then agitate amongst their co-workers and lead direct actions over specific grievances in their own workplaces. The goal of such actions will *not* be union recognition from a single boss. Instead, the goal of the actions is to build up leadership and *consciousness* amongst other workers. Once a ‘critical mass’ of workers have experience with, and an understanding of, direct action the focus will be on large scale industrial actions that address issues of wages and conditions across entire regions or even whole countries. It will be from this base of *power* that the IWW will establish itself as a legitimate workers’ organization.

## **Section 2: What sorts of techniques would be employed in a direct unionist campaign?**

When organizing without contracts—as direct unionist believe we should be—it is of great importance the IWW is (1) very strategic and tactical in our organizing and (2) honest with ourselves about how much power we can effectively exert in any workplace or industry.

With this in mind, we turn to the first step of any campaign: the workplace organizing committee. We won’t go into the details of setting up your committee here, but we would like to emphasize that once a shop committee is up and running, organizers should focus on agitating for feasible direct actions.<sup>1</sup> While most of our readers are probably familiar with the concept of direct action, we’d like to take a moment to illustrate what we mean when we use the word. Direct action is when workers—without the “help” of union bureaucrats, politicians, or lawyers— take action to make their jobs better. Sometimes this means making the boss change something about the job. Perhaps you work in a coffee shop in a rough part of town and the boss refuses to hire a security guard. You, your co-workers, family members, and concerned community members can picket the shop demanding the boss hire a security guard. At other times direct action means workers doing what needs to be done without asking management for permission. Maybe you work in a busy restaurant

where managers don't allow lunch breaks. Instead of asking for breaks, the workers can create their own break schedule.

Sometimes direct action can be defying what the boss says to do. In much of the service sector, employees have trouble getting full-time hours. Although a worker—let's call her Jane—is scheduled for an eight-hour shift, if sales are down she may be sent home after five hours. In response, workers can refuse to go home in groups. When the boss says, "Hey Jane, it's a slow day, we're going to need you to go home early," Jane and all her co-workers can walk into the boss' office and say, "Sorry boss, you've scheduled us for eight hours each and we'll all be working our full shifts. We'll gladly go home if you want to pay us, but no one here is leaving early without pay." Like any other situation, there's a whole bunch more workers than bosses. As long as we stand together, the bosses have to listen.

When organizing without contracts, it's important that we organize strategically and take 'small steps' to build up workplace power and confidence. In the early stages of a campaign, militants should encourage "**direct action grievances**". In a direct action grievance, workers will *collectively* confront whatever problem they may be having. Instead of using labor law (Unfair Labor Practices, for example), workers will strategize to come up with a response that involves as large a percentage of the workforce as possible. The following list offers some possible suggestions for direct actions. We remind our readers that each workplace is different and offers unique challenges and opportunities for action. As such, the following list is incomplete and is intended only as guide:2

**(1) Moral pressure:** Using moral pressure on a boss is simple: workers, as a group, consistently confront a manager on inappropriate behaviour.

Sometimes bosses treat us badly as part of company policy. Other times, they just have 'a chip on their shoulder' and are taking it out on those they supervise. In either case, workers can use a variety of tactics to show their disapproval. This may involve workers only speaking to their boss on matters directly related to work. If a manager

tries to spark up conversation, the response should be the same every time: point out whatever injustice the workers are facing and describe the desired solution. For example, workers at a restaurant may say, “It’s not right that the company keeps our tips; we have bills to pay. I’m not interested in speaking to someone who helps steal my money. Perhaps we can talk when you stop asking for my tip money at the end of my shift.”

In another example, workers at a grocery store may be fed up with getting yelled at on the floor. In response, every time the offending manager comes around they may simply ask, “How would you feel if you get yelled at in front of customers and co-workers? You need to apologize to us and not ever do it again.” In both instances, it is important that as many workers as possible confront the boss as many times as possible and keep it up until conditions change.

IWW member Nate H. has written quite a bit about moral pressure. As he puts it:

*Sometimes it is just a matter of saying, “What you’re doing is wrong” many times by many people, making it hard for them to feel okay about what they’re doing...Of course not all bosses are movable this way, but it’s a useful tactic.*

While recognizing that, on one hand, moral pressure is about confronting injustice, it is also about power. In another article Nate explains:

*Work is a headache for us, and to a lesser degree it's headache for our bosses. Generally it's more of a headache for the boss the lower they are on the food-chain. Emotional action [Nate's term for moral pressure] is when we offer our boss a choice: make work less of a headache for us or we will make work more of a headache for the boss. This is easier the lower the level of the boss. If the boss is a supervisor we see every day, then they will care more about our opinions and how we treat them.*



We realize that to some this may sound a bit harsh, but all we are really suggesting is to use the boss's tactics against the boss. Management training courses encourage supervisors to be aware of the emotional state of the staff. Shop-level managers are told to "be a friend" to their employees. This way when workers disobey a rule, not only are they breaking company policy, they are letting down a friend. However, just as managers use emotional pressure to influence their workers, workers can do the same to them. Managers (and even owners) in small workplaces often work very closely with their workforce. Because the connection is so close, local management is easily affected when workers turn the tables and apply emotional pressure on *them*.

Remember that emotional tactics work best 'low on the food chain'— primarily direct supervisors and assistant managers. There is little point using emotional pressure on even a store or factory manager, they're too far removed from the workforce to be influenced by such a technique. Finally, remember that moral pressure, like any other tactic, should be tailored to individual circumstances. After all, we don't want to make IWW members seem like bullies. Be firm, but stress the injustice that has made workers decide to take such a course of action.

**(2) Find the Weak Spot:** All companies have certain key measures of productivity and profit. The trick is to find them and work it to your advantage. We'll offer two examples here, but we're sure you'll be able to find the weak spot at your place of employment and achieve the same sorts of results.

a) Workers at a chain department store had decided to form a union. The workers in the commissioned departments led the union drive. One of the main ways the store made profit was by having those very employees sell extended warranties. In the course of the union drive, one of the leaders was fired. The workers responded by going on a 'warranty strike'. When customers purchased a new product, the salesperson neglected to mention that an extended warranty was available. After three weeks, the fired union member had his job back.

b) A group of workers in a call center were placed on a special project where they had to do a test run of a new customer satisfaction survey for one of the call center's major clients. They were placed in a basement which was in the process of being renovated. The windows were covered in plastic and one unfinished wall let in the cold winter air. When the workers complained about this to their immediate supervisor she called upstairs and was told to tell everyone to suck it up. Meanwhile, the company was installing special recording equipment so the client could listen in. In response to the unbearable working conditions, the workers sent one member from their ranks upstairs to inform their supervisor that everyone would walk out in the middle of calls *while the client was listening* if they were not moved somewhere warmer. Ten minutes later they were placed in a section upstairs.

**(3) “March on the Boss”:** In a march on the boss, all the workers in a given shop (or even just the shop committee) walk off the floor and into the boss' office to discuss grievances and demands.

**(4) “Reaching Out to the Class”:** Reaching out to the class entails bringing in other members of the working class to take part in a direct action against a particular boss.

In one very inspiring example, workers in the Swedish syndicalist union, the SAC, were contacted by undocumented workers who—as in much of the world—form the backbone of the Stockholm restaurant industry. The bosses were exploiting the workers' undocumented status and were paying them below minimum wage and/or refusing to hand over back pay. At this point the SAC had a choice: (1) 'go the legal route' and try to make the bosses follow the law, but risk exposing workers to deportation due to their lack of papers or (2) try some creative direct action. Choosing the second option, an SAC member called up the boss and stated, “One of the workers in your shop belongs to our union. We're not going to you who s/he is, but if you don't begin paying all your workers the minimum wage and/or any back pay, we're going to blockade your restaurant.” After a few successful

blockades, in most instances now all the SAC has to do is call a restaurant owner and any pay discrepancies will be quickly resolved.

**(5) Publicly Displaying Paychecks:** To raise wages—or to keep management from ‘playing favorites’ or not giving raises to workers who speak out—workers can get together and compare paychecks. A photocopy of the highest paid worker’s pay stub can be passed around the shop (or even “accidentally” left in the break room). Then workers, as a group, go into the boss’ office and demand that every worker receive the highest rate of pay. If he or she refuses, a direct action campaign can be waged until the boss agrees.

**(6) Picket:** The picket is a union classic. During a picket, workers with signs rally outside of their shop. Their presence not only puts pressure on the boss, but also discourages customers and suppliers from coming into the shop.

While we do feel a picket can be an effective early(ish) action, we remind our readers that they have drawbacks as well. If, for example, only five workers out of twenty show up for a picket, the boss has a very good idea of who the “trouble makers” are in the shop.

Finally, before undertaking any direct action, remember two very important things. First: get trained up. The IWW offers trainings that will prepare you and your co-workers for direct action. Unions grow by experience and there is no better place than an organizer training for workers to pass knowledge and experience to one another. The second thing to remember is to be creative. No one knows your workplace better than you and your co-workers. You know where the boss is most vulnerable, so be smart, but don’t be afraid to go for it.

Using direct actions like the ones listed here will help build up confidence amongst workers as well as achieve improvements in working conditions. *In the future*, such actions will also build up the skills and experience to pull off larger-scale ‘sexier’ actions like go-slows, work-to-rules, and even strikes. We will discuss one possible

use for the *power* gained through sustained and successful direct action grievance in section five, “What is the industrial strategy?”.

### **Section 3: Are we trying to build a “union”**

In a broad sense, yes, because anytime two or more workers take collective action, they are functioning as a union. However, in a more narrow sense—and since direct unionism does not have recognition as an immediate goal—we are operating outside what is traditionally understood as a union. It is possible that after we’ve organized a large percentage of a particular workforce we will seek to function as ‘the vehicle of workplace struggle.’ In other words, instead of IWW members contributing to workplace struggle as *organized workers*, we will force the employer to recognize the IWW as the collective voice of the workforce. However, in the short-term, and possibly for a very long time (or even forever), the goal will be to involve as many workers as possible the collective decision-making process, *regardless of IWW affiliation*. In the early stages of a campaign, the organizing committee will organize meetings of sympathetic workers to decide how grievances will be addressed. In a more fully developed campaign, the goal will be to arrange well-attended mass meetings that will decide upon strategy and actions.

### **What about solidarity unionism?**

Throughout the IWW’s history we’ve attempted ‘rebrand’ unionism to reflect our ideals of direct democracy, militancy, and overt anti-capitalism. One of the most inspiring examples of this is “solidarity unionism.” Solidarity unionism is based on the idea that workers only need solidarity to function effectively as a union—no bureaucrats, officials, or lawyers required. Solidarity unionism rejects the idea that a union needs recognition from the boss, or even a majority presence, to successfully improve shopfloor conditions.

Simply put: effective agitation, intelligent organizing, and committed militants held together by the bonds of solidarity— in a word, solidarity unionism—has always been and will always be the backbone of the labor movement. Although we whole-heartedly agree with the ideas

and ideals of solidarity unionism, we feel the net of solidarity unionism has been a bit too widely cast (in contract campaigns, for example) to fully capture how we feel a non-contractual organizing strategy should function.

### **Why “direct unionism”?**

Although we most certainly take inspiration from solidarity unionism, minority unionism, and industrial unionism (and incorporate many of their principles in to our strategy), we decided the term “direct unionism” best fits how we believe the IWW should organize. Direct unionism—at its very core—rejects contractualism and states that workers should *directly* control their workplace organizations. Accordingly, workers should reject any attempts to place a block between them their struggle—including contracts, union “reps,” casework, and full-time outside organizers.

### **How important is signing up workers into the IWW?**

The authors of this pamphlet believe that *informal participation in workplace struggle, not formal membership in the IWW, should be the first concern of a workplace organizer*. However, we realize that both participation and membership are important aspects of a successful campaign.

Allow us to elaborate:

- 1) Union membership is, and should be, an important part of any campaign. It helps sustain struggle—both in terms of finances and stability—and encourages workers to step up into leadership positions.
- 2) Membership in an organization reinforces a feeling of belonging to ‘something bigger than yourself’ and of being ‘plugged in’ to a collective struggle. The IWW, with its open membership policies, combats the ‘club mentality’ that often exists in any type of social movement.

3) Membership = Accountability. By encouraging our co-workers to join up, it provides an extra way for them to hold organizers accountable. Alternatively, if a shop militant steps up into a leadership positions, his or her membership in the IWW provides another way for participants in shop floor actions to hold her or him to account.

We also recognize that some workers may be reluctant join the IWW. Perhaps they don't plan on working in a particular shop for very long or aren't comfortable putting themselves 'on the line' as a union member just yet. We feel an organizer's time is much better spent encouraging workplace actions instead of convincing co-workers to take out a red card. In fact, there may be certain situations where it may be 'safer,' smarter, and more strategic that an organizer begins leading actions before announcing he or she belongs to the IWW. (See the next section.) After all, a successful action turns 'regular' workers into militants faster than debate or pamphlet ever could. At the same time, even an unsuccessful action—if properly orchestrated—makes clear the class analysis that underpins the beliefs of the IWW.

### **Why do direct unionist believe we don't always need to “fly the union flag” to win the union's battles?**

Direct unionists recognize there are good tactical reasons to begin fighting gripes in the workplace without letting the boss know a union is involved. It can buy us time by building the union through struggle before management goes on the attack. Often grievances appear like an upswing in everyday resentment, and bosses are quick to dole out concessions to go back to normal life. With a union however, the boss may take drastic measures, even going so far as to close a business than suffer the indignity of sharing power with organized workers. The repression is much more easily dealt with after a period of exercising collective power and inoculating against battles to come.

Organizing in such a manner allows organizers to think strategically about how we make ourselves known, when we ask for membership, and when (or even if) it is appropriate to build the IWW as the 'vehicle of struggle'.<sup>3</sup> The answers to these questions should help organizers

adapt to individual situations, while changing working conditions for the better along the way.

Direct unionism, then, lowers the bar of initial activity, while avoiding many of the problems of unions as outside organizations (“service unionism”). This isn't to say that we never come out as a union early on, just that we should do so because there are no other options and that no gains can be made without doing so (or more gains can be made in the long run by doing so).

## **What is the difference between qualitative growth and quantitative growth?**

As direct unionists we believe that the IWW needs to concentrate not on simply *growing* numerically, but increasing the *organizing capabilities* of our membership. Hence, we believe the union needs to focus on growing in terms of quality—*qualitatively*—rather than simply believing we build the union by numbers alone (i.e. *quantitatively*).

The union has already taken steps to do this very thing. The Organizer Training Committee, with its twin goals of training Wobblies in the *concepts* and practices of successful organizing, is one example of this. However, we must build on such accomplishments. We need to find other ways to train members to not only support the IWW in *principle* but to begin agitating in their own workplaces. In fact, if every IWW member is not actively organizing where they work, the union is not functioning as effectively as it should. We believe the implementation of the *industrial strategy* (to be discussed in part one, section five) will help to facilitate workers becoming more active in their own workplaces and, thus, help grow the union qualitatively.

There is one other very real reason to focus on qualitative growth: just joining the IWW does not prepare one for struggle. We could sign up 100% of a workplace, but without proper preparation, the organization is nothing more than a paper tiger. *Organization and struggle builds membership, not the other way around.*

When organizing new workers, we believe the direct unionist strategy will encourage both quantitative and qualitative growth. Since workers are included in workplace organizing regardless of membership, co-workers get to see the IWW in action before ever committing to join the union. Successful organizing, in turn, opens up a place to begin discussions on topics such as class, capitalism, and the labor movement. Once workers are committed to the IWW—both in principle and in practice—then they can take out a red card. In such a way, direct unionism combines the three Wobbly principles of “Agitate, Educate, Organize” and exposes workers to them before they even fill out a membership application.

### **We do we need to combat the assumption ‘join the IWW and the struggle will come to you’?**

Because of our history, professed militancy, and high ideals, the IWW recruits many younger political activists who are attracted to our open commitment to class struggle. However, the IWW is rife with stories of new members who joined up, got their co-workers to do the same, and then didn’t know where to go from there. It is situations like this that make us emphasize, once again, the need to undertake the same types of direct action grievances listed in section two. After all, *struggle is a process*. It is *created* and certain elements of *consciousness, confidence, organization, and accountability* must be present if we are to make headway. These facts must be known by newer members if the IWW hopes to effectively engage in workplace resistance. Worse yet, if we don’t convey this information effectively we run the very real risk of falling into service unionism, an idea that will be explored more in part three, “Why organize without contracts?”

### **Section 4: The need for organization**

We realize that our description of direct unionism could make it appear we are “fetishizing” “informal workplace resistance groups”. (In other words, advocating only for groups of pissed-off workers to concentrate on fighting grievances in their own workplaces.) Such groups certainly have a place and often provide the springboard for larger organizing



efforts. Yet for any struggle to become fully developed, formal organization is eventually going to be necessary.

As our organizing experiences have taught us, overreliance on informal work groups is a real risk. This can take the form of always expecting the dedicated members we already have to step up to fulfil too many (or even all) organizing tasks. This lends itself to accountability problems and 'clique-control'. This can cripple even the most promising campaign. What is needed, instead, is (1) formalized accountability from our organizers and (2) for militants from different workplaces to link up into industrial networks, a topic that will be covered in section five.

The need for organization begins in the workplace itself. Some of this is quite simple: formal bylaws, scheduled meetings, regular reporting, and votes on all important matters. Likewise, it is important to maintain a record of struggle. If a campaign is public, newsletters provide one way to do this. In an 'under the radar' campaign, militants may want to write (or even record) 'testimonials' that highlight changes that came as a result of direct action. Besides being a record of successful (and not so successful) tactics, such testimonials can be read by future workers to give them a sense of the history of the campaign.

Such testimonials, we should note, carry a very real danger. If they fall into the hands of a boss, they can spell trouble for the workers who created them. If a campaign decides to use testimonials, it may make sense to have them typed up anonymously or, if they are recorded, to have them re-read and re-recorded by a Fellow Worker who does not work in that particular shop.

The need for organization also has implications for bringing new workers into a campaign. This can be a tricky process, but is also one that is absolutely key if the IWW is to survive and grow as a shopfloor presence. One way to accomplish this is for an 'ambassador' to reach out to each employee who is not actively involved. For example, if a new hire comes into the shop, a friendly member of the organizing committee can strike up a conversation about something that has

recently changed. He or she might say, “They used to make us stay for an extra fifteen minutes after we’d clocked out to clean up. They stopped, though, since we let them know we weren’t going to put up with it. If they ask you to stay late, come let me know and we’ll work out a response. Don’t worry, workers here are willing to stand up for one another.” In this way, the organizer has introduced the new hire into a culture of solidarity and offered support in advance, but not scared off him or her by asking them to join a union, pay dues, or ‘resist the tyranny of the boss class.’ Once the new employee is a bit more comfortable in their job (made so through the support of members on the organizing committee) or has mentioned a grievance, then s/he can be brought into the more formal network of workplace resistance.

All of this confirms something that all IWWs should keep in mind: organizing is about small steps and building relationships of trust. This must always be our guiding principle when we organize.

A final note on organization: direct unionists want to build the form of organization that makes the most sense for the workplace, the industry, and the current level of class struggle in society as whole. We try not to overemphasize *formalism*. In other words, we don’t judge a struggle simply on its particular form—be it the union *form*, the workplace assembly *form*, or a “workers council” *form*. No form is perfect and the content and the goals of a struggle must be taken into account. In the final analysis, the goal of direct unionism is to create ‘practiced democracy, self-activity, and self-leadership’ within the context of a ‘participatory, collective, and class-conscious proletarian struggle.’ What this struggle may look like is going to vary from place to place and time to time. The goal, however, never changes.<sup>4</sup>

### **How will non-contractual organizing maintain workplace gains?**

This is no small question. Since the end goal is not the signing of a contract (or, in many instances, even formal recognition from the boss) it is up to IWW members to create a culture of resistance that will continually defend gains. (In a sense, this is not much different than a contract since bosses regularly violate a contract when they don’t think workers are organized enough to offer a defense.) To describe how we

think this is best achieved we return to a concept developed by the IWW close to one-hundred years ago: *job conditioning*. Job conditioning is based on the idea that once experience, confidence, and solidarity is built up through small job actions, workers can begin tackling larger issues by ‘playing by their own rules.’

In many factories, including non-union ones, workers set the pace of production by refusing to work faster than a given speed. If the workers decide they will only make ten tables in an hour and they all stick to it, there is nothing the boss can do to change it. The workers have *conditioned* the boss through their solidarity and willingness to stand together. Even some of the IWW’s greatest achievements were won through job conditioning. In the early 1900’s when the IWW won the 8-hour day in the timber and wheat fields it was through a combination of raw industrial power (willingness to strike) and job conditioning: workers simply walked off the job after eight hours.

We realize these examples may seem a bit long-sighted given where the IWW is right now. What’s important is that they were only possible because workers built up a culture that relied on solidarity and trust to establish and maintain gains. As direct unionists move forward in our organizing, we need to stress to our co-workers that solidarity and *solidarity alone* is the only weapon workers can rely on to make and cement gains in the workplace (not labor law, contracts, politicians, or union bosses).<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we’d like to note that direct unionism does not reject recognition from the boss. It only rejects ‘official’ recognition and the legalistic methods (contracts, labor board elections, union registration) used to do so. However, we also recognize that even non-contractual recognition carries risks and that in certain instances it is just not a realistic goal.

This pamphlet intentionally stresses the ‘here and now’, but if we reach a point where the IWW is a majority presence in a shop, recognition won’t go much further than there being a recognized IWW delegate who is management’s “first point of call” when it come to shop conditions. The rep—who will always be a member of the staff—will be

limited by the fact all decisions must still be put to a vote of the entire workforce (with the exception of scabs, management stools, etc). The focus, at least in the foreseeable future, should be the creation of industrial networks, a topic we now turn to...

### **Section 5: What is the industrial strategy?**

As direct unionists, we believe the IWW must pursue a non-contractual "industrial strategy" if we are to grow as a working class force. In the introductory paragraph to section one, we laid out very briefly how industrial networks should function:

*...The goal [of smaller-scale workplace] actions [are] to build up leadership and consciousness amongst other workers. Once a 'critical mass' of workers have experience with, and an understanding of, direct action the focus will be on large scale industrial actions that address issues of wages and conditions across entire regions or even whole countries.*

The goal of industrial networks, then, is threefold:

- 1) To encourage the formation of workplace committees who will organize direct action grievances.
- 2) To link up militants from across the industry into a formal body, preferably through the formation of IUBs.
- 3) In the long-term, to begin taking cross-workplace actions designed to cement gains and *standardize* conditions across the industry.

As we see it, the industrial strategy must be a 'two-pronged' attack that will differ depending on whether IWW members are organizing in a union or non-union workplace. In workplaces with *and* without a recognized union, the immediate goals will be the same: the creation of a rank-and-file shop committee that will encourage and help organize direct action grievances in much the way we've described in this pamphlet.

In workplaces where IWWs are dual-carding, the organizing committee will seek to encourage workers to ‘supersede’ (i.e. move ‘above and beyond’) the trade-union form and push for *mass assemblies as the only legitimate voice of the workforce*. Wobblies will encourage struggle to be organized *across* trade unions (since many workplaces have more than one active union, a fact bosses regularly uses to their advantage) and seek to bring unorganized workers into the struggle as well. When mass actions occur, Wobblies should make sure that workers remain in full control of the struggle. This means democratic and open mass assemblies of workers (as opposed the secretive “back rooms” inhabited by union officials) must decide *every* aspect of the struggle. The final decision on what actions to take and when to call them off must be decided by the workers themselves.

When union-sanctioned struggle occurs, organized Wobblies should take a leading role in laying the groundwork for successful industrial action. Recently, Wobblies working at AT&T did this very thing. In summer 2009, workers at AT&T were preparing for a nationwide strike since contract negotiations had broken down between the Communication Workers of America and company management. Recognizing that the CWA was woefully unprepared for strike action, an IWW shop committee in an AT&T call center began organizing actions (including a work-to-rule) to build solidarity amongst their co-workers. They also discussed ways to ‘up the ante’ should management not be responsive to the strike, including a potential occupation of the office.

Of course, it goes without saying that we are **not** seeking to function as a union pressure group, reform caucus, or trying to “capture” official positions within the union (although IWW members may well decide to serve as shop stewards, safety reps, or other ‘lay’ union positions). In a union workplace, the IWW organizing committee must remain independent of the recognized union at all times. In fact, all militant workers must be prepared to clash with the union when we overstep the bounds of ‘acceptable industrial action’ or encourage our workmates to ignore anti-worker labor laws.

## How would the industrial strategy work in the long-term?

As direct unionist we recognize that all tactics have limitations. Given that capitalism “cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production,” the job conditioning we advocate is primarily a medium-term solution. In other words, since the bosses are always seeking to increase profit in any way possible—undercutting the gains of workers, using new technology, “outsourcing” jobs, etc.—simple job conditioning is not going to be enough. As a long-term solution (and we cannot emphasize enough that *Organizing without Contracts* focuses on the **here and now**), the IWW and the working class must decide what to do with the power we build through successful industrial networks. This is not something we intend to decide right now. We recognize, however, that when the time comes we will have to strike a balance between protecting “bread-and-butter” gains and continuing down the path of revolutionary unionism. In terms of bread-and-butter it may make sense to institute hiring halls in industries and regions where the IWW exercises large amounts of industrial might.

In the long-term, politically and socially, our goal should be changing the way workers relate to one another, how they view their boss, and how the working class understands the larger economic system. In a nutshell, we need to be able to leverage the short-term gains we make to not only improve conditions, but to make workers understand that we won’t be able to achieve long-term changes in society without a fundamental confrontation with capital.<sup>6</sup> We don’t pretend to know what the demands—revolutionary or not—will be when these large scale conflicts occur. The demands will develop and be set *by the working class in the process of struggle*. The long-term goal of the industrial strategy, then, is to organize in a way that develops such consciousness and gives workers a way to relate to one another that creates that very change within their workplaces and within themselves.

### Section 6: Non-Contractual Organizing in the IWW

Since, admittedly, the IWW is not involved in the sort of widespread non-contractual campaign we've laid out in this pamphlet, this section will focus on two things:

- 1) Potential structures that are *already in place* that could be used in a non-contractual campaign. In particular, we will concentrate on the potential of the Industrial Delegate System while highlighting current campaigns that have made successful use of direct action grievances.
- 2) Historical examples of successful non-contractual organizing. IWW Local 8 will be our prime case study.

In keeping with the renewed interest and growth the IWW has experienced since the turn of the 21st century, in 2009 the General Executive Board passed a motion to create an Industrial Delegate for IU 530. The premise for the Industrial Delegate System (IDS) is simple: workers in a particular IU can choose to pay their dues directly to their IU's delegate. Their dues money will then be split between the Industrial Organizing Committee and the general administration.

When the IU 530 Freight Truckers Organizing Committee proposed the IDS, they did not do so in a specifically non-contractual context. However, we feel that the structure of the IDS lends itself quite well to a non-contractual campaign. As a precursor to an Industrial Union, it creates the exact sort of industrial networks we've been talking about. Workers create organizing committees both in their workplace and across the industry. Those organizing committees then begin opening lines of communication (conference calls, newsletters, listserves, conferences, etc) in which workers can share experiences and plan actions.

Another example worth mentioning is the success of the Starbucks Workers Union in employing direct action grievances. Through the use of simple measures such as moral pressure workers have forced abusive managers to resign. In a celebrated example, workers took matters of health and safety into their own hands and forced Starbucks to install an industrial-strength fan in an overheated workplace.

Historically, few examples demonstrate the potential of a non-contractual organizing model more than Local 8 of the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union. Established in the nineteen-teens by Philadelphia longshoremen, two things made Local 8 remarkable. The first was that its leaders and membership were biracial. In an age where most unions were openly racist, Local 8 organized black and white workers as equals. The second thing that made Local 8 so special was the fact it established 'worker control' on the Philadelphia docks while balancing bread-and-butter concerns with radical, non-contractual principles. To achieve this Philadelphia's longshore workers would strike any pier in which a shipper tried to bring in non-union labor to unload cargo. Or, if a shipping agent tried to pay below the union rate or ignored union work rules, workers struck and held mass pickets outside the ship. When workers decided a raise was needed, a delegation would be sent to the bosses with the demand. If the bosses refused, a direct action campaign would be waged until the workers called it off. Although they did not always receive the full amount requested (Local 8 was not opposed to elected and accountable negotiating committees), such tactics saw Philadelphia longshoremen win some of the highest wages of any pier in the country.

To ensure that non-union workers would not bring down wage rates, members of the Local 8 refused to work with non-union members or individuals who were not caught up on dues. Such practices ensured IWW members maintained steady work (no small feat in the shipping industry) and that the IWW had de facto control of hiring practices. If a potential co-worker did not meet the requirements of a dedicated class warrior (by scabbing, for example), they would be denied a red card and, thus, denied a job on the docks.

### **Section 7: Non-contractual organizing outside the IWW**

The following examples are not necessarily direct unionist, but they do point to ways that, historically and contemporarily, workers (many of whom would not identify as 'radical') have organized in ways that



avoided getting bogged down by contractualism and legalized notions of unionism. As such, they are worthy of examination and discussion by direct unionists.

**McDonald's Workers' Resistance:** We are including the example of the MWR not because we believe it is the ideal example of how the IWW ought to move forward, but because it shows the manner in which a successful network of 'everyday workers' can be built in the notoriously hard to organize service sector. MWR began when workers in a Glasgow McDonalds decided their jobs basically sucked. Instead being constantly exploited at their "McJob," they decided their lives would be much better if they began sticking up for one another and sticking it to the boss. Much of MWR's organizing was just trying to make their jobs more liveable. "Zines" were printed which told raunchy jokes about Ronald McDonald and encouraged co-workers to slow down on the job, take longer breaks, or refuse to do unsafe work.

Notably, very little of the MWR focused on issues of wages. As one of the founders later recalled, the MWR lost much of its steam once they began to tackle more 'traditional' labor issues. That being said, MWR was not without its victories. It ran a successful website that connected pissed off workers from around the world and in 2002, MWR called for all McDonald's workers to undertake a day of resistance. Direct actions, including attempted work stoppages and go-slows, were undertaken in England, Europe, Russia, and Australia. Besides giving the MWR some serious publicity, such a day of actions encouraged solidarity and consciousness amongst a massive, young, and unorganized workforce.

Of course, the faults of the MWR are many. Due to the secretive nature of the organizing, communication was patchy at best. More importantly, MWR's lack of structure provided little room for accountability or coordination. However, what's important to take away from MWR is the notion of how to build networks. We shouldn't be promising workers what we can't yet deliver, be it a raise or a revolutionary struggle. Instead, IWWs should agitate around conditions to create a shared sense of struggle and focus on linking up pissed-off workers across an

industry. By facilitating such dialog we not only increase the potential for concerted activity, but spread our ideas to workers who may have never considered themselves “unionists” or “militants” but are fed up with their jobs and looking for a way to improve their working lives.

### **Gravel Truck Drivers and Taxi Workers in Edmonton:**

**Puerto Real Shipyards:** The struggle in the Puerto Real began when the Spanish government attempted to shut down the shipyard in the late 1980s. As is common in most Spanish workplaces, multiple unions were operating in the yard including the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. From the struggle’s inception, the CNT took a leading role in organizing resistance to the government’s plans. While the struggle was ultimately successful—the shipyard remained open and workers won a number of concessions—it is the form of the struggle that most interests us. When the CNT organizes, the goal is always to organize in such a manner that the mass assembly of workers always has the final say. In Puerto Real, such a method brought dramatic consequences.

When the CNT called assemblies they were open not only to CNT members, but all shipyard workers, their families, and the entire working-class community of Puerto Real. Such an arrangement brought a flowering of resistance and encouraged widespread direct action. For example, every Tuesday was dedicated to acts of solidarity and resistance. Barricades were set up, offices occupied, and workers cut telephone service in an effort to put pressure on the bosses and the government. Of course, such assemblies showed the ability of everyday people to successfully control their own struggles and do so in a way that relies only on solidarity, direct action, and direct democracy to do so.

Before continuing we would like to remind our readers that, as addressed in part one, section four, *form* is only one part of the struggle. <sup>7</sup> The content (basically the long and short-term demands and practiced democracy within the movement) and the leadership that comes from any struggle are all keys toward creating the direct unionist movement we desire. Form alone does not build consciousness, let

alone the revolutionary activity that direct unionism ultimately seeks. While the form of the Puerto Real struggle is commendable, other forms (and new forms!) may be better suited to other situations. All that being said, we believe the CNT's actions in Puerto Real show how a successful direct unionist approach to organizing *could* operate. As direct unionists we can relate to both their theoretical rejection of contractualism and their practical implementation of mass struggle. As the IWW moves forward this is a model and struggle that we can look toward for inspiration.

## **[b]Part 2: What are potential problems that the IWW may encounter during a non-contractual campaign?**

In part 2 we will be analyzing potential pitfalls that direct unionists face when organizing. We recognize that anti-contractualism is not a 'silver bullet.' In many ways it actually makes successful organizing harder, as it's not willing to exchange militancy for stability (a set-up that is to the advantage of both the bosses and the big unions). Thus, direct unionism requires a higher level of commitment from both workers and organizers.

We do apologize that language in part two is a bit more technical (and will probably be a bit more technical in part three). While we've still done our best to keep things as simple as possible, when dealing with the in and outs of labor law and contract language, things are bound to get slightly wordy. If a section is too confusing—and we mean this in all seriousness—please feel free to email us at

directunionist@gmail.com  
with any questions.

### **Section 1: Will the direct unionist strategy lead to short-term gains as quickly as a contract campaign? How about in medium-term?**

In the short-term we believe that, yes, it will. As even the business union recognize, the chances of a successful organizing drive (which,

in their world, always means securing a contract) are dependent on having an organized, activated workforce which is capable of actually pressuring the boss. Despite their reformism, even mainstream unions recognize that workplace elections alone do not result in a successful campaign; they must be supported by organization on the ground. (Where contractualists in the IWW would differ on this point is that unlike 'big labor,' they would not want to 'turn of the valve of militancy' once a contract is in effect.) In such a way, the content of a contract is a reflection of the workers' power to force change upon the boss. This same dynamic will be at play in a non-contractual campaign: in the initial time-period the IWW establishes itself at a particular shop, the conditions will change according to how successful the workers are at employing direct action (or the threat of direct action) to change shop conditions.

As we mentioned in part one, direct unionists, taking lessons from years of recent IWW campaigns, believe we can more effectively win gains 'under-the-radar.' In our organizing we've repeatedly seen that we're able to leverage more from a boss who doesn't know the union is there than from a boss who is pitted against a union drive. These covert fights provide the 'lessons of struggle' that will build the foundation of the direct union to come. However this is not always a viable strategy in all workplaces. While we may be able to win grievances more quickly, it is also true that some bigger issues may take longer with direct unionism. Contract negotiations contain some [legally prescribed] bargaining items that the shop might not otherwise have the strength to leverage through action alone. The reality, of course, is that without that power said contract will be weak, but we recognize that direct unionism may be slower on these issues.

In the medium-term, things get more complicated. Contracts do provide stability. When workers come to a job, they know there's a union—there's a contract to prove it. If the boss tries to break the contract, the union can turn to the law for recourse. More broadly, contracts, especially when under the control of a militant local, can breed a sense of entitlement and even encourage militancy. (Unfortunately, in many

cases this militancy ends up coinciding with contract cycles—an idea that will be explored further in part three.)

In a non-contractual campaign, there is a constant need to organize each new worker who comes into the shop. Since militancy is the only recourse workers have, workers must be continually vigilant if they want to ensure gains are protected. No doubt, such a state of affairs can lead to burnout, and without a conscious creation of a culture of collective action, the union may fade with the struggles. Likewise, if workers do not pass on leadership skills to each ‘generation’ of new hires, the loss of a shop floor militant can have dramatic and negative effect on the union. However, when effective, a system that requires constant renewal of militancy and leadership is a far better breeding ground for ‘workers self-activity’ and the class consciousness that accompanies it.

## **Section 2: What if workers “want” a contract?**

The IWW has long been an organization that prides itself on an utmost dedication to democracy and, along with it, local autonomy and respecting worker initiative. In light of this, we come to another dilemma: what happens when workers want a contract?

Let’s be direct here: many workers, when they have achieved a living wage, decent benefits, and tolerable working conditions are understandably concerned with ensuring those gains are protected. Contracts provide one way to do this. By providing a ‘truce’ between labor and management, contracts offer workers a way to gain some well-deserved stability. Likewise, individuals are limited by what they think is possible. Since the modus operandi for the mainstream of labor (including ‘pro-labor’ politicians, liberal academics, and labor reporters in the media) is a collective agreement, it’s entirely understandable that workers will be enticed to follow such a route. It’s what workers think is possible and, often, what they believe to be ultimately desirable.

(We note here that in the countries where the IWW is most active—and especially in the US—union density and active organizing has been on the wane for decades. Ironically, this opens up a space for IWWs to

present our ideas of unionization to those who may have very little understanding of what a union is and how they are ‘supposed’ to function. In fact, in many instances, IWW organizers may inadvertently give the impetus to a contract campaign by presenting the differences between “us” as the IWW and “them,” the business unions. If IWW methods falter, workers then look to other, contractual, options. This is not to say that direct unionists should ever ‘withhold’ information from co-workers, but that simple solidarity—the basis for both contractual and non-contractual unionism—should always be the focus of any organizing efforts.)

### **So what is to be done?**

Before answering this question we should take this opportunity to clarify our goals as direct unionists. First, let it be said that by encouraging a non-contractual organizing strategy we are, in many ways, putting the building of class power before the protection of bread-and-butter gains. As we alluded to in our discussion of quantitative growth v. qualitative growth (part one, section three), direct unionists are not only concerned with gaining new members or recognition from a single boss, but believe these should only occur as a byproduct of the development of working class leadership and consciousness. It’s tempting to believe that once we have the numbers, then we’ll begin pulling our weight. In reality, however, this has never been and never will be the case. Our organizing must reflect our desire to not only improve wages and conditions, but to become a successful class-based, revolutionary organization

To begin answering the question, then, first and foremost we should be open with our strategy from the very onset. Whether pursuing a non-contractual course or not, there is no question the IWW is a union unlike any other. This is something we explain to new members. We explain our dedication to union democracy; our belief in direct action and solidarity; the reason we reject dues check-off and refuse to cross picket lines; and, finally, we explain the preamble and all that it entails. It should be no different with non-contractual unionism. We should

upfront with what we believe, how we organize, and most importantly, how we intend to do it.

We should be clear with ourselves, the larger union, and the workers whom we're organizing alongside: the way we organize will inevitably affect the 'character' of any successful organizing (as in lasting workplace organization) that results from those efforts. Labor law individualizes and divides—both on a personal level and between individual unions, campaigns, and workplaces. Direct action and solidarity, on the other hand, build up a collective consciousness. But it's important to recognize what comes first: direct action and solidarity. These must be the building blocks of not only successful organization, but successful education. The advantage we have when orchestrating non-contractual campaign is our ability to turn to the wealth of testimonials that demonstrate the ineffectiveness of contractualism. These range from first-hand IWW experience—for example, the article “NLRB is No Friend in Portland (Neither are Contracts)” that appeared in July 2009 *Industrial Worker*—to the classic work *Punching Out* by auto worker and scholar Marty Glaberman. Only through such a process of experience and dialog will we be able to prove to ourselves and those we organize that despite its siren song, the contract is a dead end to building true workers' power.

However, what if, after all of this, workers still want to 'go the contractual route'? What if our co-workers vote in large majority to pursue a contract with their employer; what does this mean for the direct unionist organizer? First, it means our organizing has failed on some level. Second, it then shifts how we will relate the organization that results from the union effort. Let's say, for example, that the drive results in a contract. Since we intend that most direct unionist organizing will be internal (i.e. IWW members organizing their immediate co-workers), the dedicated direct unionist will approach the IWW contract the same way he or she approaches any other contract.

Within the union there is a belief that IWW contracts will not be affected by the same constraints as other unions (or alternatively, we'll ignore the labor laws governing contracts when it's advantageous.) As we'll

outline in much more thorough detail in part three, it's not the content of current IWW contracts that we reject to, per se, it's the structural (and social) limitations that contracts carry with them. Accordingly, we believe that despite the truest of best intentions, even IWW contracts will not save the working class from dangers of service unionism and legalism.

Beyond contract clauses, de-democratization of the labor movement is part-and-parcel of any labor-relations regime. The IWW should be—and long has been—praised for its commitment to democratic unionism. Contracts, and any other form of state-mediated labor relations, seek not only to deal with centralized, hierarchical (in a word, undemocratic) unions, but seek to de-democratize struggle itself. With the above facts in mind (and once again, these topics will be covered in much greater detail in the next part of Direct Unionism), we return to the arguments we made in part 1, section five, regarding dual-carders. Our goals, as direct unionists, then will be the same in IWW contract shop as they would be in any other contract shop: to ensure that struggle itself is democratized to as large an extent as possible. Likewise, we'll use our experience as direct unionists in IWW shops (since one of us is already in this predicament) to expand our arguments for the dangers of the IWW entering into contractual relationships with the bosses.

It is also our hope that this document, and the 'direct unionist current' that has formed around its writing, will lead to a more direct unionist oriented IWW. It is our hope direct unionism will come to be built into the organizing strategy of the union itself. Such 'structural' support for direct unionism will increase the likelihood that direct unionist organizing drives succeed and that workers new to the IWW will become easily integrated into the direct unionist model.

### **Section 3: What happens when we win? When we lose?**

Common sense says that you win you win, and if you lose you lose. Collectively, our experiences are much more complicated than this. For example, during the early 2000s the Portland IWW experienced a flurry of organizing. Some of these campaigns resulted in contracts, and



others were crushed by employer repression. The interesting thing is that after the dust settled, nearly all of the committed organizers came from campaigns that were lost, and successful campaigns produced few long-term organizers. These experiences have since been seen throughout the IWW and in our organizing in general.

There are a number of crucial points to understanding what organizing to build class power involves. Generally when workers decide to take steps and organize (as opposed to being agitated from the outside, or organizers infiltrating and organizing within) it is around concrete issues at work, changes, gripes, etc. People generally seek out organizing when the shop is hottest as a last step or near-last step in their aggravation. Either these problems are solved, or they aren't. In cases where we win—whether contractually or not—there is a natural tendency for people to relax. Fights are nasty, unpleasant, and can in some cases make things worse before getting better. When grievances are solved even temporarily, people don't want to go on fighting forever (unless something has changed fundamentally...). With direct union campaigns this means we often lose a shop with victories. In fact the easier the fight, the quicker the shop cools down. This can provoke a strange phenomenon where the boss who rolls over on the most, undermines our ability to organize by depriving us of the collective action that energizes and transforms people. We are able to gain organizers from these struggles, but this paradox is a repeated occurrence which cannot be ignored. This is part of the reason our practice developed the concept of networks of organizers that keep the fight going across an industry when shops cool down. We will return to this in a later section.

In a contract shop, the same thing generally occurs. The comfort of a contract gives an extra nudge to resting from the struggle with the illusion of stability given by a contract. To take an example, we saw a victory at a strike in social service at an SEIU shop in 2004 one of us was involved in. The shop had been fundamentally unorganized, despite having a contract. Building up to the strike, little support was garnered. Miraculously, the strike itself flipped and transformed the workers from largely taking what management was giving, to

confronting them directly on the picket line, offices, and homes. With the resolution of the strike however, nearly three-quarters of the strikers quit instantly, and the rest left within two years. The union had to rebuild from scratch, and in fact never rebuilt completely and was nearly eradicated during cuts a few years later.

In some instances failure produces the opposite effect. In Portland a bike messenger shop was organized on a direct unionist basis, and was able to fight and win some grievances against a tyrannical boss. The campaign faltered though as the workers ran into objective limitations in their organizing, and the inability to expand the campaign beyond their organized base in the shop to take the fight higher against the bosses escalating repression. Out of those struggles, the workers launched a strike which crippled the business, but was unable to win the gains the workers sought. Yet out of that campaign the IWW gained committed organizers. The same thing was repeated time and time again.

What is happening is contrary to everything we hear about unions. We hear that workers join unions to improve their material circumstances, and join/stay with the union that best meets their needs. There is supposedly a connection between the ability of unions to leverage material gains and an increase in class power broadly. Ignoring the problems of these popular ideas historically (whether unions check class power or increase it), our practice and struggle have shown us that it misunderstands fundamental things about class struggle. A concept we see repeated constantly is that action often precedes consciousness. That is to say that workers will often take collective action which is in apparent contradiction to what they may say or think. Yet struggling collectively against a boss is transformative. It changes the way we relate to our coworkers and bosses, it changes the way we think about work, society, class, the world, and ourselves, and it can change our commitments. With this understanding, we can make sense of winning by losing and losing by winning. The question isn't whether we win in all instances, or how to do damage control on our losses, but instead through our organizing how can we facilitate the collective transformation of workers in struggle so that we produce as

many committed worker revolutionaries as possible. This perspective leads to a fundamental rethinking of unions, and an understanding of distinctions between what is good for the class vs good for unions, what the role of organizing is in building towards another society, and what role grievances and workplace issues have in organizing.

#### **Section 4: How would a Direct Unionist campaign relate to labor law?**

As will be elaborated upon in part three, direct unionists do not believe labor law can ever be a liberating force for workers. We limit our use of labor law to the simple fact that a well-informed workforce keeps the boss in line. Knowing the names of statutes and the dates of court cases will keep managers—especially low-level managers—‘on their toes’. However, like everything else that takes place on the shopfloor, only the unified power of the workers can force employers to follow even the limited labor regulations that exist.

Can even defensive use of labor law, ULPs for example, disempower workers?

The authors of this pamphlet are not universally opposed to ULPs, but we view them with a very skeptical eye. In a nutshell, our premise is this: as a purely defensive measure, ULPs can be effective. We believe serious problems arise when a campaign begins to use labor law offensively. When we allow an entire organizing drive to be dependent on law we—no pun intended—put the ball in the bosses’ court. We have to organize on our own terms and in such a way the builds up the skills, resources, experience, and confidence of our class.

To put in another way, ULPs and other forms of government-recognized grievance procedures—even when successful—still removes power from the worker’s hands. Knowing basic labor law and being able to ‘represent oneself’ are worthwhile skills, but labor law always attempts to individualize grievances, and thus lessen collective power and put up walls to effective solidarity.

#### **Part 3: Why Organize Without Contracts?8**

While we certainly feel the techniques we've outlined could be useful in even a contractual campaign, in part 3 we'll be addressing the reasons we oppose contractualism. Before continuing we'd like to stress that while we draw upon many historical and theoretical arguments, our reasons for writing this discussion paper—and part 3 in particular—are based on our union experiences, both within the IWW and in so-called business unions.

## **Section 1: What are the pitfalls of contractualism?**

### General problems of contractualism

To begin to answer this question, we must examine how a contract operates. A contract does a number of things. Most importantly, it recognizes the union as the 'bargaining agent' for a particular workplace. This means that management must negotiate with the union over wages and conditions. Every year (or more likely, every couple of years) the contract will expire and the union and the boss will negotiate a new contract. If the union is democratic, the workers have a right to vote on the new contract. If the contract is not to the workers' liking, the workers—theoretically—have the right to strike. In this way contracts seem appealing as they often improve wages and make work a bit more bearable.

However, alongside such benefits, workers have learned that contracts trap workers as much as they liberate them. Workers have consistently mentioned five distinct objections to contracts:

(1) No strike clauses: The vast majority of contracts in America contain a "no strike clause". No strike clauses state that during the life of a contract workers may not engage in 'work stoppages' for any reason. If workers strike while under contract it's known as a "wildcat". When wildcats occur the union can be fined and the company can get a judge to issue an "injunction" to force the strikers back to work. Under an injunction, the government (most likely the police) forces striking workers back onto the job. A few militant and powerful unions have managed to keep no strike language out of contracts, but the courts have very often determined that a union contract in and of itself functions as a no-strike agreement.

(2) Management rights clauses: Many militant unionists view contracts as nothing more than a “labor peace agreement”. The agreement works like this: in exchange for better wages and conditions, workers will not interfere with the process of production. Management rights clauses make labor peace agreements official. Such clauses—which are present in nearly every union contract—prohibit workers from taking part in decisions of how to set up the shop, who to hire and fire, how and where a company invests profits, and other such crucial business activities. Under a management rights clause, workers are essentially told “Shut up, we’ve given you as much as we’re going to give you. Don’t try and change company policy or exert any control over the workplace.” And under a management rights clause, workers are contractually obligated not to do so.

(3) Binding grievance procedures: Many contracts contain a binding grievance procedure. What this basically means is that if a union member feels management has violated the contract, he or she has the right to file a grievance. A union representative then takes the grievance up with management in the hopes of ‘winning’ the grievance on behalf of the worker. Once again, in theory, this sounds pretty good. However, for the bosses, the purpose of such a system is to direct worker discontent into management approved channels. For some perspective on how a binding grievance procedure benefits the company, it is worthwhile to read the words of auto worker and academic Marty Glaberman. As Marty tells it, before the introduction of the binding grievance procedure,

It was common practice in the auto shops for negotiations on the shop level to consist of the steward [elected by his fellow workers, not appointed by the union], surrounded by all the men in the department, arguing with the foreman. No one worked until the grievance was settled—and most of them were settled in the workers’ favor without the red tape of a bargaining procedure, appeals, and umpires.

After binding grievance clauses were introduced into the auto plants, it became the union’s job to sort out grievances and ensure they were handled ‘properly’. Having worked in union auto plants, Marty could

offer an honest view of how binding grievances led to the union actually “policing” and “managing” the workers’ grievances:

*The [union] committeeman usually considers it his job to keep grievances from being written. At each stage of the grievance procedure a majority of grievances are thrown out by the union representatives. This is supposed to be in order to assure that only the best grievances are appealed so that they can be won. But when the last stage, the “impartial” umpire, is reached, half of the few grievances remaining are lost anyway—that’s what impartiality is supposed to be.*

When workers take power into their own hands it scares the bosses, so they look for ways to control and manage the anger of their workers. One of those ways is the binding grievance procedure. Worse yet, as part of the bargain for “labor peace”, the union becomes responsible for helping to enforce discipline in the shop. This includes enforcing the grievance procedure. In this way, the union and the contract become part of the management structure of the company. Workers naturally resent this and lose faith in the union.

(4) 3rd Partyism/Service Unionism: After union representatives bargain a contract, it becomes the job of the union to “service” the contract. In other words, it becomes the union’s responsibility to make sure both the company and the workers follow the contract. Through bargaining and contract enforcement the union becomes removed from the workers—it becomes a third party. Instead of the union being the collective voice of the workers, the union becomes an organization which speaks on the workers’ behalf.

This is no small difference. Prior to the introduction of contracts, the union had to organize every new worker hired onto the job. The union had to have a shop floor presence. Older employees needed to explain the benefits of organization to new hires if the union was to survive and grow. Dues were collected on the shop floor, in the break room, or in the union hall. The union was the workers. Contracts ended that. The union became an agreement.

The notion of the union as a third party is reinforced through “payroll deductions” for dues. In most union shops, dues are taken directly from the workers’ paychecks. Instead of paying dues directly to a delegate or a steward—a real person—dues are paid to “the union”. When this occurs, the union stops being “real”, it’s merely an abstract organization workers fund through their paychecks. Automatic dues deductions also make it less likely the union will encourage workers to strike. If a shop strikes, the workers stop getting paychecks and the money used to support the union bureaucracy stops flowing in.

(5) Contracts severely limit “workers’ self-activity” and solidarity on the job: As a result of the points mentioned above, workers have found contracts to be a repressive force in the workplace. Workers who founded unions through the use of direct action find that after a contract is signed, their unions are contractually forced to stamp out direct action when it occurs. When wildcats occur, the bosses are quick to call in union representatives who order the workers back onto the job. It doesn’t matter how badly management is treating a worker or what policy the workers are being forced to endure, all the union can do is to tell the workers to file a grievance or wait until the next contract comes along. Maybe then the union will get around to fixing whatever problem the workers are having...

As a result of this, workers come to resent union bureaucrats and even the union itself. Shop stewards and committeemen only enforce the contract, they stop fighting for the workers they’re supposed to represent. The union is just like a second boss. Management has their rules and the union has its rules. In both instances, workers feel powerless to change their conditions.

Along these same lines, the contract limits the ability of workers to engage in solidarity. Say the shop down the road goes on strike. They’re demanding higher wages, better conditions, and that 100 new positions be opened to lighten the load for the current employees in the shop. It’s very simple to understand that better conditions in the shop down the road (and the other shop down the road and the other shop in the next state...) will lead to better conditions across the industry. In

the long run, that'll mean better conditions in your shop too. And even more than self-interest, you know what it's like to face pushy bosses, overwork, low pay, and disrespect. You want to support your fellow workers. You hope they'd do the same for you. You and your co-workers want to engage in a solidarity strike to support the workers down the road, but the contract contains a no-strike clause. Or say you and your co-workers are sick of your sons and daughters be dragged off to fight in a rich man's war. You want a political strike demanding an end to whatever unjust war the bosses have gotten us into this time. Can't do that under a no-strike clause, either.

The other thing bosses will do is to have more than one contract in a shop. Or, when a company runs more than one plant, the bosses will make sure the contracts in each shop expire at different times. The logic here is simple: management has used the contract to ensure workers will not strike at the same time. Before contracts, all workers in a shop or in a single company talked to one another. If there was an issue affecting the shop, it made sense for all workers to strike together.

With contracts, the bosses got smart. Let's use the example of a meat packing company. In the meat industry, the workers on the "killing floor" are very powerful. It's a dangerous job and without that particular group of workers, production stops. In this particular company, there's only one plant to slaughter cattle and another plant to process and can the meat. Hoping to cut down on the militancy of the killing floor workers, the company offers them better wages if they accept a five year contract. The processing plant is only offered a three year contract. When the three year contracts expire, the processing workers want to strike, but they know that without the killing floor workers going out, the company will just outsource processing to an outside plant. So they settle for lower wages. Then, when it comes time to negotiate a contract for the killing floor workers, the boss tells them, "The processing workers have accepted lower wages, you'll have to as well." And, of course, the processing plant workers couldn't strike even if they wanted to, but they feel they've been abandoned by the killing floor workers in the first place. In the end, the only person who has benefitted from the contract is the boss.



To put it simply: contracts limit the ability for workers to act a class. Bosses know this. Contracts are used to keep workers divided and as a way to destroy the natural bonds of solidarity that exist between working people.

(6) Long-term declines in militancy: As with so much else in the workplace, only the threat of worker action keeps the boss in line. The same is true for contracts. Simply put: when contracts are in effect, the bosses will try to break them if they think they can get away with it. Only the militancy of workers can prevent this. But here's the rub: As we've outlined above, contracts, by their nature, seek to repress militancy and enforce a "labor peace." When they succeed in doing this (repressing the threat of direct action in the workplaces), the bosses will (1) simply ignore or try to slyly undermine the contract or (2) demand concessions when negotiations come around.

The example of the US auto industry illustrates this trend. In the 1930s a massive surge in worker militancy led to the creation of a powerful union, the United Auto Workers. The auto companies, recognizing the how quick their workers were to take industrial action, negotiated very generous contracts with the UAW. This continued for numerous decades. However, in each contract, the bosses agreed to higher wages and better conditions, but in return secured more and more guarantees from the union that the workers would 'stay in line'. No-strike clauses and binding grievance procedure were inserted into the contract. However, by putting the union in charge of ensuring workers wouldn't 'act outside the contract', it sapped the spirit of militancy from the workforce. The end result of this was that by the 1970s, the union, by trading militancy for the security of a contract, had weakened itself. The bosses realized this and used any and every opportunity to secure concessions from the workers. Since that time, the workers have lost ground in every single contract the UAW has signed.

The point of all this being: while contracts do cement gains in the medium and short-term, in the long-term the outlook is not so rosy.

## **IWW-specific failures of the contract model**

While we've covered in great detail our objections to the manner in which business unions employ contracts, we would like to spend a moment on the specific issues that occur when the IWW signs contracts. Contracts, by their very nature, remove struggle from the workplace floor. This has a number of consequences. First, it creates a specialized class of negotiators and contract enforcers. In the case of the business unions we see the development of a paid bureaucracy who "services" the contract. In the IWW, "super activists" step up to fill these roles. In both cases, militants are taken off the floor and elevated into a specialized status. This may at first appear to be a smart choice by the union. After all, wouldn't you want the most outspoken, dedicated workers to be the ones who would deal with management on a day-to-day basis? However, these ex-shopfloor militants—who may have previously been leaders of direct actions—become invested in protecting both the contract and framework of contractual negotiation. All of this leads to a centralization of both knowledge and power within the union. Predictably, this comes at the expense of democracy, militancy, and rank-and-file control. In a word, workers become alienated from the union.

We would like to emphasize that very often, and especially in the case of the IWW, this is a very slow, subtle process. Steps taken in the pursuit of legitimacy or "formalizing gains", which may appear advantageous in the short-term, can—in the medium and long-term—force the union to abandon some of our most cherished principles. In the IWW there is a widespread belief that our professed radicalism and/or direct democracy will prevent us from being trapped in the framework of labor law, service unionism, and bureaucracy. However by engaging these very same means we are conditioning both our leadership and the rank-and-file to accept a more "traditional" understanding of unionism. As stated, the process is slow, subtle, and unintentional. As the old proverb goes, "The path to hell is paved with good intentions."

Although there is benefit to be found in theorizing on why the IWW falls short when it comes to maintaining and servicing contract shops, our

beliefs should always be grounded in practical experience. One of the contributors to this pamphlet works in an IWW contract shop and his experience there highlights many of the issues this pamphlet seeks to address. As he tells it, “Nobody working at the shelter when I was hired (8 workers there) knew we were a union shop. Our contract had already expired and none of us had heard a word from the union since we worked there. There is a lot of turnover at the shelter which partially explains it, but some of the longer term workers had been in the shop while the contract was in effect and didn’t even know they were in a union shop. ...I had started talking with one of my coworkers about how we needed to unionize or try at least rabble rousing and we decided to contact the IWW. Ironically, before we made contact we found our old and expired contract behind some junk in the staff closet. ... The last contract we negotiated got us some significant gains, both bread and butter gains in addition to more respect on the job and some more say in the way it operates. With that being said, it burned out several of our most militant workers and has left us in a bit of stagnation between contracts. This last point especially hurts because we constantly have new workers who aren’t inoculated and educated into the union (especially during the year that I was gone and seemingly no delegates kept contact with the shop, leading to the overwhelming majority of them falling far out of good standing). Overall the IWW has had a mediocre way of servicing the shop and it remains largely isolated from the General Membership Branch (and other social service shops). ... Even some of the more self proclaimed militant people in my shop have wasted several months over a wage re-opener that has gone absolutely nowhere. They have stated that they want to exhaust the official process until we “resort” to escalation. This is what contracts do. ... Some of my coworkers are still excited about the IWW. Some are stagnant and assume there’s nothing to be done until the next negotiations. Unfortunately some have either become (or say they feel) alienated from the union (as a whole and even their own shop).

“The final court of appeals is [always] the picket line”

In the long term, only the industrial strategy provides the way to true, unfettered industrial solidarity. As was alluded to in part 2, things may

get tricky in the medium-term, but it will our success in securing those medium-term goals that will prepare us to really shift the 'balance of class' power and create a truly independent and militant worker's movement.

Beyond simply signing contracts, there are other, more subtle ways, the IWW has come moved away from it's revolutionary potential. One, which we'd like to address here, is the notion of "capturing a shop." Whether by Labor Board elections or direct actions, the IWW has employed a "shop-by-shop" model of organizing to many of our campaigns. The premise is simple: force the boss to recognize the IWW presence in a single location and negotiate with the employees to improve conditions and pay. Once again, on the face, this seems like a reasonable idea. We are a union with limited resources: it seems logical to focus on one shop, make gains, and build from there. Yet, the problem with such a model is that it is constructed for an organization that works very differently from how the IWW would like to see itself.

Let us elaborate: in the US there are two ways to win formal recognition of a union at a shop level. A union can either (1) file for and win an NLRB election or (2) force "voluntary recognition" through the use of direct action. In either event, it takes a dedicated group of organizers who are able to overcome the inertia of day-to-day grievances and help focus struggle onto winning a union. As we all know too well, the boss has more resources, time, and can fight us tooth and nail, with the weight of the law on management's side. The overwhelming majority of all shop campaigns—business union or IWW—fail for these reasons. Organizing is hard, the deck is stacked against us, and the system of gaining recognition—voluntary or otherwise—is a trap.

Even if the IWW gains recognition, a whole new set of problems arise. The first is simply an issue of power. In many of the industries where the IWW is active, a single company's shops can spread throughout a very large geographic area. In many cases we deal with truly multinational companies who can easily have thousands of individual shops. If the IWW strikes one of these, we still hold very little power

when 99% of that company's workforce is still on the clock. Likewise, if we gain recognition at a single shop, our ability to make demands is limited by the simple fact that the company can very easily close down that particular outlet and still remain profitable. The easy answer to this is to focus on an employer that only owns one shop. Yet, even this premise contains many of the same problems. For one, and as the IWW learned in the New York warehouse campaigns, some employers will literally go bankrupt before recognizing the union. Two, without the union spread throughout the entire industry—and the solidarity and power that comes with it—were only able to make quite meager demands.

The other large problem with the shop-by-shop model is one that we've already touched on, but it's worth reinforcing. Because we are not a service union and do employ a large bureaucracy, when we capture a single shop—and if we want to have any hope of keeping it—the best militants end up becoming administrative machinery (bureaucracy) of keeping the shop together, dealing with the technical aspects, and trying to constantly reorganize the shop to fend off attacks by the boss. That leaves little room for developing new organizers to spread the struggle, agitate across the industry or workforce, and to organize around broader working class demands.

It sounds easier than it is. When we organize around grievances they tend to be either short-term winnable gains, which organization rapidly dissipates after the win, or longer-term problems that we lack the strength to challenge. Over the past decade of direct unionist struggles, the trajectory of these struggles is roughly this. Workers get agitated around some issues. We develop organizers and build a committee, the workers rally around the grievance and win or lose. The committee falls apart with either concessions or the crackdown, but we gain committed organizers (especially when the campaign fails!). Because of this there is a strong pull to try and go for the whole shop and win recognition, either by slipping into contractualism or hedging bets and demanding the boss recognize us.

Without real power in the workplace, we lack the ability to effectively challenge the boss, and make the changes necessary to keep workers active in the struggle and the union. By trying to take the shop, we do two things: we act before we've build real power, and we give a false sense of reassurance that when we take the shop we'll be able to get what we want. Without years of struggle, the level of preparation, unity, and solidarity necessary to keep a shop just isn't there. Campaigns tend to crumble when the boss drives a wedge into these contradictions, and the workers weren't prepared for it. If we do manage to win, usually by elections notably, organization crumbles as everyone expects the union to act for them no matter how much appeals to democracy and "you are the union" there are. This is because the shop-by-shop struggle pushes workers in these directions.

In some cases we've won shops and kept power. We did it because we had tight committed organizers and workers who were in it to win come hell or high water. These campaigns too tend to fail. Mostly the IWW organizes in shops of less than 100 people. In these small shops, and in the industries most people work in today, individual shops have very little power. A strike in a restaurant for example is likely to have little economic impact, and if we put an owner out of business the workers are in a tough position. In large firms, capital has grown globally to such strength that even extended strikes in isolated shops will have little impact on the long term survival of these capitalists. A large part of our power comes not just from our economic impact, but our ability to mobilize the community around our demands, and threaten to spread the struggle beyond our shops.

For example organizing at one hospital will never be able to gain the leverage necessary to win healthcare for all.

The answer to this dilemma lies in going with what we do right, and abandoning what we do poorly. In grievance struggles, we are good at winning them and at building organizers out of the process. We are bad at holding onto shops, organizing them, and extending our gains. The alternative to the shop-by-shop model is to focus on developing a base of organizers across industries, and building capacity before

making moves to win shops. Through engaging an industry, we can elevate the level of struggle around winnable grievances under the radar of the boss, and build organizers and class consciousness. We can patiently inculcate and build unity that will be an antidote to bosses favoritism, false gifts, and personal attacks. By not biting off more than we can chew, we'll end up having our fill at the collective table.

What we intend to argue is that IWW should instead move toward an industrial model that will win gains not in a single shop or even a single large company, but across an entire industry.

Networks of militants who lead direct actions in their own workplaces w/o seeking recognition while recruiting new members to the IWW. Once we've reached a critical mass, begin to push for industry-wide changes. Move away from GMBs to IUBs – industrial delegates

7) Industrial Strategy: Instead of hoping to “capture” a workplace, the industrial strategy seeks to build a network of militants across an industry. These militants will agitate amongst their co-workers and lead direct actions over specific grievances in their own workplaces. However, the goal will not be union recognition from a single boss. Instead, the goal of the actions is to build up leadership and consciousness amongst other workers. Once a ‘critical mass’ of workers are experienced union members, the focus will be on large scale industrial actions that address issues of wages and conditions across entire regions or even whole countries.

Direct unionism, at its very core, rejects contractual organizing. In our history the IWW has proposed many alternatives to contractualism—minority unionism and solidarity unionism being two of the most notable—but in practice even these anti-contractual concepts have been used in contractual campaigns. It is our intent that direct unionism should not suffer the same fate.

An argument against contracts that I think is more bread and butter: the IWW sucks at administering contracts. We can and should criticize

service unionism, but there's also an important distinction between the service union model executed well (within/according to its limited criteria) and that model executed badly. I think we're pretty bad executing this model. That's a good thing over all, or the result of a good thing – us being volunteer driven and not having professional staff – but it's an important fact

### **Part 3A: Why organize without contracts? (Draft Alternate Version)**

- Section 1: The pitfalls of contractualism

- IWW-specific failures of the contract model

→ Although there is benefit to be found in theorizing on why the IWW falls short when it comes to maintaining and servicing contract shops, our beliefs should always be grounded in practical experience. One of the contributors to this pamphlet works in an IWW contract shop and his experience there highlights many of the issues this pamphlet seeks to address. As he tells it, “Nobody working at the shelter when I was hired (8 workers there) knew we were a union shop. Our contract had already expired and none of us had heard a word from the union since we worked there. There is a lot of turnover at the shelter which partially explains it, but some of the longer term workers had been in the shop while the contract was in effect and didn't even know they were in a union shop. ...I had started talking with one of my coworkers about how we needed to unionize or try at least rabble rousing and we decided to contact the IWW. Ironically, before we made contact we found our old and expired contract behind some junk in the staff closet. ... The last contract we negotiated got us some significant gains, both bread and butter gains in addition to more respect on the job and some more say in the way it operates. With that being said, it burned out several of our most militant workers and has left us in a bit of stagnation between contracts. This last point especially hurts because we constantly have new workers who aren't inoculated and educated into the union (especially during the year that I was gone and seemingly no delegates kept contact with the shop, leading to the overwhelming majority of them falling far out of good standing). Overall the IWW has had a mediocre way of servicing the shop and it remains largely isolated from the General Membership Branch (and other social service shops). ... Even some of the more self proclaimed militant



people in my shop have wasted several months over a wage re-opener that has gone absolutely nowhere. They have stated that they want to exhaust the official process until we “resort” to escalation. This is what contracts do. ... Some of my coworkers are still excited about the IWW. Some are stagnant and assume there’s nothing to be done until the next negotiations. Unfortunately some have either become (or say they feel) alienated from the union (as a whole and even their own shop).

- “The final court of appeals is [always] the picket line”
- Section 2: Success rates using the NLRB – sociological study
- Section 3: “Capture the shop” vs. Building Class Power
- potential for use of the union bug (part 1 e-mail discussion)
- Section 4: Revolutionary potential

When contracts are in effect, the bosses will try to break them if they think they can get away with it and it’s only the militancy of workers that prevent this. But here’s the rub: contracts, by their nature, seek to repress militancy and enforce a “labor peace.” When they succeed in doing this, the bosses will ignore the contract or demand concessions when negotiations come around. So while contracts do cement gains in the medium and short-term, in the long-term the outlook is not so rosy. In the long term, only the industrial strategy provides the way to true, unfettered industrial solidarity. As was alluded to in part 2, things may get tricky in the medium-term, but it will be our success in securing those medium-term goals that will prepare us to really shift the ‘balance of class’ power and create a truly independent and militant worker’s movement.

Only through such a process of experience and dialog will we be able to prove to ourselves and those we organize that despite the siren song of the contract is a dead end to building true workers’ power.

“A CIO contract is guarantee against strikes”

Britain –

In Britain, workplaces which a union is recognized as a bargaining agent of the workforce (since labor law does not allow for collective contracts in the American sense of the word), face many of the same obstacles as contracts shops in America. For one, any strikes have to be balloted for in advance and the boss has a minimum of seven days notice before industrial action can legally begin. If wildcats occur,

workers can be legally sacked. The union, for its part, has to “repudiate” the strike and no union funds or support can be offered to workers. If the union does not repudiate any unofficial strikes, the union’s funds can be seized and its assets frozen. Officials can face jail time. This doesn’t mean that wildcats don’t occur and that they may even be encouraged by local officials. In fact, some of the most successful strike in modern British history—the Visteon oil workers’ strike of 2009 to mention just one—have been wildcats. However, when the aforementioned Visteon workers took such action, they received no support from their national union.

When balloting does occur for industrial action, workers have ballots sent to their houses. Even at this early stage, then, the struggle is de-collectivized, individualized. Such a process also gives bosses space for legalistic maneuvering. The Christmas 2009 British Airways dispute contains all the classic aspects of company manipulation and is a daunting reminder of the dangers of unions accepting a legalized approach to strike action. Set off BA’s plans to unilaterally reduce staffing levels, nine-tenths of cabin crew members voted to strike over the Christmas holiday. British Airways sought, and received, an injunction against the strike on the grounds balloting irregularities. Had the workers been organizing the strike by votes of mass assemblies, free from the constraints of labor-relations regulations, the strike would have gone forward. The airline might have still sought an injunction, but the workers would have already been operating outside the bounds of labor law and would be in a much better position to organize in an extra-legal manner to allow for a successful strike. Instead, they belonged to a union that had gone through all the proper steps of legal certification and had followed the legally prescribed balloting procedure. Having bought into a legalized organizing process and given certain ‘privileges’ for doing so (i.e. being allowed to represent a particular workforce), the union was in no position to encourage its membership to break the law and push forward with its overwhelming wish: an all out strike against a drastic cuts to their working conditions.

Of course, other similarities exist that we don’t have to go into here: solidarity strikes are illegal; the severe division of workplaces into

(often competing) unions; legalized, individualized grievance procedures; closed shops are illegal (much like in American 'right-to-work' states)

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- 1. If you're unfamiliar with how the IWW organizes we recommend you contact the IWW Organizing Department to schedule an organizer training. During a training, IWW-certified trainers will come to your town to show you how organize your workplace. In the US, the Organizing Department can be reached at (970) 903-8721 (this number was current as of Summer 2009). You can also go to [iww.org/en/organize](http://iww.org/en/organize) to find out more. If you live outside of the US, go to [iww.org](http://iww.org) to find out how to reach an IWW organizer in your country.
  - 2. A more complete list of direct action tactics will hopefully soon be available in another pamphlet by the same authors.
  - 3. For an explanation of "vehicle of struggle" see the introduction to part one, section three "Are we trying to build a union?"
  - 4. We apologize about all the complex annoying language in this paragraph. We'll try not to let it happen again.
  - 5. When discussing organization, it is important to understand that direct unionism, like any form of unionism, poses problems of administration. Struggle is going to ebb and flow. Because of this—and especially in high-turnover industries—a direct unionist campaign may only lead to certain percentage of a particular workforce being actively organized at a given time. It's important that our co-workers understand this and are prepared for this potential outcome. Having the presence of an organizing committee in a shop will improve conditions, but by rejecting legalized notions of collective bargaining, sustaining a union presence is going to have its ups and downs. We view it like this: preparing workers for potential administrative difficulties is part of the *inoculation* process that the Organizer Training 101 addresses and the inoculation process all direct unionists should be taking their co-workers through.
  - 6. Once again, we apologize for the language in this paragraph. For clarification, in this sentence, "capital" refers to all business owners (capitalists) as a class.

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- 7. “We try not to overemphasize formalism. In other words, we don’t judge a struggle simply on its particular form—be it the union form, the workplace assembly form, or a “workers council” form. No form is perfect and the content and the goals of a struggle must be taken into account. In the final analysis, the goal of direct unionism is to create ‘practiced democracy, self-activity, and self-leadership’ within the context of a ‘participatory, collective, and class-conscious proletarian struggle.’ What this struggle may look like is going to vary from place to place and time to time. The goal, however, never changes”
  - 8. Editor’s note: Part 3 was never finished. After this part is a part labeled Part 3A, which is the start of an alternate draft. The writers never finished this section so neither is the more complete version. Both are included here for any interested readers. Part 3 was supposed to have 4 parts. Only part 1, “What are the pitfalls of contractualism?”, was ever written. Below is the original outline of these sections. Some of these points are covered or at least mentioned in part 1, but these other proposed sections that were never fully written out. Section 2: What we do we oppose a “capture the shop” model of organizing? Section 3: Practically, what are the success rates of labor board elections? Section 4: How do contracts inhibit the revolutionary potential of the IWW? Section 4 was supposed to have three subsections – Section 4a: Success rates using the NLRB – sociological study. Section 4b: “Capture the shop” vs. Building Class Power, potential for use of the union bug (part 1 e-mail discussion) Section 4c: Revolutionary potential

## **A REPLY TO DIRECT UNIONISM**

### **by JUAN CONATZ:**

Part 1 of a 2 part reply by a IWW member, to 'Direct Unionism: A Discussion Paper', which argues for a network of militants and non-contractual organizing.

#### **Intro**

Recently, an unfinished piece titled 'Direct Unionism: A Discussion Paper' appeared on the internet. It was written by a group of IWWers a couple of years ago and was intended to start a dialogue within the union on contracts and generally how we organize in the workplace.

It's inline with more recent developments in syndicalism, reflective of the contemporary CNT-AIT and of Solidarity Federation's recent change into a 'revolutionary union initiative'. A strategy that recognizes itself as a minority and attempts to address this without being co-opted by the various welfare state or social democratic institutions and programs that have emerged since the Second World War.

In my opinion, it's a welcome addition to further a conversation within the North American syndicalist or industrial unionism milieu. Often, in the IWW, in depth discussion and assessments do not occur for various reasons. This wasn't always the case. The historical IWW had a number of different publications, with varying purposes, and some of them included very theoretical, long, and in depth articles. As the IWW receives additional attention and interest due to its campaigns at Starbucks, Jimmy John's and in Wisconsin, now is no better time to restart these conversations around strategy and organizing that can determine the outcomes of what we do.

#### **Direct Unionism and 'Building the Union'**

The piece suggests a new way<sup>1</sup> for the IWW, defined by the phrase 'direct unionism. It is described as

*In a nutshell, we are proposing that instead of focusing on contracts, workplace elections, or legal procedures, IWW members should strive to build networks of militants in whatever industry they are employed.*

This definition I find hard to disagree with, in fact, I enthusiastically support this outlook. During the union's most active years, until the 1930's, no contracts was actually part of the constitution. As Joyce L. Kornbluh mentions in an essay:<sup>2</sup>

*As labor-management contracts were viewed as an interference with labor's unconditional right to strike, the IWW would not sign contracts, a controversial position it did not abandon until the 1930s. Strikes rather than contracts were the fuel for IWW militancy, for strikes built the experience and perspective needed for the general strike that Wobblies thought would overthrow the capitalist system.*

In section 3, 'Are we trying to build a union?' they address some important sentiments of people when it comes to organizing. The sentiment of recruitment equaling activity, or by merely increasing membership, we elevate our ability to function or to influence events. That is partially true, more people joining means more resources in the form of dues, which allow us to do a lot of things. However, just because people join does not mean they become active. The IWW, much like the Communist Party USA and the Socialist Party USA have quite a bit of historical admiration and background they've inherited. Because of this, the lack of identifiable radical organizations in some areas and the ease of joining online, these organizations have many interested people join for a short period of time and then fall through the cracks (the so-called 'one month wonders').

Syndicalism or industrial unionism has been criticized by many anarchists and left communists on the attitude of 'building the union for the sake of building it'. There's some truth to that, like I mentioned, some people are really focused on getting people to join as if that is the end all, be all. After they join, they aren't engaged as much and the same effort that was put into getting them to join is not put into getting them active. Some of the propaganda, much of it older, doesn't help fight this attitude, either. But what is forgotten is that, despite the

phrase of 'One Big Union', the IWW at its largest and most active, still mostly organized strikes and actions with workers regardless if they were members or not. Membership was secondary to militant organizing.

In my own experience in easy to join groups, I've seen this issue. While 20 or so people total were technically a part of a group I was involved in, we did far better work when we reorganized ourselves and totaled less than 10. It's the whole 'quality over quantity' thing.

Another sentiment that is tied with 'building the union' is the unfortunate one of thinking membership precludes activity. As our Organizer Training 101 program says 'We need to act like a union before calling ourselves a union.' A group of workers who are active on workplace issues but do not call themselves a union is more desirable than a workplace with a union presence, but workplace issues go unaddressed or ignored. As is mentioned in the piece:

*informal participation in workplace struggle, not formal membership in the IWW, should be the first concern of a workplace organizer*

Our aims are to intensify class struggle. This requires our co-workers becoming active and gaining confidence to do such things. Their membership in the IWW is good thing, but it is a secondary thing. As they do in the Direct Unionism piece, I must stress that this does not mean I believe everything should be informal 'workplace resistance groups'<sup>3</sup> or whatever those in the insurrectionary or ultraleft camp think. Membership in formal organizations is an important aspect, but it is part of a wider experience and outlook, not the only and final thing. However, some of the 'direct unionist' perspective may amount to some of the shortcomings of the 'workplace resistance groups' and indeed to some of the shortcomings of the historic IWW...

### **Staying Power**

In section 4, the piece tries to address how gains are protected without contracts and with membership de-emphasized. But it's not really explored as much as it should be. While I'm in general agreement with

the direct unionist perspective and see it as re-centering the union to what were and are some of our more successful practices, there are negative aspects to these.

For instance, one of the major issues of the historical IWW was staying power. They came into a particular town in a particular industry, organized and then, whether the result was a win or a loss, IWW presence disintegrated fairly quickly. Now, the question I have is how much of it was a result of the internal splits, government repression and exodus to the CPUSA, and how much of it was inevitable due to a non-contractual, network of militants, de-emphasizing formal membership strategy?

Part of elevating struggle is building a combative working class culture. Would direct unionism be too informal to contribute to the infrastructure needed for this?

### **Industrial Strategy and Dual Carding**

In section 5, 'What is the Industrial Strategy', the comrades lay out pieces of what has not existed in the IWW: a dual card strategy. They state:

*In workplaces where IWWs are dual-carding, the organizing committee will seek to encourage workers to 'supersede' (i.e. move 'above and beyond') the trade-union form and push for mass assemblies as the only legitimate voice of the workforce. Wobblies will encourage struggle to be organized across trade unions (since many workplaces have more than one active union, a fact bosses regularly uses to their advantage) and seek to bring unorganized workers into the struggle as well. When mass actions occur, Wobblies should make sure that workers remain in full control of the struggle. This means democratic and open mass assemblies of workers (as opposed the secretive "back rooms" inhabited by union officials) must decide every aspect of the struggle. The final decision on what actions to take and when to call them off must be decided by the workers themselves.*



This is a really important concept and should be used to combat the chauvinism that many folks have when it comes to their particular unionized workplace or mainstream union. I've noticed, amongst mainstream union members in general and some dual carders, in particular, a kind of 'my union/workplace is completely unique and you can't give me advice'. There is sometimes an attitude that their union/workplace is an isolated island, free of any sort of commonalities from other workplaces (unionized or not) and other unions. This is probably not done or expressed purposefully and most likely has a lot to do with the way of organizing most mainstream unions operate under. While, yes, each workplace or mainstream union local is different in some ways, there are a number of broad strategies, principles and guidelines we can set. Ones which destroy the divisions between unionized and non-union, public and private, etc. are the most important. While it's a well known fact that the IWW is small, it is often forgotten that the mainstream unions are also small, representing a combined 11.9% of the U.S. workforce<sup>4</sup>. We can't afford to stay restricted to one segment of the class, and must, instead, use tactics that broaden the struggle beyond our small numbers. In the spirit of this, the piece says:

*Of course, it goes without saying that we are not seeking to function as a union pressure group, reform caucus, or trying to "capture" official positions within the union [...] In a union workplace, the IWW organizing committee must remain independent of the recognized union at all times.*

This is also where de-emphasizing membership is important. The point is not to 'poach' members from the mainstream unions or to raid them. Even if the IWW was at a level where this was a realistic way of doing things, I wouldn't think it was a good idea. An ideal dual carder strategy would not be about trying to replace the mainstream union<sup>5</sup>, but about elevating the struggle and bridging divides.

## **Puerto Real, the contemporary CNT & the CGT**

Section 7, 'Non-contractual organizing outside the IWW', gives some examples of such. Because it is often given as an example of the type

of organizing we should do, I'm going to address Puerto Real and Spanish syndicalism in general.

In Puerto Real, the CNT, as one of the numerous unions in the shipyards, worked to 'massify' the struggle and organized cross-union and cross-industry assemblies of workers and the community. The people were very militant and fought the closing of the shipyards incessantly, not only preventing the closing, but winning bread and butter gains that, to my knowledge, weren't originally part of the struggle.

It's a very inspiring event and one that should definitely be looked at and learned from. However, this seems to be one of only a few examples of a large, successful campaign the post-Franco CNT has had. This could possibly be a language issue. There isn't a lot of material translated on the contemporary CNT and its successes and failures. To discover the different perspectives on their activity, it is pretty much a requirement to know Spanish. This ties into the different perspectives in Spanish syndicalism in general.

In Spain, the three most widely known anarcho-syndicalist unions are (in order of size), the CGT, the CNT and Solidaridad Obrera. The CGT originated as a faction and later a split off from the CNT over various issues, the main ones being what level of participation should occur in the workplace councils (a sort of workplace parliamentary system, with different unions acting as 'parties' and representing workers) and accepting state funding. The CNT took a abstention stance on these issues and seems to organize in a way similar to the direct unionist approach. Solidaridad Obrera sees itself as inbetween the CGT and the CNT, leaving decisions on these matters to locals or workplaces.

Why these debates are of interest to IWWers is because we've had some similar ones. There was obviously a debate at sometime that we would prohibit dues checkoff, the act of the employer subtracting union dues from employee paychecks and then transferring to the union. There was also intense debate on how to respond to various labor laws enacted in the 30s, 40s and 50s such as NLRB elections, secondary

boycotts and anti-Communist pledges for officers. Some of these debates resulted in disaffiliation from the IWW, such as the Cleveland factory workers who disaffiliated over the IWW refusing to agree to anti-Communist affidavits outlined in the Taft-Hartley Act<sup>7</sup>. But in order to discover the outcomes of the various strategies intended as a reaction to the state's laws on workplace organizing in Spain, it is necessary to be able to find answers. Has the CNT's approach (which is similar to direct unionism) been a success, or just an occasional one? Does the CGT actually function like the mass, militant union we want to be or has it been too incorporated into the state from its pragmatism? Is Solidaridad Obrera a successful merging of the two positions? While we cannot simply draw a blueprint based on what's going on in Spain, knowing these things would shed some light on the viability of direct unionism.

## Conclusion

Part 1 of 'Direct Unionism: A Discussion Paper', in my opinion, is quite good. It combats some of the negative parts of radical union organizations (fetish of recruitment and quantity automatically meaning quality) and builds off the Organizer 101 Training, taking it to its logical extent. It also touches upon and tries to initiate a much-needed conversation on dual carding, while giving some examples of why the direct unionist approach can work. Even though the piece is a couple years old at this point, I would hope that they further develop some of the points in Part 1 so that this discussion, which is happening in other places as well, can continue.

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- 1. Technically, a lot of what they advocate is not 'new' for the IWW, but is merely emphasizing some ways of organizing that already exist. The newness of it is describing this tendency in the union and formulating its expression.
  - 2. *The Industrial Workers of the World*, Joyce L. Kornbluh, [http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/iww/kornbluh\\_iww.html](http://www.lucyparsonspj.org/iww/kornbluh_iww.html) (accessed 5/15/11)
  - 3. *On the frontline: anarchists at work*, Anarchist Federation, July 2009, <http://libcom.org/library/frontline-anarchists-work>
  - 4. Union membership falls below 12 percent of workforce, Kansas City Star, January 12, 2011, <http://www.kansascity.com/2011/01/21/2601545/union-membership-falls-below-12.html>

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- 5. Although, in some situations, if winnable, I wouldn't be opposed. For example, in Chicago (among other places), there are some old, not very well known, unions controlled by organized crime. They are barely functional even by contemporary mainstream union standards and there are other unions, such as UE, that are requested by the workers to come in on a desertification/re-certification effort.
  - 6. Some may contest calling the CGT anarcho-syndicalist (and I tend to agree) due to their participation with various state run workplace programs, but regardless, this is how they self-identify, this is the tradition in which they see themselves, and they use the same imagery. In any case, this is irrelevant, since I am not particularly interested in bickering over ideological labels, nor is the IWW an anarcho-syndicalist union itself.
  - 7. "With the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act in 1959 and its anti-communist affidavits to rid unions of leftist leaders, the IWW lost the Cleveland metal shops. As a point of principle, the IWW, along with the Typographical Union and United Mine Workers, refused to sign such loyalty oaths, so the Cleveland shops left the Union and affiliated with a more compliant one." *The IWW - It's First 100 Years*, Harry Siitonen, <http://www.iww.org/en/culture/chronology/Siitonen1.shtml>

Part 2 of a 2 part reply by a IWW member, to 'Direct Unionism: A Discussion Paper', which argues for a network of militants and non-contractual organizing.

### **Intro & The Early IWW and Contracts**

In the Direct Unionist piece, it is split up into three parts. The first part of my response focused on the first part, which mainly concentrates on linking the conception of direct unionism to the IWW's Organizer 101 Training, while giving examples, both historical and contemporary, of groups and organizations which practiced something similar to the conception outlined. The second and third parts get more in depth into considering contracts with employers. Before taking up what the piece has to say, it's worth looking at the subject of contracts within the early IWW.

On the official IWW website, the subject of contracts is taken up in the 'Myths' section<sup>1</sup>, which is a section on the website that attempts to dispel a number of misconceptions about the union. Myth # 2 is called "The IWW doesn't negotiate contracts with employers". In this, it

acknowledges that contracts were shunned in the early days and tries to explain this:

*This misconception results from the fact that during the early years of the IWW, union contracts had no legal force in the United States of America. In fact, union contracts did not become federally protected agreements until the passing of the National Labor Relations Act in 1937. Prior to that, many union contracts were attempts by the employing class to limit economic direct action and class based solidarity by unions.*

This is a bit dishonest though. Contracts always include attempts to 'limit economic direct action and class based solidarity by unions'. A contract is a written agreement that affected parties attempt to get what they want out of it. By the nature of class struggle, employers want uninterrupted production. U.S. labor law hasn't changed this. Later in the myth section, it quotes from Fred Thompson's book<sup>2</sup> that 'Originally the IWW had put no restrictions, except requiring GEB approval'. However, Philip Foner<sup>3</sup> describes in 1912, a local in Montana which had its charter revoked over signing a contract. The 1932 constitution<sup>4</sup> does state all contracts required GEB approval, and also prohibited contracts that were for specified amounts of time or required notice from workers before making demands on wages, hours or shop conditions.

A 1920 pamphlet<sup>5</sup> stated:

*It is against the principles of the I.W.W. to sign contracts with employers. When workers sign an agreement not to strike, they sign away the only weapon they possess. Past experience has shown that employers only respect contracts so long as the workers have power to enforce them. When the workers have such power, contracts are unnecessary. When they lack power, contracts are useless, for the employers break them whenever it suits their purpose. . . .*

So it's probably safe to say, that while the early IWW didn't explicitly forbid contracts, it structured their acceptance in a way which would be difficult, while seemingly seeing them as undesirable. Why this changed is outside my scope, but it probably had a lot to do with the

combination of declining numbers and, at the time, new labor laws such as the National Labor Relations Act ('Wagner Act') of 1935.

While it is certainly interesting to take a look at the past and see how IWWers handled the question of contracts, it's 2011, not 1911. We shouldn't let the ghosts of the past determine what we do in the present, otherwise we'll have no future.

## **The IWW's Uniqueness**

In Part 2, Section 2 (What if workers “want” a contract?) the piece mentions something significant and

*We note here that in the countries where the IWW is most active—and especially in the US—union density and active organizing has been on the wane for decades. Ironically, this opens up a space for IWWs to present our ideas of unionization to those who may have very little understanding of what a union is and how they are ‘supposed’ to function. In fact, in many instances, IWW organizers may inadvertently give the impetus to a contract campaign by presenting the differences between “us” as the IWW and “them,” the business unions. If IWW methods falter, workers then look to other, contractual, options.*

This is mostly correct. The space opened up by declining union density means most workers will only be vaguely familiar with how a union operates, some may not even have this vagueness. So we have a chance to do that defining, and operate in a somewhat ideal way. But I think the reason the piece attributes contract campaigns being taken on (listing differences between us and the mainstream unions, workers wanting 'stabilized' gains) is missing something. I think what probably happens just as much, is that the IWW's radical outlook is downplayed and it is 'marketed' as basically a more militant version of an AFL-CIO union or just a smaller UE. The importance of the preamble gets minimized and the language of the mainstream labor movement is adopted. There are a variety of understandable reasons for this. Among them being a history of red-baiting in the U.S. that can't be paralleled with anywhere else, a tendency for populism inherited from

the left, and fear of alienating or scaring co-workers away. Another reason worth exploring is the quite conservative way mainstream unions are, which leads to those with experience in these unions looking at the IWW as appealing. But the appeal is sometimes merely for something more militant than the mainstream unions, which covers a lot of ground, much of it not an area the IWW should be covering. It's something we shouldn't try to do and is, in my opinion, a significant factor in why contract campaigns are chosen in some organizing committees.

The IWW is a revolutionary, anti-capitalist union which advocates for the abolition of the wage system. We have different goals, and so, should have different methods. If one sees ends and means as linked, it doesn't make sense to mimic mainstream union tactics for our end goals. The piece states:

*First, let it be said that by encouraging a non-contractual organizing strategy we are, in many ways, putting the building of class power before the protection of bread-and-butter gains.*

This is important. We aren't merely trying to improve our conditions, we are trying to also, eliminate these conditions. If an organizing campaign wins higher wages but does not develop our co-workers skills and knowledge, we have failed, overall. We need both and when we organize, we need to consider how what we do will determine both.

The piece describes two shops with campaigns. One won, but lost nearly all its committed organizers. The other lost but gained committed organizers. A win doesn't necessarily mean that our capacity is increased. A loss doesn't necessarily mean disillusion and people drifting away. It's *how* the campaign is organized that determines these.

## **Bad Things in Contracts**

So, coming from the point of view that the IWW is a revolutionary anti-capitalist union which should be building class power and developing

our co-workers organizing skills and commitment, why would contractualism be counter-intuitive to these goals? In Part 3, Section 1 ('What are the pitfalls of contractualism?'), a number of negative things employers almost always want in contracts are listed, they are:

- 1) No strike clauses
- 2) Management rights clauses
- 3) Binding grievance procedures

Let's take the 'no strike clause'. In my opinion, no union, much less a self-professed revolutionary one, should ever agree to this. It is basically a set of handcuffs that restricts our greatest power, the power to disrupt. Yet, this is one of the first things an employer wants in a contract. In fact, it is an already assumed and understood aspect of contract negotiations. 'Management rights' is the same thing. It acknowledges the employer's right on the speed and pace of work and many other workplace issues. If there is a dispute on what these issues are, the way for addressing this (since strike or work stoppages are off the table) would then be 'binding grievance procedures', a disempowering process that leaves your issue in the hands of a steward and member of management. All 3 of these things, which are usually things every employer wants in the contracts, take away our power or individualize our issues, when we should be building our power and *collectivizing* our issues.

## Conclusion

Direct unionism, very purposefully, brings up the question of what exactly the role of the IWW is. Are we just a militant, democratic union? Or are we a militant, democratic, revolutionary anti-capitalist union? And how do our campaigns, strategies, and decisions reflect this? We are small, no doubt about it. But we have always and continue to punch way above our weight. It is time we recognize this and the tactics that make this possible. Part of this is recognizing that contracts may be something that works against our goals, not towards them.

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- 1. <http://www.iww.org/en/culture/myths/myths1.shtml>



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- 2. *The IWW - Its First Fifty Years*, Fred Thompson, pp. 45-6.
  - 3. *The Industrial Workers of the World: 1905-1917*, Philip S. Foner, pg. 137
  - 4. <http://www.workerseducation.org/crutch/constitution/const1931.html#agreements>
5. *The I.W.W. in the Lumber Industry*, James Rowan,  
<http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Curriculum%20Packets/Evergreen%20State/Documents/document%2028.html>

An article by Juan Conatz replying to some of the Direct Unionism discussion paper responses.

Cleaning out my numerous Google Doc drafts, I found this, which continues the direct unionism debate by taking on most of the responses to the original discussion paper. So I decided to finish it, as most of the written discussion has dropped off.

First off to clear something up, I did not write (not even one word!) the original discussion paper. There seems to sometimes be confusion over that, probably due to the fact I wrote 2 reviews in the Industrial Worker newspaper. Honestly, outside of a few people who later became involved in Recomposition, a former American Wobbly who is now in Solidarity Federation and some folks I associate with the Workers Power column, I don't know who all wrote the thing. It was a collaborative effort involving a group of Wobblies over a couple year's time.

Looking back on the discussion paper, I think (the authors would probably agree) it should be seen as an unfinished draft. Further along than a rough draft but not quite a final draft. I don't view it as a complete program conceived in full agreement. Speaking of 'direct unionists' or a 'direct unionist tendency', which sometimes happens, is sort of misdirected because it talks of differences and perspectives in terms of factions. This is convenient when speaking in generalizations or to identify commonality, but can also be unnecessarily divisive or destructive. Part of how I interpret direct unionism is not as a sexy self-identifier, but as building a culture of seriously talking about IWW organizing in a way that advances our practice. To put it a bit more clearly, it's not about being part of a formalized tendency that 'wins' out, but about pushing debate in a way where it has organizational

ramifications that are discussed and decided upon by membership. Also, another problem of the sexy self-identifier is that it can be more about the term and not about the ideas. I've come across a few Wobs that identify with the term, but then advocate ideas that are basically the opposite of what the paper advocates.

Those ideas the paper advocates, in my opinion are:

1) **Anti-contractual**, as well as being against National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections and overly relying on Unfair Labor Practices (ULP's) or using them as an offensive weapon.

2) **Being enthusiastically pro-Organizer Training 101**, particularly about the replace yourself parts, building more and better organizers and direct action grievances.

3) Being **against permanent, full time, paid staff organizers**.

4) Seeing value in membership, but **emphasizing participation first**.

5) **Suspicion of formal recognition** from the state or bosses.

There's other stuff that can be taken from the discussion paper, but I think it's safe to say this is the meat and potatoes of direct unionism.

Anyway, there's been several different responses and comments related to the discussion paper, and I wanted to reply to parts of some.

The first one comes from a member of Black Orchid Collective. BOC is a small eclectic Marxist-influenced political organization based in Seattle. They write quite frequently and are worth checking out. In their response, the author expresses agreement with the thrust of the paper, but brings up its lack of political content, made all the more relevant because of their experience as a care provider in a state-run facility.

*to win, we need also to challenge the political narratives of the state, debate in the broader ideas about what health, care and disabilities*

*justice means — We won't be able to win in our little shops, in our expendable jobs, through class struggle narrative alone, on the basis that we are workers. We don't produce lifeless products, which we can abandon at will through class unity. As healthcare workers, our care for our patients and residents play into how we struggle, and how our struggle is perceived. The reason why the liberal state succeeds is because it is able to present itself as the spokesperson for the well-being of elderly people and people with disabilities in healthcare settings. We, the workers, need to break down that state monopoly and claim that role alongside our patients and their families. This is a struggle that is beyond the workplace. It is a battle against the state in the realm of ideas and analysis about healthcare, disabilities justice and the like, questions that cannot simply be answered by direct action on the job, but require study, conversation, debate, discussion etc.*

While acknowledging this situation is unique, there are similar questions to much of our other organizing. What it comes down to is that we fight for bread and butter issues, but also have a revolutionary perspective. What is it and how does it transform our views of the jobs we organize at? Take education for example. The school system as it exists is often a horrible place for teachers and students. A radical approach needs to acknowledge and incorporate how the education system deals with, treats and conditions students, as well. Or fast food. I doubt we imagine 'self-managing' fast food restaurants or merely wanting the employment there to be better paid. Some have even advocated 'abolishing restaurants' altogether. The point is, we should have a wider critique of what that industry represents and the consequences of its existence.

Other parts of this response continue along 'What is the political content?' question, which is a valid one. I don't have the answer for that. When it comes to what is our vision of society 'post-revolution', that's something that needs to be developed more fully. But this is something an organization needs to be careful and concerned about. While such a thing, more fully developed, will help inform the practice in the now, this is something that can distract from real organizing, turning the membership inward, while elevating those who say over those who do. It's a balancing act.

The last part of this response is on the unemployed.

*Another question I have, is the role of the unemployed in relation to the IWW. As we all know, the high unemployment rate in the US right now reflects deeper racial divisions and segregation. A strategy for the working class needs also to include the demands of the unemployed, not simply for political reasons, but also for practical reasons. The precarious, low waged jobs that many of us are in means that our lifestyles and prospects are not that far from those who are unemployed. [...] In building the leadership and consciousness of workers, how do the writers of Direct Unionism think through the relationship between precarious workers and the unemployed?*

Another good question, which there probably isn't an easy answer. In the 1930s, the IWW was involved in various unemployed movements, but I'm not sure of their activity. My question to the author would be, what do you think? One of the few things I've heard about this sort of organizing is refusing to work overtime because of the conception of overtime 'scabbing' on the unemployed. The desired effect was that refusing to work overtime would lead to people being hired, thus bringing them out of unemployment.

As a direct response to my reviews in the *Industrial Worker*, Sean G disagrees with both the discussion paper and my favorable opinion of it. While I would love to argue some more about this, Tom L sent a letter to the *IW* that tackles most of my disagreements with Sean. Chris A and Nate Hawthorne also replied and covered a bunch, too. Also appearing in the *IW* was a letter from Staughton Lynd. I was pleased to see that someone who has been so influential on the IWW paying attention to our debates. He says:

*I agree with Sean G. that there is nothing inherently sinful about reducing an oral understanding to writing. At the big Westinghouse plant east of Pittsburgh in the 1930s, if the management and the union reached an understanding about a particular matter, it would be written up and posted in the plant. And under Section 301 of the NLRA as*

*amended, such an agreement can be enforced in the courts, and is therefore less likely to be ignored by management.*

I find this a bit confusing, because Lynd has been one of the most critical people on the radical left of contractualism. If he didn't invent the term, he certainly popularized the term within the labor movement. For one, mentioning enforcement of the courts brings up some questions. It is my understanding that Lynd is critical of getting wrapped up in contractualism and labor law, not only because this is the capitalist's arena, but also because it takes disputes and decisions out of the hands of the rank-and-file. The problem with the example, is that it still would place the union as enforcer of this contract. A contract, to me, presumes a negotiation between the union and management of give and take. But I'm not sure we should be in the business of 'giving'. Rather, how about the workers come to an agreement about their demands and then engage in the required amount of work disruption to get it? From that point, management has to show their agreement through action and meet the demands, or disruption continues. In my opinion, this sort of 'job conditioning' avoids the pitfalls of representation and negotiation that were the seeds of the contractualism we see today. Making negotiation happen through action seems to possibly be a way of doing this. I realize this raises lots of questions about the level of militancy, firings and other topics.

In sort of an extended version of his reply to Sean G on the development of labor law and contractualism, Nate Hawthorne wrote a libcom.org blogpost titled 'Workers, the state and struggle'. In it, he gets more in depth about why current labor law is the way it is. Where he talks about direct unionism, he echoes the Black Orchid response by saying:

*the point is that those of us who are engaged in conversations about the form of workers' struggles, including so-called direct unionism and other efforts to avoid the traps of collective bargaining and other institutionalized forms of workers' struggles, we should have further discussion about a few things. One thing I think we should discuss further is the role of explicit, openly revolutionary political perspectives as part of our activity in struggle.*

This is also a big part of his piece, 'Mottos & Watchwords: a discussion of politics and mass organization', which, as I understand it, being one of the authors of the original discussion paper, was him addressing what he saw as shortcomings of it. As I already stated, I agree that the political content of direct unionism could be developed more, but this task is inseparable from the task of developing the IWW's political content more. So while, this critique of direct unionism is fair, in some ways, it misses the mark, as neither direct unionism nor the IWW itself is very clear on how practice and vision are related and linked.

As the Black Orchid response makes clear, there are organizing situations which necessitate a wider vision. But also, as Nate argues in 'Navigating negotiations', without this wider vision, we're in danger of just kickstarting the existing institutions that aim to simply make a 'better capitalism' to work for us. One of the reasons alternative unionism arises, and this includes solidarity unionism as well as direct unionism, is that the current scheme isn't working. Not even in the narrow parameters that it is meant for. When this happens, alternatives arise. This sometimes gets the current scheme to start working, which will attempt to incorporate these alternatives. Incorporation is inevitable unless the alternative has a vision beyond that scheme.

Moving on from Nate, the next response comes from IWW members in Vancouver. 'Direct unionism in practice: undermining service industry barriers to worker solidarity' gets a bit more specific than some of the other responses, describing both Canadian labor law and the service industry.

Not being Canadian, there's not much for me to say on the labor law bit, but there's a lot to agree with here. The recognition that there are things we do at work daily to deal or even resist the imposition of wage labor is an important thing. These 'informal work groups' should be the basis of our organizing, and are the key to many campaigns.

The last sentence of this article has really stuck with me. It says:

*Without the basic infrastructure to carry out these direct actions and the willingness of IWW organizer's to let go of the organizing based on site/contracting, the IWW is irrelevant; it becomes simply a club in which to wax poetic about the ideals and dreams of a liberated working class.*

To me, this means that even if we wanted to, the IWW can not be a regular reformist union based on collective bargaining contracts. This isn't the basis for our potential power and will not succeed as a strategy.

I do have some concerns about what is written about affiliation (which I assume means membership). Deemphasizing membership too much can lead to our co-workers not taking what we're doing seriously and impede the identification of the union as the vehicle for what we need and what we're doing.

This gets us to the most recent response to the discussion paper, by fellow Twin Cities IWW member John O'Reilly. On the topic of formal membership and building a union he says:

*The union form, the IWW version of the union form at least, is important. We need to build formal organization and we need to be able to use that to build an IWW identity. A union as the IWW practices it is a group of workers coming together to represent their interests and act against the boss's interests today and in doing so building a fight against the boss class's interests tomorrow. By building the union, we push our message throughout the class and have a flag that we can point to and say "See, this is what the union does."*

I agree with this. Despite the often negative connotations with the word 'union', it's something we have to redefine ourselves. That possibility exists now because as much as there are many bad things associated with the word, there are many people (most people in fact) with little experience with unions.

The various conversations that have branched out from direct unionism have been valuable for me personally, and in my opinion, have been much needed in the IWW. There's much more to say, and much more to experiment with, and I hope we continue to do both.

# DIRECT UNIONISM

A discussion paper put together by some members of the *Industrial Workers of the World*, a revolutionary syndicalist union, arguing for the organisation to build a network of militants rather than attempt to represent members through contracts. It represents a synthesis and compromise of various positions. The paper was never fully finished but generated much discussion amongst the revolutionary union movement, some of which is included within.

