

The Lay of the Land for Labor – Draft Pre-Convention Document

Mark B. (New York) and Jane S. (Detroit)

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/labor2008>

August 2008

Despite Weakened State, Labor Still a Key Force for Social Change

- The labor movement is the largest mass of independent, working class organizations in the country, with over 10,000 local unions nationally counting 16 million union members
- As the west coast dockworkers' recent May Day work stoppage to protest the Iraq war indicated, some unions continue to wield serious economic leverage, capable of striking a blow to profits.
- Unions also have tremendous financial resources, taking in close to \$10 billion in dues each year (and holding another 19 billion in assets).
- Labor represents a key player in national elections, spending upwards of \$250 million in 2008, and mobilizing tens of thousands of people to walk precincts, phone-bank, and do other voter education and turnout. In the 2004 election 25 percent of voters came from union households.
- Despite some unions' history of racism and exclusion, unions have had an important positive impact on white working class consciousness. Although it's admittedly an imperfect measure, white working class voters who are union members (and not evangelical Christians) support Democratic candidates 60/40 in elections. Non-union white working class voters are the reverse, supporting Republican candidates by roughly the same margins.
- Unions are also, of course, the workers' organizations that are by definition and by law created to fight the boss, either a capitalist employer or a government one. They remain organizations where workers are forced to come together across racial and gender lines and where hundreds of thousands of workers have the experience of getting to know and working together with people of other races that they do not have in their communities. The union (and the workplace) is where the reality of "an injury to one is an injury to all" is there for all to see (even if it's not always seen).

Economic Landscape for Labor: Global Integration, Rise of Finance and Logistics

- With the entry of the former Soviet Union and China into the world capitalist market, together with the opening of India's economy, we have experienced an effective doubling of the world labor market.
- The rules of the global economy have been written by global corporations, though trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA, and are now being enforced by the WTO
- These two factors, together with the "logistics revolution" of the last 30 years, have allowed corporations to truly globalize production, stretching supply chains across countries and regions. One stark measure of this trend is shipping container traffic in and out of the U.S:
 - 8.4 million in 1980
 - 15.6 million in 1990
 - 30.4 million in 2000
 - 45.0 million in 2007

- While these trends have had a major negative impact on some sectors of the U.S. economy like manufacturing, they have also tremendously increased the leverage of workers positioned at the chokepoints of today's cargo chain. Together, and in some cases individually, the clusters of ship hands, longshoremen, truck drivers, railroad operators, and warehouse workers have the power to cripple today's "just-in-time" delivery networks, idling the ships, terminal yards and trucks now used as mobile warehouses.
- The evolution of financial markets in the last three decades, both globally and inside the U.S., has changed the dynamic of profit-making, shifting resources and attention out of the sphere of production into what is often speculative activity. In the U.S., for example, in 2007:
 - 5% of all workers were in the financial sector
 - 15% of gross value added came from the financial sector
 - 40% of total profits came from the financial sector
- This has made capitalism, especially in the U.S., even more unstable and "irrational." It has also removed some of the traditional leverage that workers have on the job (e.g., if GM makes most of its profits through its financial arm rather than making cars, this weakens the power of on-the-job activity by auto workers). It also has put workers involved in 'production' in competition not just with workers in other regions or countries, but with the choice of no production at all (that is, capital could choose to invest in speculative activity instead).

U.S. Economy Continues Long Trend of Getting Leaner and Meaner

- The recession that marked the beginning of this decade never ended in some sectors, and the situation will only get worse given the current economic turmoil.
 - We have lost over three million manufacturing jobs this decade
 - 2000: 17.2 million
 - 2007: 13.7 million
 - These losses have been especially concentrated in core union industries like automotive and heavy equipment.
 - Part has been due to trade, given the enormous increase in the flow of goods in and out of the country (see container traffic statistics above).
 - Also due to technology, owing to the heavy investment in capital equipment in the 1990s.
- Recent trends are a continuation of 'Lean Production' – a corporate squeeze play that dates back at least 30 years. The results are now depressingly familiar. Lean production not only reduces the number of jobs through straightforward methods like speed-up, it also fundamentally changes the way the workplace is structured (both physically and in terms of the balance of power on the shop floor). Workplaces are redesigned to isolate workers and minimize opportunities for solidarity and collective action. Work processes are re-engineered to strip workers of discretion and reduce their power on the job,
- Corporations have also found new ways to attack workers:
 - Gutting union contracts through the bankruptcy courts (e.g. Delphi and Northwest)
 - Shifting the social risks associated with pensions and retiree healthcare onto unions (e.g. VEBA at Goodyear, GM, Ford, looming proposal at Verizon) or

eliminating pensions and retiree healthcare altogether for newer, second-tier workers.

- Using large pools of capital (i.e. private equity), Wall Street investors are now capable of taking over major corporations (even giants like Chrysler), often pulling a quick “strip and flip,” chopping the company into pieces, and/or piling on debt to goose up stock prices and line their own pockets.
- The place where unions have had success organizing in the past 40 years, namely in the public sector, is increasingly becoming an island of decent jobs, in terms of pay and pensions, in a sea of low-wage, no-benefit, non-union private sector options. Conservatives are gunning for public sector workers:
 - Exploiting the gaps between higher public sector standards and the private sector (for comparable work) to push for privatization, contracting out, and the creation of charter schools.
 - Using the poor pay, pensions, and benefits of most private sector workers to pit them against “overpaid” public sector workers, bolstering general opposition to taxes and public spending, and deepening the general cynicism and mistrust of many voters towards government.
 - Conservatives’ concrete strategy is to exploit this distain for taxes and mistrust of government to “starve the beast,” i.e., fight tax hikes or other means of increasing public sector revenue.
 - Choking off new revenue creates a material crisis for the state, forcing it to cut spending and services. These dynamics are only exacerbated by other conservative policies like balanced-budget mandates and new changes to pension accounting rules (which force governments to count all future pension obligations as current liabilities).
 - After decades of rightward political drift many public sector unions are too willing to accept the stereotype of voters as conservative and anti-tax. This has led many to shy away from high-profile “us-versus-them” campaigns—where the risks are high—relying instead on incrementalism and their status as “insiders” in the political process to protect members’ standards. Not only has this reinforced many voters’ picture of unions as a special interest, it has also ensured that most public sector unions won’t touch the “third rail” of U.S. politics—the tax system—since “insiders” all agree that this is political suicide.
 - We can only expect these trends to intensify as the current recession deepens.

Private Sector Remains Hostile Territory for Unions, Low-Hanging Fruit in the Public Sector Has Mostly Been Picked

- Private sector union density is at its lowest point in 100 years.
 - 12 % overall, 7.4% in the private sector
- Large scale organizing in the private sector remains an elusive goal.
 - Where unions have succeeded it has often been by getting employers to agree to card check or neutrality agreements (see more below).
 - Another successful strategy has been to use the leverage that comes from ties to the public sector, such as forcing new publicly-funded construction to use union labor, or requiring vendors and contractors at public airports to remain neutral in union organizing drives, or even using zoning and permitting processes to extract

“community benefits agreements” (which typically include neutrality provisions) from big developers.

- Today most newly organized workers come into the labor movement outside of a typical NLRB election procedure, usually through a card check or neutrality agreement with the employer. There is wide variation in how unions secure neutrality deals and organize within them.
 - It is possible to win a card check/neutrality agreement through beating up on the employer.
 - The 1999 card check agreement that eventually helped CWA organize more than 17,000 retail workers at Cingular Wireless was the product of five years of struggle with Southwestern Bell, Cingular’s predecessor company.
 - The 2006 neutrality agreement giving San Francisco-based UNITE HERE Local 2 the right to organize in the suburban markets and outlying counties was the product of two years of “bargaining to organize” that included strikes, lock-outs, and civil disobedience the targeted hotels.
 - But in many of these agreements, the union explicitly or implicitly agrees to mute struggle against the employer, before or after the contract is signed, and to keep improvements in workers’ conditions minimal. Such agreements result in more members and more dues for the union involved, and may even beef up the union’s political muscle in elections, but the “union advantage” for new members is sub-par.
 - For example, in 2002 the UAW secured a neutrality agreement with parts-maker Metaldyne and agreed to wages \$10 lower than Big Three standards. This included forcing UAW members at DaimlerChrysler’s New Castle, Indiana plant to take pay cuts when their portion of the operation was sold to Metaldyne (or to transfer out of town).
 - SEIU secured a quiet quid-pro-quo agreement with California’s Nursing Home Alliance that gave the union organizing rights at facilities the companies chose, provided the union help get more money into the nursing home industry through the state legislature. The union spread “template agreements” to newly organized homes that gave up the right to strike, limited workers’ ability to talk about patient conditions publicly, and contained wages and benefits below those in other SEIU-organized nursing homes. Ironically, SEIU organized more non-Alliance nursing homes during the time period of the agreement, usually with better contracts and standards.
 - While there is lots of variation with neutrality agreements, a few points are clear:
 - Sweetheart contracts, or playing junior partner with management, is not the way to rebuild the labor movement.
 - The recent experience of the Steelworkers at Dafasco in Ontario also illustrates that employer neutrality is not enough. You still have to organize the workers and convince them that there are good reasons to join the union.
 - You also still have to build a union. And how you organize in the first place has a tremendous impact on what you are able to build down the

road. If the union is a product of struggle, of grassroots rank-and-file involvement, then it will be a different organization than if it's the product of backroom deals or sweetheart contracts.

- Given the prodigious difficulties of organizing today, because of employers' ability to break the law at will, it would not be tenable to dismiss neutrality agreements out of hand. The question is what *kind* of neutrality agreement is negotiated and, as always, the involvement of workers in fighting for their own union.
- Given the hostile terrain, raiding between different unions will continue, and may intensify (e.g., the war between the SEIU and the CNA as seen in Ohio, California, Illinois, and Nevada and the recent raid on AMFA at United Airlines by the Teamsters). Raiding or unions fighting over the same members is very often unproductive and wasteful, a substitute for organizing the unorganized. But sometimes it makes sense for members to switch unions—to one that is more likely to fight concessions, for example (as when United Airlines mechanics left the Machinists for AMFA), or when the incumbent union is hopelessly corrupt or undemocratic. Union officials don't "own" their members, and while the burden of proof may be on the raiders, raiding should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
- After decades of growth, new public sector organizing has also slowed down.
 - New, large-scale organizing requires moving into largely non-union, right-to-work states in the South and Southwest. It also requires actually establishing the right to collective bargaining for public employees (just over half of all states permit public employees to bargain collectively, with the rest either denying bargaining rights explicitly or offering limited "meet and confer" options).
 - Unions have also branched out in the public sector to organize new kinds of workers. In fact, it is important that the largest single chunk of new organizing in the last decade has moved unions pretty far away from their traditional model, namely, the organizing of more than half a million homecare and childcare workers. These workers have become new union members through ballot initiatives and/or gubernatorial decree. By creating public entities to serve as the employer of record for such workers—who ultimately receive their pay from the public purse—unions (usually SEIU or AFSCME) were able to sign them up as members.

Top Union Leaders Recognize Crisis, Abandon the Fight

- For the first time in its modern history, the bureaucracy recognizes the crisis it's in.
- The first outward response was the contested election for AFL-CIO president in 1995, which brought John Sweeney and the "New Voices" slate into office.
- But 10 years of trying to rebuild the labor movement "from above" brought few results, leading to the 2005 split in the AFL-CIO and formation of the Change to Win federation. In many ways, Change to Win is a paradox.
 - The public rationale for breaking with the AFL-CIO was the need for a stronger federation, one that could force affiliates into line and "on program".
 - But in practice CtW has even less infrastructure and resources as a federation than the AFL-CIO.

- Despite their weak center, CtW projects an even more intense program of revitalization “from above” through its driving force the SEIU. Since the split in the AFL-CIO, for example, SEIU has created a wave of mega-locals—administrative units of tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands of members that often span multiple states—and the union has centralized more resources and control over bargaining in the hands of SEIU’s national leaders.
- Now, top leaders of unions in both the AFL-CIO and the CtW are managing the decline of union standards (and sometimes the decline of unions themselves) as we’ve known them for the past 60 years.
 - Some unions are trying to manage the decline straightforwardly.
 - The UAW and the Steelworkers, for example, have argued that global competition is too tough, that U.S. workers can’t compete with workers in China who are paid so little.
 - The UAW has openly said that a large portion of its members in auto—parts supplier workers, “non-core” workers in the Big Three, and new hires in the Big Three—should not be paid the decent wages/benefits of the past, and has enshrined this point of view in every major contract negotiation in the last five years.
 - The spring 2008 strike at American Axle, was, on the level of International leaders’ wishful thinking, a last-gasp resistance to the pauperization of parts-sector workers, but in reality it had no strategy to win, with predictable results.
 - Some are trying to manage the decline via spin, accepting lower standards (which will ultimately serve as a drag on better union standards everywhere) and claiming they are immense victories. Unions in the “spin zone” are primarily associated with Change to Win.
 - At UPS Freight, a formerly non-union division of UPS, Teamsters refused to use their leverage inside the rest of the company to bring UPS Freight workers into the union and up to the standards of the National Master Freight Agreement. Instead, they won a neutrality agreement which forced them to organize each UPS Freight terminal one-by-one, with contract standards that will undercut Teamsters in other parts of the freight industry.
 - In 2002 SEIU launched a janitors strike in Boston. Rather than organize an effective work stoppage (there was never more than 15 percent participation in the strike), the union waged a series of highly visible and even militant public actions in the streets, counting on political pressure from city leaders and state officials to coerce the contractors association into a decent settlement. While the strike was tremendously important in terms of making the work of Boston’s immigrant community visible, the contractors held out and the union took a weak settlement, which it trumpeted as a major victory.
- Where unions do exist they have continued to cede the workplace, not even showing up for the continuous bargaining that should be happening daily between workers and management, both over the ordinary give-and-take on the shop floor and over the changes that management is continually introducing (technological, workplace organization).

- The most ominous trend is for outright acceptance of the corporate agenda, in hopes that corporations will let their “partners” survive. More on this below under “Survival Era.”
- Meanwhile, many local leaders who have not given up the fight continue to try to represent their members, including through militant and sometimes innovative struggles. Unfortunately, their hands are often tied by their national unions’ policies or lack thereof.

Union Strategy in the ‘Survival Era’

- The shift in union policy we are seeing today can be described as a shift from retreat to organized surrender. This shift is not a thorough one; there are still many areas where retreat—or even resistance—are still the order of the day. But the growing trend among top union officials is to surrender.
- The “retreat” line that top leaders have enforced for over two decades says to the members “We have to take givebacks now because we’re not strong enough [though they usually don’t organize any fight to in fact test the balance of power between employer and union]. In order to level the playing field between employers and unions, we need to get the politicians to carry our water.” So unions have focused all their hopes (and their considerable financial and staff resources) on the political arena. The message is that “Organizing in the private sector is too hard. Corporations are too powerful. The deck is stacked against us. Congress needs to do something.”
 - That something is the Employee Free Choice Act, which is made to sound like a cross between the passage of the civil rights legislation in the 1960s and the second coming of Jesus Christ.
 - The drumbeat has gotten even stronger with the Democrats in (bare) control of Congress and with a chance to win the White House. But there are a few holes in the logic:
 - First, these are the same politicians who gave us NAFTA, refused to ban permanent replacements for striking workers, and worked so hard on behalf of Wall Street during the Clinton years that we’re now left with the biggest gap between rich and poor since the Great Depression.
 - Yes, organizing is hard, but unions could do a lot of it with the quarter of a billion dollars labor will spend in the 2008 election.
 - This logic reverses the history of our labor movement, the civil rights movement, and every significant advance ever made in the U.S. We didn’t take those steps forward because a light bulb went off in somebody’s head in Washington.
 - They were the product of struggle: the hard-won fruits of millions of ordinary people, convinced of the righteousness of their cause, acting together, willing to face fire hoses, attack dogs, employer goon squads, Pinkertons, and even the National Guard. Politicians aren’t the motor force of history, people are.
- While labor’s current knee-jerk spending on Democrats—usually with little or no accountability required—won’t get workers anywhere, it is certainly true that labor needs a political program backed up by mass action in the streets. Many of the battles workers are now in cannot be won workplace by workplace. Pensions and health care are essentially political problems.
- There are also positive signs on the political horizon. Although DC insiders in both the AFL-CIO and CtW are maneuvering to sideline their efforts, more and more unions are

endorsing single-payer legislation. In the same vein, the center of gravity within the labor movement is solidly against the Iraq war and occupation. In both cases, what is missing is any vision for how to spark a movement that can take these struggles into the streets and communities.

- In the big picture, however, we still face an uphill battle, trying to foster consciousness for which there is no concrete political expression. The U.S. working class has no political party of its own, and when shifts do occur in working class consciousness they usually cross squarely through the Democratic Party. The Democrats remain stumbling block on the road to a socialist alternative, and labor's allegiance is not just at the level of the officialdom but among most rank-and-file activists as well. Our task remains finding a working class solution to the current economic and political turbulence and achieving that task will force us to moves past the tremendous barrier of not having our own political organization.
- The surrender mode of operation goes further than retreat. In this mode, unions volunteer to carry the *corporations'* water. Go straight to the source, and try and prove your worth to the corporate bosses. "If we help you, you will let us live, right?" Everyone knows that CEOs are reasonable people, just looking for ways to "add value" to their bottom line—and unions are just the people to help them. This is the ideology of partnership that has infected nearly every corner of the bureaucracy. It comes in different flavors.
 - **Old School:** Union leaders surrender in two ways here:
 - At American Axle the union was so timid that it didn't take the minimum steps necessary to win a strike. The Canadian Auto Workers' early contract negotiations, before expiration, in order to make preemptive concessions, is another example.
 - At Chrysler during the last Big Three negotiations, union leaders put down rank-and-file efforts to fight back.
 - **New School:** Implicit and explicit promises are made to employers that if the union is allowed to sign workers up, it will help corporate profits. Not only will the union promise not to strike and not to disparage the company, and to keep wages down, it may also put its political apparatus at the company's service.
 - For example, in California SEIU initially backed legislation to make it harder for nursing home residents to sue the homes, until their quid pro quo with nursing home operators was discovered and they had to disavow the deal.
 - SEIU represents the vanguard of this trend, with a well worked out and even public rationale that sometimes dismays (and shafts) even its Change to Win partners. SEIU puts itself forward as fighting for all workers, not just union members ("Justice for All"). But the more in bed the union is with the corporations, the less tenable that posture is.
 - It is important to note that the new-school surrender mode requires more discipline in the union, to carry the line and to keep resistance from breaking out. Megalocals, appointment of local officers from above, armies of appointed staffers, bullying, and a general corporate modeling of union functioning are almost a prerequisite for this survival strategy.

Can The Ranks Save Labor?

- We can't ignore the facts. Private sector union density is as low as it's been in the last 100 years.
- Worse still is action where it counts – strikes and work stoppages – face to face confrontation with the boss, wielding our economic muscle.
 - In this decade there were about 200,000 workers in any given year idled by strikes and work stoppages.
 - To put that in perspective
 - 1910s 581,000
 - 1930s 889,000
 - 1940s to 1970s roughly 2 million
 - 1980s 718,000
 - 1990s 384,000
- What do 'survival era' politics at the top mean for rank and file activists and our interventions in the labor movement?
- This moment coincides with the end of an arc for many of the interventions we've made in the labor movement:
 - New Directions in transit and various reform movements in auto.
 - Consolidation of Hoffa's power inside the Teamsters
 - We've also seen the disappearance of some newer reform movements in other unions, and the immigrant rights movement that pulled off massive marches in 2006 has pulled back in the face of repression and political backlash.
- What does all this mean for class consciousness?
 - Most workers have not had the experience of fighting back on the job, or any experience they had was quite a long time ago.
 - The 1970s upsurge is gone, and the generation who thought open combat with their bosses—or civil war within their own unions—was a sensible idea are now retiring or already gone.
- Organizing and fight-back, however, continue, whether at labor's grassroots or in new formations like pre-majority unions, or workers centers.
 - Rank-and-file union members and local leaders continue to prove that the fight—on the shop floor or in the streets—is not over and that winning is even possible.
 - On May Day dock workers up and down the West Coast shut down the ports to protest the Iraq war, a move initiated by rank-and-file longshore workers.
 - Union reformers inside the 40,000-member Los Angeles teachers union put more than a quarter of their membership in the street demonstrating during their last contract fight, winning reduced class sizes and more control of school curriculums in some schools. Just last month LA teachers delayed the start of school to protest looming budget cuts, with close to 15,000 community members joining them on the picket lines.
 - Healthcare workers from Massachusetts to California have struck to protest mandatory overtime and unsafe staffing levels. They have also been at the forefront of political fights to save public hospitals in cities like Los Angeles and Buffalo.

- A two-hour wildcat strike by 100 train dispatchers in Fort Worth, Texas in 2005 snarled train traffic from Seattle to Chicago, as union workers walked off the job to protest unilateral changes to the company's vacation policy.
- Even after losing two organizing drives, workers at Smithfield's largest hog processing plant, in North Carolina, continue to fight for a union. The primarily African American and Latino workforce has staged wildcat strikes and walked off the job to win the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, and workers are waging in-plant protests in support of the union.
- Faced with intense employer opposition, some unions forego representation elections and contracts, organizing "non-majority" unions using Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act to "fight like a union" before they are recognized or have a contract.
 - Organized through Black Workers for Justice and UE Local 150, workers at the Consolidated Diesel engine plant in Whitakers, North Carolina, have gotten fired workers reinstated, forced the state government and the company to pay unemployment benefits during slow periods, won a paid holiday for MLK Day, and forced the company to deliver on its broken promise to pay out more than a million dollars in bonuses.
 - Philadelphia security guards, working with Jobs with Justice, formed a non-majority union for guards at the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University, winning paid sick days, significant raises and at U-Penn a new building for the guards' office. They are now moving their organizing campaign city-wide.
 - In Texas nurses are organizing non-majority unions together with the National Nurses Organizing Committee (the national arm of the California Nurses Association), forming patient care committees inside the hospitals to fight for patients' rights, and pushing for a safe-staffing bill in the state legislature.
- And many entirely new workers organizations—mainly in the form of workers centers—are sprouting up across the country, primarily organizing immigrant workers or those in the freewheeling segments of the service sector (restaurant workers, domestic workers)
 - Some worker centers have been able to win impressive victories against corporate behemoths, like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, who have forced Taco Bell, then McDonalds, and now Burger King to pay more for the tomatoes CIW members pick.
 - Others have won millions in back wages and overtime (e.g. the New York Restaurant Opportunities Center's recent victory against the Fireman Hospitality Group).
 - These are organizations with strong internal political education, typically organizing workers of color (especially immigrant workers), and tackling the challenge of organizing where there are large numbers of workers in the economy overall (e.g. restaurants and retail). They are also more organically rooted in communities than most unions, despite their overall

small size and limited leverage at any one workplace and their heavy reliance on staff direction and foundation funding.

- At the same time that resistance continues so too does the development of working class consciousness. The reality of “us” versus “them” is still present, and if anything spreading. But collective solutions to what are indeed collective problems don’t seem viable, so people resort to individual solutions.
 - Looking up the corporate (and social) ladder, rather than to the people standing right beside them (going back to college, starting own business, going into management, making deals with supervisors).
 - Taking no action on the things that outrage and disgust them (war, healthcare, rich getting richer) because action doesn’t seem viable.

A Bridge to Socialism?

- Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to transforming organized labor into a true social movement. This is an essential task if the U.S. working class has any hope of achieving its revolutionary potential. A militant, class-conscious labor movement is needed if we want to reconnect the U.S. working class to socialist politics in any large-scale fashion. (“Labor movement” is broadly defined to include not just unions but other kinds of workers’ organizations as well.)
- The building blocks of union transformation are no mystery:
 - Struggling to defend workers’ gains against the employer offensive.
 - Expanding labor’s ranks through large-scale member-driven organizing.
 - Re-connecting labor to its community roots and linking it to other social struggles.
 - Enabling women and people of color to take the lead.
 - Re-creating unions as consciously pro-immigrant, LGBTQ-friendly, anti-racist and anti-sexist organizations.
- All of this requires breathing life into limp local unions, rebuilding them as ‘instruments of struggle’ and equally importantly as ‘schools of democracy’ where workers become, in Marx’s words, ‘fit to rule.’
- In the here and now this requires taking unions in a different direction. That is why we’re involved in building—or leading—reform movements within unions. Victories, even small ones, change consciousness, offer lessons and serve as building blocks for further organizing and organization.
 - Particularly important are winning shop floor victories—everyday skirmishes with the boss to try to make the work day bearable—because the workplace is typically where class conflict is most apparent, where workers are thrown together across racial, ethnic, and gender lines, and where all workers have a chance to participate in struggle, whether they are active at the union hall or not.
 - The fight for union democracy has a similar long-run impact, building the possibility for workers to look upon unions as truly their own organizations. This sense of ownership is a precondition for renewed engagement with the life of the union, and a necessary condition for workers to take the kinds of risks needed to win against today’s aggressive employers.
- It also requires a different vision for the labor movement, which is why we’re involved in building cross-union formations and networks, like Jobs with Justice, Labor Notes, and

the many local variants, together with projects that expand the political and social vision for labor—embodied in initiatives like the Labor Party, U.S. Labor Against the War, and the myriad labor-community and international solidarity campaigns that have sprung up in the past two decades.

- These efforts at sparking a grassroots labor revival stand in sharp contrast to other alternatives. For example, Steven Lerner, architect of SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign, has recently argued that their current “Justice for All” program is much bigger than their union, that in fact it represents a comprehensive vision for advancing the interests of the entire working class. While most of their goals (expanding healthcare, raising the minimum wage, making it easier for workers to form unions) are unobjectionable, their method for achieving these ends leaves members largely on the sidelines, and minimizes the role of struggle. Gains are secured from above, within the system, and the role of the rank-and-file as the agents of their own emancipation is short-circuited. This approach misses the critical point that how we get where we want to go matters. It also ignores the fact that struggle is the best school for socialism, not just because of its transforms consciousness, but also because it forces us to grapple with profound questions, like how to build a democratic movement, or what change do we actually want to see in the world.
- Our job, as always, is to engage in struggle, whether it’s fighting over discrimination in daily job assignments, circulating a petition, spearheading a contract fight, organizing drive, or a strike, contesting in a union election, picketing a boss’s house, or arguing politics. Struggle changes consciousness on a scale and to a depth that we cannot match through any other means. It’s also important to recognize that even in better times we lose more fights than we win. As such, our challenge is to build struggles which offer a greater sense of power and a deepening sense of history and social purpose, even when we lose. Thus the way we build fights and organizations is not predicated only on winning a victory—though we want to win—but also on fighting in way that means we come out the other end with more committed fighters, a clearer sense of which side we’re on, stronger organization, and a sense of the bigger picture historically and socially, so that even if we lose today we are increasing our capacity to win tomorrow.
- A socialist labor activist first and foremost is a reliable ally. We have our co-workers’ backs in a way that inspires them to have ours. We get to know what moves our co-workers and what gets in their way. We experience camaraderie not as a tactic but as part of our own survival. We know our co-workers quirks, their warts, and their sometimes astonishing moments of bravery, solidarity, and kindness.
- We cannot necessarily foresee the clash of forces that will spur masses of workers into motion. What we do know is that we want to be there when they move.