

Rank-and-File Caucuses for Workers' Power In Trade Unions

TODAY U.S. WORKERS FACE A STEPPED-UP assault on our lives by a ruling class* intent on squeezing every last dollar of profit out of our labor. With their economy in a crisis, these bosses are moving to shift the burden of that crisis onto our backs. They are using their government to freeze our wages, cut budgets that already provide inadequate services to millions of workers, lay off workers as unemployment continues to rise, cut welfare (even as they force millions onto welfare because there are no jobs), and continue to raise prices, rents, transit fares and everything else needed by workers to survive.

Particularly hit hard are black, Latin and Asian workers who are the last hired and first laid off, forced into the lowest-paying, least secure and hardest jobs and who suffer double the unemployment rate of white workers. These millions of minority-group workers provide a source of superprofits for U.S. bosses and the racism that sets this up is also used to split the workers' potential for unity needed to fight back.

The working class's main organization to try to meet this assault has been the trade union. At one time, in the 1930's, many of the unions really represented the interests of the rank and file and fought militant battles for higher wages, shorter hours and job security. This was especially true in the CIO, which was organized and led by communists. In fact, that was how the big, trustified industries—steel, auto, electrical, maritime and many others—first won union rights and the benefits that went along with that.

COMMUNISTS OUT...SELLOUTS IN

However, by the 1940s the ruling class succeeded in getting the communists kicked out of the union leadership and a long trail of sellouts was begun. The unions have come under the control of piecards

who use them to make a cozy spot for themselves, working with the bosses and the government to hold workers in check. These sellouts have become what we know as unions today because the rank-and-file workers have been unable to organize to control our main weapon—the shut-down of production—and create our own leaders, throwing these others out. The "union" is that group who has the organized power to shut off the flow of profits and bring production or services to a standstill in order to force the bosses to come across on our demands. Right now the present crop of union leaders stand in the way of the rank-and-file exercising this power while they themselves live high off the hog, wheeling and dealing with the bosses.

WORKERS DO NOT TAKE THIS SITUATION LY-ing down. Leading up to—and since—the wage freeze, large groups of workers in steel, auto, telephone, railroad, government services, and many other areas have defied the bosses, their government and the union misleaders and struck against the assault on us. Hundreds of thousands of black and Latin workers have rebelled in the ghettos against racist cops and fought for jobs, decent housing and schools, etc. But all of these wildcat walkouts and rebellions, while winning some immediate gains, have been "one-shot" offensives. None have had consistent planning by an organization carrying out



Rank-and-File seamen challenge 'King' Joe Curran

*The ruling class is composed of the owners of the big monopoly corporations—GM, Ford, GE, AT&T, etc.—and the big banks like Chase Manhattan, First National City, Bank of America, etc.—who use the various levels of government to protect their class interests—profits—and keep down workers. They control the two-party system, the press, TV, radio, movies, etc. The only way workers have ever made any advance is by fighting them.

and consolidating a drive for real power. At the point of production, none have had the goal of actually taking away the power of the bosses' union flunkies and putting it in the hands of the rank and file, who then truly become the union.

The fight against the workers' enemies is not a "one-shot" fight. It is a struggle for power, both over our day-to-day class interests—higher wages, shorter hours, better working and living conditions—and for the long-range goal of state power* to prevent the ruling bosses from taking back whatever gains we make.

ORGANIZED STRUGGLE NEEDED

Anything the working class has ever won in its own interests has been achieved through organization, whether it be the 8-hour day and shorter workweek, long and successful strikes or the actual unionization of the mass production industries. Workers are always involved with small, lower-level struggles, usually one-shot fights around day-to-day grievances, harassment, contract violations, threatened layoffs, unsafe working conditions, etc. However, no sooner than one fight is made, and even won, the boss turns around and attacks on another front, taking away any gains.

To not only maintain gains won through class struggle, but to plan against inevitable counterattacks by the boss, a permanent, organized group is needed both to make plans for immediate struggles and to reach out to, and unite with, other workers with the goal of winning power at the point of production—becoming the real union. Such a group is a caucus or workers' rank-and-file committee. A caucus is a stable group of workers united around a common set of demands, an organization that fights those opposed to its demands—the boss and his union lieutenants—and makes plans to carry out these fights, assigning its members specific responsibilities.

To really represent rank-and-file class interests, a caucus's guiding principles should include:

- 1) Demands in the interests of all workers.
- 2) Unity of all workers against all enemies (the bosses, union sellouts, scabs and stoop pigeons within the workers' ranks, etc.) in an ever-widening area. This means fighting racism against all minority-group workers, fighting the special exploitation of women, and fighting for class solidarity;
- 3) When the best interests of the workers conflict with the bosses' laws, "ground rules," contracts or "legal procedure" already laid down, a fight must be made to break these rules, since they are opposed to the best interests of the workers, just as the bosses and their union lieutenants break any and all laws, rules or agreements whenever it

*By state power we mean control of all governmental levels, including the military, courts, jails, police, etc.—all of which, under Socialism, would replace the dictatorship of capitalist bosses with the dictatorship of the working class. Workers would run the government and bear arms to enforce workers' rule.

suits their best interests.

Within a strategy of achieving a measure of power over the ability to shut down production, and becoming the union, these guiding principles will determine the tactical approach to such questions as union elections, grievance procedure, the contract, etc. These things, in and of themselves, are not good or bad. It is how they are used by one class or another that is important.

If the boss is overloading a worker, which is also violating a contract rule, then a broad fight can be made to "defend the contract." But if contract procedures bar a militant fight, stating that one must "file a grievance" to settle the issue (which may take years to resolve), then militant action—a slow-down, work stoppage or even wildcat strike—over-rides the contract (since, in such a situation, "using the contract" is helping the boss). Similarly, if union misleaders have connived with the boss to put things into the contract which hurt the workers, a militant caucus should feel free to break the contract to enforce the workers' best class interests, just as the boss breaks the contract every day in the week when it suits his (profit) interests.

RUNNING FOR UNION OFFICE

Running for union office is another tactical question to be determined by the three guidelines. The rank and file usually looks for leadership to workers' caucuses that carry out militant programs, not to the official union leaders. The rank and file's immediate desire is to throw out the corrupt officials and put the caucus in power, to be better able to fight the boss. Once the caucus launches such a campaign, it must do so with the understanding that, if it wins, it will not—and cannot—function under the "ground rules" followed by the old leadership. Rather, it must follow the principles which won it the respect of the majority of workers. Inevitably this will put the new leadership and the mass of workers they represent into sharper conflict with the boss and with the higher union misleaders, a battle for which the caucus must be prepared before-hand.

IF THE NEWLY-ELECTED LEADERS CONDUCT this kind of battle, it will change the union from one that acted as an agent of the boss to one that acts in the interest of the rank and file. If the workers and their militant leadership now have it within their power to shut down production, they become the union, no matter what franchises are handed out by the international bureaucrats. If this kind of militancy and power does not enable the rank and file to also become the union in name (the international, acting for the boss, might expel it if it couldn't break it up), it will still be the union in actual fact, since it will have the power to shut off the flow of profits. Therefore, it is with the caucus-led rank and file with whom the boss will have to deal, not with his lieutenants in the international whose power over production is zero in the face of a militant, organized rank and file.

The union, its offices, contracts and procedures are not permanent agents of the boss. They are weapons in the class struggle which the bosses now control, for the most part, but which—at one time or another—may or may not be used as weapons of the workers. The guiding principle must still be: what is in the best interests of the workers at a particular time: what will unify the most workers to strengthen the fight against the boss.

Should the workers elect the caucus to union leadership—and thereby enable the rank and file to become the union—the struggle is not over; the real battle has just begun. Now, with the workers having a better chance to wage a real class struggle in their own interests, the class enemy—the bosses and their flunkies—will counter-attack even harder. Since the caucus includes the most effective leadership of the workers, some of whom may become union officers but most of whom won't, it is extremely important that the caucus not disband because it has taken union power. The continued existence and growth of the caucus will be one of the factors against the newly-elected officials going over to the bosses' side or being bought off by the higher union sellouts.

CAUCUS AIM: POWER OVER PRODUCTION

If the caucus does win and follows the guiding principles outlined earlier—which means sharp battle on every grievance, harassment, bad working conditions, as well as for shorter hours, higher pay and job security—it is inevitable that the workers and their leaders in the caucus will be attacked by both the boss and the defeated union flunkies, along with their international masters. They may even succeed in ousting the rank-and-file elected officers, or putting the local into "trusteeship." Then the caucus would have to organize an actual

shut-down of production, assuming it had that kind of power among the workers.

The caucus must exist and branch out **under all conditions**. Again, the main object is not to solely get elected to office, but to fight in the best class interests of all the workers, with whatever tactics prove useful.

ONCE WORKERS TAKE POWER OVER THEIR immediate situation through such a caucus, attacks will come even more sharply than during the initial struggle—first bribery and then harassment, the carrot and then the stick. Since rank-and-file caucuses and trade unions operate within the capitalist system and don't have goals which go beyond the system; and since the bosses still hold state power, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the rank and file to withstand the attacks to come without understanding the necessity to "go all the way," to fight to overthrow the bosses' system—and their state power—completely.

The rulers will throw troops, jail terms, injunctions, etc. at these rank-and-file fighters, to break them if bribes don't do the trick more easily. Communists and their ideas see beyond the bosses' profit system, to a society of workers' state power (not just trade union power), which will enforce workers' rule and workers' ownership of production, and will eliminate bosses as a class that can take away hard-won gains. This is a revolution for socialism.

COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP NECESSARY

Because communists see the class struggle not as an isolated fight for immediate gains but as a long-range fight for state power, they more easily can point out the profit motive behind all the ways bosses attempt to split workers—white against black and Latin, men against women, young against



New York phone strikers storming Manhattan streets in display of working class strength

with and defend communists among them, as long as the communists, the Left, are giving leadership in the best interests of the working class.

COMMUNISTS IN PLP BELIEVE THAT THE ingredients for workers' state power are contained in daily class struggle of workers for immediate needs. A program for a Left-Center coalition, for a rank-and-file caucus fighting for power at the point of production and in the trade union movement, could include some or all of the following:

A PROGRAM FOR ACTION

AGAINST THE BOSS: a fight for a shorter work week with a big pay boost—thirty hours work for forty hours pay, or any variation thereof; a fight for higher wages—smash the wage freeze; strikes over grievances if the boss violates the rules; against no-strike clauses in the contract; two-year maximum contract length; ironclad protection against discrimination for black, Latin and women workers; labor unity, especially between rank-and-file movements.

FOR A BETTER UNION—democratic rank-and-file control over all decisions of the unions, absolute membership power over ratification of contracts; an all-embracing shop steward system, always elected by the steward's crew; no union official to be paid a higher salary than the average of the unit that elects him; specific campaigns to organize the unorganized and the unemployed within the realistic possibilities of each level of the

union; no split on strikes by one-at-a-time local back-to-work movements within national companies; locals to be run by committees and officers from the shop; all negotiating and policy committees to have a majority of rank-and-filers on them.

AGAINST RACISM—smash the bosses' tool that divides workers and prevents them from fighting in their class interests; upgrading and preferential hiring of black and Latin workers into jobs denied them because of boss-inspired and union-supported racism, thereby reducing the bosses' ability to break the workers' strength; support for the inclusion of militant, class-conscious black and Latin workers in all levels of union leadership; support for and unity with black caucuses fighting for class demands against the boss; defense of black and Latin people in the ghetto.

AGAINST THE BOSSES' GOVERNMENT—reputation of the "national interest" and all state-invoked wage freezes and "guidelines" as a bosses' tool; smash all strikebreaking, union-busting laws; fight the shoving of the cost of city services onto the workers through the profiteering of banks (unity between Government and non-Government workers against the common enemy); no support of ruling-class parties or candidates; no submission of contract disputes to arbitration or other "neutral" Government boards. Unity of all sections of the working class around a militant, class struggle line should be the guiding principle that governs every short- and long-range action of any group of workers. The eventual goal must be a national rank-and-file movement that will unify the workers as a class and sweep the labor fakers out.



Men and women kept scabs out with fighting mass picket lines during Puerto Rico telephone strike.