

A Report on the Solidarity Labor Commission's Evaluation of the Rank-and-File Strategy  
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## **Introduction**

For more than 25 years Solidarity members have engaged in the promotion of transitional organizations within the U.S. working class and its institutions through the development, elaboration and practice of what has come to be known as the rank-and-file strategy. The primary setting for the rank-and-file strategy has been within the trade unions and its principle vehicle has been the development and expansion of grassroots networks within and across unions (e.g. contract campaign committees, caucuses, and independent organizations such as Labor Notes and the Association for Union Democracy). A primary goal has been to contribute to developing workers' consciousness, leadership skills and capacity through self-organization and struggle. This effort is premised on a belief that such organizations, coupled with a broad, class-conscious layer within the working class, are the most promising road to re-establishing the social-movement union tradition here in the U.S., and a key to revitalizing the socialist project itself.

One of the main tasks of the Labor Commission during the 2002-2004 period was to continue the evaluation of Solidarity's rank-and-file strategy begun at our May 2002 Labor Retreat. To this end the Labor Commission solicited written evaluations from many comrades engaged in rank-and-file work during the spring of 2003, culminating in a weekend long labor commission meeting in May of that year. This meeting, which included a broad layer of our labor activists who were not part of the LC, grappled with the various written submissions, reflections, and reports, attempting to draw conclusions and lessons learned.

What follows is the first attempt to summarize and synthesize the discussion presented at the May 2003 LC meeting, as well as the written submissions that have now filled two special discussion bulletins (with one still to come). For space considerations this document makes no attempt to summarize our work in different industries. Those experiences are covered in quite a bit of detail in the first two special discussion bulletins.

As will become evident, there is quite a bit of work still to do evaluating our experience. For example, we still have not seriously examined why projects died out in certain sectors (e.g. steel and telecom)<sup>1</sup> while surviving and even growing in others (e.g. auto, teamsters, and teachers). There also remains much to be said about our experience fostering working-class consciousness within the labor movement, or introducing socialist ideas into labor work. This unevenness, in my view, suggests that continuing our evaluation should remain a priority of the incoming Labor Commission. Before turning to the lessons, I first provide a brief review of our strategy, as well as some of major shifts within the economy and the trade union movement that have occurred over the past generation.

## **Why The Rank-and-file Strategy?**

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 1990s several comrades reengaged in rank-and-file work in telecom, renewing Solidarity's a presence in that industry. The factors leading to a collapse of our earlier telecom project remain largely unexplored.

The strategy was initially conceived as an approach to our work within unions. The starting point is the observation that most periods of intensified class conflict in the U.S. produced an increase in workplace activity. This resistance to the intensification of exploitation has taken a variety of forms over the years (included strikes, slowdowns, walkouts, wildcats, and outright sabotage) but is nonetheless a consistent feature of class conflict in this country. Our strategy is based on the belief that this sort of grassroots resistance can, and under the right conditions will, serve as the crucible for the development of working class consciousness. Widespread working class consciousness, in turn, is a necessary condition for the development of socialism, since our ideas about the radical transformation of society won't really get a hearing without a broad layer of class conscious worker-activists already convinced of the fundamentally divergent interests between "us" and "them".

Unions have been the primary setting for the rank-and-file strategy, first and foremost because they bring people together in the workplace, where the ongoing cycles of class formation and class conflict are most intense. By promoting a collective response to this class conflict, unions as institutions hold the potential for changing consciousness, however infrequently this potential is realized.

Although we want to be involved in the workplace struggles that help shape working class consciousness, and we see unions as the primary vehicle for waging these struggles, the evolution of U.S. unions in the last 40-50 years has left them hobbled, ineffective, and bureaucratic. Indeed, as the period of large-scale rank-and-file activity in the 1970s demonstrated, unions were often as much of a problem in the eyes of those in motion as were the bosses. Thus, an important element of the strategy has focused on transforming unions by a variety of means, turning them back into democratic institutions, with both the ability and inclination to fight the boss. Seen more broadly this effort is aimed restoring the traditions of militancy, solidarity, and democracy that have been part of the US labor movement at different points in history.

Although unions were the initial focus of our rank-and-file strategy, and remain central to any project for revitalizing working class power, they are by no means the sole vehicle for building working class consciousness or engaging in "us" versus "them" struggles. Indeed part of our rank-and-file approach is to build a labor movement that is bigger and broader than the trade union movement – one that encompasses a variety of organizational forms, and non-workplace issues, including worker centers and community-labor coalitions such as Jobs with Justice.<sup>2</sup>

### **Power and Our Strategy of Engagement: The Economy**

As with our choice to focus on the workplace, and to work primarily in unions, another important choice many folks have made is to concentrate their work in "industry" (although public sector

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<sup>2</sup> David L. has done a really good job providing us with a unified framework for analyzing work in these diverse areas. See his "Reflecting on the Rank and file Strategy: A Draft Discussion Document for the 2002 Solidarity Labor Retreat".

work and teaching have always also been a priority).<sup>3</sup> Industry has typically been understood as the manufacturing, transportation, and communications sectors of the economy. As with many other aspects of the rank-and-file strategy, the orientation towards industry was, in part, based on an assessment of where we could have leverage and exercise power (in the economic sense).

Whatever the merits of this initial focus on “industry,” one undeniable fact of the past thirty years is that these sectors of the economy have been declining in overall importance. The figures below give some perspective on this decline.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Industry as % of GDP</i>	<i>Production Workers in Industry as % of Total</i>
1950	53%	46%
1960	48%	40%
1970	43%	35%
1980	42%	32%
1990	35%	26%
2001	30%	23%

Although these sectors (particularly telecommunications and transportation) remain key points of leverage in the U.S. economy, their diminished overall significance suggests that Solidarity must think more carefully than perhaps we historically have done about how and where we try and deploy our limited resources. This is especially true given the changing conditions of work in industry over the past generation. Recent airline and trucking layoffs are just one example of the greater instability facing the industrial workforce today versus a generation ago. The current recession, coupled with the constant pressures of lean production, will only serve to make stable industrial employment more and more difficult to maintain. In addition to a fresh evaluation of strategic industrial sectors, we must also take a more serious look at other strategic sectors (particularly those that are expanding), with the most obvious case being healthcare.

### **Power and Our Strategy of Engagement: The Unions**

We choose to work in unions not because we hold any romantic notions about these institutions. We know that there are deep material roots to the business-union traditions of the last half century, and that U.S. unions have a long, unsavory past with regard to issues of racial and gender justice. We also recognize that workplace struggles are just one arena in which working class consciousness is formed, and our work in unions necessarily must build a bridge to these other areas of struggle and consciousness-formation. It is nevertheless true that the unions today, even in this low ebb, represent the largest and most multi-racial network of working class

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<sup>3</sup> Although industry was the primary orientation, other sectors, such as teaching were part and parcel of the rank-and-file strategy since the beginning. For example, the International Socialists Labor Perspectives document adopted at the 1972 convention identified the following six priorities for the coming year 1) UAW/Auto; 2) Teamsters/Trucking; 3) USWA/Steel; 4) CWA/ Telephone; 5) AFSCME/Public Employment; 6) AFT/Teaching.

institutions in the U.S. They are also strategically important for their massive financial resources (approximately \$16 billion in annual receipts, and \$14 billion in assets).<sup>4</sup>

However, much like the economy in which we find ourselves, the unions in which we work have also undergone dramatic transformations over the last generation. In the mid 1970s, the industrial unions dominated the labor movement – the UAW, the Teamsters, and the Steelworkers all had over 1 million members. As the figures below indicate, today the Teamsters are the only industrial union with more than a million members, and they represent the best case of holding steady or growing slightly.

*Membership Figures for the 10 Largest Unions in 2001, in thousands  
(with their 1975 membership for comparison purposes)*

	1975	2001
IBT	1,300	1,398
UFCW	***	1,385
SEIU	480	1,376
AFSCME	647	1,300
IBEW	856	741
AFT	396	736
IAM	780	723
UAW	1,300	702
CWA	476	618
USWA	1,062	589

\*\*\* The UFCW was formed in 1979, but the three largest unions that joined to form it (Meatcutters, RWDSU, and Retail Clerks) had 1.2 million members in 1975. It is not counted as an industrial union since less than a third of its members are in food processing, manufacturing, or meat-packing jobs

While it remains the case that industrial unions still count for 6 of the 10 largest unions in the U.S., only one industrial union (CWA) displayed any significant membership growth over the last generation. Moreover, in all cases industrial unions have been losing sectoral density, even if absolute membership has remained steady, implying a weakening of their economic power.

By contrast SEIU has nearly tripled its membership since 1975, and AFSCME and AFT have doubled (or nearly doubled) their membership over the same period. While an important part of this growth for SEIU has come from mergers, these three unions operate in some of the only sectors (healthcare and the public sector) which have seen union density growing over the past generation, and both the public sector and health care have seen large employment growth over

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<sup>4</sup> For a sense of just how big the labor movement is, relatively, consider the annual revenue of the following organizations: Urban League (\$46.5 million); NAACP (\$50 million); ACLU (\$60 million); AARP (\$517 million); Ford Foundation (\$652 million in expenditures, including all grants; \$9.3 billion in assets); Red Cross (\$2.7 billion); and United Way (\$5 billion). It is also worth noting that the labor movement collects more than half as much money each year (\$16 billion) as all U.S. foundations combined give away in grants (\$26 billion), so U.S. unions as a whole will necessarily dwarf any organization which relies heavily on foundation support (including most community-based organizations, worker centers, and labor-community coalitions).

the same period. At the minimum Solidarity needs to think more systematically about how to relate to activists within some of the most rapidly growing unions (e.g. SEIU and AFSCME) and possibly whether, or in what ways, we should try and build a base within them.

### **What Are the Implications of these Broad Shifts?**

None of these issues are news to Solidarity members. Indeed, we have been on the forefront analyzing many of these trends in the economy and the labor movement. Their implications for our labor work are less clear. Based on our internal assessment to date, there is widespread agreement that industry is still an important strategic orientation. If anything, the spatially disbursed, just-in-time economy that we now inhabit makes certain locations within industry more strategic than they were a generation ago. And for a small organization with limited reach, it makes enormous sense for us to continue to support and even expand many of the projects that we have built inside the union movement.

Nevertheless, these dramatic changes also require us to more carefully examine both the priority industries and geographic regions that comrades looking to take up rank-and-file work should target. They also suggest that our traditional sectors of activity should be complemented, if possible, with some other orientations (such as healthcare).

Developments in the larger labor movement offer an even more mixed picture. For example, in practice most unions continue to cede the workplace. This is true of both the old line industrial unions, buffeted by the most recent wave of layoffs and concessions, as well as the “organizing unions,” increasingly reliant on external/political interventions to win organizing drives and settle contract disputes. This implies that our efforts will continue to resonate with workers, and that our message of fight back will find an audience. However, the low level of resistance on the part of union leaders feeds on itself, and makes concessions or individual passivity appear as a rational choice.

Another contradiction we witness is that the labor movement has become increasingly tied to the Democratic Party in the last decade. One factor, of course, is the growth of public sector unions and their material interest in the public budgeting process. It is important to stress however that even for private sector unions, the increased reliance on political solutions to contract disputes and other conflicts has tightened their links to the Democratic Party. Labor’s PAC contributions have skyrocketed, as have their investment of staff time and other resources. This greater intertwining of labor and the Democratic Party makes it much more difficult to relate our perspective on independent politics to other union activists. At the same time, however, the labor movement is becoming increasingly instrumental in its political approach. Examples include the UAW’s brief debate over whether or not to endorse Ralph Nader for President in 2000, as well as AFSCME and SEIU’s endorsement of Howard Dean for President in 2004. This instrumentality opens up space for at least some discussion about candidate accountability and why (and on what terms) labor should make political endorsements/contributions.

We must also grapple with the changing character of labor leadership. While there are still far too many of the dinosaurs lumbering around the labor officialdom, it is much more difficult to characterize the entire bureaucracy as socially conservative, corrupt and out of touch with the

membership as it was thirty years ago. A significant layer of today's labor leaders came of age during the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and they bring a rhetoric and practice of social justice to the mainstream of the U.S. labor movement that would have been inconceivable in the not too distant past. These leaders and their unions are also attracting a broad layer of young people to the labor movement who are motivated by these progressive/social justice values (fight for immigrant workers, organize the unorganized, etc.).

While these leaders have often proven to be as authoritarian as their predecessors, it is difficult to be critical of their work and still maintain in a constructive dialogue with the younger layer of union staff. Many recognize the contradictions inherent in the way their unions organize, acknowledge the marginalization of their members, and are uncomfortable with the undemocratic functioning. But they are also convinced of the imperative to organize and fight, and they are frequently turned off by what they see as overly critical or negative coverage in the labor paper or within Solidarity.

As long as these union staff positions remain a significant pole of attraction for young activists Solidarity must find a way to build a bridge between their experience in the labor movement and ours, between their motivations to fight for economic and social justice and our analysis of the material limits of doing so within the framework of the official labor movement. This challenge is a new one for us, and is rooted in the bureaucracy's orientation towards young activists since the mid-1990s, accompanied by their dramatic expansion of staff-led organizing and the accompanying job opportunities.

Finally, another important shift we must confront is the very structure of local unions, which pose real challenges to our traditional "from below" approach to rank-and-file work, particularly in the UFCW, SEIU and the Carpenters. For example, it is, on the surface, very daunting to imagine building a reform caucus in a 26,000 person state-wide local of building service workers in a state as geographically dispersed as California. Many of our organizing methods need to be re-examined in light of these changing union forms.

### **What Are the Specific Lessons from our Rank-and-file Work?**

Moving beyond a general analysis of shifts in the economic and trade union environment in which we do our work, what are the insights we have gained from more than a generation of rank-and-file activity? The remainder of this document takes up some of the big questions that we have faced in putting the rank-and-file strategy into practice. It is organized along the lines of our discussion at the 2003 Labor Commission meeting, although insights from the written submissions are drawn in where appropriate.

#### *Internal Union Dynamics and Running for Office*

One prominent manifestation of Solidarity's rank-and-file strategy has been the formation of internal opposition/reform caucuses. This orientation is grounded in the reality that most unions have little or no culture of internal democracy or broad member participation. Moreover, union leaders – distant from the day to day pressure of the shopfloor and interested in preserving harmonious relations with management –are usually disinclined to engage in workplace

struggles. As such, reform/opposition caucuses can be a natural pole for members wanting to fight the boss (or their own union leadership), whether it's by resisting speed-up; challenging unsafe working conditions; rejecting a concessionary contract; or questioning the high salaries of union officials. By focusing this opposition within the ranks we can set people in motion, and hopefully even change their sense of what is possible through collective action. However, it is almost inevitable that any organized opposition is going to face a challenge from members to "put your money where your mouth is" and run for office.

In our discussion at the May 2003 Labor Commission meeting, we reviewed our experiences running for office and contesting for power within our Transit, Auto, Teamsters, Teachers, Airlines, Telecom, Clerical, and Postal work. Clearly there was an enormous variation in folks' experience or success with running for office. There have also been a wide variety of approaches to challenging existing union leaders beyond pure electoral efforts.

At the broadest level, as one member noted, we were grappling with the question of how, as socialists, we should contest for and exercise power in "non-revolutionary" times. Our goal is to get activists to be "for" rank-and-file power, but we are also constrained by the fact that we are often talking about things that members don't "want" (e.g. confrontations with their supervisor, going to meetings, talking to strangers). Experiencing power can change members' perspectives, but we don't have a lot of moments where we get to exercise real shopfloor power, so this necessarily limits our ability to "transform by experience". While we can sometimes rely on similar experiences of power from outside the workplace, there also have to be these experiences within the workplace to foster a lasting change of perspective.

In reflecting on our experiences, it is clear that running for office is also a risk and an opportunity, depending on the context. In New Directions in Transit, for example, elections were the key to the project's survival in the early years. They provided much broader exposure to our ideas within the local than would have been possible otherwise, and they consistently exposed the union leadership's inability or unwillingness to confront management's concessionary demands. However, contesting for elections in Transit proved to be the downfall of the project in the later years, as New Directions attracted a layer of oppositionists who did not share our commitment to rank-and-file control, but who were nonetheless able to isolate our comrades within the larger caucus and use it as their electoral vehicle.

Elections can also crystallize the major issues facing a union at a given moment in time, such as the Jerry Tucker campaign for Region 5 Director in the UAW in the mid-1980s. That campaign, with its message of resisting concessions and "jointness" with management, was seen by many as a "referendum on the politics of the international." It was, not surprisingly, a campaign that originated far from Detroit, and was enabled by divisions within the Administration Caucus. Since our comrades had oriented to the urban auto plants in Detroit, with their large African-American and Arab populations and their legacy of black radicalism, they were not well positioned to participate in the early stages of the New Directions Movement (NDM), limiting their ability to influence its character in the early stages.

Unfortunately elections can also distance us from a focus on workplace issues. For example, it could be argued that the NDM missed one of the key lessons of the TDU experience, and became

primarily an electoral vehicle, de-emphasizing its roots in shopfloor struggles against concessions and labor-management cooperation. The re-orientation of NDM as an electoral vehicle, together with the divisions sown between NDM activists and black rank-and-file members during the Don Douglas campaign for Region 1/1B Director help explain its ultimate demise.<sup>5</sup> The Douglas campaign in particular also reveals the deep roots of the UAW bureaucracy within the African-American in Detroit, as well as the very deep influence that the bureaucracy can wield with its joint appointments and staff positions.<sup>6</sup>

Speaking to the situation in “organizing unions” comrades in telecom raised the issue of whether it made sense to contest for office, or organize in an oppositional manner to existing leaders. In their situation they concluded that it did not, despite the deficiencies and problems of the existing layer of leaders. This is clearly an issue where we need more thinking, analysis and debate, as “progressive bureaucracies” are becoming the norm in a greater and greater proportion of the labor movement. It is also essential if our analysis of the officialdom is going to ring true with ordinary members.

Whether we run for office or not, even if we run and win we still face a host of other constraints. First, we need to do a better job serving members than our competition. This is no small matter, and it means not only having to face difficult choices vis-à-vis the functioning of the union (e.g. grievance handling and contract negotiations), it also can mean taking decisions or making compromises that you have previously criticized others for. A second real risk of holding power is that the workload will lower our sites, diminishing our expectations to the point where we strive to be the best bureaucrats in the local, but not much beyond.

On the other hand, our experience practicing the rank-and-file strategy has been very successful in a host of ways. We have trained leaders. We have changed the internal environment in our unions. We have created a layer of activists who would not be there if it weren't for our organizing (the pond of class conscious activists that is necessary for socialist ideas to get a hearing). However we need more of us. The low numbers of committed revolutionaries engaged in this work necessarily limits its effectiveness.

### *Combating Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Workplace*

Within today's fragmented and divided working class, encounters with racism, sexism and homophobia on the job are all too common. Through our rank-and-file work we recognize that there is nothing automatic about overcoming institutional racism, sexism or homophobia, and we

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<sup>5</sup> The Administration Caucus branded Douglas as a racist, and mobilized African-American International Reps to campaign against him throughout the region. Because the Douglas campaign had paid insufficient attention to the way racial issues were likely to play out within the UAW, they had not built a slate that could effectively counter the Administration Caucus' smear campaign, and both he and Tucker were defeated in their elections at the 1989 convention.

<sup>6</sup> To get a sense of the deep reach of the UAW bureaucracy, consider the fact that at one comrade's plant in Detroit, the bureaucracy controls more than 50 joint appointments and staff positions. In a comparably sized Teamsters local the union is likely to have only three business agents. This reveals the complicity of the Big Three in helping maintain the status quo in the auto industry, since they provide the UAW with the material conditions necessary to exercise this control.

have challenged them on the job and in our unions. We have also worked to change white workers' consciousness, as well as their willingness to challenge institutionalized oppression.

Difficulties, of course, abound. For example in telecom, the culture of sexism and homophobia is pervasive. You are always in a position of deciding whether and how you will confront someone about these problems, and sometimes, when prompted by external events (Amadou Diallo's murder, the 9-11 attacks, the war) you have no choice. In heavily male industries we often encounter resistance to fighting specific instances of sexism. Individuals are frequently reticent to "stick their neck out" and we often find ourselves fighting on someone else's behalf. Addressing the problem may mean getting management involved (e.g. in cases of sexual harassment) which is always a problem.

It is also the case that even when these issues have been substantively addressed in the union they are never definitively "settled." There is always a need to "re-learn" things as time passes and new people come into the union. One concrete example from our work in the postal workers union involved newer members asking why the union needed to send women members to a "women in unions conference."

Another perennial problem is being tuned into the ways in which gender, race, and sexual orientation will shape rank-and-file members' understanding of any issue. The Don Douglas campaign for Regional Director within the UAW is instructive in this regard because his campaign did not anticipate the way in which race would become the defining issue of the election. Douglas, coming from a GM local in Pontiac, MI didn't begin his campaign with an explicit strategy of building a multi-racial slate (in contrast with Jerry Tucker's campaign in Region 5). Indeed a racially-informed perspective did not appear to play even a tactical role in the campaign (e.g. producing flyers with the photos of the entire NDM slate, which was multiracial).

As noted in the prior section, this was the campaign's undoing, as the Administration Caucus labeled him a racist, and utilized union staff, particularly African American international representatives, to campaign against him in the Detroit city plants. Obviously this problem was in part inherited by our comrades in NDM, since they didn't start the electoral opposition movement but came into the process after Douglas and Tucker were already organizing. However the failure of the campaign does highlight the pitfalls of organizing in a "race-blind" manner among the auto rank-and-file.

In our teamster work, we operate in a culture that is pretty bad, and those problems are reflected in TDU. On the one hand this is a good sign – it means that TDU is attracting people from the ranks – however the culture itself is a problem. TDU's approach has been to take the problem on directly, recruiting and training leaders of color, as well as confronting the racism of white workers. In a union where 23 of the 24 nationally elected leaders are white men, TDU has an elected leadership where one third are people of color, and 4 out of 18 are women. Comrades were adamant that the counter-position of defense of minorities and internal democracy (a juxtaposition frequently made by the UAW bureaucracy) is a false dichotomy. They argued that we need to have some faith in the membership's ability to understand and engage these issues, and offered their experience of leadership selection with TDU as a successful example.

Taking up institutional oppression directly was also important to building our work among clericals at the University of California. Campaigns to defend affirmative action and to win domestic partner benefits were early struggles in that union, and in the latter case provided an important opportunity to take the issue of domestic partner benefits directly to the membership.<sup>7</sup> CUE activists have also confronted the campaign against an English-only initiative at the UC as part of their campaign for respect in their contract, and dedicated significant resources to anti-racist trainings within their union.

In addition to addressing specific instances of institutional oppression, many comrades were arguing that we also need to fight for institutional access for women and people of color. This may translate into fighting for affirmative action within the workplace, or it may mean fighting for training and access to skilled jobs for women and people of color. In a New England healthcare union one comrade discussed how this approach to fighting institutional oppression laid the groundwork for transforming people's conception of the union. In this instance it even led workers to challenge traditional "spokespeople" for their communities (such as the NAACP) when they were on the wrong side of their labor dispute.

In our West coast teacher work, comrades have found that in order to build truly multi-racial campaigns and develop leaders of color within the union they have to target campaigns of significant importance to people of color within the union. By necessity this has meant taking up issues beyond the workplace. As will be discussed more below, some comrades have argued that this fusing of workplace and non-workplace based organizing is not just specific to Los Angeles, or to teachers unions, but that it is a necessary reformulation of what they view as our traditional approach to rank-and-file work, rooted primarily in the workplace.

Finally, since we began most of our rank-and-file projects there have been several interesting developments with regard to race and union elections. In particular, there are a number of milieus in which we work where people of color have won top office or gain substantial representation in leadership.<sup>8</sup> This shift in composition has not necessarily altered the basic orientation of these leaders towards bureaucratic top-down functioning (the election of Roger Toussaint in TWU Local 100 being a prime example). And in many cases it has not substantively reduced the practice of business unionism. This situation creates a contradiction for the new layer of leaders of color, and it creates both opportunities and problems for our rank-and-file activists. On the one hand, it sharpens members' focus on the practice of union leadership and the vision that different candidates bring to the election. On the other hand, it also complicates our caucus building, where we often were able to reach a significant layer of workers of color by running a self-consciously multiracial slate against a predominantly white leadership.

### *How Do We Relate to The State?*

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<sup>7</sup> The union leadership decided to have the union's position be decided by referendum, so it forced activists to go out and have discussions with rank-and-file members about the importance of the issue.

<sup>8</sup> It also bears note that in many respects the UAW has been on the leading edge of these developments.

Another perennial question in our labor work is how we relate to the state, in particular the formal political process. Although many of us confront the state in “extraordinary” circumstances (state and local budget crises, federal bailouts, consent decrees, on the picket line), the most common context is the familiar tug of electoral politics and integration into the Democratic Party. As noted earlier, for a variety of reasons several key unions today are more intertwined with the Democratic Party than in the preceding period. This relationship is contradictory, as unions are also behaving more instrumentally in the political arena than in the past (e.g. 1199NY’s endorsement of Pataki). However it continues to pose difficulty for us to raise our perspective on independent politics within our labor work.

While we are still searching for a workable approach, several openings are presenting themselves. First, there is significant layer of the bureaucracy that concedes we have gotten very little from the Democratic Party for all our time and money. This has created the space for some comrades to argue for political endorsements based on issues or criteria. Such an approach accepts the reality that our unions will endorse Democratic candidates, but aims to restructure the basis on which we allocate our money and time, tying them to positions on issues that matter materially to us. Some comrades have also argued for a shift towards nominal endorsements, but the withholding of significant financial resources, redirecting that money instead into organizing or other union-building activity.

We are also seeing some small cracks in the edifice of support for the Democratic Party, particularly at the local and state level. For example, in Grey Davis’ re-election campaign (before he was recalled) the California Teachers Association endorsed Davis but did not donate much to the Davis campaign. Other local initiatives, such as the fight for a living wage at the port of Oakland, have opened up space for our comrades to argue for a different relationship between labor and the Democrats. In Massachusetts, more than 12,000 workers in public higher education waited 2 ½ years for the state to fund their contracts following this recent budget crisis. In a state where 85 percent of the legislature is Democratic, the ensuing contract campaign gave rank-and-file activists ample ammunition to question unwavering support of Democrats. Indeed, at the height of the contract campaign both the Mass. Teachers Association (NEA) and the Mass. Federation of Teachers (MFT) voted to refuse endorsements or campaign contributions to any legislator who did not support their members’ contract funding.

### *How Do We Address Workplace versus Non-Workplace Issues?*

As discussed above, teachers in Los Angeles have for many years been involved in building non-workplace based campaigns (for adequate funding, against English-only and high-stakes testing, etc.) These comrades have concluded that this approach is central to their efforts to build a multiracial activist base within their union. Theirs are clearly not the only efforts to bridge workplace and non-workplace struggles, as other comrades have found it is possible, indeed imperative to work hard within our unions to talk about non-workplace issues.

Efforts to address the war in Iraq are just the most recent example. For example, comrades have found that resolutions against the war can be important an important vehicle for engaging the membership in a debate about U.S. foreign policy. However, the ways these resolutions are introduced and motivated are as important as the motion itself. For example in TWU Local 100

the executive board passed a resolution against the war in Iraq. They did so, however, without any member debate, awareness or involvement, as if they didn't want the members to find out. Comrades noted that in such a situation it probably would have been better to lose the vote, but be able to spark a membership wide discussion. Others noted that the very fact that so many resolutions (whether widely debated or not within the ranks) against the war are emerging is an important statement about the changing character of the bureaucracy. They also noted how these resolutions have enabled the creation of U.S. Labor Against War (USLAW) which is a tremendously important break with labor's historic support for U.S. imperialism.

One teamster comrade noted that raising social movement issues is very context specific, and in different situations it may make sense to raise or not raise certain issues. The issue is that we be attuned to the thinking and attention of the ranks. When activists are talking about it (not just committed leftists) then it seems like it is a good time to raise the issues. We need to be clear though that what we do in voluntary organizations like Jobs with Justice or TDU is more constrained than what we do within our unions. Within our unions we should not be shy about raising these issues with our longstanding allies, even if it causes problems.

There are also more reasons to address non-workplace issues than the purely symbolic. In many instances these efforts strengthen our organizing, bringing together more force than the union can mobilize on its own (e.g. parents and students together with teachers). They can also help us bridge a specific location in the economy (education) with a particular geography (neighborhood, city or region). As noted early they can also strengthen our base within the union by mobilizing a certain segment of the membership.

Non-workplace based campaigns can also be important strategically for many unions who face difficulty winning gains through workplace action alone. For example homecare workers in Los Angeles may need to build a broad alliance of workers and consumers in order to overcome their limited leverage on the job. Such campaigns, however, can also become a substitute for workplace mobilization. One good example of this is the strap-hangers campaign led by TWU Local 100 in New York. There the Touissant administration used coalition-building to avoid rank-and-file mobilization, hoping instead to convince the governor to increase transit funding with consumer mobilization, through instrumental persuasion rather than direct conflict.

As once Bay Area comrade noted, another creative tension that emerges from non-workplace campaigns is that these efforts can pose problems if we are working non-instrumentally with our community allies. This follows from the fact that working in genuine solidarity may mean taking up their demands rather than pressing the demands that we find most important or useful in our trade union work.

It also bears note that it is not necessary to start from a non-workplace issue and bridge backwards to the workplace to build these broader initiatives. It is indeed possible to raise these issues in the context of a workplace fight and have it resonate much more broadly than among the membership. Examples include: 1) The UPS campaign that a "part-time America doesn't work"; 2) fights over forced overtime; 3) nurses strikes over staffing levels (e.g. Brockton, MA); 4) The fight for dignity and respect language in the contract of a Teamster meatpacking local; 5)

Teacher contract fights over budgets and staffing levels that link learning conditions and working conditions.

In closing, it is important to mention a longstanding debate that continued to crop up in our evaluation. Because the rank-and-file strategy's starting point is on the workplace, it is frequently criticized (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) as a conservative approach to labor work.<sup>9</sup> Some have argued that engaging workers in concrete struggles on the job offers no bridge to socialist politics, that while we may engage in some important fights, there is no place for that work to go. One comrade even counter-posed two theories of labor work – what he characterized as our current theoretical approach “rank-and-file unionism,” with an alternative “class struggle unionism”. The latter approach to labor work, it was argued, builds equally from a fight against the racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideologies of oppression along side the fight for broad economic demands.

Clearly this is a debate which we must continue. However digging deeper into our actual experience, neither of these broad formulations fits our work particularly well. In many instances areas which have often been labeled the most “narrow” (e.g. teamsters) had some of the most compelling examples of the kind of broad fight against oppressions (e.g. their work with immigrant meatpackers and cannery workers). Similarly the fights that have often been characterized as “broad” (e.g. teachers) are often intimately grounded in workplace issues (e.g. teacher control of curriculum). We are at the stage in our labor work where we need to move beyond these dichotomies and into a richer, more rooted analysis of our actual practice addressing workplace and non-workplace issues in combination.

### **Lessons for Solidarity**

In conclusion, what lessons do we draw for socialists functioning in the labor movement, and for Solidarity as a revolutionary socialist organization? First, as Henry P. summarized in his 2002 document, *Reflecting on the Rank and File Stratey*, “[w]e have to measure our successes and failures in relative terms. Overall, the rank-and-file work of our small collective of socialist activists has had significant success in a difficult period.” Through our labor paper we have had tremendous success at keeping key issues in front of the labor movement, such as international solidarity versus “buy American” and resistance to the team concept. The fact that we had a good analysis of lean production and a way to fight it was an important ingredient to some of our limited success. This made a difference for an important layer rank-and-file activists, and it is why many of them joined TDU or other of our reform efforts. People were drawn to our leadership, and they were receptive to the politics and strategy we promoted.

We also must be clear, however, that our labor work, by and large, has not drawn rank-and-filers to Solidarity. It has, however, been quite effective in helping us recruit others outside the labor movement, particularly young people and students, to the organization. While we should not give up on recruiting workers to Solidarity, particularly if we make the organization as a whole more habitable, we also must recognize that recent trends are unlikely to shift dramatically. This necessitates a consistent and self-conscious outreach effort to the layer of young global

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<sup>9</sup> One of the more pointed examples of this is in “The Mass Work” section in Chapter 7 of Milton Fisk’s *Socialism From Below* which was on the reading list for our May 2003 labor commission meeting.

justice/anti-sweatshop/anti-war activists with whom we work. Solidarity as an organization needs to expand its efforts to build youth participation at Labor Notes, as well as coordinate and expand our visibility and involvement in milieus like Jobs with Justice, USAS and other student-labor activity.

Such recruitment is likely to pay dividends in terms of retention and involvement in Solidarity. It is no accident that most of active and engaged comrades under forty are involved in labor work, and rank-and-file activity has often been the glue that has kept many involved while others of their generation have drifted away. Having a Solidarity-wide project within our labor would make this sustained engagement even easier. We also must broaden the organization-wide connections among rank-and-file activists, through national retreats and conferences, a labor fraction email list, and more face to face meetings of the labor commission and/or specific industry fractions that have not functioned nationally in the past (e.g. teachers and airlines). Building our collective functioning will enable us to grapple with many of the outstanding strategic and theoretical issues that our rank-and-file assessment to date has not really covered. These include:

- organizing the unorganized
- building working class consciousness within and outside of trade unions
- bridging working class consciousness and socialism

They will also permit more engagement with and reflection on:

- our different takes on union elections
- ideas on where people should concentrate
- debate on the issue of economic leverage (as against other factors like stability of employment, workforce composition, possibilities for other non-workplace organizing, opportunities to orient toward immigrant workers, etc.)
- reflections on what it means to do “politicizing” in our different areas of work
- further discussion of organizing efforts and some way to bridge between organized workers and organizing efforts.
- more nuts and bolts assessments of what people need (pamphlets, conference calls, industry meetings, etc.)