

Getting the Labor Movement Back on the Offensive

Opening Remarks “Building Solidarity from Below” Conference

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When we started organizing this conference nearly a year ago, most of our conversation was about “how in the world are we going to we cheer these people up?” How are we going to show them some light at the top of this hole that we’re in?

And then this Spring workers took to the streets. They were the largest series of workers’ demonstrations in the history of this country. I feel privileged, to have the chance to speak to you just four days after International Workers Day was finally celebrated the way it should be.

I want to start by asking you a couple of questions.

Who here has heard that the AFL-CIO split? [Most hands go up in the audience.] Okay, almost everyone. If I’d seen fewer hands I’d think you all came to the wrong conference.

Who here has heard of the Longshore Workers Coalition? [Many fewer hands go up.] Okay, less of you. That’s also not a surprise.

They are a reform group inside the East Coast longshore union. Since 1999, these workers, from Houston to St John’s, Newfoundland, have been fighting to take back the International Longshoremen’s Association—the ILA—from their corrupt, do-nothing leadership. The reason I’m bringing them up is that regardless of whether there is unity at the top of the labor movement, we need to build and support movements like the Longshore Workers Coalition.

BIG PLANS

Yes, we need big plans too. Yes, we need to organize new members en masse. But things like what these longshore workers are doing, at the grassroots, hold as much promise to change the labor movement as any of what’s happening at the top.

Look at the ILA as an example of power we’re not taking advantage of. This is a union with the power to shut down parts of the entire U.S. economy, for heaven’s sake. Their members stop working, and cargo stops moving.

But when the ILA’s contract was up in 2004, the officers were prepared, as these guys often are, to take a pass on using the members’ power. They agreed to cut the new hires’ wages, and they put out the concessions for a membership vote.

But some members of the Longshore Workers Coalition decided otherwise. They started a vote no campaign under the banner of the ILA Rank-and-File. They said no way should

we be divided by a two-tier contract. One thing they did was organize car caravans to go leafleting from one port to another.

ILA members from New Jersey told me that when they arrived in Hampton Roads, Virginia, the leaflets were literally grabbed from their hands, photocopied, and within a few minutes they were circulating through the port like hot cakes.

Now, the vote count came out as a yes vote. Big disappointment. But the members documented multiple locals where the voting wasn't conducted fairly. If the vote had been fair and square the ILA leadership would have faced their first contract rejection in decades.

So now the Coalition is organizing to take over their locals and their International. Otherwise, they'll keep on getting stuck with concessions.

Groups like the LWC are just one example of what will help put labor back on the offensive.

But, in times of retreat, when we are on the defensive, we need to do more than criticize leaders: we need to point to alternatives.

So let me ask you this: what are you all doing to light some fires? What kind of trouble are you making? How do you think we can put the movement back in the labor movement?

FIXING OUR MOVEMENT

I'm going to go through some of the ideas for fixing our movement. Because lets face it: we're getting our butts kicked right now.

1. We have to **fight on the job**. You're right: too many leaders have lost track of the idea of power at the workplace. When you build power on the job, that feeling, that rush of power, can break through the cynicism and defeatism that decades of losses have left with us.

Any of the New York City transit workers here tonight will tell you what their three-day strike did last December—it gave their co-workers a sorely needed reminder of their collective power to say “this contract stinks and we deserve better.”

2. **Union democracy**. Running and owning your own union is also the kind of experience that gives you the confidence to take on other fights—not to mention the ability to do it.

We need the kind of union where members and leaders trust each other. Where the leaders don't feel they have to do everything behind the members' back, because they think the members are too dumb to understand, and where the members know that leaders

have their back. In that kind of union, members will say: “Yes! Count me in! I’ll be there on the front lines with you!”

3. That leads me to point three: we have to say “**no to concessions**” and the idea that maybe, this time, in my workplace, concessions just might save jobs.

Even more important, we have to reject the philosophy of labor-management cooperation, which seems to be making a big comeback among some of our more prominent leaders. The union’s job is not to provide docile workers for companies. That’s an idea that will dig us deeper into the hole we’re in.

We won’t win all our fights against givebacks this year or next year, and we need to be prepared to learn from our defeats. But the fight is worth making, win or lose, and we need to continue to fight for our vision of what’s fair.

4. **Organizing.** We need to do it strategically, by looking at two things: one, where we have power in the economy—the chokepoints and natural sources of power—and second, where workers are ready to get down to it.

Another May Day story: a small group of immigrant truckers, troqueros, in the port of LA/Long Beach struck—and the biggest port in the U.S. was crippled. That’s a chokepoint! Tom Leedham from the Teamsters will talk about the importance of organizing strategically.

5. We need **a vision of fighting for everyone on the job.**

Not just the long-time workers, not just the white workers, or the straight workers, or the men, or those who were born here in the U.S.

Take the example of the ILA again—the reason I talk about them so much is that I cover them for Labor Notes, I go to all their meetings—and I love this crew. This is a union where the majority of members are African-American and where the top leadership has been—almost always—dominated by white officers. As often happens, their struggle for power in the union is linked to Black workers’ struggle for equality.

A divided workplace is management’s dream; solidarity from below is our dream and their nightmare.

6. **Solidarity has to be international.** Until we are as global as the companies are, management will keep doing end runs around the places where we have built up power.

So the ties you make this weekend, with the 100 international troublemakers who are here...those ties ought to help us use the power of a truly international workers movement.

What's the final key to getting labor back on the offensive? It's the realization that all the work we do is getting ready for the next upsurge, and to build with that in mind.

Just look at the power and organization of the amazing immigrant rights movement that has emerged over the last few months. It's not just a spontaneous uprising.

It's the result of many years of organizing by groups that have been around for a while, like the Coalition for Dignity and Amnesty for Undocumented Workers that started at the 1999 Labor Notes conference. We'll hear more about this kind of organizing from Alejandro Sosa tonight and Yanira Merino on Sunday.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Who else has been laying this groundwork? All of you here in the room who've been in battle over the last few years: telephone workers at SBC, grocery workers from southern California who struck for four long months, airline workers at Northwest, NY City transit workers, boilermakers from Illinois, to name but a few of you.

All of you have been building leaders and gaining experiences that are incredibly valuable for the battles to come. And there will be more fights—that's why we're all here!

Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, once wrote: "While history has shown that revolutionaries and reformers have sometimes been outflanked, out-organized, and even quashed, it is perhaps out of the most distressful situations that new leaders have emerged from the ranks of the previously unseen and unheard."

You think you're in a "distressful situation"? Baldemar has just told you why you ought to feel good about it!

You are the leaders of a rejuvenated labor movement, here in the U.S. and around the world, so when you go home, make more trouble and if the bosses ask you how you got to be so troublesome, tell them about the Labor Notes conference!