



*BUILDING
A
RANK-AND-FILE
CAUCUS*

by

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This booklet, written by rank-and-file union members active in caucus organizing, will attempt to outline, on the basis of the experience of past and current rank-and-file struggles, the main problems and considerations which union members should expect as they struggle against the officials for democratic and militant unionism. Because of the sophisticated manner in which all union contracts and labor laws are written today, it is advisable that after a group gets together, an attorney who is well versed in labor laws be retained. (Contact the National Lawyers Guild in your area for such people.)

Workers in trade unions are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that they have little or no control in their union's affairs. This is more than a simple problem of democratic rights; it means as workers we not only can't make decisions about our working conditions and wages, but we can't even protect ourselves from abuses (and unfairness) on the job. This can only be described as slavery. Whether the slave-master is generous or stingy, the fact remains that workers don't control the supply of things we need and want. We need workers' control of the means of production.

The key to workers' control over their job conditions and livelihood and protecting what little bit they have today is their trade unions. Trade unions are the only existing institutions in the United States which supposedly belong to the workers. However, our unions are not controlled by the members. The unions are run by bureaucrats who are concerned with lining their pockets and keeping their nice "respectable" cushy jobs as union officials. Even if there are a few local officials who are "good guys," the international officials keep things nailed down.

The union bureaucrats, from the international president on down, will generally do anything to keep their positions. They hobnob with company officials, cooperate with and brown-nose the government, and sweet-talk the union members. If a rank-and-filer insists on union action, criticizes the bureaucrats, or even questions union policy, he receives treatment ranging from being totally ignored to physical abuse. It is essential that we oust the sell-out bureaucrats and institute rank-and-file control so that we can serve our own interests and needs.

A PRINCIPLED PROGRAM FOR MEMBERSHIP CONTROL

Two basic ideas must be understood before workers can fight their oppression: First, it must be crystal clear that bosses, no matter how big or small their businesses, have distinct interests which are directly opposed to the interests of workers. *There is no middle ground between the interests of workers and owners because the owners get the things they want by exploiting workers as best they can—by screwing workers to the utmost, until every drop of profit is squeezed out. This makes workers and bosses deadly enemies. Therefore workers must examine every issue to see if it poses a threat to their interests. They must fight for the things they need. Every issue, economic, social, and political, must be viewed from a working-class perspective.*

Secondly, workers must join together in order to be successful in a fight for their interests. This is why unions were organized—so the workers of each plant or an entire industry could stand up to the bosses united. Today the officer bureaucrats of the unions have gotten fat, they've become used to plush living, they're bought off by the companies. They run the unions to protect their cushy jobs instead of the workers' needs. So again workers must join together, this time inside the unions, to overthrow the bureaucrats, regain membership control, and run the union for the benefit of the rank-and-file.

We must be sure to replace the lousy bureaucrats with something better. Building a rank-and-file movement involves more than running around the plant or yard, talking about how lousy the union officials are and running a few "good guys" against them in the next election. The often well-intended idea of getting a few "good guys" into office and then "explaining things to the members" is the most dangerous course to follow. It begins with impatience and leads directly to opportunism and sell-out betrayals.

Removing the bureaucrats from office is pointless unless there is a constructive alternative. For this reason the aim of every rank-and-file trade union movement should be *membership control based on a sound, principled program*. This demands patience, study, and determination. Candidates should run on the basis of a program of their ideas of both political and economic union action. They can then be held

to their program by the rank-and-file in case they turn out not to be such "good guys" after all.

Without such a program an opposition caucus will fall apart, be smashed by the bureaucrats, or, once in power, turn out to be no better than the bureaucrats it replaced. Only a full program, which includes the main points for a better contract (economic and work rules), union democracy (union constitution changes) and social and political issues, can secure a lasting and meaningful victory for the membership. Any other course can only lead to wasted effort, opportunism, and betrayals.

There is no blueprint for overthrowing union bureaucrats—for the membership to gain control of their unions—for building rank-and-file caucuses. But there *are* two main guiding considerations: First, before change can be made there must be a program for change, where positions, principles, and objectives are clearly and briefly stated. Second, meaningful and lasting change can only be made by the rank-and-file membership, when they know and understand the issues.

GETTING A GROUP TOGETHER

A rank-and-file movement usually begins when a small group of members feels that there is something wrong—that the policy and activity of their union does not serve their needs and interests—and they want to do something about the situation. Before such a group of members can launch a campaign to improve their union, they must fully understand the situation and what is involved for correcting it themselves.

At this point the brothers get their thoughts together. They should have regular meetings to discuss the problems (and grievances) which exist on the job, in the union, and in society. They should form a caucus on the basis of a program of solutions for all these problems. The caucus should then struggle to become the leadership of the union. Each member of the caucus should try to educate himself about the history of the union and the whole labor movement. Experience is the best teacher. It is better to learn from the experience of others in the past in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of others, thereby saving time and energy for the present-day struggles.

Besides studying background, it is necessary to know and understand the situation in the union today. Instead of

NATIONAL WORKERS PROGRAM--BLACK PANTHER CAUCUS

1. Organize the Unorganized: There are more than 71 million workers in the U.S. Only 20 million of them (28%) are union members. In order for the workers to have the strength and unity we need in fighting the bosses, we must organize all workers into unions.
2. Shorter Work Week: The work week should be 30 hours per week (with no compulsory overtime) at 40 hours pay, or fewer hours if necessary to guarantee full employment.
3. Stop Runaway Shops: When a boss decides to move his shop, all workers must be given the choice of: a) going with the shop at the same wages and conditions (with transportation paid by the boss), or b) taking 3 years severance pay with continuation of health and welfare plans for 3 years or until they find new jobs. The union contract must go with the shop to its new location.
4. Women Workers: One third of the workers today are women. Unions must lead the fight for an end to discrimination against women. Women must have equal rights to jobs and must receive equal pay for equal work. Unions that represent women workers must guarantee leadership positions to women. As part of the struggle for these ends, unions must demand child care centers to be provided by the companies and the government for the children of working women.
5. Automation: The unions must fight to win the right to negotiate all automation with the company before it takes place. The unions shall set the conditions of automation so that there are no lay-offs and job safety is guaranteed.
6. Health and Welfare: Every year in the U.S., 14,500 workers are killed on the job; over half a million fall ill with occupational diseases; seven million are injured; and two million are disabled. Unions must fight for the right to set and enforce health and safety standards on the job. Unions must fight to win fully paid medical and dental coverage for all workers and their families. At the same time, labor must struggle for free medical and dental care for all the people.
7. Anti-Labor Laws: Labor must take the offensive against anti-labor laws by demanding their repeal and defying them when they are used.
8. End Racism: The labor movement must struggle against racism in the unions in order to effectively combat racism in the society. The unions must educate the workers to understand that racism serves the bosses by dividing the workers and preventing the development of class consciousness.
9. End the War: Labor must demand an end to the war in Vietnam and all aggressive, imperialist wars. This must be coupled with a struggle in this country against racism and growing fascism. The economy must be re-directed to serve the basic needs of all the people: full employment, food, clothing, housing, education and medical care.
10. Union Sell-Out: All of the problems we have outlined can be blamed in part on the sell-out of union leadership to class collaborationist, cold war and racist policies. We must re-build a militant trade union movement by combating these policies through the formation of rank-and-file caucuses and the fight for class consciousness.

concentrating on personalities or individuals, caucus members must understand the overall situation and all the problems of their union.

There are three main factors which they must know backwards and forwards: (1) *the contract or agreement* that the members work under (including pension, welfare, health and other benefits); (2) *the union constitution* (both local and international structure, officer and body functions, elections, trials, conventions, meetings, etc.); and (3) *Roberts' Rules of Order*. It is absolutely necessary that the rank-and-file understand exactly how they are being screwed. Specific examples must be pinpointed by the caucus before they can be publicized before the membership. Once a dissident caucus is organized and makes itself known, it will be impossible for it to challenge the phony "leaders" before the rank-and-file unless its members know the contract, rules and procedures of their union. Caucus members should know *all* of their rights as union members, since the caucus must defend the rights of all members to express their discontent in union papers, meetings, elections and conventions.

A second category of information which union dissidents must learn can be referred to as the union facilities. The facilities are supposed to be open means for members to express their opinions and alternatives to the membership at large. There are four main facilities: (1) *the union organs* (local, regional, and/or international official publications of the union); (2) *union meetings* (the monthly local meeting and any others that are held); (3) *the union convention*; and (4) *union elections* (at all levels and for all offices). Rank-and-file union members, especially those in opposition caucuses, must be aware of and understand these means of expression which are, at least theoretically, at their disposal, and expose them for a sham if they are not.

THE CAUCUS PROGRAM

After this groundwork has been completed, a list of proposals and positions should be drawn up by the dissident brothers. These proposals and positions are the basic things which must be achieved to defend workers' interests and improve their situation—it is the draft program of the dissident brothers' caucus. Additions and word changes might be made in the program as more brothers join up with the

original group of union dissidents, but the basic ideas and points should be the solid guiding principles for the caucus fight and union orientation.

The rank-and-file program should deal with three general topics and might be formally divided this way by topics: (1) *contract issues* (wages, conditions, work rules, manning scale, pensions, welfare, medical benefits, etc.); (2) *union constitution issues* (union rules and regulations for elections, membership rights, officers' duties, meetings, publications, etc.); (3) *social and political issues* (repeal of anti-labor laws, civil rights and civil liberties, right to strike, racism and other tools which divide labor, etc.). Once a basic set of objectives and principles is decided on in the framework of a program, a small group of union members becomes a formal body—a caucus of rank-and-filers which presents to the membership an alternative of constructive, militant unionism for the positions and leadership of the current union officialdom. This is what the caucus program is—a constructive alternative for better unionism and a better life.

FROM THE PROGRAM TO POWER

The development of a program is the first part of the battle against a sell-out union bureaucracy. The next step is to build the caucus. This can be a long slow process. When men have been stuck in a rut, sold out time after time, and intimidated just for questioning things, they won't usually move the first time a chance for change comes along—and rightly so. Men must have a sense of self-confidence and confidence in something, before they can commit themselves to strong positions, especially if a struggle is involved. As fellow workers and union brothers become convinced of the correctness of the caucus program, they will see a need and a way to fight their oppression.

At first, information about the caucus and the rank-and-file program may be passed by word of mouth. Sincere and interested brothers should begin attending regular caucus meetings. As the caucus grows, leaflets and perhaps a caucus newsletter or newspaper should be issued and distributed at plant or shop gates or at union meetings. Gripes, beefs, sell-out activities of union officials, and constructive proposals based on the application of the caucus program should be publicized and brought to the attention of the union membership.

A caucus can grow and its program can spread both to other plants and to other union locals. As this happens, the caucus will become more than a group or organization—it becomes a movement. The rank-and-file caucuses of the union in different areas should link up on the basis of a sound, principled program.

At each stage of development for the caucus, from a small group of dissident brothers in one shop or local to a national caucus with a program, there must be a firm basis of support grounded in the rank-and-file before the next stage can be accomplished or even attempted. Before brothers can be asked to join a caucus, a group of brothers must first agree on a program; before open caucus meetings can be held, there must be a reasonable number of brothers who have become committed to the caucus and the program; before the bureaucrats can be challenged at meetings, in elections, or in the union papers, caucus members must become informed on the issues.

RECOMMENDED READING
FOR RANK-AND-FILE ORGANIZERS

1. Labor's Untold Story by Boyer Morais
2. The Rich and the Super Rich by Ferdinand Lundberg
3. American Trade Unionism by William Foster
4. Facts and Fascism by George Selders
5. Value, Price and Profit by Karl Marx
6. Fighting Words by The Daily World
7. Monopoly Today by Labor Research Ass.
8. The ILWU Story by ILWU
9. Women Against Slavery by Samuel Sillen

10. Concentration Camps U.S.A.
by Charles R. Allen, Jr.
11. On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party
by Eldridge Cleaver
12. Seize the Time by Bobby Seale
13. The Genius of Huey P. Newton
by Eldridge Cleaver
14. Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide
by Michael "Cetewayo" Tabor
15. Conversation with Eldridge Cleaver (Algiers)
by Lee Lockwood
16. The Enemy Forgotten by Gilbert Green
17. Again Korea by Wilfred G. Burchett
18. Wealth and Power by Gabriel Kolko
19. Wobbly (I.W.W.) by Ralph Chaplin
20. Elements of Political Education by Berdnikov Svetlof
21. History of May Day by Alexander Trachtenberg

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