



Get a Rank & File Job!



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A Note To Young Activists

NOTES

The student movement has been fertile ground for the left. Time away from the daily grind of work, exposure to a wide variety of ideas and experiences changed many people's lives. Thirty years ago political activists coming out of college chose to get a job in the workplace — hospitals, factories, hotels— to build for a working class-led revolution. But these days, more and more young activists choose to work as staff in politically oriented non-profits or less often as staff within unions.

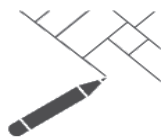
There are many reasons for this. First, capital's relentless war on wages and private sector unionism has paid off. In the 1970s and early 1980s working class jobs simply paid more. You could drive a taxi or work in a hospital kitchen and make ends meet with just one job. Those days are long gone. Second, most students today come away from school with bone-crushing debt. Student loan repayment dictates job choice more often than not. The days of working all summer to pay a year's tuition at a state college or university have disappeared. Third, today's activists have summed up that the thirty or more years of dedication to organizing the workplace and making unions a fighting tool of the working class was a failure. As one student activist told me about 8 years ago, "Your generation put in 30 plus years of work and all you can show for it is Andy Stern? There must be a better way." Fourth, and this never changes, are pressure from family (and peers) to use that high-priced education to live an easier life. This pressure is intensified for children of working class parents.

With the economy in the toilet, recent grads are finding it difficult to land a job in their “field.” Progressive NGOs are struggling for funds cutting out another prevalent employment scene for educated leftists. Maybe it’s time to (re)consider becoming a rank and file worker. Those college skills will be used, but not in the way that might have been envisioned.



The workplace is (still) crucial: Of course the world of work has changed dramatically since Marx and Engels, and even Lenin and Luxembour, targeted the producing section of the working class as the leading force in revolution. In advanced economies of the north, and certainly in the US, producing things has declined as much of that type of work has shifted to the periphery, decimating unions in the process. As a result, other sectors of the US internal economy have gained ascendancy. Currently, the public sector is a major source of employment, especially for African Americans. It is also the last bastion of unionism. Thus it has become a major site of struggle for workers and on the ideological level with capital.

Work is what centers the working class; it is the place most adults spend at least 8 hours a day. The workplace provides a captive audience for ideological struggle. You can’t slam your front door on that canvasser, union organizer on a home visit, or that Jehovah Witness when you are at work. You gotta listen and stay put. We need to contest the capitalists on their terrain. We cannot continue to give them a free pass for 8 hours or more a day.



Staff or rank and file: This debate has been raging among the left for the last 15 years or so, as staff positions in workplace and community organizing have opened up to educated leftists. Dedicated staff with a political outlook and long term vision is important. But staff social/political relations with the base/

ABOUT US

Members of Freedom Road Socialist Organization / Organización Socialista del Camino para la Libertad are working class people and people of all races and gender identities. We are both veteran comrades who have 30 to 50 years in the trade union movement, and young people who recently joined our revolutionary movement through Workers Centers, or just began to work. We take pride in the fact that our members work respectfully with other socialists, progressive activists and all others in a non-sectarian way, seeking to learn, share lessons from victories to defeats, and humbly contribute to building the left wing of the labor movement.

These are tough times for workers in the U.S. This is the hand we have been dealt, and there is no other. But our class has been on the defensive for most of its existence. We are optimistic that we have an opportunity at this particular point in history, based on the actual nature of the history, class structure and struggle in the U.S. today, to overcome past weaknesses to create a new, stronger labor movement set on a revolutionary course.

Join us to build social justice unionism in the United States, to build progressive New Working Class Organizations among oppressed sectors of our class, bring them together in communities of solidarity, and build the socialist current among working class people.

This document is available online at <http://freedomroad.org/rank-and-file>

This pamphlet was laid out and printed with voluntary labor.

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grassroots/rank and file are tinged with a power imbalance. This of course does not disappear as educated leftist enter the rank and file, but that imbalance is greatly reduced. Dedicated staffers may honestly be sympa/empathetic to the cross currents of the daily rhythm of a workplace, but they do not experience it the same way. These differences are magnified for those of us who are documented (are citizens, permanent residents, have working papers).

From my experience as both as a rank and file elected leader, and then staffer, the best way to become a staffer is through the ranks. If one is going to organize or represent workers it is critical to know what it is to be a worker and not just for a few months but for a significant time. Organizers or staffers who come from the rank and file and have built a solid reputation as an activist have far more credibility than those who suddenly come into positions of authority because of their education or previous privilege. One of the core arguments in this regard is that just as it is important for whites to repudiate racial privilege, it is also important for those who come from petit-bourgeois or academic background to give up class privilege and learn about being working class by becoming part of the work force. That is why rank and file work is so critical.



Building Workplace Power: Organizing at the workplace is different than organizing in the community. So here I offer some thoughts on how to proceed and build the power of those oppressed by capitalism from the workplace.

First, you need to *be as strategic about where to work* as you are about how to accomplish your goals. It starts with an analysis of the local economy: what is foundation of the political economy where you live? In some places it might be finance others tourism, others health care, in a tiny few places some actual production of something tangible. What specific work

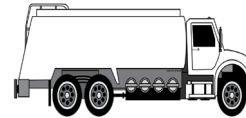
are other leftists and activists doing (teachers, public university, post office, transportation, health care, local government)? Building or adding to already existing work is a priority because it maximizes our impact.

Second, should you work *union or non-union*? Since the working class in this country has no political party, unions are one of the few institutions—with resources!—of the working class. It is our duty to build them where they do not exist and transform them where they are. Most current unions are unbelievably flawed and hitched to ideology of capitalism. This makes our task is more difficult. However, there are a number of locals unions (thanks in large part to dedicated leftists both rank and file and now staff) that are actually trying to practice what many have called “social justice unionism”, or something close to it.¹ Those need to be identified and where possible so that folks can try to get rank and file jobs at the workplaces they represent. There is no doubt that a unionized workplace, regardless of the quality of the union, is preferable to a non-union workplace; there is at least a framework for protection and collective activity to move forward.

Third, is *how to orient to existing union leaders*, both elected and staff. Unity with union leaders/bureaucrats is a **tactical**, not strategic, question. This has been a major source of friction within the left, both coming from the Trotskyist and New Communist Movement traditions. Many leftists within both traditions had a firm line of “no unity with the bureaucrats.” It grew out of an analysis that bureaucrats had a different class

1. These five features define social justice unionism: unions that speak for the entire working class; aim to win social and economic justice in the workplace and in society; practice global solidarity; are transforming into organizations run and shaped by members; and build strong alliances with the social movements.

“communist leadership” to transform them into real class vehicles. Over the last 20 years a new approach to unionism has developed based on practice. It recognizes the independence of the unions from a party of the working class, and sees that unionism must be based on uplifting the working class and preparing them to lead their organizations –unions, community groups, and parties of the working class.



Be ready to put your money where your mouth is:

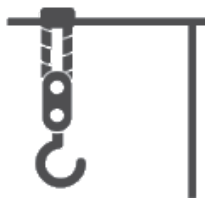
The essence of this point is that co-workers don't have endless patience for arm-chair critics even if that analysis is spot on. As we

heard many times, “if you have a better idea, why don't you run for office and change the union.” This adds some nuance to why unity with union leaders/bureaucrats is a tactical not strategic issue.

So comrade-students, don't be shy or afraid. That perfect job might not be on the horizon, but I can promise you if you get a rank and file job, you will learn more than you can imagine.

Example One: One of the main objectives we had in our union work was to wipe out white supremacy. Many of us were under the illusion/hope that if we just explained with patience and a proper attitude how white supremacy was a tool of the boss, white workers would shed their beliefs. Needless to say it didn't work out that way. Years of patient lesson drawing, education, multi-racial activity, didn't eradicate white supremacy.

Example Two: My union was massively undemocratic and corrupt. For years we didn't even have union meetings. Even after laying low and checking things out, we emerged harping hard on that fact. ("Geez, I've been over 8 months now and I haven't seen any notices for a union meeting. At my last workplace the union wasn't that great but at least we had meetings. How about we start a petition to get union meetings.") We had been extra cautious about stepping out since earlier there was a pitched battle at the factory gate—with bats and lead pipes—between workers and NCM leftists (a few of whom were employed at that particular workplace) who were leaf-letting workers telling them not follow corrupt, sell-out union bureaucrats. Workers knew this, but resented being told they were stupid. Anyway, in addition to demanding union meetings, we tried running for low level union office. Yeah people wanted union meetings, and yes, they wanted honest hard working leaders, but that wasn't the way in. Eventually we learned that what bugged people the most was dirty elections. Building a massive campaign about this was the turning point.



Replace yourself: work to develop leaders from the rank and file. The crisis in socialism has heavily impacted the labor movement. The European inspired socialism of the 20th century saw the unions recruiting grounds for or appendages of the party, while ac-

knowledging the limited economic consciousness in need of

position from the rank and file, given their separation from everyday work, their pay and living standards, and the quality of their interactions with "the captains of industry." This has real life consequences in the day to day building and transforming of unions from the ground up. For example, if the strategic orientation is no unity with the bureaucrats/leaders how we will convince our co-workers about the importance of developing new leaders with a better agenda and then voting them into office? How can rank and file so bombarded in anti-union rhetoric not consider this fuel for that fire? How will we build social justice unions or bolster bottom-up unions like the UE? By holding a lopsided view that says the rank and file is always correct and bureaucrats wrong, transitioning to elected leadership proved difficult. The fact is, at times the leadership (local or national) may be more progressive than the membership on issues such as race or war. The issue is not new leadership but how to do education and carry out struggle on the issues.

Fourth is whether how to enter the workplace—as a "salt" or "colonizer." Some unions, HERE and the building trades in particular, have developed "salting" programs. Salts are people who have been recruited by the union to help build unions in the workplace. Most salts have been recruited off of college campuses. They are given some basic training in organizing and then asked to find a job, usually in a targeted workplace(s). Once there, they meet often with union staff people to help carry out a plan to get that workplace unionized, or in some cases defend the union against raiding or decertification.

"Colonizers" — to use a term harkening back to the 1930s and used in the 1970s— are red folks who enter the workplace to build the union (or transform an existing one) without the knowledge or training from the union. They are not part of the union team though they share a goal of a struggling for a union at that workplace. The colonizing approach allows for more

independence in building a left vision of what a union should look like and how it should function. Colonizers can unite with the union leadership (elected or staff or organizers) if they think their plans help build social justice unionism; but they have no obligation to stick with a union-directed plan or tactic that is off the mark. Salters might have disagreements with some particular tactic or campaign, but their independence is compromised—they have signed up to be agents of the union who has invested resources into them.

Fifth, and certainly not least, how to do the job of *organizing on a day to day basis*. This can be summed up, to use the old Maoist term, as “practice the mass line”. The mass line has a number of interconnected features, but in essence it is centered on “from the masses to the masses,” or more popularly, understanding the dialectical relationship/two way street between leaders and rank and file; between the conscious forces and those who are not yet.



Swim like a fish in the sea: Like it or not, if you go into a workplace where a college education is unusual, you will stick out like a sore thumb. The way we talk, our knowledge of the world events, our politics, all make us different. But we can learn to make these qualities work for us if we settle in and do what most working people do—spend time with family and friends, go to the movies, participate in or coach sports, make time to have fun. The most important aspect of this is to be someone your co-workers think they can be. Too often we are the ones who people admire (our boundless dedication to our cause, our legendary schedules of work and then meetings), but unless everyday workers can see themselves “being you” we can never really recruit them to be the leaders of the mass struggle.



Eyes open mouth shut for 6 months: This is the lesson many colonizers and working class reds learned the hard way. Many times we leapt before we looked. We came in with a game plan to “clean up the place” and once our probation was up — if we even waited that long— we started to gather a team around us. Too often the first people to jump out are not the folks respected by their co-workers (eg the loudmouths, those that are trying to “get-over”, and/or the cry babies). By taking a low profile it is possible to learn about friendship networks, what politics people have, who has a good work ethic, and most importantly who are the natural leaders in the group since every group has them. For many of us our experience was that the “natural leaders” who agreed with us hung back, waiting to see if we were good workers (pulling our weight and not trying to get over on co-workers), would stick around through thick and thin.



Take people where they are at, not where we wish them to be: Unlike community-based groups which gather like-minded people (tenants in a particular neighborhood, immigrants angry and willing to do something about draconian legislation) the workplace is a broad cross section of political views, ages, interests, work styles and commitment, genders, etc. Thus political work starts from a different basis. Because we have a clear vision of what to do and where to go, sometimes we are too eager to spin our line and not do more active listening to find out what is on people’s minds. Here are two examples from my own experience: