

using 1-on-1 organizing conversations to discuss grievances and move towards collective action.

One challenge of making the transition from movement protests to workplace organizing is psychologically adapting to the differences of pace and scale. The high points of protest cycles are, with their tens of thousands of people defying authority in the streets, uniquely thrilling and invigorating. In contrast, the regularity and size of job actions, even in the most well-organized workplace and industry, are typically less frequent and smaller.

But what workplace organizing lacks in flash it compensates for in other ways. Building long-term relationships with coworkers who you see at work every day, often for years, provides a form of social sustenance for radical activity that is unmatched by the often short-lived communities formed through street mobilizations. Getting together with a handful of coworkers to stand up to an abusive boss and regain our dignity is no less of a thrill to me than a large and unruly protest.

The revolution won't fall out of the sky into our laps tomorrow. The most cherished gift we can give to radical social movements is a lifelong commitment to making a better world. It's a long way to the stars of our utopian imagination, and union organizing is a rocketship especially well-fitted for such a journey. If you'd like to join, there's plenty of room. There's no rush, so take as long as you need to think about it. If you decide to give it a try, grab a helmet and get ready for blast off.

Recent cycles of crisis and protest have created an ever-growing number of radicalized youth and young adults. While there's been wide variation in social movement activity year by year, since 2011 there's been a significant upsurge.

As initial phases of intense agitation and involvement pass, many young people think about how to turn their change in political consciousness to a change in their life. The crests of heightened action are too intense emotionally to sustain indefinitely, and the troughs of demobilization are too long for a committed protestor to remain perpetually engaged.

Why the Labor Movement?

The union movement is one place where you can build towards long-term radical change as part of a sustainable, consistent, and long-term commitment. Almost everyone who isn't already rich has to work for a living. If that includes you, there's a lot of people you can unite with against those few who profit off your labor.

Capitalism's main weakness is that it is dependent on workers. Strong unions are uniquely positioned to attack capitalism from the inside by withholding labor at strategic points and moments. Strikes and other labor actions can be used for social reforms of any scale and have been key components of most revolutions of the last 150 years.

Labor isn't a one-issue domain of organizing, but rather the entirety of capitalist society is integrated through the work that workers do. Every social issue is a labor issue in some way, not least of all issues related to white supremacy and patriarchy, which are most powerfully reproduced through capitalist exploitation and inequality. A radical union movement has the potential to buttress if not lead the fight against every major social injustice.

It's true that many union leaders have politically moderate and even conservative politics, and most workers themselves are invested in or resigned to the status quo in some way. But unions shouldn't be seen only as reflections of the liberal attitudes that elites have perpetuated.

Rather, with the aid of a layer of radical workers, unions have the unique potential to bring the working masses together around their material self-interest. Once workers see each other and recognize their shared position, they realize that they need to take collective action to win decent wages and healthcare. Over the course of such fights, radicals can broaden the political horizons by revealing how the working class also has a shared self-interest in deeper social transformation around issues like workers' democracy in the workplace, fighting against environmental destruction, and opposing imperialism. No other social institution provides such direct channels towards class unity and radicalization.

Furthermore, if our model of revolution includes not just a small number of people taking extreme action, but rather imagines the reconstruction of all social institutions according to liberatory principles, then we have to bring as many people as possible along for the fight. Through struggle, people can be transformed. Through unions, our struggle can touch the lives of millions.

I personally made the journey from community activist and street protestor to rank-and-file union organizer. I was radicalized towards the end of college and spent much of my twenties adapting my flexible jobs and lifestyle to the ebbs and flows of protest movements. As I inched closer to my thirties I felt the pull towards wanting to put down roots and organize in a more long-term and sustainable, but no less radical and militant, way. So I got a relatively normal, semi-skilled job where I could organize at work.

This pamphlet outlines what steps to take to smoothly transition into the rank-and-file of the labor movement. There's no one way to do it, but there are important guidelines that can set you up for success.

So the best way to supplement finding organizing buddies at work is to be in touch with a network of union-minded people in your area and industry and join up at workplaces in groups of two or three. If you're at a loss of where to find potential organizing buddies outside of work, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, the Democratic Socialists of America, and Labor Notes are all organizations with national presences in US where you can look for other union-minded people in your local industry to connect with. Also, local unions and political organizations may have the connections you seek.

If there are ten committed rank-and-file organizers in an industry each working at ten separate workplaces, I think just two or three of them will be lucky enough to find another organizing buddy in the short-term off the shop floor who will be able to contribute to successfully building a union presence at their workplace in the long-term. A 20-30% success rate is far too low for us to bank on as a movement. Committed grassroots organizers are the most important resource that radical movements have, and if we set them up for failure and burnout by starting them out in isolated situations, our movement will remain small.

But if those same ten committed organizers in an industry pair up at each of five separate workplaces, I think the chances of success in building a sustainable, long-term union presence at each workplace is more like 50-75%. Once such a presence is established at a worksite, it will be more able to spawn further organizers, mentor organizers from other workplaces, and provide an example and lessons for others. Getting a third organizing buddy at work will insulate you from the danger of being reduced to one organizer if another one leaves.

Conclusion

In summary, if you want to join the labor movement, the key preliminary steps are: 1) get a relatively strategic job that you're open to being in long-term, 2) start building relationships with as many coworkers as you can, and 3) find an organizing buddy. From that solid foundation you can start

Getting an Organizing Buddy

One of the most important things to do early on in your organizing at a workplace is to find an “organizing buddy.” The main features of an organizing buddy are that they have similar aspirations to build workplace power on the shop floor, they are someone you talk to regularly to collaborate with, and they share the organizing load. While I don’t think we should draw hard lines around who is and isn’t an “organizer,” I think there is a meaningful difference between those who help out occasionally and casually join in on workplace actions and those who are intentionally putting in the work to foster relationships and build shop floor power. Finding an organizing buddy effectively doubles the organizing capacity at your workplace and vastly increases your potential for taking successful action and building long-term worker power on the job.

While a good workplace organizer can do a lot by themselves, they can very rarely do enough alone to create long-term union success. Besides not having the capacity to do all the tasks by oneself, the lack of emotional support and shared sense of purpose over the long term is very likely to burn out even the most committed solo organizer.

Where do organizing buddies come from? Sometimes while building relationships and agitating against problems at work you find someone with a preexisting interest or someone who acquires an interest in organizing. Getting workplace buddies off the shop floor is ideal. There’s no way to build a radical union movement in the long term without finding and building up other people at work who want to put in serious effort to build worker power.

However, I’ve come to the conclusion that relying entirely on finding coworkers at your job who want to become organizers won’t be enough on its own. Organizer buddies turn over at work as much as anyone else, and in the long-term you’re as liable to lose one to firing or quitting as getting a new one.

“Salting” for the Long Haul

There are many different situations that can be fruitful for union organizing. Getting a job at a unionized workplace is no more or less important for the movement than going into a non-unionized workplace with the intent to organize it. While unionized workers may have a few more protections and perks, many unions do the bare minimum for their members and are in dire need of revitalization and real organizing.

One practice that’s common in parts of the labor movement is called “salting,” where someone gets a job in a non-union workplace with the intention to unionize it. But there are different ways to approach salting. I’m personally critical of going into a job to unionize it but with the intent to leave the job after the workers have won a union. For the labor movement to reach its radical potential it needs people who are willing to put deep roots down into workplaces and industries to build working class power for the long-term.

That doesn’t mean that when you get a job you must commit up front to a five- or ten-year stint. If you don’t know what kind of industry you want to work in long-term, there’s value in trying various jobs and seeing which ones suit your temperament, personality, and interests. In addition to your personal preferences for various kinds of work, there are strategic organizing considerations to think about that might also influence where you want to work.

Finding a Strategic (Enough) Job for Organizing

Some *industries* are more or less strategic to focus our organizing on. Public education and healthcare are often considered strategic because of their importance to the general functioning of society and the way they interface with broader working class communities. Logistics and transportation, including jobs in warehousing, trucking, and shipping, are strategic because of how job actions can disrupt the distribution of goods in a wide array of industries. Jobs at vulnerable points of industries with

long supply chains can have strategic organizing value, such as factories that manufacture car batteries or solar panels.

Some *jobs* are more or less strategic. A degree of turnover is inevitable and even helpful if it means there's a degree of dissatisfaction that can be turned against the boss, but too much turnover can make it difficult to build up an organizing crew. Some jobs have a naturally high degree of interaction between workers, such as those on an assembly line or in a hospital, which is advantageous for talking to and getting to know coworkers. An existing degree of union activity in a particular sector across the country can embolden other workers in that sector to think about union organizing at their own job.

Some *workplaces* are more or less strategic. For example, when a particular boss is generally disliked and incompetent, it can be easy to agitate coworkers against them. When the workers at a particular workplace have strong ties outside of work or have shared backgrounds, that can make it easier to unite them around job grievances. Organizing workplaces that have very few workers under the same employer can have limited impact on building a working class movement.

However, no job is ideal for organizing, and all jobs have a mix of pros and cons as to their strategic relevance. Organizing companies where people work remotely is a challenge but has been done plenty of times before. The limits of small workplaces can be overcome if you broaden your campaign to include more of the workplaces in the same industry in a particular city or region. Historically, many industries and workplaces that appeared unorganizable at first turned out to be highly organizable once serious efforts were made. While I think it's worth taking some consideration of the strategic value of different industries, jobs, and workplaces when choosing where to work, fixating on this too much can distract from getting down to the brass tacks of actually organizing.

Making time to see people outside of work 1-on-1 is the best way to build deeper relationships. When I have enough of a connection to a coworker, I look for an opportunity to ask them to get coffee before work or a beer after work sometime. Asking for and offering small favors, like carpooling or trading shifts, can foster connection.

Building and joining social groups at work is also powerful and sometimes feels less committal to coworkers than meeting up individually. Group happy hours are often easy to put together. Getting coworkers to sign a birthday or get-well-soon card for someone builds camaraderie. As these relationships start to sprout it will be easier to explore further social activities, like a board game night, pickup soccer game, or showing up as a group to a coworker's poetry reading.

Much of this relationship-building doesn't "feel" or "look" like so-called "real" organizing, and for that reason sometimes people ignore it. I've had to remind myself and counsel others many times that even when this relational work isn't translating into immediate actions, it's often still the most important organizing to be done (it is definitely *real* organizing). All of the successful actions I've taken at work have depended entirely on the relationships built up in countless small ways day in and day out.

One common challenge is translating sociality with coworkers into shared beliefs around workplace problems. Without turning every conversation or hangout into a serious union intervention, I've learned from watching fellow organizers how to casually sprinkle little opinions about work issues into these social interactions. When coworkers express frustration at the boss or stress from the job, I validate their feelings, briefly add my two cents, and follow their interest on the matter by asking them follow-up questions. This creates a culture of openness that can be immensely helpful when a larger crisis hits the workplace.

important is that the workers involved discuss and choose a direction together. A more in-depth look at this question is beyond the scope of this piece, but the methods elaborated below apply equally to all approaches when starting out.

Building Relationships with Your Coworkers

Whether you're going through the formal unionization process or not, the source of the strength of the workers in a workplace is the relationships between the workers themselves. As obvious as this is on the surface, the main oversight of most union organizing guides is giving this too little emphasis. The main weakness of most failed union efforts is neglecting the relationship-building side of organizing.

Three dimensions give coworker relationships their power. First, workers have to **care** about each other. The only way to care about someone is to get to know them, their fears and their joys. Second, workers have to **trust** each other. In going up against the boss, workers will only act together if they know they have each other's backs and no one is going to snitch. Third, workers have to feel **solidarity** towards each other. This means that they are willing to take action not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of the others in the group too. If one worker is getting bullied by management, will the others stand up for them? If one group of workers are getting their hours and benefits slashed, will the other workers walk into the boss's office with them to demand they be treated fairly?

The first step of all good organizing is building these kinds of relationships. To some people this stuff comes naturally. But for many, including myself, it doesn't always, so it's worth spelling out and being intentional about. Some of this can be done on the job itself by collaborating with others on work tasks, chatting in down moments, or sitting together in the break room. However, to keep deepening these relationships and to get to know those beyond just your department you'll have to make extra efforts.

Rank-and-File Is Where the Action Is

Many people with organizing experience in other social movements will be drawn to getting a job on staff as a paid organizer in a union. The appeal is that getting to organize full time will give you more influence. However, I think the drawbacks of such an approach outweigh the benefits in most instances. Getting a job outside the workplaces being organized by becoming a union staffer makes you one big step removed from the rank-and-file. It also binds you to the existing level of politics of the union president or staff director who hired you (and can fire you).

Rather, what makes a powerful union movement is an active layer of rank-and-file organizers who build up the militancy, democracy, and radicalism of the movement from the bottom up and from inside the workplaces. Instead of having our union organizing mediated through staffers, who have different working conditions and often different interests, we'll do better to build a grassroots movement through direct relationships with our coworkers. This gives us the power to form bonds of solidarity that can be directly translated into action.

Mastering Your Craft

Once you've got a job you want to organize, the next task is getting good at the job itself. In many workplaces, workers depend on each other to complete tasks and coworkers will only respect you once you've proven your worth as part of the team. Rather than try to organize all your coworkers to take direct action your first day on the job, slow down and learn the job first.

One aphorism advises you to be "a good worker instead of a good employee." What is meant by that is that you should aim to get good at your job in a way that is good for the team you work with. However, you should not go out of your way to become a "good employee" by impressing the boss by not taking your breaks or working so hard that you burn out.

Traditional vs. Nontraditional Union Organizing

In the US, there's a standard route to getting a legally recognized union that's been in place since the passage of federal labor law in the private sector with the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. The traditional legal route to securing a union is to first get a majority of workers to sign "union cards" saying they want to be represented by a particular union. Second, you can pressure the employer to "voluntarily" recognize the union, upon which the union becomes legally recognized. Or if the employer is more resistant, as most are, then you begin the process of setting up a unionization vote where all employees in a designated potential bargaining unit (i.e., the future grouping of workers who would be represented by the union) cast a ballot on whether to join the union or not. If more than 50% of workers vote for a union, then it becomes legally recognized and the employer is legally obligated to bargain with the union in good faith for a contract.

The traditional unionization route has the advantage of being a straightforward process where established unions can provide resources and advice. Winning a formally recognized union can be the first step towards significant material gains and workplace protections. While the traditional unionization route is provided for by law, there's no legal necessity that all union activities and efforts have to be channeled through those routes.

A non-traditional union organizing route can include many of the same steps as the traditional one, such as building relationships with and talking with workers about problems on the job, making demands to resolve them, and taking collective action to win. The non-traditional route just does this without taking the intermediate step of formally voting to become a union. Federal labor law for the private sector offers some protections for workers who take action even without being a formal union, and protections for this kind of activity varies state-by-state for public sector workers.

There are many reasons why some workers prefer to organize without first voting to formally be recognized as a union. First, employers play dirty and break the rules of these unionization procedures all the time. If you're not strong enough yet to directly confront a nasty employer who's willing to bully and fire workers, less traditional organizing can fly under the boss's radar without triggering a brutal anti-union counteroffensive. Second, some employers might not be covered by labor laws that enable traditional unionization, such as public sector workers in states with strong anti-union laws. Third, if your workplace is so large that winning a majority of workers to a union is too big a task to tackle immediately, you may prefer to start with other forms of union organizing. Fourth, the traditional unionization route provides certain benefits but also puts certain limits on what you can do with your coworkers. For those who are agitated and ready to take action right now or who aspire to take action beyond what's circumscribed by the formal channels, you might find it more effective to do so outside of the traditional unionization route.

Another form of non-traditional union organizing is when your workplace is unionized, but workers decide to take action without official approval and outside of the formal union channels. Workers have occasionally chosen to do this when union leaders were themselves too weak or conservative to stand up against an employer, such as when many union workers conducted unsanctioned sickouts early in the COVID pandemic.

My personal opinion is that both traditional and nontraditional union organizing routes can be worthwhile depending on the interests of the workers and the context they find themselves in. Think through what will best enable you and your coworkers to take action and win immediate demands in the short-term while also building longer-term power. Which ever route you take, realize that to be strong enough to win it'll be you and your coworkers who will have to do most of the legwork. Official unions and labor laws are not some cheap magic trick where an outsider comes in and does everything for you. In deciding between the traditional and nontraditional approaches to organizing a non-union workplace or going into an already unionized workplace to strengthen it, what's