

SOCIALISTS ARE TRYING TO REVIVE THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

A CONVERSATION WITH GABRIEL WINANT AND TEAGAN HARRIS

The Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, a partnership between socialists and the United Electrical Workers union, is trying to be at the heart of a new mass labor resurgence. Their success could help millions of workers.



During the height of the pandemic, the Democratic Socialists of America and United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America teamed up to launch the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC). It represented an ambitious attempt to meld together growing socialist currents with the existing labor movement and to help create new avenues of organizing for workers.

Below, historian Gabriel Winant writes how EWOC has been able to support worker organizing in ways that unions often have not, and shares his experience volunteering as an EWOC organizer. Food-service worker Teagan Harris then recounts how Gabe, as a volunteer, assisted her and her coworkers in winning demands from management at their workplace in Chicago.

Gabriel Winant

For the first time since the 1970s, the labor movement has momentum on its side.

A wave of strikes in the fall of 2021 set the tone for rising worker militancy, although these largely occurred in already unionized workplaces. The spread of new organizing in the nonunion sector, however, signals something distinctive and new: since the landmark victories at several Starbucks stores in Buffalo in late 2021, workers at about 220 more locations have filed for union representation elections; so far, there have been over twenty pro-union votes (a number of them unanimous) and only two defeats. Arguably even more dramatic is the triumph of the independent Amazon Labor Union at the giant JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island in March 2022; ALU reports that it has

since heard from workers at over a hundred more facilities seeking support to replicate the feat.

For those of us who are convinced that the labor movement must come back for our democracy – even our civilization, such as it is – to survive, this immediately raises a challenge: What can we do to help? How can we join in?

These are difficult questions, because both the Starbucks and Amazon campaigns are distinguished by their grassroots, bottom-up quality. In fact, it's the absence of interested outsiders that appears to have been key to their success.

How can workers' organizing scale up fast while retaining the self-directed quality that has been so critical to these breakthroughs? We see signs everywhere that there is a vast, subterranean river of discontent coursing through the American workplace, far larger than these two huge corporations. How can we help tap into it and bring it to the surface while channeling, rather than checking, its momentum?

ALU is a direct, organic outgrowth of the workforce at JFK8, and it has shunned any formal relationship with a larger labor union. Slightly differently, Starbucks Workers United is an affiliate of Workers United, itself an affiliate of the giant SEIU. Yet the latter campaign itself is proceeding with a high degree of autonomy, spreading far faster than union staffers would be able to accomplish if they attempted to implant the union in each new store themselves.

This autonomy marks a departure from both the successes and the failures of the mainstream labor movement to accomplish new organizing in recent years: where labor has won, it has often been through the concentration of resources (organizing staff, legal and research capacity) at sites where unions have identified strategic opportunities and possible leverage.

On the other hand, where labor has lost, the burdens of existing organizational legacies have weighed heavily. For example, the repeated failures of major organizing efforts in the South (including the prominent Amazon campaign in Bessemer, Alabama) have much to do with the political and organizational baggage of existing unions, which limit the space for workers to see their own participation as a meaningful form of voice and agency.

A paradox of union organizing is that it requires resources, but the investment of those resources tends to shift control (of strategy, tactics, message, and tone) upward, and

therefore may tacitly disempower workers – even though the union is trying to do the opposite. Management has become skilled at exploiting this paradox, arguing persuasively that workers will have less voice with a union than without one.

There are good reasons that workers often need support beyond themselves to organize. Some of these needs are obvious: legal counsel, access to political allies, space to meet, money for supplies of all kinds. But even more important is the crucial role of organizing support itself.

It's true, as any good organizer will tell you, that workers know best how to organize their workplaces. But this is not as simple a truism as it would appear to be, because the things that workers already know are almost always jumbled up with all the confusing, dangerous, and humiliating compromises required by everyday life in the American workplace.

This is true for everyone: consciousness is always contradictory. All of us carry around in our heads fears about the consequences of stepping out of line. We encounter them as the anxieties of loved ones who depend on us, which might make us risk averse;

or the painful lessons of past failures and defeats – our own, or those of people we know, or those of the working class on a larger scale; or the optimism of ambitions that we don't want to spoil, or of relationships (including with bosses) that we don't want to damage.

To be sure, anti-union campaigning is often clumsy and out of touch (as with Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's recent efforts). But more insidiously, the boss also speaks to the worker in the worker's own voice, in the guise of an internal whisper of doubt and confusion or even simple exhaustion. This is central to how power in the workplace in a capitalist society operates.

Occasionally, you meet natural-born organizers – people who have no trouble sorting out their own ideas from the deposits left in their own thought processes by the employer. Most of the time, though, most of us have to learn to articulate what it is that we already know, and to develop in ourselves the capacity to speak out loud what we actually think, with the employer's power excised from our own thoughts and speech.

Boiled down to its essence, the skill of organizing is the ability to be more honest and direct than is natural for most of us in everyday life, which is structured ordinarily by self-protective forms of politesse and indirection that are

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inimical to trust and solidarity. When you start organizing, you typically sound stilted and awkward at first, as though you're trying out someone else's voice. In a union effort, this often manifests as wheedling, placating, or manipulation.

But when you get good at it, you sound natural – like a more concentrated version of yourself. Sometimes this takes years. (It did for me.) Sometimes it only takes hours.

To make their way through this process, there's only one thing that workers ultimately need: someone to talk to. In the final analysis, this is all an organizer really is.

Workers find this resource first and foremost among each other, of course. But it's often helpful, or even necessary, to have someone else with some outside perspective who's been around the block a few times: do enough organizing and you start to recognize patterns of how certain kinds of conversations go, pitfalls that can be predicted and avoided, and opportunities that might have otherwise been obscure.

Here is where a risk arises. Workers may need someone to talk to about what they're going through, to flesh out what they want to say and to whom. The organizer who plays this role makes an invaluable contribution by listening carefully and reacting honestly.

But for the organizer, it's a major effort to give such relationships the time they need to develop. American unions, having shrunk so badly over the past two generations, operate under significant financial constraints, and their campaigns typically follow a template developed out of years of bitter defeats and narrow victories in their particular industries.

In this context, professional organizers often experience pressure to try to speed workers up, overtaxing the relationships of trust that might exist with workers or among them (what Jane McAlevey famously calls "shortcuts"); or to make strategic decisions on behalf of workers, short-circuiting workers' own self-development into assertive and self-confident organizers.

How can the new spirit of militancy in the American working class find the organizational channels it will need to grow without becoming warped or stunted by these channels? An organization that could answer this question would need to be able to support workers' organizing without any structural pressure to reshape workers' struggles in its own image.

Such a group exists. I know because I've been volunteering with it since the start of this year. It's called the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee.

EWOC, a joint project of the Democratic Socialists of America and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE, a small and independent left-wing union), functions as a kind of help desk for workers' organizing. Fundamentally consisting of a network of volunteers with

organizing experience, EWOC operates an intake system for workers who request support, and then assigns these workers to a volunteer organizer: maybe someone with experience in the relevant industry, or someone who lives nearby.

Because EWOC organizers are under no pressure to mold workers' dissatisfaction and solidarity into any particular organizational form, this kind of organizing has a certain pure quality: never in any other organizing work have I felt so free to listen to workers, share my honest assessment of their situation, and then simply ask, "So what do you want to do?"

This distinctive quality of EWOC organizing became clear to me in a conversation with a worker who said to me, at a crucial inflection point, "I'm realizing that I can't persuade anyone of anything. I just need to tell them what I really think and ask them what they really think, and then they'll do what they're going to do and I can't control that. Oh my God, I just realized that's what you just did in this conversation with me!"

Since it is not our job to try to persuade workers of anything, we are free to help them test out and develop the forms of organization and tactical approaches that make the most sense for them. Organizing in EWOC, you have no product to sell. (This radical tactical autonomy is also the organization's main strategic weakness. Unlike unions, which generate financial capacity internally from their members that they may project as organizing resources into unorganized workplaces, EWOC remains for now a strategically passive entity: workers seek us out rather than vice versa.)

EWOC organizers are already playing support roles in Amazon and Starbucks unionization efforts around the country, as well as hundreds more struggles that are less prominent. A minority of these will wind up as union recognition campaigns. Many others will be a success because they secured repayment of stolen tips or won a fairer schedule.

But at some level, all are a success, because solidarity is not a feeling but a habit that can be learned – and the more people who practice it, the easier it becomes for others to cultivate. In this key sense, every struggle is a victory.

What EWOC needs most of all is more people: more volunteers who can organize or want to learn how, and more workers who want to organize their own workplaces. In recent weeks, EWOC has received an influx of requests for support, indicating the emerging opportunity in the American workplace. We should not miss the chance – every worker has something to contribute.

Below is the account of a group of workers that I supported in a fight at a retail food service establishment in my neighborhood in Chicago.

Teagan Harris

It was really my coworker Shannon who reached out to EWOC in the first place. I hadn't organized anyone or known anyone who had. In fact, out of all the direct family members of mine who were blue-collar, factory, or food-service workers, none of them had been a part of a union.

In Arkansas and Oklahoma, where I grew up, a union was often only visualized through large inflatable rats and passive-aggressive remarks, so I was understandably wary of Gabe when he entered the picture. But we'd been cheated in our workplace, and our bosses, when they decided to cut corners to decrease costs (starting with their workers), left us footing the emotional and physical bill: it's a food-service place with only six of us working there, and while we were frustrated with lots of things – safety issues, missing tips – the biggest problem was staffing. Management would sometimes schedule only one of us for the rush times, an experience that was often overwhelming. As a more experienced worker once told me, "Don't worry, the panic attacks stop after a few months."

So it started with a group chat and then a letter signed by all six of us, and then, as threatened, a strike. We asked our bosses to give us pay stubs, better safety equipment, and fewer solo shifts – that was it. We expected the threat of all the workers walking off the job would be enough for the small business to care, but we quickly found out how replaceable we were in the bosses' eyes.

So we chose to play the waiting game. In the end, our bosses canceled all shifts, forcing the managers to work seven days a week. After a full pay period, they reached out demanding an unconditional return and mandatory retraining for all the workers.

At this point, the stalling had certainly worked: we had gone from full participation, to half, to just a fraction (the rest waiting for someone else to make the final call). We were no match for a business whose sole interest was keeping us down, especially when many of us had second jobs or school. Which is what made outside assistance not just helpful but necessary.

The first time I'd spoken to Gabe was when we had three people actively involved: Aidan, Shannon, and me. That was enough to keep the whole workforce together. The second time, it was Shannon and me, and the third, it was Gabe and me. Turns out it's exhausting trying to get demoralized and disempowered workers to show up to a meeting from 7 PM to 9 PM. The long road to unionization was out of the question because of the temporary nature of our working situations as food-service workers and students. Half the time, quitting looked better than fighting it out.

So I sat on the phone for a few hours processing how to get five employees back on board and get our bosses to not just respond but cave to our demands. That was, until I realized that isn't how organization works.

Our sense of solidarity came through our shared position as overworked and now thoroughly replaceable laborers, and therefore our collective action was not going to come from the passion of a single person but in the rekindling of hope in the group.

We decided that, even if it was just for the workers coming after us, we would not quietly quit or return without change. We had to do the most with what time and resources we had. Had it just been me, my own time would have been the only resource I had to draw on. But with the volunteer work of EWOC and other groups, like a local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, and in the wake of food-service workers unionizing all around us at Starbucks, we suddenly had access to the expertise of others in our same position. We had legal counsel, other workers, concerned community members, and organizational help. So we set smaller goals.

To be honest, it started with a vengeful desire against management, but wound up being a second wind of motivation stemming from a renewed sense of hope.

Within days of telling management of our intent to hold a rally outside the store, we had a negotiation time and date in hand. After a successful negotiation, we then spent the next few weeks planning a return to work with the full force of our community behind us. Our employers met every demand, and the new requirements are hung in our place of work for every employee to follow.

It isn't a union campaign story, but it's a win for labor organizing nonetheless. Now it's a matter of making resources apparent to the workers, making the solidarity of workers clear and accessible, and raising up new stories, like our own, that allow people the space to understand that collective action is a threat not to the worker but to the boss who steps on them.