

# Occupations, workers' control, and workers' government: readings



Readings from Genora Johnson Dollinger, Leon Trotsky, and Antonio Gramsci.

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## The Flint Sit-Down Strike 1936

Genora Johnson Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Strike

A considerable amount of preparatory work was done before the strike. That preparatory work was done by radical parties. We had several very active organizations in Flint and Detroit: the Communist Party, the Proletarian Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World (IWW). And, with the exception of the Communist Party, we all had our headquarters in the Pengelly Building, a very old building that became the major strike headquarters of the whole United Automobile Workers Union of Flint. Even as the strike was going on, we still had our rooms on the second floor, while the main activities in the auditorium were on the third floor.

Two years before the strike broke out, the Socialist Party in Flint organized the League for Industrial Democracy, (LID). We held meetings in garages and in basements, secret meetings, so the people wouldn't get caught and beaten up.

As we got bigger, the Socialist Party started sending us their speakers from New York. Many of them were from the Brookwood Labor College. We put out leaflets and sold tickets for these meetings, which were held in the basement of the biggest Methodist church and in the Masonic Temple.

We held lectures in socialism mainly, plus labor history and current events, focusing on what was happening politically. Those were very popular meetings. We would get three and four hundred people at some of our meetings.

This was all before the strike, in preparation for when the struggle actually broke out, when the workers couldn't take any more and rebelled. A core of socialists understood that this would eventually happen. I was busy organizing the LID and the Socialist Party during this time before the strike. I was well known in Flint.

Our Socialist Party was the next biggest organization to the Communist Party. The Socialist Party held on-going classes in labor history, public speaking, and parliamentary procedure. These classes were very important and produced many capable people.

One of the Reuther brothers, Roy, was a member of the Socialist Party. Roy had organized several workers' education projects and was sent into Flint to organize the UAW early in 1936.

Our newspaper, The Socialist Call, was distributed widely as an aid to our recruitment of GM workers into the Socialist Party. We laid a solid groundwork so that some of the first people who took the initial brave actions in the shop were Socialist Party workers.

The Communist Party met at the north end of Flint because that's where most of the immigrants from Russia, Poland and Hungary lived. They were mainly Buick workers. They had a lot of social activities, dances, and political meetings. They also had an insurance organization, the International Workers Order. Robert Travis, the top UAW organizer in Flint, was in the Communist Party, and he selected Roy Reuther to work as his second-in-command during the strike.

But, in my opinion, the main leaders of that strike, the ones who were able to organize, to speak in public meetings and so on, came out of the Socialist Party.

Workers were receptive to the idea of a union, but so much fear came along with it. When we started signing people up to be in the union, General Motors organized a huge rival organization called the Flint Alliance that cost nothing to join, but you signed a card so that they had a record of you. A great deal of anti-union propoganda was disseminated into the homes of workers through the Flint Alliance. The workers knew conditions were horrible, but they were in fear of losing their jobs if they refused to join the Alliance. They also saw what happened to some of their buddies who would go to a union meeting and get beaten up and come to work the next day with black eyes or a busted head.

So workers didn't all rush to join the union. In fact, if General Motors had known the real number of union members at the time those plants went down, a successful strike wouldn't have been possible. We had to keep the actual membership figures as secret as we could.

As I said, a fermentation was taking place for a couple of years before the first sit-down. No question about it. Many revolutionaries, so-called, talk about "spontaneous combustion of the workers." I can't see that at all, because it took time for the organizers in various plants of this whole General Motors empire to talk to the workers and to bring them to classes-to make some contact-create a bond. You had to trust your fellow worker if you were going to be an active union member because we had an awful lot of spies in there, a lot of people who would get special favor for squealing on somebody else.

I should add that the one big daily newspaper, the Flint Journal, was controlled completely by General Motors. They wrote things like, "You don't bite the hand that feeds you," and "These people coming in are all imports from Soviet Russia, and they want communism." So everybody was labeled a Communist who joined the union. The radio stations (we didn't have television then) and every avenue of information was controlled by GM.

The only thing the union had at first was mimeographed sheets. Finally, we were able to put out a weekly, the Flint Auto Worker, with reports of what the union was doing and what we were working for- what kind of a society we wanted. We handed these out at the plant gates after work. And the distributors often got beaten up by the company's paid agents. They had Pinkerton men in there, two or three different spy agencies, plus the people that they would pull out of their own ranks, General Motors protection police. It was a dangerous period- no question about it.

And we had our sound car, an ordinary car fitted with loudspeakers on top with large batteries. During the strike we would send it around to the various plants that were still operating- A.C. Sparkplug and Buick. As the workers were going in, we would taunt them with the conditions that they had to face, and we'd give them a little pep talk, "As an individual you are only one, but the union gives us strength." Many of the workers in those plants came down and walked the picket lines in sympathy, but there was not enough preparation done in those plants and not enough leadership, for them to take the chance to shut their plants down.

"They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn.  
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.  
We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn,  
That the union makes us strong."  
Verse from the song, "Solidarity Forever", written by Ralph Chaplin.

The first sit-down was on December 30 in the small Fisher Body Plant 2 over a particularly big grievance that had occurred. The workers were at the point where they had just had enough, and under a militant leadership, they sat down. When the UAW leaders in the big Fisher Body Plant 1 heard about the sit-down in Fisher 2, they sat down, also. That took real guts, and it took political leadership. The leaders of the political parties knew what they had to do because they'd studied labor history and the ruthlessness of the corporations.

Picket lines were established and also a big kitchen in the south end of Flint, across from the large Fisher 1 plant. Every day, gallons and gallons of food were prepared, and anybody who was on the picket lines would get a ticket with notification that they had served on the line so they'd be able to get a good hot meal.

The strike kitchen was primarily organized by the Communist Party women. They brought a restaurant man from Detroit to help organize this huge kitchen. They were the ones who made all of those good meals.

We also had what we called scavengers, groups of people who would go to the local farmers and ask for donations of food for the strikers. Many people in these small towns surrounding Flint were factory workers who would also raise potatoes, cabbages, tomatoes, corn or whatever. So great quantities of food were sent down to be made into dishes for the strikers. People were very generous.

John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers helped us financially so that if there was somebody in serious difficulty we could help them out a little bit. Later on, the garment workers sent money. But with thousands of workers, you couldn't help everybody, so many families were taken care of by committees forming in plants, whether they were on strike or not. Committees in Buick, Chevrolet, and Fisher Body took care of some of the urgent cases so nobody starved or got into really major medical difficulties.

After the first sit-down started, I went down to see what I could do to help. I was either on the picket lines or up at the Pengelly Building all the time, but some of the strike leaders didn't know who I was and didn't know that I had been teaching classes in unionism and so on. So they said, "Go to the kitchen. We need a lot of help out there." They didn't know what else to tell a woman to do. I said, "You've got a lot of little, skinny men around here who can't stand to be out on the cold picket lines for very long. They can peel potatoes as well as women can." I turned down the idea of kitchen duty.

Instead, I organized a children's picket line. I got Bristol board and paints, and I was painting signs for this children's picket line. One of my socialist comrades came up and said, "Hey, Genora, what are you doing here?" I said, "I'm doing your job". Since he was a professional sign painter, I turned the sign-painting project over to him and that was the beginning of the sign-painting department.

We could only do the children's picket line once because it was too dangerous, but we got an awful lot of favorable publicity from it, much of it international. The picture of my two-year-old son, Jarvis, holding a picket sign saying, "My daddy strikes for us little tykes," went all over the nation, and people sent me articles from French newspapers and from Germany and from other European countries. I thought it was remarkable that the news traveled so far...

Now remember, the UAW was still in the process of getting organized. It didn't have elected officers or by-laws or any of the rest of it. So we were free to organize our Women's Auxiliary, to elect our president, vice-president, recording secretary and heads of committees, all on our own... We set up public speaking classes for women... We trained them in how to get up in union meetings and what appeals to make. We gave them an outline of a speech and they practiced in the classes...

The successful occupation of Plant 4, which joined the occupations at Fisher 1 and 2, broke the resistance of General Motors and negotiations began in Detroit. We still maintained the picket lines and the security of the plants. The areas that weren't controlled by the union were controlled by the National Guard.

The National Guard kept everyone away from the Chevrolet embankment. If you came down Chevrolet Avenue and you looked up at the buildings there, you'd see guardsmen with their machine guns pointed right down the street.

The Brigade went to help the women from the kitchen get food into Plant 4 the first night, but we couldn't get by those guards. I started talking to one of these young boys and his finger was actually trembling on that trigger. We didn't fool around with them because they were all excited. They thought this was a big adventure - what the hell, shooting a couple of people. It was war. But the governor declared that the strikers were to be fed.

However, General Motors had turned off the heat in Plant 4 and they had no cushions. Fisher Body plants have cushions and materials for seating and so they were much easier to hold. Not only that, the huge motorized picket lines at Fisher Body 1 meant we were strong enough so that the picketers and sit-downers could get out if they wanted to and go across to the union restaurant to contact people. They could even have their families come into the plant for a little while and get them back out again through the big front windows, because they were guarded by the union.

At Chevrolet you couldn't get out. GM used all kinds of tactics to break that sit-down. They sent in notes that some members of the strikers' families were very sick. One man was told his father was dying, and so he left. They had doctors come in saying that some little cough was very dangerous—a contagious disease. But Kermit was a very strong leader and he managed to keep the men together.

This time it was General Motors that was stymied. On February 11 they signed a peace agreement recognizing the UAW as representative for the auto workers. And on March 12 the first labor contract was signed.

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### **Sit-down strikes - by Leon Trotsky, from "The Transitional Programme"**

On guard against routine handling of a situation as against a plague, the leadership should respond sensitively to the initiative of the masses.

Sit-down strikes, the latest expression of this kind of initiative, go beyond the limits of "normal" capitalist procedure. Independently of the demands of the strikers, the temporary seizure of factories deals a blow to the idol, capitalist property. Every sit-down strike poses in a practical manner the question of who is boss of the factory: the capitalist or the workers?

If the sit-down strike raises this question episodically, the factory committee gives it organized expression. Elected by all the factory employees, the factory committee immediately creates a counterweight to the will of the administration...

Trade union bureaucrats will, as a general rule, resist the creation of factory committees, just as they resist every bold step along the road of mobilizing the masses.

However, the wider the sweep of the movement, the easier will it be to break this resistance. Where the closed shop has already been instituted in "peaceful" times, the committee will formally coincide with the usual organ of the trade union, but will renew its personnel and widen its functions. The prime significance of the committee, however, lies in the fact that it becomes the militant staff for such working class layers, as the trade union is usually incapable of moving to action. It is precisely from these more oppressed layers that the most self-sacrificing battalions of the revolution will come.

From the moment that the committee makes its appearance, a factual dual power is established in the factory. By its very essence it represents the transitional state, because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open the doors, if not to a direct revolutionary, then to a pre-revolutionary period – between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes. That the propagation of the factory committee idea is neither premature nor artificial is amply attested to by the waves of sit-down strikes spreading through several countries. New waves of this type will be inevitable in the immediate future. It is necessary to begin a campaign in favor of factory committees in time in order not to be caught unawares.

### **"Business Secrets" and Workers' Control of Industry**

... The necessity of "controlling" economy, of placing state "guidance" over industry and of "planning" is today recognized – at least in words – by almost all current bourgeois and petty bourgeois tendencies, from fascist to Social Democratic. With the fascists, it is mainly a question of "planned" plundering of the people for military purposes. The Social Democrats prepare to drain the ocean of anarchy with spoonfuls of bureaucratic "planning." Engineers and professors write articles about "technocracy." In their cowardly experiments in "regulation," democratic governments run head-on into the invincible sabotage of big capital.

The actual relationship existing between the exploiters and the democratic "controllers" is best characterized by the fact that the gentlemen "reformers" stop short in pious trepidation before the threshold of the trusts and their business "secrets"...

Workers no less than capitalists have the right to know the "secrets" of the factory, of the trust, of the whole branch of industry, of the national economy as a whole. First and foremost, banks, heavy industry and centralized transport should be placed under an observation glass.

The immediate tasks of workers' control should be to explain the debits and credits of society, beginning with individual business undertakings; to determine the actual share of the national income appropriated by individual capitalists and by the exploiters as a whole; to expose the behind-the-scenes deals and swindles of banks and trusts; finally, to reveal to all members of society that unconscionable squandering of human labor which is the result of capitalist anarchy and the naked pursuit of profits.

No office holder of the bourgeois state is in a position to carry out this work, no matter with how great authority one would wish to endow him... Only factory committees can bring about real control of production, calling in – as consultants but not as "technocrats" – specialists sincerely devoted to the people: accountants, statisticians, engineers, scientists, etc.

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The struggle against unemployment is not to be considered without the calling for a broad and bold organization of public works. But public works can have a continuous and progressive significance for society, as for the unemployed themselves, only when they are made part of a general plan worked out to cover a considerable number of years. Within the framework of

this plan, the workers would demand resumption, as public utilities, of work in private businesses closed as a result of the crisis. Workers' control in such case: would be replaced by direct workers' management.

The working out of even the most elementary economic plan – from the point of view of the exploited, not the exploiters – is impossible without workers' control, that is, without the penetration of the workers' eye into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy. Committees representing individual business enterprises should meet at conference to choose corresponding committees of trusts, whole branches of industry, economic regions and finally, of national industry as a whole. Thus, workers' control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the working class will prepare itself for direct management of nationalized industry when the hour for that eventuality strikes.

To those capitalists, mainly of the lower and middle strata, who of their own accord sometimes offer to throw open their books to the workers – usually to demonstrate the necessity of lowering wages – the workers answer that they are not interested in the bookkeeping of individual bankrupts or semi-bankrupts but in the account ledgers of all exploiters as a whole. The workers cannot and do not wish to accommodate the level of their living conditions to the exigencies of individual capitalists, themselves victims of their own regime. The task is one of reorganizing the whole system of production and distribution on a more dignified and workable basis if the abolition of business secrets be a necessary condition to workers' control, then control is the first step along the road to the socialist guidance of economy.

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## **The demand for state ownership - by Leon Trotsky, from "The Transitional Programme"**

### **Expropriation of Separate Groups of Capitalists**

The socialist program of expropriation, i.e., of political overthrow of the bourgeoisie and liquidation of its economic domination, should in no case during the present transitional period hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the expropriation of several key branches of industry vital for national existence or of the most parasitic group of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, in answer to the pathetic jeremiads of the gentlemen democrats anent the dictatorship of the "60 Families" of the United States or the "200 Families" of France, we counterpose the demand for the expropriation of those 60 or 200 feudalistic capitalist overlords.

In precisely the same way, we demand the expropriation of the corporations holding monopolies on war industries, railroads, the most important sources of raw materials, etc.

The difference between these demands and the muddleheaded reformist slogan of "nationalization" lies in the following: (1) we reject indemnification; (2) we warn the masses against demagogues of the People's Front who, giving lip service to nationalization, remain in reality agents of capital; (3) we call upon the masses to rely only upon their own revolutionary strength; (4) we link up the question of expropriation with that of seizure of power by the workers and farmers.

The necessity of advancing the slogan of expropriation in the course of daily agitation in partial form, and not only in our propaganda in its more comprehensive aspects, is dictated by the fact that different branches of industry are on different levels of development, occupy a different place in the life of society, and pass through different stages of the class struggle. Only a general revolutionary upsurge of the working class can place the complete expropriation of the bourgeoisie on the order of the day. The task of transitional demands is to prepare the working class to solve this problem.

### **Expropriation of the Private Banks and State-ization of the Credit System**

Imperialism means the domination of finance capital. Side by side with the trusts and syndicates, and very frequently rising above them, the banks concentrate in their hands the actual command over the economy. In their structure the banks express in a concentrated form the entire structure of modern capital: they combine tendencies of monopoly with tendencies of anarchy. They organize the miracles of technology, giant enterprises, mighty trusts; and they also organize high prices, crises and unemployment. It is impossible to take a single serious step in the struggle against monopolistic despotism and capitalistic anarchy – which supplement one another in their work of destruction – if the commanding posts of banks are left in the hands of predatory capitalists. In order to create a unified system of investments and credits, along a rational plan corresponding to the interests of the entire people, it is necessary to merge all the banks into a single national institution. Only the expropriation of the private banks and the concentration of the entire credit system in the hands of the state will provide the latter with the necessary actual, i.e., material resources – and not merely paper and bureaucratic resources – for economic planning.

The expropriation of the banks in no case implies the expropriation of bank deposits. On the contrary, the single state bank will be able to create much more favorable conditions for the small depositors than could the private banks. In the same way, only the state bank can establish for farmers, tradesmen and small merchants conditions of favorable, that is, cheap credit. Even more important, however, is the circumstance that the entire economy – first and foremost large-scale industry and transport directed by a single financial staff, will serve the vital interests of the workers and all other toilers.

However, the state-ization of the banks will produce these favorable results only if the state power itself passes completely from the hands of the exploiters into the hands of the toilers.

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## **The Workers' Government - by Leon Trotsky, from "The Transitional Programme"**

The central task... consists in freeing the working class from the old leadership, whose conservatism is in complete contradiction to the catastrophic eruptions of disintegrating capitalism and represents the chief obstacle to historical progress.

The chief accusation which the Fourth International advances against the traditional organizations of the working class is the fact that they do not wish to tear themselves away from the political semi-corpse of the bourgeoisie.

Under these conditions the demand, systematically addressed to the old leadership: "Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power!" is an extremely important weapon for exposing the treacherous character of the parties and organizations of the Second, Third and Amsterdam Internationals. The slogan, "workers' government," is thus acceptable to us only in the sense that it had in 1917 with the Bolsheviks, i.e., as an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist slogan. but in no case in that "democratic" sense which later the epigones gave it, transforming it from a bridge to Socialist revolution into the chief barrier upon its path.

Of all parties and organizations which base themselves on the workers and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers' government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the program of the "workers' government."

Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers' organizations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. However, one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty bourgeois parties... may go further than they wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie. In any case one thing is not to be doubted: even if this highly improbable variant somewhere at some time becomes a reality and the "workers' and farmers' government" in the above-mentioned sense is established in fact, it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual rule of the working class.

However, there is no need to indulge in guesswork. The agitation around the slogan of a workers'-farmers' government preserves under all conditions a tremendous educational value. And not accidentally. This generalized slogan proceeds entirely along the line of the political development of our epoch (the bankruptcy and decomposition of the old bourgeois parties, the downfall of democracy, the growth of fascism, the accelerated drive of the workers toward more active and aggressive politics). Each of the transitional demands should, therefore, lead to one and the same political conclusion: the workers need to break with all traditional parties of the bourgeoisie in order, jointly with the farmers, to establish their own power.

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## Italy 1920: the factory occupations

Excerpts from two articles by Antonio Gramsci

### Workers' Democracy

An urgent problem today faces every socialist with a lively sense of the historical responsibility that rests on the working class and on the Party which represents the critical and active consciousness of the mission of this class.

How are the immense social forces unleashed by the War to be harnessed? How are they to be disciplined and given a political form which has the potential to develop and grow continuously into the basis of the socialist State in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is embodied? How is the present to be welded to the future, satisfying the urgent necessities of the one and working effectively to create and 'anticipate' the other? The aim of this article is to stimulate thought and action. It is an invitation to the best and most conscious workers to reflect on the problem and collaborate— each in the sphere of his own competence and activity—towards its solution, by 28 focusing the attention of their comrades and associations on it. Only common solidarity in a work of clarification, persuasion and mutual education will produce concrete, constructive action.

The socialist State already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class. To link these institutions together, co-ordinating and ordering them in a highly centralized hierarchy of instances and powers, while respecting the indispensable autonomy and articulation of each, means creating a true and representative workers' democracy here and now. Such a democracy should be effectively and actively opposed to the bourgeois State, and already prepared to replace it in all its essential functions of administration and control of the national heritage.

Today, the workers' movement is led by the Socialist Party and the Confederation of Labour. But for the great mass of workers, the exercise of the social power of the Party and the Confederation is only achieved indirectly, by prestige and enthusiasm, authoritarian pressure and even inertia. The scope of the Party's prestige widens daily, spreading to previously unexplored popular strata; it wins consent and a desire to work effectively for the advent of Communism among groups and individuals which have never previously participated in political struggle. These disorderly and chaotic energies must be given permanent form and discipline. They must be organized and strengthened, making the proletarian and semi-proletarian class an organized society that can educate itself, gain experience and acquire a responsible consciousness of the duties that fall to a class that achieves State power.

Only many years of decades of work will enable the Socialist Party and the trade unions to absorb the whole of the working class. These two institutions cannot be identified immediately with the proletarian State. In fact, in the Communist Republics, they have continued to survive independently of the State, as institutions of propulsion (the Party) or of control and partial implementation (the unions). The Party must continue as the organ of Communist education, the dynamo of faith, the depository of doctrine, the supreme power harmonizing and leading towards their goal the organized and disciplined forces of the working class and the peasantry. Precisely because it must strictly carry out this task, the Party cannot throw open its doors to an invasion of new members, unused to the exercise of responsibility and discipline.

*[Founded at Genoa in 1892, The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) represented the Second International in Italy. Unlike its French and German equivalents, it did not support the entry of Italy into the War in May 1915, but neither did it adopt a Zimmerwaldist attitude. The result was that it survived the War with the three wings characteristic of pre-War Socialist Parties: a reformist*

*wing on the right; a 'maximalist' (orthodox) centre; and a revolutionary wing on the left. The General Confederation of Labour (CGL) was the Socialist federation of trade unions. Founded in 1906, its pre-war membership rose to 384,000, about half the organized workers in Italy. After the War, the CGL membership rose rapidly to 2,000,000; its Catholic (CIL) and syndicalist (USI) counterparts claimed 1,160,000 and 800,000 members respectively. The CGL was dominated by reformists like its post-War secretary, D'Aragona.]*

But the social life of the working class is rich in institutions, is articulated by a multiplicity of activities. These precisely demand development, co-ordination, and interconnection in a broad and flexible system that will include and order the entire working class.

The workshop with its internal commissions, the socialist circles and the peasant communities are the centres of proletarian life in which we must work directly.

The internal commissions are organs of workers' democracy which must be freed from the limitations imposed on them by the management, and infused with new life and energy. Today, the internal commissions limit the power of the capitalist in the factory and perform functions of arbitration and discipline. Tomorrow, developed and enriched, they must be the organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration.

The workers should proceed forthwith to the election of vast delegate assemblies, chosen from their best and most conscious comrades, under the slogan: 'All Power in the Workshop to the Workshop Committee', co-ordinating this slogan with another: 'All State Power to the Workers' and Peasants' Councils'.

A vast field of concrete revolutionary propaganda would open up before the Communists organized in the Party and in the ward circles.

In accord with the urban sections, the ward circles should make a survey of the workers' forces in their zone, and become the seat of the ward council of workshop delegates, the ganglion that knits together and centralizes all the proletarian energies of the ward. The system of elections could be varied according to the size of the ward, but the aim should be to get one delegate elected for every 15 workers, divided into categories (as in English factories), arriving by electoral stages at a committee of factory delegates which included representatives of the whole work process (manual workers, clerical workers, technicians).

The ward committee should also try to include delegates from the other categories of workers living in the ward: servants, coachmen, tram-drivers, railway workers, road-sweepers, private employees, clerks, and others.

The ward committee should be an expression of the whole working class living in the ward, a legitimate and authoritative expression that commands respect for a discipline invested with spontaneously delegated power, and that can order the immediate, integral cessation of all work throughout the ward.

The ward committees should be enlarged into urban commissions, controlled and disciplined by the Socialist Party and the craft federations.

*['Commissioni interni': roughly equivalent to the shop steward committees set up in Britain during the First World War. The internal commissions had long been demanded by the engineering workers' union (FIOM) in Turin before they were acknowledged by the government (but not fully by the employers) in 1915. Most were dominated by revolutionary workers, though a few were tools of the management.]*

Such a system of workers' democracy (integrated with the corresponding peasant organizations) would give a permanent form and discipline to the masses. It would be a magnificent school of political and administrative experience, and it would incorporate the masses into its framework down to the last man, so that tenacity and perseverance become habitual for them, and they get used to regarding themselves as an army in the field which needs a strict cohesion if it is not to be destroyed and reduced to slavery.

### **Political Capacity**

Today, the engineering workers are to approve or reject, by referendum, the motion voted by the congress of their Federation [to call off the occupations and negotiate with management]. The result of this consultation of factory guilds is not difficult to predict... [they voted by a narrow majority to call off the action].

So the vanguard of the proletariat should not be demoralized or disorganized by this outcome of the revolutionary movement. Its quality as a vanguard will be verified by the strength of mind and political capacity it succeeds in demonstrating. Have the groups of workers which have been at the head of the movement in the last few days taken the exact measure of their powers to act and the forces of passive resistance that exist within the masses? Have they acquired a consciousness of their historical mission? Have they acquired a consciousness of the inner weaknesses which members of the working class have revealed, weaknesses which are not individual, that do not lower our assessment of the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat in the present historical phase, but which can be traced to the general relations of a trade organization? Have they transformed their experiences into an active and operative consciousness? Are they skilled in identifying the deepest hidden feelings that move the popular mind, and the negative feelings, the inhibiting impulses that fatigue, and immobilize the most generous and daring impulses? The political capacity of the proletarian vanguard (and hence the real revolutionary capacity of the Italian working class) will depend on the attitudes that emerge from today's referendum. Many perils threaten the working class; these perils are not external, they are primarily internal. The greatest danger is the lack of a 'spirit of adaptation' to higher circumstances, a spirit of critical, conscious and deliberate adaptation, which cannot and must not be confused with opportunism.

Rather, it is their lack of this spirit of adaptation that leads the working class into opportunism, or, what comes to the same thing, to the triumph of the opportunists among the masses, to the maintenance of the leadership that has brought the revolutionary movement to its present pass.

The revolutionary vanguard needs to consider and analyse the events that have just taken place, not according to its own wishes, passions and will, but objectively, as external data to be subjected to political judgment, and as a historical movement susceptible to conscious extension and development. From a merely objective point of view, the working class can register a great step forward. As a mass guided and disciplined in the factory by its direct representatives, it has proved itself capable of industrial and political self-government. This fact, which should be elementary for revolutionary Communists, has consequences of incalculable social importance. The middle classes of the population have compared the strength of the proletariat with the inadequacy of the entrepreneurial class. Half a century ago, the proletariat was still, as Marx put it, a sack of potatoes, a generic imponderable, an amorphous conglomeration of individuals without ideas, without will, and without a unitary perspective. Today it is the entrepreneurial class that has become a sack of potatoes, an aggregate of the inept and the imbecile, without political capacity, without internal power. The revolutionary events of the past few days have illuminated this position of the two classes competing for the government of society's production. The prejudices and follies that the capitalist-owned press had disseminated in public opinion have collapsed; the middle classes are lining up with the proletariat, convinced that this young and energetic class holds the key to civilization and human progress. From the test that both classes have had to undergo, the proletariat has emerged higher in public estimation, while capitalism has revealed even further its deficiencies and incapacity. This new political situation has definitely put forward the proletariat as a ruling class; it is a spring that drives it irresistibly towards the conquest of power.

Why, then, did this not happen immediately? Or at least, why has no attempt been made to reach this goal? The answer to this question must be sought in the tactics pursued until today, culminating in the referendum. The leadership of the proletarian movement bases itself on the 'masses', that is, it asks the masses for prior permission to act, consulting them in the forms and at the time it chooses. But a revolutionary movement can only be based on the proletarian vanguard, and must be led without prior consultation, without the apparatus of representative assemblies. Revolution is like war; it must be minutely prepared by a working-class general staff, just as a war is by the Army's general staff. Assemblies can only ratify what has already taken place, exalt the successful and implacably punish the unsuccessful. It is the task of the proletarian vanguard to keep the revolutionary spirit constantly awake in the masses, to create the conditions which keep them ready for action, in which the proletariat will respond immediately to the call for revolution. In the same way, the nationalists and imperialists, with their frantic preaching of patriotic vanities and hatred against foreigners, are trying to create the conditions in which the crowd will approve a war that has already been agreed on by the general staff of the Army and the diplomatic service. No war would ever break out if prior permission had to be obtained from the masses to declare it; parliaments approve wars because they know they have already been inexorably decided, because they know that they will be thrust inexorably aside if they oppose them. Similarly, no revolutionary movement can be decreed by a workers' national assembly. To call for such an assembly is to confess one's disbelief in it beforehand; it amounts to exercising a prejudicial pressure against it.

The proletarian vanguard, which today is disillusioned and threatened with dissolution, must ask itself whether it is not itself responsible for this situation. It is a fact that in the General Confederation of Labour, there is no organized revolutionary opposition, centralized enough to exercise control over the leading offices and capable not only of replacing one man by another, but one method by another, one aim by another and one will by another. This is the real situation, which lamentations, reproaches and oaths will not change, only tenacious and patient organization and preparation. It is thus essential that the groups of workers which have been at the head of the masses accept the facts as they are, in order to alter them effectively. The masses must be kept firm and united behind their programmes and slogans; it must be made possible for an energetic general staff to emerge from among them which is able to conduct wide-scale collective action with intelligence and daring. Today, we have the referendum; its result must not be the occasion for dismay and dissolution, but rather a call for tighter, more disciplined and better organized action. The emancipation of the proletariat is not a labour of small account and of little men; only he who can keep his heart strong and his will as sharp as a sword when the general disillusionment is at its worst can be regarded as a fighter for the working class, or called a revolutionary.

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**Source URL:** <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2009/07/28/occupations-workers-control-and-workers-government-readings>

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### **How to negotiate: tips from the US labour movement**

Tips from *The Troublemakers' Handbook*, a publication from *Labor Notes* in the USA, <http://www.troublemakershandbook.org>

- \* Negotiating committees that are not sufficiently linked to members often make the mistake of thinking the force of their arguments alone will help them win... Member solidarity is the most important element in successful bargaining.
- \* In almost every negotiation there is a moment when the boss gets up and yells. Committee members should be told to anticipate that moment, and when it actually happens they will not be intimidated.
- \* The company must trust the negotiating committee. They don't have to like you, but they do have to respect you. Sneakiness is not good; your word has to be good at all times. You can, however, surprise them.
- \* The people who are negotiating for the company often do not have a real understanding of how the company operates on the ground. Bringing people in to testify can have a large impact.
- \* The most common mistake [novice] negotiators make is to bargain against themselves. For example, the negotiator will say, "We'll take 50 cents". When the company says no, the negotiator will then say, "Okay, we'll take 25 cents". A better strategy is to make an offer and leave it on the table. Wait for the company to make a counter-offer.

\* Communicating with the membership about the process of negotiations is crucial, but the committee should not make the company's arguments for it. Report what the company says, but don't make their arguments for them.

\* If you cannot recommend the contract, do not recommend it.

\* Negotiators who've sweated through bargaining sessions have a natural tendency to put the best possible face on the... offer... [But] members should get a true picture of the contract, warts and all, and have plenty of time to discuss it... Negotiators should provide members the entire proposed contract... This is easily done online, but make enough paper copies for those who want them too.

\* If you recommend rejection... you'll need a clear alternative plan: keep striking... go on strike, keep negotiating, inside strategy [i.e. work-to-rule or similar tactics]...

### **How to win a sit-in, by Amy Offner**

Although a student sit-in is different from a workplace takeover, there is much to learn from the successful occupation by the Harvard University students' campaign for a living wage for campus workers in 2001. These are excerpts from an article by Amy Offner on the lessons of that sit-in.

On the inside, the major task of the first few days was just holding the space. The police did not try to drag everyone out, but made it very difficult for us to stay inside and function. For instance, they prevented people from leaving the room they were in to go to the bathroom, and they forced their way into a room that the inside team had staked out as a cop-free room for meetings.

The inside team eventually got the police to back down by threatening to go to the bathroom in wastebaskets if they couldn't use the bathroom, and by having the outside team make a huge amount of noise in the middle of the night to get the cops to leave the meeting room. The noise produced so many angry calls to the police department from students trying to sleep that the cops decided it wasn't worth staying in the room. For the remainder of the sit-in, however, the outside team was careful not to make noise at night because we didn't want to alienate students.

On the inside, we also worked to keep the cops from being thugs by videotaping them: at least four people on the inside brought in video cameras and recorded everything...

Filming on the inside was also a central part of our media strategy. The inside team tossed tapes of footage out the windows to the outside team, where a member with filmmaking experience quickly produced a highlights tape which we copied and gave to TV news crews...

Another early concern was food: we needed to get it inside. The campus dining hall workers solved this problem for us. On the first night of the sit-in, a group of workers marched to the building with a stack of pizzas and essentially browbeat the police until they were allowed to deliver the food. From that point on, the police let food in, and every day, the outside team arranged for donations from unions, community groups, and restaurants.

On the outside, the goal from the start was to bring as many people as possible to the building, to isolate the administration by eliciting active support from as many constituencies as possible, and to generate positive publicity about the campaign.

A first step was to see that, every day, the noon rally and 8pm vigil were well-run. We made sure the speakers list was diverse, including workers, union reps, faculty, representatives from other student organizations and community groups, politicians, alumni, parents, and big-name speakers. We included musicians, spoken-word artists, and comedians. And we had a good group of drummers who backed up the chants.

We spent a lot of time making phone calls and canvassing to increase our turnout every day. Over the course of the sit-in, we chose three of our daily rallies to pump up into huge affairs: one after we'd been inside for a week, another about a week later when we got members of the AFL-CIO executive board to come and speak, and one on the day we left the building...

We scheduled other events all day long so that people could always come by the building and find something happening. Events ranged from a teach-in on race and poverty by the Black Students Association to salsa dancing lessons in front of the building... Every morning, we would plaster the campus with posters announcing that day's schedule, and we included the schedule in our daily e-mail updates and on our website.

After the first few days, when it was clear that our support was growing, the police stopped fighting over space inside the building. At that point, members of the inside team split into work groups, and for the remainder of the sit-in, they spent all day making phone calls to turn people out to events, solicit endorsements from national figures, and speak to reporters.

Workers and unions took part in all the events outside the building, and also organized their own. Janitors held their own rally, and off-campus unions sponsored a solidarity night. For many people, the highlights of the sit-in were two explosive night-time demonstrations with the campus dining hall workers. The sit-in coincided with the dining hall workers' contract negotiations, and the two developments fed each other...

The outside team found unique ways to involve every possible constituency. We attended meetings of student groups to answer questions about the sit-in, and those meetings generated new endorsements. We then got supportive student organizations to co-sponsor our noon rallies...

A few days into the sit-in, our most supportive faculty members organized the Faculty Committee for a Living Wage. They wrote an open letter in support of the campaign, collected over 400 signatures in a few days, and published it in the Boston Globe. Some professors held their classes outside the building...

On campus, we worked to constantly escalate the pressure on the administration: we didn't want them to think they'd seen everything we could do. For instance, we arranged... to run a mass civil disobedience training on campus during the sit-in, and had people role-play getting arrested on the steps of other administrative buildings. The implication was clear: we were ready to spread the sit-in if necessary, and many new people were willing to risk arrest.

Our most important escalation was the sprawling tent city that we built outside the occupied building. The university actually has rules banning anyone from camping out in Harvard Yard, so campus police could have arrested the entire outside team for doing this. To prevent arrests, we assembled a large crowd to launch the tent city. Over the next few days, the city grew to 100 tents and physically transformed Harvard Yard.

We put tremendous effort into media work, and this more than anything was what won the sit-in for us. Many off-campus supporters assumed that we got a lot of media coverage because Harvard was an irresistible draw. In fact, we got almost no media coverage for the first week of the sit-in, most likely because Harvard was using its connections to black out the story. We broke the blackout by being creative and unremitting. We had supporters call and write to papers and networks to ask why they weren't covering us.

We also understood that once the sit-in started, reporters would not consider it newsworthy in itself: we had to constantly create new angles for reporters. New endorsements from national figures could create stories that our support was growing. When janitors held a rally, we placed stories about workers getting involved. We turned the dining hall workers' strike authorization vote into a story about a swelling labor crisis on campus... In addition to our press team on the outside, several members of the inside team did nothing but call media outlets and plan stories for three weeks.

By the end of the sit-in, about eight very creative and persistent campaign members working with no budget had secured coverage in every major newspaper in the country and every major TV news show.