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THE SERVICE WORKER



“We Must Organize As One”

Our successes and failures of labor organizing in the service sector have revealed many hard-won truths about the industry’s conditions. As an example from New England, many useful lessons can be drawn from the work done at Maruichi, a small New England Japanese grocery/ cafe chain that a labor activist with the Organization of Class-Conscious Service Workers attempted to organize.

The shop was made up of 3 departments- grocery, kitchen, and cafe- which all were under different points of authority and received different pay rates. The barista position at the cafe faced a particularly strong contradiction regarding wages, in that they were getting only \$6.75 an hour plus tips, although it was originally promised to be \$15 when they were hired. The baristas ended up organizing around this problem and presented a demand letter to the manager that threatened to drop certain duties that they had recently taken on with no extra pay, as well as to stop accepting tips from customers if their demand for their original promised wage was not met. The planning and execution of the action was successful and technically won the primary demand of a wage increase from \$6.75 to \$15 an hour. However, a hard lesson was learned when the backlash to this letter was immediate and cleverly mixed in with management’s concession. The baristas wages were raised, but then the manager essentially got rid of the barista position by cutting drinks from the menu, and fired one of the participants. The remaining workers were then transferred to other departments and organizing fizzled, with the OCSW organizer unable to further politicize or mobilize workers before transferring to another shop.

The lessons of this action are two-fold: the necessity to be militant and the necessity for all departments under one given shop to be united. These things are crucial for our ability to both leverage against management and protect against punishments. To be militant, firstly, in small shops in industries with high turnover (like service) it does no good to start with small actions, threatening something larger in order to appeal to management. Management does not care and they will punish any form of organization once it has been revealed to them. Our

power lies in our ability to stop production, and actions that center around this should be the priority. We must have a solid united front that is prepared to deal with the consequences, and in fact, is ready to escalate with Plans B and C if management does not bend. In this way, secondly, we must better prepare for backlash. If a smaller action is initiated, be prepared to do a larger one at the drop of a hat. Be ready to walkout or quit in solidarity with workers who are punished, and start strike funds within shop organizations before actions are even planned in case firings occur and workers need monetary support.

This second lesson is just as important. In shops where there are multiple departments, even when divided by workforce, management, and hiring companies, these departments should be united politically and coordinated organizationally. Had the cafe been fully united with kitchen and grocery, and these separate departments participated in the demand letter or otherwise showed solidarity with their actions, the baristas may have had more success and management may have been less willing to immediately retaliate. But this is also an important aspect of the move away from “craft unionism” to “industrial unionism”. Whereas craft unionism organizes workers into unions based off the craft or trade we work in, industrial unionism organizes workers into unions based on the industry we are in regardless of skill or other differences. Industrial unions are the basis of class-conscious unions, uniting us by our role as workers against the common enemy, whether that be one manager or many, one company or more. When we organize as one shop, one collective bargaining agent, all demands of the separate departments serve each other and our leveraging power can reach its fullest potential. Moreover, independent industrial unionism provides us with strategic advantages in this fight. While workers can be fired from a given shop, they can be fired or isolated from a union or labor organization the capitalists have no control over.

The question now is to take these lessons and strategic advantages we have worked so hard to achieve, and leverage them to take the workers movement back to a new and exciting period of struggle.

Are you a service worker? We want to hear from you!

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