

Rank and File Organising – Lessons from America Part 2

Kim Moody, Ray M and Anindya Bhattacharyya

The International Socialist tradition has always believed in socialism from below –which means that socialism can only come about by the self-activity of the working class.

In this interview Ray M and Anindya Bhattacharyya spoke to labour organiser Kim Moody about his experience of rank and file organising in the US since the 1960s, and his view on developments in Britain today¹.

Thanks for offering to come and speak to us about your experience of industrial organising. We hope to cover a lot of ground, and I thought it would be best if you could begin by talking about the Labor Notes project, how it operated as a network.

Labor Notes came out of a couple of experiences in the late seventies. The first one was a coal miner's strike in the United States in 1978. It was a very long strike that stirred up a lot of solidarity action among other kinds of workers with caravans of goods and money going from north down to the south where the coal mines are and the coal miners sending up their caravans to the industrial cities like Detroit and the steel towns. The long upheaval from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s had involved rank and file organisation, wild-cat strikes, leaders being overthrown, and rank and file committees forming at all kinds of levels in a lot of big unions; but all that appeared to be dying down, and then along came this strike that everybody paid attention to. It was fabulous because Jimmy Carter, the president at that time, applied an injunction on this strike and they just ignored it and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. It was great.

Did it come back?

No. One of the problems with the rank and file upheaval of that period in the States was that, though you have these huge strikes, black caucuses and all these kind of things going on, they had almost no connection to each other, very little communication even. You might have a handful of leftists involved and some of them would communicate with each other, but basically there was nothing to give it a more class wide voice or coherence. This came in the wake of a split in the US International Socialists (IS). I don't want to emphasise this too much, but

¹ The interview was conducted before the Junior Doctors' strike. A shorter version of this interview was published in the rs21 Magazine in autumn 2015, and is available at <https://rs21.org.uk/2015/10/31/radicalising-the-rank-and-file/>

nevertheless these things happened and we had to re-evaluate our approach. We changed from the party building idea that we got from the UK to a re-groupment idea. Part of that involved the need for a labour paper that could reach across the movement and give people news and analysis of each other's struggles; but it also involved a transitional idea where you take what is happening, what people are actually doing and then try to tie it together and give it a more class-wide view or analysis – not so much a bunch of demands, more a kind of direction.

So how did the work for the paper lead to the Labor Notes conferences?

Those were some of the things that lead to the formation in 1979 of Labor Notes. Three of us started it. We were all members of IS, but we realised from the beginning that if this thing was going to work it could not be seen as a front group or run in that way. This was a tightrope act. Although the IS obviously discussed the project we were very clear that it could not be a party publication with a "line" and we had to involve other people right from the beginning who were not in our group or in any group for that matter. We could do that because, from the work in IS, we already had a very broad network of trade union activists. So that made Labor Notes possible and it really took off.

Now, unfortunately the upheaval of the sixties and seventies disappeared, we thought it might go on but it didn't after the miner's strike. Nevertheless, it became possible for us to have this role in creating a network. We never tried to set up an organisation, but rather a very loose network that went pretty much across the whole trade union movement in the beginning. Obviously it doesn't mean that we had millions of subscribers. They were in the thousands but it meant that these were key activists in these various different unions, and, with a tiny handful of exceptions, none of them were highly placed officials. Some of them were local union branch union officials and a couple might have been a little higher than that, but no presidents or general secretaries or whatever. Partly that was because we didn't want them, we wanted this to be a rank and file thing, and partly because they wouldn't touch us anyway – in fact they pretty much hated Labor Notes from the beginning.

We started to do other things with it as it grew, not just the subscriptions, although the way we did that was important too. Of course people bought individual subscriptions but we also encouraged people to take small bundles to use at work. People did that lots and still do, so in that way it got out to more people. By 1981 we had the idea of holding a conference. The first had about 500 people, which was more than we expected and from that time it has pretty much just grown. The people who subscribe, who come to the conferences, obviously have changed over this long period of time. If you'd been at the first four or five Labor Notes conferences you would have seen mostly car workers, steel workers, factory workers, teamsters, truck drivers – mainly blue collar, very heavy blue collar. Even as those industries began to shrink or move to the south or disappear or move abroad, yet the numbers kept going up, but the constituencies

changed significantly all the time. It also became more racially diverse. Also our numbers went up because of our intervention in debates at the time around management-worker partnerships and participation.

What did you mean by describing Labor Notes as a 'transitional' project?

I guess one lesson we learned is to listen to what people are saying about new management initiatives and take up the issues that other people won't take up. Don't try to beat the union, but try to get a current of people in the unions that have this point of view which we would call a class point of view, a basic 'us versus them.' So what made it transitional? Of course the idea comes originally from Trotsky, but what made it transitional in our minds was that we took something people were concerned about, but didn't quite understand in the beginning, and were able to turn into a kind of education and dynamics. We tried to make clear that it was not just about labour management – this is after all about capital and labour, about this fundamental relationship – but also tried to avoid Marxist rhetoric as much as possible, by remembering who we are taking to. Increasingly, no matter what the subject was about, we would begin to introduce workshops and things on questions of race and gender, and I have to admit it was something we were most nervous about. It is not the left we are speaking to after all, but big-bellied truck drivers and southern workers and all kinds of people like that, as well as black workers and Latinos and so forth. The amazing thing is that it really worked if you did it in a certain way. It had an influence at least on this small layer of activists across the movement because it taught them how to make these arguments against racism, racial talk, or unions ignoring the issues of black people or immigrants.

By the mid-to-late 1980s there were big debates about 'partnership programmes' which were about cooperation between labour and management. When these things came along, the labour bureaucracy embraced them, which led to division among the membership. People asked if this was empowerment or fraud. Of course we argued the latter, and put out books, held conferences and weekend schools that trained hundreds of activists on how to fight these things. To understand how we did things, you need to know about the way in which employers in the States enter into a legal contract with workers, which is different to what you see in Britain. When the workers get to vote on a new contract, the company can demand all the things that they want, and in those days the unions were increasingly giving in to their demands. In our books we showed how workers can subvert the process. So, when workers went to a meeting with management, the management wanted workers to sit around the table, but our books said 'don't do it'. We wanted to put all the union people on one side with the management on the other. Stops it being about partnership, and suggests workers should propose things that are not on the agenda. That way we were able to get across the class view, that it is us versus them, and some of the top unions took interest in some of our training and classes.

What is the role of rank and file organisation in rebuilding the labour movement?

How do you change the labour movement? Jane McAlevey says that you need a big left but you can't get a big left without a big labour movement. I think that's because Jane approaches this in a bureaucratic manner as a professional organiser, staff organiser and so forth. I was on a panel with her at Historical Materialism conference and she has a lot of interesting good things to say, but I don't think it's a chicken and egg problem at all. I think that the way you build the left is by building a large current within the labour movement or the working class more generally.

Partly this is just the obvious stuff about building strong workplace or on the job organisation. I say on the job because this also goes for people who don't have or don't spend all their time in the workplace – like say delivery drivers or couriers. All kinds of jobs now are not workplace based but can be still be organised in this fashion into unions. And if they are in the union then they are going to run into the problems that all workers have with union bureaucracy. Overcoming that involves the building of rank and file organisation based on workplace power as much as possible – but not just in order to run for office. One of my criticisms of what goes on in the UK among the left is the idea that the united left, or broad left, runs people for these high offices and they become electoral machines. Back in the day of course the IS criticised the Communist Party's operation for being exactly that and now the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has increasingly adopted the same approach. But it isn't just the SWP; it's all of the left groups, or at least all the ones I am aware of. I think that's a mistaken approach, because if you run people for office before you have an organised base they're going to be in trouble: they're not going to have authority, they're speaking largely for themselves and they will get into trouble not only with the bureaucracy but with their base such as it is, and their comrades because the dynamics involved.

Sounds like you are critical of leftists getting into positions of influence to build the movement.

From our perspective, we understand that we're not 'the only ones' and that we should work with other socialist groups who take the same approach. It's not possible everywhere but wherever it is to set up actual rank and file organisation – movements, but with a structure, something people can join, which puts out newsletters in the workplace and things of that sort. I would say the most important thing is for those who are able to do it to become stewards or reps. That can be difficult in a lot of places, but it would be more important than running for top office.

Similarly, more important than having some long list of demands is again the

transitional idea about picking on what people are actually worried about, and would like somebody to do something about, and getting them to do something about it with their mates. In the US, this actually happens perhaps more than it does here and there is currently a kind of wave of them. Most involved taking over local union branches, which are different in the States in that they're more workplace based than here. When I say local unions or branches I'm talking about organisations most of which have several thousand members or some of them even bigger than that, so we're talking about a lot of people.

Can you give any examples from the States showing the approach you are looking for?

I suppose the best known one here at the moment is the Chicago teachers' union. The left played a huge role in that. At least three groups that I know of, Solidarity, the International Socialist Organization and the Freedom Road Socialists Organization have worked together for quite a long time in spite of differences. So it is possible to go beyond the borders of your own group when there is something important to do. I'm obviously not saying differences will never come out, but they learned to handle them in a constructive way. The Chicago teacher's strike is obviously such a prime example because it was conducted as if somebody had written a handbook on how you do this beforehand: they did everything, including consulting all of the members about the strike — it was absolutely fantastic.

Now you can't do that in every situation, since you don't always have the kind of conscious leaders that they had. And it took them a while to get there. They organised this core quite a while ago, and were doing lots of things, but they understood that you don't begin with the election or the strike for that matter. You begin with the little things and the not so little things. Chicago is the best known example but there are actually scores and scores of these mobilisations. One estimate is that the successful ones now control local or in a couple of cases national unions covering about a half a million workers. Whether it will continue to spread I don't know. It isn't just something that Labor Notes, much less the left groups did; but when it starts happening, because Labor Notes has established itself as this kind of centre where you can come for help, they do. So this last conference in April had two thousand people and that just blew my mind, as it represented all these rank and file movements as well as immigrant community groups.

I can't say that this dynamic will keep going, a lot of these groups will fail – that's almost inevitable, unfortunately. But what you see taking place in the unions where it's happening is that something like a new generation of leaders are taking shape and their views are radically different from the older generation of leaders. Most of them wouldn't call themselves socialists, but they're definitely class conscious, they are against partnership and for all of the things we could

say they should be for, except for revolution. Some of them are even in favour of that, although they have some vague ideas about what that might be, but it's clearly a different current from the previous leaderships. Now I don't know if that would have happened without Labor Notes or not. Labor Notes didn't create the activists, but it does help educate them.

So I think that's how the labour movement changes and how you build the left. I mean, I'm sitting on a panel in New York shortly after the conference in Chicago, one of the guys on the panel is one of the rebels in a huge Teamster local, called Tim Sylvester, a working class guy from Queens [in New York] and he says, 'my members think I'm nuts to come and sit on this panel with communists and socialists, but hey, you know.' You get more and more of this, they know who we are. It's not like there's any secret about our politics so they're willing to work with us even if they're not willing to adopt all of our politics.

Any thoughts about how this links to building the left in the UK?

Now obviously there's more to building the left than trade union work. Any organisation in the UK is going to have to intervene in more movements and over the issues of race and the NHS. For example, take these little strikes they had in the NHS.^[2] Four hours isn't much, but if you've never done it before it's a little step and if we were there in significant numbers and we had something to give health workers like Labor Notes or something or a rank and file group among the nurses there would be a lot to be said. They're striking for money because that seems to be the acceptable, legal thing to do — but what about demanding more staff and shorter hours, and better nurse-patient ratios? Maybe they can't go for those things right now, but if we had a publication or a centre or something like that, that's the kind of thing it would be saying and we would have nurses saying it, we don't need to say it, they need to say it.

Perhaps we could look more closely at the questions of race and gender, and also how immigration is affecting the composition of the working class in the States.

Well, the first thing I would say is that in the States there is enormous hostility to immigration among the white working class, just as there is in Britain. That has to be tackled. But, before we talk about that it's worth saying something about immigrant workers in the US today. Many are now in industries that are simply too important to be ignored. These are industries the unions have been trying to organise for a long time. Meat packing in particular is now almost entirely made up of Latino immigrants, along with immigrants from central Mexico, the Caribbean and central Latin America. They work in new plants which were set up to avoid the unions, which have almost disappeared. Not only are they not in unions, but a lot of the workers are undocumented, and many are fearful of being deported because of their status. But even there the unions have actually learned

something, even the bureaucracy. They have seen that immigrants in the US have become densely organised among themselves. There are these workers' centres they have set up, which reminds me of the 19th century in the US when there were a lot of new migrant groups coming to the States.

What kinds of debates has this stirred in the movement?

The first thing people say about these workers' centres is 'don't all these ethnic organisations divide the class?' But it turns out to be almost the opposite. We started to see that this was a way to get people from different groups into the union in the first place. So when you think that we have about 25 million people, who are not going to get kicked out, you start to see that this is a big group who are going to play a big part in the union. Getting the rank and file to understand that has been important.

Don't you get complaints that the immigrants are taking people's jobs?

Yeah, but the first thing you say to your workmates is 'they're not taking your job cos you have a job, so what are you talking about?' Then when you've won that point you say 'is it better to have them be underpaid or to be in the union?' Of course more things follow, they may be saying 'well aren't they just lazy', and you can use the same arguments, just as you should when a socialist is challenging racism. Solidarity does not start with saying 'we must all love each other', but that it is necessary that we stand together. That means you cannot support people who run for office in the union on a racist basis, because it's against solidarity. I think that's something you get more in America than in Britain.

We've had stories in Britain from people getting into arguments about UKIP with workmates. They usually show that, although the media presents a one-sided picture on immigration, it is possible to keep a class instinct alive. But sometimes you get into a row with a fellow worker, and without a union or organisation it can be hard to sustain anti-racism on the shop floor.

If you're not in the union then it's not going to work, except on an individual level. That's not a political strategy for confronting these things. I think the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) is a model because they organised, for example with southern white truck drivers. Their programme said 'no discrimination', and 'solidarity means solidarity.' We also said that if you want to win, you have to work with everyone in the union. Although it doesn't deal completely with racism, it's kind of your starting point, particularly in a union that is becoming more diverse.

That sounds like a good start, but where do you take it from there?

The next step they took was to take people from there to a Labor Notes school where it's much more explicit. The Labor Notes schools gave people a chance to bring their workmates and expose them to people from across the labour movement who are saying that racism is nuts, that we don't need that, and when they see white people saying that as well as Black people and Latino people it makes the point. Now we have people who were being organised by the TDU and having been to a Labor Notes school running their own workshops on racism.

We can see the importance of having socialists in the workplace who can support this kind of initiative, but many people encounter racism in the community – shouldn't the unions be active there?

I think we have to remember that as organisations socialists are small compared to the working class. We can't do everything and that's why the question often comes up 'well shouldn't we be doing all this community work'. Well maybe some people in the group should be doing that, but if the central strategy is going to be based on this idea of working in the organised labour movement, which I think it has to be, then we have to find these transitional ways to educate people to get our class ideas across and our perspectives on what the union should be doing. From what I see, the left is not doing this for the most part.

I could give you the example of the TDU taking on UPS in 1997. It was important because the company's strategy was to introduce a production management cooperation plan in a way that would divide the workforce. The employers were also counting on white workers in the south scabbing if things came to a strike. In the end it didn't happen. There was a strike and the TDU had the right approach on the ground. They forced the union to take up their arguments, and go into the south and carry out educational work as part of the strike. The south was solid.

Sticking with this example, you say that management thought they could split the south, but did the unions too? And can you say more about how it was prevented?

It was very much the management who had this plan. The TDU were successful because they had people in the south, both Black and White, who were reporting that the company is saying the Whites are going to scab and Black workers are believing it, which was creating a lot of tension. So people made the arguments, held the meetings and did the right things at the lowest level, like when picking the picket captains, made sure they were integrated with Black and White people. Naturally, they couldn't do it everywhere, but in a lot of big locals of UPS they were able to do this and the scabbing never happened.

The TDU started doing this a couple of years before the contract came up. They knew this was going to be a make or break fight particularly over the issue of the part timers but also on all of the racial stuff. Just while I am thinking about it,

there have been other similar examples. New Directions was a rank and file group in the car workers' union in the 1980's that did a lot of good educational stuff on race and gender.

Can I ask about how Labor Notes have organised around issues of gender and sexism?

Well, the first point is about developing women leaders and the second is that women have been involved in the workplace in the States for much longer than in Britain. There were women steel workers in the 1970s, and through the 1970s and into the 1980s there was what we call a working class women's movement in the car plants, who organised women's caucuses in their unions at the local level and sometimes higher. There were also national organisations of trade union women but they tended to be mainly of high level officials. But at the base there were women who organised themselves in the big industrial unions, even in coal mines. I think that the self-organisation of oppressed groups was always central to IS politics throughout the 1970s and 1980s and still is I would say, such as in the group Solidarity. People would complain about there being a Black Caucus or a Women's Caucus, but we would say that the division is already there in society and it's even in the union. So women need to be able to talk about their problems in the union among themselves, and the job of male socialists is to support their demands.

Many trade unions today would support women's, black and LGBT sections. But it seems you're talking about women self-organising in large workplaces or in conglomerates and workplaces locally. How would you view that approach to self-organisation, and how can you prevent the union bureaucracy from capturing it?

You're right. The first point is that most workers have some sense of a dividing line between the rank and file and the union bureaucracy. This cuts across race and gender, and is a class thing. It is really an institutional difference. Sometimes caucuses can work in an institutionalised way, but you need to give people in the rank and file support to be able to voice their concerns. This means giving your fellow workers who are women, who are people of colour the understanding that you're going to support them if they get together to discuss something, even if it starts out as informal and then becomes an issue in the union for everyone get involved in. But again, it is not about there being a formula for how women and Black people should organise in a union like Unite or Unison. Much depends on how new people are to the labour movement, who we are talking to and how we can help them get their voices heard.

I would like to hear your take on a rebellion at the top table of the Unison conference. The women's group, which has traditionally been a right wing

bloc, went against the leadership over the domestic violence policy, which lawyers were objecting to. It was the first time this had happened and led to the top table being voted down.

Well, the question for me would be something like ‘if women are raising the issue, what is our role, how do we support them as much as we can?’ I would still point to the importance of having a rank and file challenging the way the union is working, so these issues become a part of that, which is what happened with the TDU as I described earlier. If I may go back to the dispute with UPS, there were a lot of women drivers, and we were lucky enough to have a couple of them who were very talented organisers and who could raise these questions through the TDU. So I think that the best way to get this is by building rank and file committees or organisations or caucuses within the union at the local level first. But it has to be real. One thing I have seen in Britain with the grass roots left in Unite is that they are acting like they are the party and take on every issue under the sun. You take on race and sex and gender and these kind of things because they’re actually there and the people you’re trying to pull into the rank and file movement are going to articulate these issues. That’s how you go from daily workplace issues around sexism to these bigger issues.

So what does that mean about passing motions about wider political issues outside the workplace, like Palestine, for instance?

I don’t think to be honest that a rank and file group should be particularly engaged having a position on Palestine, though that doesn’t stop a local socialist group inviting people to pro-Palestine events. I can give you an example of this that goes back to the Vietnam War. When I was in the communication workers’ union in New York as a telephone engineer, I was in a workforce that was almost entirely White, mostly working class Irish and Italian, who tended to be very conservative on all kinds of issues. We had a rank and file group, but didn’t particularly talk about the war. What we did as individuals was to take people from our workplace to the big anti-war demonstrations. By doing that we actually had a sizable contingent for a march into Central Park where a big rally was to take place. We marched past a telephone company truck that was obviously there to carry out surveillance on the demonstration. Of course, all the telephone workers that we brought knew this immediately, and agreed that we should surround the truck and put it out of commission. You could do this without having the rank and file group agree a position per se. The point was that everyone knew what we thought about the war, and that you could take people to the demonstrations or to meetings about the war or even to socialist meetings.

Listening to this example makes me think of current debates about social movement unionism.

I’ve actually stopped using that term and I’ll tell you why. The term comes

primarily out of the experience in the 1980s in South Africa and Brazil. What we saw there was that newly organised trade union movements had the power to mobilise the broader movement against military dictatorship and Apartheid. Back then I was attracted to the idea that we should be building movements and being less like a bureaucracy. Now, the political situation in Brazil and South Africa warranted this because the unions had more power against the state than communities alone. You can have a big uprising in Soweto and everything, but it can't sustain itself forever. But the unions can sustain themselves and so they have that kind of power to lead those mobilisations and to give them the sort of staying power you need. Now, when it comes to the US, the UK or Europe the focus is not as simple and clear. Here we see that demands for shorter hours, turning part-time jobs into full-time jobs and lessening workloads would be aspects of what a social movement would fight for. But my main objection to the term is that there are so many academics who have reduced the thing to the formula 'union + 5 community groups + 7 clerics = a social movement.' It's very top down.

I remember an example in Texas about ten years ago. The union was trying to organise some building service workers there and the first thing they do is to go into town, round up the clergy. There's your social movement, but I would say that it's a fake. It looks good, but whether it can fool the employers or not, I don't know. But this leverage thing is a big issue because it looks like you're rounding up other groups to support something or someone else. But it too has become so formulaic, and I can see this in Britain with Unite. We participated in a demonstration when they were trying to organise the cleaners. They started the Justice for Cleaners campaign, a sort of imitation of the Justice for Janitors thing in the US. They got people to go around in red t-shirts and blow whistles and horns in front of this corporate building. Well, gee, this isn't Joshua at Jericho. I mean the building is not going to come down because you blow some horns at the corporation.

It has become a kind of common sense, and this is my gripe. I'm not saying unions should never use these tactics, because it depends on what you're doing. If you're supporting some striking group in Bangladesh and you can find a way to do this economic leverage that actually makes a difference then well, ok, but if you're just going to get a bunch of people blowing whistles in front of a building, then I have a real problem with that. They are not organising the workers. They're not even talking to very many of them. They are trying to win representation without involving the workers. But organising has to be worker to worker, face to face organising of the old-fashioned kind. Unfortunately, leverage won't do it. I heard about Unite trying to organise the workers at the London Gateway Port. There were hundreds of workers inside and they tried leverage. The union said there were thousands more workers further down the supply chain, but if you can't reach hundreds how are you going to get to thousands?

Just to try to bring it back to where a lot of people find themselves today, if you're an activist in a workplace and you want to get things going, how do you get started if you're in a call centre, a nursing home, or one of the smaller workplaces where there's perhaps less tradition of organising?

Well, the first thing you do is begin to figure out who else in the workplace looks like they're some kind of leader. When Jane McAlevey talks about finding the natural leaders, this is not altogether wrong. Then you'd ask, 'what are the issues that people talking about?' I was organising in a welfare centre, way back when. I didn't even know most of the people. There were three of us who decided 'we should do this', so we got talking to people, 'what are the issues?', 'what do you think is the problem here?' Turns out the big problem was caseloads, it wasn't even wages. So we organised around that and went to every department, talked to everybody, even the people who you knew were going to be hostile.

When should you set yourself up as a union, before or after that kind of thing?

You got to do a lot of organising before you emerge as a union. We did this because there was no union, we just made it up. We just said 'we are the union, this is our name, here are your cards', and we recruited everybody in the place. It was a different era, these people were veterans in the civil rights movement so it was a lot easier than now, certainly than a call centre or something like that. Still, I think the thing is for you to work there for a while first. You can't go into a place like a call centre and just start organising. You have to be known as being there for a while, and try to get to know people. You have to figure out what are people thinking, who are the best people to work with, and not just who complains the most, because often they're not the organisers. You have to figure out who you can trust and by working one by one you start to create a little informal committee. In some of these places like call centres and supermarkets it's really not possible to do that on the job, and you don't want to get people fired, so you have to be careful at first. So you may meet in a coffee shop down the road. Then you can begin to build up the same way you'd organise a rank and file group where there is a union, except it's easier in that context than it is to organise from scratch in a call centre. It is very difficult, but they do organise call centres here and in the States and elsewhere.

A couple of our younger activists, people who were radicalised by the students' struggles four years ago, are now doing pretty much whatever dead end jobs they can get hold of and are looking to organise.

One of the things about this era that is very interesting is that it's very hard for young people to get a decent job. On the other hand, it's easy to get crap jobs because they're all over the place and the turnover is massive and that's why it's hard to organise.

But does it not work the other way? Because turnover is high people aren't scared of taking on the boss in the same way. Not far to go to get another crappy job.

I was talking to one of these young guys, who were organising in big new warehouse districts in America. The district in Chicago had 150,000 workers in a 50 mile radius, mostly Black workers. This young kid, who was White, was politically active. He said he's organising in this warehouse, not to get a union right away, because if he did that they'd blow them away. So they do all these little things, even just getting petitions together. Because the whole warehouse industry is based on Just in Time delivery, meaning low inventory, it's a great advantage for the workers, and you can take even just a small action to make a real difference. He said 'oh we don't worry about getting fired, there's 500 other of these warehouses, they're all owned by different companies, it's an advantage so I'm not on a blacklist.' So they're willing to take risks that others might not and this is true even of the older Black workers. They now have the backing of a union, it's a very tiny left wing union without many resources but it's a good thing they have this backing. They're not going through a traditional recognition strategy with the employers, but concentrating on building their organisation first.

Logistics is becoming more important. If the dockers in the West Coast in the US go on strike, even for one day, they close down trade in the entire Pacific Rim. It's spectacular. In fact, they have so much power it's actually a problem, because the government intervenes right away. So now the leadership, which is not as radical as it was at one time, is becoming more cautious about having these strikes. Nonetheless, yes, they have enormous power, as do truckers, railroad workers and warehouse workers. The interesting thing to see at the Labor Notes conference is that more of these kinds of workers are being unionised. This is important, because they know all about Just in Time logistics and they're making contact with each other for the first time and with these warehouse workers. It is all at the level of the rank and file and not official at all.

So the workers can use the physical routes that goods have to pass through to organise themselves?

Yeah, that's the goal, whatever the official unions do. If they can build this network which runs the whole logistics chain from coast to road to rail to warehouse, setting up an inter-modal system, they will have built a lot of power. You get the people who are already well organised – like lorry drivers and rail drivers to help the others. When that happens, the warehouse workers can go on to help Walmart workers to organise. They've already inspired some unofficial strikes in Walmarts around the country.

Do you mean the sales assistants or the warehouse workers?

Yeah, unofficial strikes in the warehouse. There's a great loophole in American Labour law these days that guarantees you the right to concerted action, but if you have a union contract there's all sorts of clauses that take it away. If you don't have a union contract you can more or less do anything you want to.

Earlier on you began talking about a lack of a resurgent left, and the chicken and egg question of workplace organisation versus a powerful left. You also began to talk about class consciousness.

I suppose the question is 'how do you build class consciousness?' I think people basically get the rudiments of class consciousness through their own self-activity. It comes back to that in the final analysis. But then the question is 'how do you take that rudimentary consciousness and make it into a broader outlook?' That's where something like Labor Notes comes in. If the rank and file groups are big enough, you can use Labor Notes to build consciousness through explaining that activity that's going on. Of course we're going to talk to people about theory, 'what is exploitation?', 'what is your relationship to your employer?' I love to give these classes, as it just opens their eyes. 'Oh, you mean I make my whole wage in two hours?', and all the rest of that stuff. One thing the TDU used to do was to run labour history courses: 'Where do we come from?', 'how did we get this corrupt union?', 'why are we bothering to change it?', 'what did they do before?' So we give them the Farrell Dobbs book about how the Trotskyists organised in the Mid-West and that of course brings in socialism, and so they see that all of these union leaders were socialists. Some of this education work is done by the socialist group in Labor Notes. There's no reason why the socialist group can't put on a day school or forums in which these things are discussed.

That echoes a bigger debate about left organisation, which is useful to link to the question of how to build class consciousness.

Ultimately they can't be separated. To be honest I think this is more difficult in Britain precisely because so many of the spaces where you would need to organise are already filled up. The Socialist Party and the SWP competing rather than working together and it's not easy to deal with that. When we started both Labor Notes and the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the left looked at this and said "this is economistic, we're not interested". Good, thank you. Now it's different, a good deal of the left comes to the Labor Notes conferences, or uses Labor Notes in their workplaces.

The question of class consciousness and the rank and file made me think of your example of the communications workers in the Vietnam demo. It seems we need to understand how you move from rank and file organising to tackling bigger political questions.

It's always difficult. If you want to get a rank and file movement that has numbers, power and coherence you can't take on every issue, in the way you would as a socialist group. You have to figure out what to take on and how to link the rank and file to it. When we did this anti-war thing, we could do it because we had been involved in a long strike and everybody was in the mood to do this kind of thing. If it had just been a normal work week or something, it would have been a lot more difficult. So even though not everyone saw a direct connection between the war and the workplace, and they certainly didn't have an analysis of imperialism, it was an era of movements including the labour movements and strikes. Also a lot of these workers were veterans, a lot of them said 'this is shit, we have no business doing this stuff', and so you had something really to work with there too. We could approach the military in that period through the underground GI network. The American army was totally demoralised and one of the factors in that was this network of different anti-war newspapers that were circulated not only in the States, but in Vietnam itself. They were writing concrete stuff against the war, the officers, specific incidents. So it was like the workplace stuff, with GI gripes, but no unnecessary preaching. I was involved in New York in distributing them at the port authority, where a lot of the GI's would come in from their bases or be going to their bases and we would pass out these papers. So there was so much going on. We don't have that advantage now, which makes it harder than back then. But the theory is that if people are in motion against capital they will be open to other ideas.

That takes us back to our earlier discussions about racism and sexism, and how you handle people who are becoming class conscious, but don't agree on oppression or a number of wider political issues.

I remember about 10 years ago talking to one of the leaders of the opposition in the auto workers' union, a guy called Dave Yetaw. He was a really good union guy and class conscious, but religious, and he says 'Kim, do you have to have this gay and lesbian stuff on the first page of the programme?' and I said 'this is part of the movement, this is part of the woodwork now, it's not going away, get used to it', and you know he got used to it. I don't think he liked it, but he got used to it.

Now we are on this subject, I would like to ask what you think about this generation gap. It seems that people in their 40s and older experienced defeats and were around during times of the partnership arguments you were talking about. Today people in their 20s have come in through anti-racism, anti-imperialism and poor job prospects. I wanted to ask your thoughts about this, because we are talking about the next generation and the future – which looks like a good place to finish.

I think I will end by looking back at the early 1930s when many of the unions we have been talking about in the States got started. Back then you had something

similar, with people who had degrees and got their politics in university, but ended up in the unions. They even started some of the unions because they couldn't get good jobs in the depression. I am thinking of people like Walter Reuther, a university guy and socialist who went into the auto plants and thought 'let's do something'. Some of the people in the Minneapolis Teamsters graduated from university. We may be seeing the start of that again.

Great, well on that thought we will leave that there and wish you the best with Labor Notes. Hopefully we can pick up some time on further discussions about rank and file organising in the 21st Century.

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