The Strategy of Workers' Councils

David Van Deusen, Green Mountain Anarchist Collective

2004

Contents

Proposal To: The Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists
Submitted By: The Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (NEFAC-VT)

Introduction

The Old Socialist Labor Hall, Barre, Vermont 2004 — The current social and political dynamic within North America, and much of the western industrialized world, is one of both growing hope and an escalation of capitalist oppression.[1] While workers are being attacked by the forces of capital, and while the U.S. ruling class embarks upon imperialist campaigns of war, conquest, and cultural-political-economic homogenization, a mass movement is building within the very walls of the empire. The 1999 Battle of Seattle witnessed the coming together of a great and diverse new American left. As the anti-globalization movement matured, culminating in the 70,000–100,000 strong Battle of Quebec City in 2001, a mass anti-capitalist, pro-democracy movement was in full swing. This momentum was effectively stalled due to the hesitation demonstrated on the part of the left immediately following the tragic September 11th terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, and the four civilian jetliners. However, momentum against the empire not only became reinvigorated, but grew to massive proportions with the people's movement against the imperialist invasion of Iraq. Let us not forget the more than half-a-million people who marched in opposition through New York City on February 15th. Nor should we forget the tens-of-thousands of others who marched in hundreds of other North American cities and small towns.[2] Let us also remember the 13 million people who took part in sister demonstrations across the world, making February 15th, 2003, the largest day of global protest in the history of humankind. While we did not succeed in stopping the war, we did, temporarily, make the neo-conservative's scale back their rhetoric about invading other nations such as socialist Cuba, communist Korea, Ba'ath controlled Syria, and Islamic Iran. And like in the streets of Seattle, DC, and Quebec, this opposition included millions of union workers (i.e. U.S. Labor Against The War), socialists, anarchists, students, environmentalists, and many others. In short, while the audacity of the ruling class grows, so too does our movement towards socialism and direct democracy. It is with this in mind that NEFAC must begin to up the ante, and develop a coordinated strategy with the end goal of popular victory.

What is this popular victory? While it would be arrogant to state exactly what a post-capitalist, democratic, socialist world would look like (as this will be defined by the people themselves), we can, at minimum, say that it will be one where communities are organized by directly democratic assemblies, industry and agriculture will be coordinated by directly democratic unions, and all

[1] 2017 note from the author: This document was written by myself, with the exception of the first 13 paragraphs that appear in the subsection *Origins of the Vermont Workers Center and Internal Structure* (these 13 paragraphs were taken from the essay *Class Struggle In The Green Mountains: Vermont Workers' Center*, which was written by Lady of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective, and was published in the Northeastern Anarchist, 2003). The entirety of this document was adopted as an official proposal to NEFAC by the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective. The proposal was presented at the spring NEFAC conference held at the Old Socialist Labor Hall in Barre Vermont in 2004. The proposal was discussed and debated at length by the assembled member collectives, and although not being without vocal supporters, NEFAC declined to adopt this strategy and (even though NEFAC did much solid organizing during its time as a federation) largely failed to articulate any unified strategy during the years of its existence.

people will have (among other things) access to food, housing, healthcare, higher education, childcare, jobs, and social security.

While it is always possible that some unforeseen crisis in western capitalism will spur the spontaneous creation of such a society in the northeastern part of North America, it presently appears unlikely in the near future. Therefore, the task of NEFAC should be that of building the subjective and objectives conditions necessary for such an unfolding of social liberation. And here, such focused activity will entail the building of democratic mass organizations that reflect the free society that we intend to achieve. In other words, we must prioritize the building of directly democratic peoples' assemblies in our communities, the building of integrated workers' councils in industry, and building of democratic farmers' organizations where we can. In the initial phases of such a project it will be likely that these organizations will not present themselves as complete, mature bodies focused on social revolution. Rather they will be initially focused on concrete issues that people have a direct and obvious personal/class stake in. For example, instead of calling for a general peoples' assembly, in many cases it will make more sense to build tenants' unions in sections of a city, or for us to call for a peoples' assembly in response to a specific issue (as was the case in Vermont after the imperialist invasion of Iraq). Our experience in the Green Mountain State has been that farmers are not presently inclined to come together except for immediately practical reasons, such as to fight against the drastically low price paid by larger capitalists for raw milk. And finally, it is unlikely that workers' councils will come into being devoid of years of prior groundwork and a spark issue that mobilizes people into avenues already created for their participation. It will be through these concreate issues that people will become more open to the full critique of capitalism. For every step of the way we can begin to demonstrate how each of the issues that directly affect them is tied to other issues and how they are all wrapped up in the false totality of capitalism. But first things first.[3]

Currently NEFAC is not strategically focused or coordinated on a broader federation level. Beyond the vague strategic commitment to: 1.) direct intervention in the class struggle; 2.) work on housing/poverty issues; 3.) anti-fascism; and 4.) fighting for immigrants' rights, we do not coordinate our activities in an effective way. One collective will prioritize free speech struggles, while another does solidarity work on a local labor strike, while another may be involved in any number of different local campaigns. While all these activities are good, they do not lead to a measurable advance in the revolutionary workers' movement in the northeast as a whole. By enlarge many of these activities are reactive, as opposed to proactive. While they do result in small victories against specific capitalist attacks, the culmination of these distinct campaigns do not necessarily lead to the overall weakening of the capitalist system or the strengthening of the workers' movement. We need to formulate a coordinated plan, to be implemented across the northeast that can begin to demonstrate real measurable success over a period of years. Our times require that we find a way to move ahead in a concerted effort towards the ends of weakening capitalism and building a directly democratic socialist system that can take its place. If we do not do this, it is likely that the objective historical opportunities that the present holds will be lost, and serious moves towards socialist victory will not be possible for at least another generation.

In the following sections of this document we will propose one such strategy for the raising of class consciousness, working class empowerment, the creation of duel power, and the general advance of the revolutionary left — that strategy will aim for the creation of workers' councils in all areas where NEFAC is active. We recognize that any strategy that solely seeks such formations is inherently incomplete as workers' councils are only one element of what rightly should

be a three prong strategy. Ideally NEFAC should be seeking to build workers' councils, peoples' assemblies, and democratic farmers' organizations. For it will be three these three bodies (all working together) that true democracy and socialism will be both functional and possible. However, proposal will only seek to deal with one of these aspects of the social revolution. While reading and considering what follows, one should bear in mind that that GMAC does not propose that the below strategy by superimposed upon collectives and individuals who are currently doing work that relates to the building of either peoples' assemblies or democratic farmers' organizations. This includes collectives and individuals that are engaged in the building of tenants' unions; of which we understand as a potential building block for the eventual formation of directly democratic neighborhood organizations (i.e. people's assemblies). The below proposal is only intended for those collectives and individuals who are not presently engaged in these other two activities, or those which do not plan on becoming engaged in such activities in the near future.

The proposal will be broken down into a number of sections. We recognize that any proposal that calls for the formation of workers' councils, without giving adequate context, is both hollow, meaningless, and utopian. Therefore, we will begin this document with a detailed discussion of the class struggle in Vermont over the course of the last ten years. We have included such sections in order to give context to how and why we think NEFAC is and/or could be capable of bringing together such workers' formations. It is our contention that the lessons of the Vermont working class have a direct relevance upon the class struggle throughout the northeast. However, for sake of clarity, this document will first give a definition of workers' councils, followed by a brief framing of the question as to how they can be achieved. It is to this task that we now turn.

Workers' Councils As Real Democracy & Revolutionary Power

The concept and practice of workers' councils (also called soviets) has long been recognized by the revolutionary left as a powerful means to fight the forces of capital when and if they begin to take shape. Historically workers' councils are directly democratic bodies of workers who come together at the shop level. When shops are too large to feasibly hold meaningful participatory decision-making meetings, delegates are elected by each section of the shop representing all aspects of labor. In turn, these shop-level councils seek to federate with other councils in order to coordinate activity on a wider more socially comprehensive basis. In principle, these councils are capable of taking over, democratizing, and coordinating industrial production without the exploitive presence of an authoritarian ruling class. In real practice, such formations have often acted as a defensive force against a still present capitalist class. Such councils often came together during times of great national or class crisis and have achieved differing degrees of organizational success. We saw Russian workers' councils form in response to the intense social-political conditions brought about by World War I in 1917 (resulting in the October Revolution and the fall of the Provisional Government). We saw them form in Germany in 1919 (resulting in an unsuccessful workers' revolt), and again in Spain in 1936 (in some regions resulting in two years of workers' self-management). More recently, the financial crash of the neo-liberal Argentine economy (2002-present) again witnessed the mass creation of such councils (resulting in the ouster of several pro-capitalist presidents and the seizure of numerous factories which continue to operate under worker self-management).

Where such councils form it is often only a matter of time before the capitalist state becomes extremely vulnerable to left-wing insurgencies. Here in the U.S. despite an increasing economic hardship, imperialist wars, and the rise of the domestic police state, workers are yet to take such an action in any large scale way. But what if it was possible to build the conditions necessary for such organizations to form? What if we could find a way to create these conditions that would lead to such formations, even if a single catastrophic event did not show up on cue? If we could build networks of such councils, all directly democratic and controlled by the workers alone, we would be in a better position to see workers call for organized general strikes, direct actions, and an upping of their confidence as witnessed through their demands and expectations. Through the existence of such bodies we would be in a better position to seize and manage the means of production and commerce when conditions allow. We, in a word, would be in a much more advanced phase of our epic struggle to democratize and socialize our world.

If such a movement is again to be built, it must allow for certain variations that account for what is possible, and, given certain conditions, probable. A modern resurgence of these councils would more likely be based on a larger geographic proximity, rather than on a small shop level. In other words, given the daunting task of forming hundreds of small councils in a single section of a city, while simultaneously fighting for more local democracy in already established unions, it may

make more sense to create larger councils where workers from numerous shops come together into great directly democratic bodies. In the event that such bodies prove too large for meaningful debate, discussion, and general participation, it may be possible for each separate shop to elect delegates (in proportion to the size of the particular workforce) to carry the sentiments of the particular shop to the larger body. However, these are details that will have to be worked out through the democratic decision making of those directly affected.

An additional benefit of forming workers' councils is that they could serve as a means to circumvent the bureaucratic and top down structure of the major labor unions. While such unions are, even at their worst, a line of working class defense against capital, and even though they are mass organizations that NEFAC works within (as both members and tactical allies), they are by no means revolutionary in and of themselves. In addition, the self-perpetuating and alienating nature of some of these organizations, a number of whom consistently fail to involve rank and file workers in their overall decision making process, is problematic towards our transformative goals. Left unchanged, such unions cannot be expected to evolve into class war organizations; at least not without direct intervention by ourselves, other revolutionary organizations, and/or a radicalized internal workers' movement. And even when some of these unions are challenged from within, they, like the state, have a tendency to structurally maintain themselves and the more moderate politics that they assume.

OK, it should be recognized that it is one thing to say that workers' councils are powerful revolutionary bodies and that we should seek to create them, and it is another thing to actually do it. First of all NEFAC, like most relevant leftwing organizations, is both limited in numbers and resources. While we are workers, and while many of us are currently in labor unions, we on our own are in no position to galvanize the hundreds of shops and thousands of workers necessary to make such a project realistically feasible in the foreseeable future. In addition, each separate collective has differing degrees of practical organizing experience, respect in their community, and clear channels of communication with the mass of workers in their areas. While some collectives, as in Quebec and CAC in Boston, have been actively building good working relations with unions and rank and file workers, others are still trying to find ways to relate to the broader, more outwardly moderate labor movement. Bottom line, if a coordinated campaign to build such councils is done by NEFAC in isolation, we would most likely fail.

Even assuming that we were capable of building such councils, where would we begin? Would we seek to incorporate all workers, both union and non-union? If so, that would place our collectives in the unrealistic position of having to mobilize thousands of workers who have no organizational accountability to the project. Where it may be possible for us to bring together several hundred workers in the beginning, the task of maintaining momentum among so many individuals would be unlikely if they fail to see themselves as the owner of the project. Then what are we to do? Should we look to potential allies from within the already established unions as partners in this project? Do we build councils that are essentially bodies of separate area unions? Should we attempt to form more democratic and localized versions of AFL-CIO Central labor Councils? Recognizing that all of these tasks are daunting in and of themselves, and recognizing that without many conditions already in place, we most likely would fail at all of them, the answer to the question remains both yes and no.

First of all, we would need for participating workers to have a degree of accountability. In this capacity it makes sense to only include unionized workers (including those without official recognition who are in what is called a "minority union" at their specific shop). But this leads to a

significant problem: if these councils are to be indicative of a directly democratic workforce, then we cannot shutout the majority of workers who, in actuality, are not union members. In the U.S. approximately fifteen million people are in unions. That is roughly 13% of the workforce. In the northeast those numbers are somewhat higher, but still constitute a minority. A direct workers' democracy cannot be based on such a minority. For this reason it would appear that there are certain preliminary campaigns that would have to be sufficiently accomplished in a locality before it is possible to launch a workers' council. And, as will be demonstrated through the testimony of this text, it is through these preliminary campaigns that the subjective conditions necessary for such a project to shift its chances of success from slim to likely.

Given our social-political context, one preliminary condition must be the creation of unions which are based on small geographic locations, and are open to all workers. This is not to say that the abstract existence of such a union, like the modern incarnation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) exonerates us from building more practical alternatives. While the IWW does good work in some localities, it has almost no resources to carry out sustained organizing drives. Regionally (as opposed to specific localities) it is fairly irrelevant, has a total membership of only 1000+, and officially represents only a half dozen shops across the entire continent. No, the IWW does not fit the bill. We need all-workers-unions which show growth, effectiveness, creativity, and are capable of winning real victories, and of representing many workers. So where does this leave us?

One possibility is that NEFAC begin to build our own all-worker-unions. Something to this effect was proposed by our Quebecois comrades at the 2002 Boston Strategy Summit (The Precarious Workers' Union). While clearly this would be a positive development, we question NEFAC's ability to effectively carry this out. While we have little doubt that NEFAC is capable of building strong independent unions in select workplaces, it is difficult to understand how we could rally the resources necessary to carry such a campaign into the larger public arena. NEFAC has limited legal, financial, and human resources. And such an effective all-workers-union must seek to actively involve hundreds, if not thousands of workers from numerous shops. For example, the Pissed Off Projectionists campaign, while being a great victory for the federation, took all the efforts of one collective months just to build an organized presence among less than a dozen workers. We must be sober enough to accept that the building of such unions in small shops, even given 100 years at the present trajectory, will never constitute a workers' organization large enough to give an organized voice to the people.

Therefore, if we are to build such a movement, and we contend that we can, we will have to seek committed allies, primarily from within the established labor movement.

Lessons From The Green Mountains

The Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (GMAC) has always looked for ways in which dual power can be built. We are not utopian; rather we are revolutionary anarchists who prioritize victory over vague dreams. We have done our best to experiment with different strategies, and have met both relative failure and success. With this being said, we have been working with the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the Vermont Workers Center (VWC), and dozens of community members for well over six months on creating a democratic workers union, for all workers, in Vermont's capital city of Montpelier (The Montpelier Downtown Workers Union-MDWU). This experience has taught us some valuable lessons and has helped illuminate ways in which such duel power can be achieved.

It is our contention that the experiences of the Vermont working class has a direct and relevant bearing upon struggles in other regions. We also contend that the experiences of the Montpelier Downtown Workers Union, as well as the context out of which it emerged, has direct ramifications for the movement towards direct democracy and socialism throughout the northeast. In the following section of this document we will discuss and analyze these developments, giving an accurate history of the struggle, as well as discuss the broader social-political context out of which they emerged. It is our claim that the thus far successful advances of the Vermont working class can, given reasonable modification to suit the particularities of different regions, be replicated throughout the northeast. Therefore, following the below history and analysis of Vermont's experience, we will propose concrete steps that NEFAC should take in order to build all-worker-unions and workers' councils.

Building A Workers' Center & Launching An All-Workers-Union

The launching of the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union could not have been possible without the pre-existence of the Vermont Workers' Center. In was the VWC Director James Haslam (previously a supporter of the anarchist Northern Spy Collective) who began to push for the idea of creating a general union of workers in Vermont. This idea was presented as a means to organize those within the service sector and other employees who labor in shops historically too small for the established unions to spend time and resources to individually organize (*in Vermont only 11% of the workforce is unionized — nationally it is 13%, down from a high-water mark of 35% in 1960). Developing an effective means to bring such workers into the organized camp is pivotal to the future of the labor movement and the left generally in Vermont, as it also is to the northeast and North America as a whole. Without organization, this most strategic segment of the American population, the working class, will inevitably fail to resist the continuing and escalating attacks of the wealthy ruling class against the masses of poor and working people. Vermont, like much of the industrialized world, has lost thousands of decent paying, often union, manufacturing jobs as a result of the free trade policies of NAFTA, the WTO, and the general trends of global capitalism (factories to Mexico, China, etc.). While many workers in the manufacturing sector are fighting back through their unions, and while a small a small amount are seeking to form worker-owned factories 9i.e. Island Pond Wood Workers), the reality is that this sector of employment is quickly disintegrating while the service and retail sectors are expanding in order to partially fill this employment vacuum. Again, in 2003, while Vermont lost manufacturing jobs it gained 6000 new service and retail jobs (bringing down the net job loss for 2003 to a still unacceptable two thousand). Of course the contradiction of the domestic manufacturing sector and the expansion of the domestic service and retail sectors translates into thousands of Vermont workers having to survive on poverty wages, little or no benefits, and, as things stand, no job security, no union protection, and little or no organized means of economic and political self-defense. This situation is driven by the fact that service and retail jobs rarely pay anything close to a livable wage (which today, 2004, in Vermont is $11.60 an hour). With the exception of certain wait-staff bartending positions, the vast majority of service and retail jobs pay closer to the minimum wage, which in Vermont is presently $6.75 an hour — and in no way comes close to a dignified, sustainable income, decent enough to support a family on. The growth of these sectors commonly translates into the weakening of the labor movement. For most such employers hire no more than between three and twenty-five workers. In this way Vermont's economy is quickly becoming strikingly similar to that of a colony to the greater U.S. nation. The service and retail jobs are largely driven by tourism, and the larger employers are often owned by corporate out-of-state interests (i.e. the American Ski Corporation — who owns the Mount Snow and Killington resorts and employs over 2000 workers, most at poverty wages). Even in other sectors such as large logging interests and the IBM plant in Essex Junction (which is Vermont's largest

private employers at 9000 jobs), etc., the ownership class comes from the corporate culture and is based out-of-state. On the other hand, the majority of businesses (most very small), are owned locally and still fail to provide decent living standards for its employees.

Large, more established unions tend to not spend time and energy organizing such individual small workplaces, as the energy to secure union recognition is not normally proportionate to their size. As the manufacturing base disappears, the unions, who commonly held recognition at such plants, dwindle in size as their membership base decreases, and along with it, so does their accrued revenue through dues. As their resources dwindle, the potential arises for them to become even less apt to spend time and money organizing small shops. While this situation, as felt all across North America, unfolds, it is tempting to view the social-political context in terms of a downward spiral, with the end result of the strengthening of capital over labor. However, this situation, which is indicative of the new western capitalism, also carries with it new possibilities for radical resistance and socialist emergence.

Correctly recognizing these objective conditions, Mr. Haslam began to discuss his ideas with VWC founders, trade unionists, other leftist community supporters, and personal friends within GMAC. Most of all, he and others began to discuss the possibility of forming such a union with local Montpelier service workers, with whom he held friendships. Montpelier was identified as a potential battleground because of the symbolism it brought with it as the capital of Vermont, because of the strong presence of labor in the area (the VWC officers as well as that of the VT AFL-CIO and Vermont State Employees' Association are located there), and because a recent victory there (at the largest city grocery store) would give the new drive early momentum.

After several months, Haslam (having gained the endorsement for the project by the democratically run VWC Steering Committee) arranged a series of meetings with representatives of the UE. There he discussed the possibility of launching such a campaign in the capital city (population 7800) with the aid of that union. Here much of the above discussed reasons for union hesitation was overcome by the idea that they would not so much seek to unionize individual small shops (each requiring formal NLRB-mediated elections and individual labor contracts), but that they would seek to build a citywide union of the estimated 800, mostly service and retail oriented workers from small shops. They would provide a simple, relatively short universal contract that could better guarantee protections against unjust firings, a grievance procedure, and modest wage increases with the eventual goal of establishing livable wages for all workers. So instead of seeing the struggle in terms of gaining union recognition in a series of very small shops, the UE was made to understand the potential of creating a local of all 800 workers. And finally, the potential for an active VWC/UE alliance was furthered by a Workers' Center offer to pay half the salary (the other half coming from the UE) of one full time organizer for the project. With all this in place, the UE accepted the offer, and in a matter of weeks the campaign was launched.

The UE was approached, as opposed to other allied unions, for three primary reasons. 1.) The UE is a very democratic union and would be unlikely to co-opt the democratic outcome of the organizing drive. 2.) The UE, in the months prior and with active support of the Workers Center, successfully helped the employees of the Hunger Mountain Food Co-op gain union recognition and a decent contract (*the co-op is the largest grocery employer in the city). Here it was argued that those 70+ newly unionized workers (who overwhelmingly joined the union) would act as a kind of advanced guard for the general organizing drive. In other words, it was thought that these workers would help with much of the preliminary actions which would have to be done before the union could publically establish itself, and that their recent victory would help instill

a sense of impending victory among yet to be unionized workers.[1] 3.) The UE was formally a strong force in the region in the manufacturing industry, and with its collapse, the union was seeking creative ways to organize workers among emerging industries (in the months prior, it was the UE who successfully organized the Montpelier based Hunger Mountain Co-op, as well as the Burlington based City Market — also a food co-op).

What is apparent from these beginnings is that it is very unlikely that this project could have got off the ground without it being advanced by Workers' Center. This is due to several reason. 1.) The VWC, then five years old, had gained a good deal of respect from within the Vermont labor movement, the broader left, as well as among the working class as a whole. In fact the VWC in recent years evolved into a kind of hybrid between Jobs With Justice and a center seeking to aid in the struggles of non-union laborers. This confidence did not manifest overnight. Jason Winston, a co-founder of the VWC, former Love & Rage #10 Collective member, and current VWC President recalls that in the early years the established Vermont labor movement was very apprehensive about their involvement in union struggles. "Back then it was a big deal if we received permission to table at their events." For many years the center diligently worked to build solidarity for strikes, contract drives, union drives, etc., without pushing an overt leftwing ideology upon those it aided and worked with. Rather, it battled alongside labor on concrete issues, and in the process helped win concrete gains. From its humble beginnings, it also established a statewide, 24/7 workers' rights hotline. This 1-800 number was distributed across the state in flyers, publications, and by word of mouth, and through it workers can discuss instances of discrimination, unfair labor practices, etc. with trained VWC personnel (often such volunteers are rank & file union members). Such personnel, in turn, can inform the workers of their rights, refer them to legal aid, or unions if they wish to organize. This hotline, which continues to this day, is confidential, yet contact information is entered into an internal database, and complaints about employers are also logged and catalogued. To date, more than one percent of the state's workforce has used this free service.

It was through such diligent and relevant solidarity work that the center began to win over the active support of hundreds of workers and the unions themselves. In time, the center took on more and more responsibilities for statewide workers' campaigns and local struggles, and as it did it began to focus, in part, on the bigger picture and articulate it back to the individual unions. In other words, it did not limit itself to solidarity work centered around separate specific issues. Rather it sought to build a broader labor movement which valued class-wide (cross-union) mutual aid and respect. It sought to link specific issues with bigger issues, and attempted to draw popular attention to these links and logical ends.

In 2000, it launched a campaign called "Justice For Healthcare Workers." Coming off the heels of union recognition for workers from a private nursing home provider (Berlin Health & Rehab), and in the midst of a contentious union drive for the nurses at the state's largest hospital (Fletcher Allen of Burlington[2]) This campaign sought to build a network of solidarity between all healthcare workers, publically link certain workers' issues such as short staffing and mandatory overtime with the inherent dangers they caused to maintaining quality public care, and finally, to link the entire campaign with the broader demand for universal healthcare.

[1] As the effort unfolded, these co-op workers were not engaged in the campaign at the levels optimistically expected to organizers.

[2] Not only did the nurses win, but they achieved a contract which has significantly raised the statewide standard for wages, benefits, and working conditions.

The VWC has more recently announced their "Good Jobs For Vermont" campaign, which seeks to bring together the different building trades in order to gain class power and better pay/working conditions for such workers across the state. For the last several years the center has also organized an annual Labor Day march and picnic in Burlington. This event regularly draws 300-400 mostly union workers in a demonstration of class solidarity. Tellingly, in 2001, the Vermont AFL-CIO recognized the organizing efforts of VWC Director James Haslam with the Labor Leader of the Year award.

By 2002, the 8000 strong Vermont AFL-CIO, the 7000 strong Vermont State Employees' Association (VSEA), the UE, the Teamsters, and numerous other labor unions, as well as other mass organizations were official members of the center. The VWC's official membership constituency now numbers over 15,000 (in a state with a total population of just over 600,000).[3]

Without this earned respect, the major unions (who have economic, legal, political, and personnel resources that most leftwing organizations — including NEFAC — no not have) would not have taken the proposal to form an all-workers-union seriously. It is unlikely that any of them would have committed themselves to the project. And without their resources — without a fulltime organizer, and without the confidence that, for better or worse, these established unions bring to the workers, it is unlikely that such an ambitious project as the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union would have gone as far as it thus far has.

[3] Organizational members of the Vermont Workers Center include: Alliance at IBM/CWA Local 1701, AFSCME Local 1369, AFSCME Council 93, Champlain Valley Central Labor Council, GCIU Local 745, IBEW Local 300, Machinists Local 2704, VT National Writers Union (UAW Local 1981), Plumbers and Pipe Fitters Local 693, Teamsters Local 597, UE District 2, UE local 221, UE Local 234, UE Local 254, UE Local 267, United Nurses and Allied Professionals Local 5086, United Nurses and Allied Professionals 5109, United Professions of Vermont-AFT, United Steelworkers of America Amalgamated Local 4, United Steelworkers of America Local 518, Vermont Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals Local 5221, Vermont State College Faculty Federation AFT Local 3180, Vermont State Employees' Association, Vermont State Labor Council AFL-CIO, Washington-Orange County Central Labor Council, Older Woman's League (Vermont Chapter), Anti-Racist Action Team, Woman's International League for Peace & Freedom (Vermont Chapter).

Origins of The Vermont Workers' Center and Internal Structure[1]

The Vermont Workers' Center opened the doors to its first office space in the spring of 1998. The mission of the center reads: "we seek an economically just and democratic Vermont in which all residents have living wages, decent healthcare, childcare, housing and transportation. We work to build a democratic, diverse movement of working Vermonters that is locally focused and coordinated on a statewide basis. We work with organized labor in moving towards economic justice and in strengthening the right to organize. We are committed to taking action on the full range of issues that concern working people, and to building alliances nationally and internationally." The VWC seeks to build an effective and meaningful labor movement within the particularities of Vermont.

The overarching goal of the VWC is to empower those persons within the working class who are normally shutout of the political and economic systems that, time and again, pursue policies that do not uplift the worker, but rather pushes them closer to the precipice of poverty and ignorance. To quote from their outreach pamphlet: "by organizing public hearings, forums, publicizing people's stories, and taking part in direct action, we support workers throughout the state who are trying to improve their wages, benefits, rights on the job, working conditions, and their communities."

This is not to say that the sole focus of the VWC is centered on piecemeal issues that are perpetuated by the basic internal dualities of capitalism (which can be seen as the idea that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer). In a word, the VWC is not simply running around sticking their fingers in leaky dams. The center also makes the connection to, and is actively working towards, long term, more comprehensive solutions to the problems of capitalism and the oppressive contradictions between worker and owner, labor and management, the common person and the boss, the voter and politician.

The founding membership of the VWC came from a community group founded in 1896 called Central Vermonters For a Livable Wage. This group was made up of welfare recipients, activists, labor union people, community affiliated people, and one-quarter of the group's membership was the #10 Collective (formerly Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation members). Central Vermonters For a Livable Wage did solidarity work with labor struggles, and got people together to talk about economic justice. Tanya Waters, a former member of the #10 Collective, founding member of the Vermont Workers Center, and Vice President of her local nurses' union recalls: "Many of the members began talking about raising the minimum wage, which meant legislative work. We were effective in earning another $1 an hour, but we wanted to do work that was more

[1] The next thirteen paragraphs, with only minor alterations, were written by Lady (a member of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective) and first appeared in the article *Class Struggle in The Green Mountains: Vermont Workers Center*, which was published in the Northeastern Anarchist, fall 2003.

focused around working with the community; whereas legislative work was a disempowering experience."

The first projects of the VWC were a statewide workers' rights handbook and hotline that still functions today, solidarity with the Bennington Potters, Solidarity with Capital City Press workers in Barre, raising the minimum wage, and presentations on workers' rights at adult education programs, churches, union shops, several high schools, and a few colleges.

The VWC was an evolution of three years of work and tactics that organized as an issue organization (Central Vermonters For a Livable Wage). Issue organizations are harder to keep together than a workers' center that organizes around several of the concerns working class people have. A workers' center is an organization that people will self-identify with, a place where people can find others who share similar experiences they have had to deal with. It serves as a place with resources that the community can access, such as writing press releases, phone banking, and a meeting space. It organizes campaigns that try to improve wages, benefits, rights on the job, working conditions, and ultimately the community.

Functionally the VWC has a steering committee and a coordinating committee made up of unions, community organizations, religious groups, and individuals. Organizations and individuals are accepted as members of the steering committee after they have been nominated by a member organization or person. Following this, the steering committee votes to accept the nomination, or not. Political parties are not allowed to become members. It is also worth mentioning that since the VWC accepts both organizations (usually unions) and individuals as members, it sometimes serves as a place where left union dissidents are able to democratically take part in the organized class struggle alongside the union which, although they may be a member, effectively shuts them out of the internal decision making hierarchy due to their political convictions and workplace actions. In this way the VWC acts as a democratizing body despite the participation of some unions that are not known as being internally democratic as would be desirable.

The steering committee (composed of both organizational delegates and individuals) meets four times a year to democratically decide on projects they will work on, and the coordinating committee, which is elected by the steering committee, meets monthly to focus on more day-to-day issues. The VWC is funded through foundation grants, individual donations, and union donations. The first year it started with an annual budget of $11,000 and the ability to pay one staff person at $100 per week. Currently, through display of successful work to union and community members, their budget has increased to $65,000 a year and the ability to pay one fulltime, and two part time staff persons. At the onset, the VWC was able to solicit such funding through the use of the Burlington Peace & Justice Center's 501C3 tax exempt status. In 2003 the VWC gained independent tax exempt status and no longer holds any formal ties with the Peace & Justice Center.

The VWC differs in some regards from other workers' centers across the continent. One way it is unique is because Vermont is traditionally different than areas where workers' centers primarily exist. This difference is reflected in two areas: race and population. The population of Vermont is 620,000 and with rural living comes a higher real-unemployment rate[2] due to economic flight (i.e. the effects of free trade) and a minimal amount of jobs employing a large number of people,

[2] Official unemployment estimates run low. Presently [2004] they claim to have less than 4% unemployment. However, this statistic is based on the number of people who qualify for unemployment insurance. Unfortunately many thousands of people do not qualify for such and are therefore ignored by the official statistics. In reality portions of Vermont such as the Northeast Kingdom commonly see seasonable real unemployment rates of 15% or higher.

such as factory work. Eighty-five percent of businesses in Vermont employ 9 workers of less. "Vermont is unique because there are no models where you can organize 85% of the businesses. You really have to pull your resources together," says Tanya. "We build rights and power for people who might not work in a large factory and have the minimal protection of a union."

Most workers' centers in the U.S. are located in immigrant communities. However, in a state that is 97% European-American, there is no prevalent immigrant community or larger minority population for such a center to connect with. "Our analysis early on was really about finding the power to make change. Early on we recognized race was not going to be our rally point. Gender has always been an issue, and economics is what we found to be most powerful because it is something people here can relate to." (Tanya)

The VWC was founded by a large proportion of class struggle anarchists, and currently those who do a lot of the organizing identify to one degree or another with anarchism or left socialism. While the volunteers involved with the center do not all identify as such, a number of those who do are known to the community as anarchists. However, their personal politics are not front and center. It is about the work they are doing. The VWC prioritizes its work by first building a movement around people and what their issues are. Then, the need to figure out how to build that into a more radical democratic movement, emerges. "We are far from being revolutionary," says Jason Winston, a VWC co-founder and former #10 Collective member. "But we have the strategy of starting where people are at. People only joined because of what we are doing, not because of what we said. We don't act like we could tell them what they want to hear. It is not a theoretical relationship. You build trust with people because you stand on their picket line," says Winston. Through the course of the last five years of doing diligent, nonsectarian solidarity work, the VWC (with the VT AFL-CIO & VSEA & other major unions as participating members) was able to pass an official resolution against the imperialist invasion of Iraq during a 2003 Steering Committee meeting, officially endorsing the two million strong U.S. Labor Against the War..

It is important to note that many VWC organizers recognize the historical limitations of bureaucratic trade unions (of which they work closely with). Often these organizations fail to see beyond their limited (and immediate) self-interest. In the current union model, the labor unions are not the all-powerful defenders of the working class they have the potential to be. Due to the collaborative nature of many unions between their official leadership, party politics, and cooperation with the bosses, numerous labor organizations are compelled to traverse undemocratic paths, and this often stifles attempts of direct action in the workplace. Acknowledging these flaws, we know that mainstream trade unions in the U.S. are not currently revolutionary organizations, and most unions today fail to promote radical worker self-activity and serious class warfare. The issue is not whether unions are revolutionary, rather it is how anarchists work within unions towards a revolutionary end.

Karl Marx once referred to the unions as 'the universities of the working class.' While this may have been clearly more true during his time, we should understand the potential that unions retain today for such educating to occur. Through participation in labor unions, workers acknowledge class interests and develop class consciousness. The union movement is the most important mass movement the working class has built. Based on the numbers of people represented by unions, anarchist groups and other radical organizations must have a program that addresses and relates to these organizations and the workers who participate in them.

Bottom line, it took eight years of hard work (three within the parameters of Central Vermonters For a Living Wage, and five more organizing as the Vermont Workers Center) to get to the

point where major unions could realistically be approached about the possibility of starting an all-workers union in one trial area. This was done through nonsectarian solidarity work on behalf of the working class and their imperfect organizations, and through the eventual gaining of working class respect and the respect of the established union leadership. Additionally, the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective is currently able to maintain relatively good and productive relationships with the established mass labor movement because those doors were diligently opened to us by those class struggle anarchists who came before, and are still active in the VWC and as union members and organizers. Even so, it is worth noting that it has taken us a good part of two years of concerted effort to build these relations to where they are today. And of course this too was achieved through diligent solidarity work, a willingness to engage in militant and non-militant picket lines, and generally demonstrating that we are committed working class organizers.

State of The Montpelier Downtown Workers Union

As of print, the union drive, which seeks to organize all workers in the capital city, includes about 100 of the 800 employees of small downtown shops. Official union recognition has been won at the Savoy Theatre & Downstairs Video shop (14 workers), a majority has been reached at six other shops, and workers from more than fifteen separate shops have joined the union. A workers' organizing committee meets regularly in order to discuss strategy and to coordinate worker solidarity actions. Recently this committee has begun the publication of a monthly newspaper, the Downtown Workers' Journal (funded by the VWC and UE), which discusses the union drive and other worker issues. The workers distribute them on the street to other area employees and send them in the mail to core VWC activists. Within this organizing committee there is also a sub-organizing committee of five workers from one of the large and more contentious shops in the city. These are workers from J. Morgan's restaurant (40 workers), and they meet on their own to discuss the direction of the specific union drive in their shop. In addition to these committees, community support meetings are held every other month at which community members are able to come together in order to discuss how they think the general strategy should go, and to further coordinate their own support activity among the broader population. These meetings regularly draw 25 or so people from diverse left perspectives. These include union members (including the President of the Vermont AFL-CIO), Vermont Progressive Party members (social democrats), peace activists, and of course members of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective.

The formal decision making process of the entire campaign is far from perfect. While the UE is a very democratic union, they do not believe that democracy should necessarily be practiced until after a shop wins official recognition.[1] The official stance of the union aside, high degrees of direct democracy have been achieved. It is common for general and specific tactics and strategies to be discussed at both the workers' organizing committee meetings and at the community support meetings. If a general consensus, or strong majority position is not reached at both these meetings, plans are often modified, delayed, or changed. Furthermore, the union, both paid staff (of which there are three) and workers, do not undertake any action targeting a specific shop without the plans first being approved by the union workers at that shop. All told, internal democracy, especially during these phases where workers are not officially incorporated into a recognized union, is something that must be guarded. GMAC, as well as others, have maintained vigilance in this sphere. Here it is helps that a number of the people directly involved in this drive, including a minority of workers on the organizing committee, identify with anarchist.

In regards to official recognition, the strategy from the beginning has been to demand card check recognition, and to avoid filing for any National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) monitored elections. The reasoning behind this is that the lapse of time between the filing for an election

[1] There are exceptions to this within the union, especially in instances of 'minority unionism', wherein internal democracy is practiced.

and the date of the vote leaves too much space for the bosses to intimidate the workers. This is thought to be more of a problem than in larger shops (like factories and grocery stores) because the boss (who often is the owner) tends to work with the employees, and in such small, isolated spaces the obvious and subtle threats of this person can have a serious impact upon the workers combative stance. Also, the union does not wish to become bogged down in countless elections in dozens of separate shops. Finally, the structure and legalities of such elections are consistently tilted in favor of the bosses and tend to weaken the motivation of the workers.

This strategy has thus far had mixed results. On the one hand, filing for so many elections could have resulted in a draining of much of the energy of the overall drive. Each election would require a concerted campaign to maintain confidence and momentum in each shop leading up to the vote. And recognizing that the drive, even with the backing of the UE and VWC, has limited resources, such a course could have translated into the overall campaign being bogged down in legalities, shortsighted efforts, etc.. On the other hand, after six months of organizing we only have official recognition at one shop. With NLRB monitored votes, we could have two to four more shops officially recognized. As the successful Cambridge Pissed Off Projectionists union drive demonstrated (CAC, Boston-NEFAC), there are pros and cons to both sides of this question. Any similar union drive in the U.S. will have to decide this one on their own.[2]

In general, the union has fought for recognition by adapting a two-prong strategy. First, they have attempted to convince bosses to recognize through a highroad public recognition campaign. Second, they have used direct action and public demonstrations as a means to force an anti-union boss to relent to their demands.

Concerning the highroad approach, the union has launched a pro-union letter writing drive to the two local mainstream newspapers (both independent — one a weekly the other a daily). To date dozens of pro-union letters have been printed (as have a smaller number of anti-union ones). They have also gained 700 signatures on a pro-union petition (no small feat in a city of only 7800 residents). Hundreds of these signatures were from Montpelier residents. The petition also stated that the signatories would frequent union shops for business. The most important part of this petition effort was the hundreds of working class people who union members and supporters were able to talk to while gathering signatures. One GMAC[3] wet door to door in a working class Montpelier neighborhood, and discovered that most working people (who work outside the city), who presumably do not read the papers, were unaware of the drive. Many of these people invited this person into their home in order to discuss the campaign, and in that neighborhood only three people refused to sign. In turn the VWC and UE paid to have the petition published as a full page ad in a local newspaper. The union has also sent community delegations to a number of shops where a majority of the workers have joined — especially those where the boss had been publically supportive of the organizing activities of the employees. These delegations were made up of respected community members, workers, and union officials (include those from outside the UE). There the delegations requested that the boss/owner voluntarily recognize the union. Finally, the union also organized a union buy-in day, where maybe 100 supporters frequented shops, wearing union pins, and told the boss that they were spending money there because of their apparent willingness to recognize the demands of the workers.

[2] In Quebec, Ontario, and Canada generally, card check recognition is recognized as a legally binding form of gaining official union recognition.

[3] 2017 note from the author: That was me.

All told, this high road approach, with one exception, has not seceded in gaining recognition at any shops. However, this approach is being conducted in conjunction with a more confrontational campaign at one shop, J. Morgan's restaurant, and its combined effectiveness will not be fully known for perhaps another six months.

At J. Morgan's the union drive has taken much more confrontational turns. The restaurant is owned by one of the wealthiest families in the city. This family also owns a movie theatre (not the Savoy), a dry cleaners, a laundromat, and a hotel. As such they are able to spend large sums of capital fighting the union drive. In this capacity they have hired a union busting firm and have chosen to intimidate, interrogate, threaten, and spy on workers. Management even fired one worker for her union activity. In response, the union, upon invitation from the shop's organizing committee, has disrupted restaurant business through various means during peak hours. These methods have been diverse and have included the holding of a coffee-in (where union supporters take up all the tables for several hours and spend no more than the price of a cup of coffee while leaving a large tip and pro-union messages on the bill), the presenting of a Grinch-of-the-year award in front of patrons, the holding of large pro-union demonstrations outside the business, the organizing of regular informational pickets, and encouraging of organizations to pull business from the establishment until they recognize the union. These actions have cost the owners untold thousands of dollars, as has the hiring of union busters (which costs are currently estimated at over $250,000). While the owners have thus far been able to absorb these losses, it is hoped that they are wearing management down. In addition to these actions, the union has also filed twenty Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs) with the NLRB. Tellingly enough, the assigned NLRB investigator decided to file these, plus eight additional charges, some very serious. While we cannot say with confidence that this shop will become union, it appears that the negative publicity that they have accrued, the loss of respect from elements of the community in regards to the owners, the loss of revenue, and the difficulty that direct actions and pickets have had on the normal operations of the business may result in other shops accepting union recognition as a means to avoid the type of struggles not witnessed at J. Morgan's. While the richest family in town may be able to hold out against continuing losses, most businesses would fail if subjected to such pressures over an extended period of time. Any small business owner in Montpelier, who is not a fool, knows this and is forced to contemplate this reality.

At present, Bob Kingsley, the National Director of Organizing for the UE, based out of Pittsburgh PA, has met with the organizers of this drive on several occasions, and is now advocating that the union move beyond the immediate goal of signing up members and gaining shop majorities, and instead begin to "act like a union." What is meant by this is that the union is moving in the direction of organizing actions in support of the demands of the workers, whether or not they have official recognition or even a majority in a particular shop. From the beginning some organizers argued that this would be the best way to launch the union, as opposed to simply signing people up (which sometimes, without context, can seem a bit too abstract). One of the first efforts has been to post signs around the city letting workers know that it is against the law for bosses to subtract from one's hourly wage for breaks that last less than thirty minutes (union contact info is included on the flyer). In this same vein, organizers plan on working with employees of targeted shops that are known to break this labor law in order to get such practices discontinued. It is further thought that making an example out of one or two shops will indirectly have the effect of bringing a number of other shops inline. Here it is hoped that the union will be successful, and with success they will be able to point to a small but real victory won by the

union against the bosses. As the union takes part in more and more of these sub-campaigns it is anticipated that more workers will come to view the union as a democratic force that is both on their side, directly relevant, and an arm of their class defense. And with that it is hoped that the union's numbers will begin to swell.

Union organizers have also put together a questionnaire for workers to fill out. With this the union intends to ascertain the basic democratic wishes of the majority of workers. From this the union will produce a document provisionally named "The Montpelier Standard", which will demand that certain basic workers' rights and shop standards be recognized by all bosses in the city. A workers' Town Meeting is currently scheduled for April 22nd, 2004, where this document will be discussed, debated, amended, and hopefully ratified through directly democratic means. What comes out of this workers' Town Meeting will inform the tactical direction of the union's efforts. Whatever the workers demand as their top priorities will be what the union fights for in the coming months. And here, the union will not just carry the fight to shops with union majorities, but they will seek to widen the arena of struggle across the entire city. The workers will set the common standards, and the organized force of the union will facilitate a campaign around these standards.

In essence this overall tactic should be understood as an attempt to apply the functioning concept of minority unionism to an entire (small) city. Like in a factory where one thousand out of a possible eight thousand workers organize a union, and then persists in acting like one, the Downtown Workers Union is viewing their 100 members as a minority within a potential pool of 800. And if they can exert their power throughout the capital and in doing infuse the unorganized workers with a sense of excitement and hope, it is more likely that a momentum can be built and maintained that can propel them even further down the road of building a powerful duel power. With this in place, it is unclear as to whether or not this move towards minority unionism will result in the UE officially recognizing the democratic integrity of the union (as UE local 221), or if they will continue to officially uphold their institutional right to direct the drive above the authority of the workers. Here it is important to recall that the drive, thus far, has been run very democratically. The only question is whether or not that democracy will become the guaranteed right of the workers. It is expected that this question will be formally answered in a matter of days.

Since the union drive does not seek to negotiate separate contracts with each shop, and since the contract is much less comprehensive than is usually the case (only three pages), the union is only requiring a flay $3 a week sum from each unionized worker. If an employee works only eight hours or less, the weekly sum is only $1.50. If a worker works at multiple shops (as many downtown workers are compelled to hold several jobs to make ends meet), they are not required to pay additional amounts above the standard $3. From the start of the drive it was understood that workers would not pay any dues until their workplace wins official recognition. As the union begins to exert itself in regards to concrete issues in the city, it is hoped by some organizers that union members from shops that are not officially recognized will begin to pay regular dues voluntarily from each weekly paycheck. Such money would go into supporting such projects as the Downtown Workers' Journal. This approach may or may not prove effective. On the one hand, if the workers come to see the union as both theirs and as a real counter force in the community, they may be ok with supporting it to the tune of three bucks a week. On the other hand, if the union does not demonstrate its relevance in a timely manner, many workers will be turned off by the prospect of giving it even a dollar of their hard earned money. In either case, as

this change becomes formalized, it is likely that the union will suffer at least a temporary decline in membership.[4]

During the beginning of the union drive most activity was driven by VWC and UE organizers. However, one of their initial goals was to build a workers' organizing committee representing employees of at least ten different shops. After several months of effort, and after talking to dozens and dozens of workers, this was achieved. Today the honest truth is that without the paid staff and/or volunteer staff the entire drive would likely fall apart. While clear leaders have been emerging out of the rank and file, most still lack the experience of organized struggle necessary to carry the torch on their own. Still, much progress has been made, and as the fight continues, it would appear that certain workers will develop into outstanding strategists and tacticians. While rank and file leadership development can be aided through workshops, trainings, etc., it is mostly by walking through fire that one learns how not to burn the feet. And as the campaign wears on, the signs are there that things are moving in a positive direction.

During the course of the last two months, the workers' organizing committee has begun the writing, layout, and distribution of their own monthly newspaper. They also organized a rapid response delegation to the workplace of one union member (also a member of the organizing committee) in order to confront her boss.[5] This boss, the day before, cut her hours, most likely because of her outspoken support of the union. The delegation confronted the boss and demanded that she be given her hours back. The boss, obviously intimidated, relented. Victory. More recently a number of workers attended a Montpelier Business Association meeting where they were allotted time to speak before the owners in regards to why they demand recognition of the union. Their goal was to try and help foster natural spits among the small owners, neutralizing the potential venom of some, winning support of the very few, and separating these from the rabid anti-union camp. By doing so it is hoped to stifle attempts by owners to organize a front against the drive and to further pool their collective resources in order to stamp it out. All told the meeting went well from the point of view of the workers. But revealingly enough, the workers decided amongst themselves afterwards that next time they would not invite the paid organizer with them, as it was felt that her presence (as she has been very visible from the beginning) immediately turns off small owners that may naturally be riding the fence in regards to their active position on the union. The workers decided by themselves that attempts at dividing the owners would be more effective if carried out by them alone. This event is significant as it shows that the workers are beginning to develop their own collective identity as something, not distinct from the union, but as something that constitutes the legitimate existence of the union. The union, in their minds, is developing into an expression of their democratic will, as opposed to a separate organization which has their interests in mind.

The more such worker self-activity can be fostered the better. For it is such activity which points to a maturing in class consciousness, and it is just such a mass of workers which is necessary if we are to build a movement which is eventually capable of escaping the ideo-religious confines of authoritarianism and capital.

As has previously been discussed, a small number of anarchists, and others sympathetic to anarchist ideals, were involved in the union drive since its conception insofar as certain anar-

[4] 2017 note from the author: The UE ultimately decided to *require* weekly dues from all members regardless if they had recognition in their shop of not.

[5] 2017 note from the author: The delegation was headed by Sean West, a union member and a member of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective.

chist persons who helped form the Workers' Center continued to maintain an active role within it. Specifically, the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective sought ways to support the drive from the start. Still, in the early months, GMAC participation was very limited. At that stage the primary work was around collecting intelligence (i.e. cataloging all the separate shops, finding out how many workers each had, what they were paid, and whether or not they received any benefits). This task was performed by a paid union organizer and a worker from the recently unionized Hunger Mountain Food Co-op. Later the tasks moved to drafting agitational material which described the idea of forming an all-workers union, and clandestinely getting these materials to the workers. Here again GMAC was minimally involved, as this was easily handled by a few involved people, and primarily relied upon workers passing them out to each other.

As the union drive began to mature, and as more and more workers signed union cards, GMAC decided to commit its members to support roles in different elements of the drive. One member, who was also a downtown Montpelier worker, joined the workers' organizing committee (this member was recently voted in as Treasurer of the Local). This member was also instrumental in the production of the agitational Downtown Workers' Journal. Two other members immersed themselves in the drive as non-paid staff volunteers with the VWC.[6] These two have recently begun to act as a team in support of winning union majorities in targeting shops and carrying out other support tasks. Another member continued to help produce GMAC/anarchist specific agitational material which was distributed to the workers, and posted around the city. Towards this end, GMAC produced a four page pamphlet entitled "Union + Town Meeting = Democracy." Several hundred of these were given directly to workers and posted everywhere possible around the capital by the GMAC member on the workers' organizing committee. This pamphlet, using accessible language which incorporates imagery that is reflective of the regional culture and history, sought to demonstrate the link between building such a union and achieving direct democracy in Vermont. GMAC's newspaper, Catamount Tavern news, also committed itself to providing coverage of the union drive from an anarchist perspective.

Generally speaking, GMAC members have made an effort to publically separate their roles in the drive. Those members that have committed themselves to signing up workers alongside the UE and VWC staff maintain their public identity with that of these organizations. This is not to say that any GMAC member ever lies about their political beliefs and/or affiliations when asked. We don't, and any worker or organizer who asks, or who is around for any length of time knows exactly what those beliefs and affiliations are. All we are here doing is not confusing the union and the VWC with that of NEFAC. In addition to being arrogant and misleading, it is possible that claims of NEFAC/anarchist control of the drive, or even the over stating of our role, could result in the UE and the VWC being red baited by opponents. While the actual result of such a red baiting campaign is uncertain[7], we see no need to test the waters at this time. Our immediate goal is to build a democratic organization of workers (who are commonly not in workplaces that possess unions) that will be capable of adding to the overall class struggle in the region. As to what name it is done under, or who publically gets credit, those are questions that have no real bearing for us. Besides, the political identity of the union will have to be defined by the workers themselves, not by ideological lines.

[6] One of these GMAC members recently became employed in a downtown Montpelier shop and has recently joined the workers' organizing committee.

[7] Red baiting campaigns have consistently failed to diminish the popularity of Vermont's self-described socialist, Congressman Bernie Sanders.

All told, GMAC's duel role as both non-sectarian supporters/Workers' Center organizers, and that of producing explicitly anarchist oriented agitational literature, has done nothing but help the drive. While many workers join the union because of bread and butter issues (which the VWC and UE staff are good at articulating), many have also joined because of the basic issue of democracy. And here GMAC's anarchist perspective has aided in bringing over such workers. At the end of the day our role as an organized anarchist presence in the campaign is both to help the drive along however we can, and to publically articulate (through our writings and appropriate conversations with workers) how the specifics of the campaign relate to the broader goals of direct democracy and socialism. Internally within the drive we also try to suggest tactical directions that we feel could be effective, and try to encourage as much democracy as possible. Finally, we see our long term role as a force that can potentially effect the direction of the union after the campaign reaches certain levels of success and self-sustainability.

Any similar union drive in different regions would benefit from such a mix of official bread and butter unionism (as determined through official organizing staff), and radical, pro-direct democracy, pro-socialism agitation on behalf of anarchist groups. Furthermore, by making connections to workers' democracy from the near onset, seeds are planted in the minds of interested workers that in future years can only make the struggle to achieve a radical class consciousness among the population that much more successful.

From Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union To A Montpelier Workers' Council

This unique union drive has had a positive effect in bringing together area unions (non-UE) and individual union members in a common support role. At community support meetings it is common for representatives from the state AFL-CIO to be present, as well as individual members unions such as the Teamsters, Vermont State Employees' Association (VSEA), Iron Workers, National Writers Union, National Educators Association, etc.. The VSEA, who for years held their union events at Capital Plaza (which includes J. Morgans), pulled their business from the establishment in solidarity with the union drive. Other union members have offered help on the drive ranging from phone banking, to talking picket lines, to collecting relevant intelligence. In a word, this effort has galvanized many different branches of labor, adding to the growing sense of inter-union solidarity in the region.

It is not a huge leap to believe that the Montpelier Downtown Workers' Union will have official recognition in maybe five shops, a total membership of 150 workers, in maybe a year and a half. At that point, when the union becomes a legitimate and stable force in the city, a real union presence will be represented in the capital that is potentially inclusive of all workers. Already utility workers, librarians, firefighters, teachers, state workers, some tradesmen, postal workers, etc., have their own unions. Only now *all* workers will have access to organized labor.

When this time comes, in maybe two years-time, we can conceive of an issue coming up in the city which affects all, or a significant segment of the working class population on the local level. When such occurs, it is possible, given the general context outlined above, that all unions could be brought together in a general assembly of union members in order to address the issue.[1]

We can foresee a situation where such a meeting was called for by the rank and file of the Downtown Workers' Union, and/or by organizers from the Workers Center — maybe through GMAC prompting. Here a few volunteers could physically go to dozens of shops in the city personally giving invitations and other related information directly to shop stewards with the intension of them distributing these to their fellow workers. We could reach out across union lines to the teachers (NEA), the utility workers (IBEW), the state workers (VSEA), the service and retail workers (UE), the postal workers, the librarians, the firefighters, the tradesmen, etc.. And if such a general meeting of unionized workers was called for from elements within organized labor, and because of the ten year history above discussed, we could feasibly imagine a large and diverse number of workers attending the meeting.

One potential stumbling block for any such attempt would be opposition on the state level from within the different unions to these meetings. Without a strong and tested history of inter-

[1] The current [2004] contract fights going on in Boston, leading up to the Democratic National Convention, immediately comes to mind as a perfect spark to ignite such a project. We must understand that the contradictions of capitalism will time and again lead to such opportunities. Only we must build the effective channels through which this class anger can be brought together as a far reaching, organized force.

union mutual aid and trust, certain union officials, from the county level up, could view this as a threat to the integrity of their larger, separate, apparatus. This may not prove to be a problem with the unions such as the NEA (who vest a good deal of autonomy within the Locals), but within the AFL-CIO it is always a possibility that should be thought about. And again, if such a negative intervention is pursued by Executive Councils and even local Labor Councils, the tragic history of organized labor being held back by a built in bureaucratic and centralizing tendency could easily repeat itself and potentially doom such an all-worker meeting before it even began. But because of the positive environment of labor solidarity brought about through the five years of effort on the part of the Workers' Center, we have reason to believe that if the right circumstances presented themselves, such a meeting could be called for in Montpelier without having to fight tooth and nail against failure. And again, this is thought to be possible also because of the changing conditions within the pre-existing labor movement itself.

The effective solidarity work and inter-union coordinating efforts of the Workers' Center has also helped to raise the level of political and organizational activity of the different unions. In some cases these emerging dynamics have helped to motivate more of the rank and file, and in turn this motivated rank and file has further motivated the unions. With this, many leftists and reformers have been elected to high ranks within the Vermont unions in the last few years. Dan Brush, a print worker from Capital City Press, was recently elected President of the Vermont AFL-CIO on the reform ticket. Ed Stanak, who is supportive of many left leaning initiatives, is President of the VSEA. This past fall Jerry Colby, of the Burlington area, was elected national President of the Writers' Union (UAW Local 1981) also as a reform candidate. In addition, many progressive union members have been elected to posts within their Central Labor Councils. Tellingly, Hall Leyshon[2], President of the Washington County Central Labor Council (under whose jurisdiction is Montpelier) has taken to inviting unions other than those in the AFL-CIO (VSEA, UE, NEA, etc.) to their meetings.[3] It would seem that the tide is turning in our favor.

If we could get as far as successfully holding such a democratic all-workers meeting, and if this body voted to take action in response to the issue at hand, and if that action resulted in some level of immediate success, it is possible that a new sense of class empowerment could reverberate through the ranks of the workers. Here it may be possible that the assembly of workers would be invigorated in such a way as to indefinitely extend the tenure of the assembly. And if this were to happen, NEFAC collectives/members (which inevitably will include local union members) would be in a very good position to see that the new body adopt an internal structure which is in line with direct democracy.

For example, if the spark issue that brought this meeting together was a desire to organize solidarity work for several unions which were out on strike, is it not conceivable, given a pre-existing inter-union atmosphere of respect, trust, and mutual aid, that such an all-workers assembly could, in solidarity, vote to call for a one day general strike? And if such a strike was successfully carried out with positive effects, it is also conceivable that the assembly would recognize the benefits of coming together in such a grassroots, united, fashion. With this realization it is only a very short step to the permanent formation of a formalized all-workers organization. As soon as the local rank and file of separate unions begin to organize their own activities in the general interest of the entire class (as opposed to just their particular shop), and as soon as this is expressed through

[2] 2017 note from the author: he later changed his name to Traven Leyshon.

[3] Central Labor Councils are typically composed AFL-CIO unions exclusively.

directly democratic means by the mass of workers (of which NEFAC should strongly encourage), the workers' council is born! And if such an organization was to form through a similar evolution as outlined above, there is a good chance that it would develop into a directly democratic body with effective structural means to take positions, actions, and to coordinate basic struggles. This is true insofar as basic values of union democracy, class solidarity, and respect will have presumably been infused throughout a great number of the most outspoken and influential workers through the long trials, tribulations, and campaigns which presuppose these new councils. In this sense, even if a short cut could be used to foster such workers' councils, it is uncertain if such a road should be trusted. Maybe, maybe not. This, in that it will be the very process of building the conditions necessary for their rational appearance which will not only make them likely, but also subjectively sustainable.[4]

Finally, we recognize that the transformation of all-worker unions to that of workers' councils is uncertain. These are waters that we not yet swam in. However, because of where we now sit, we can see such possibilities looming on the not so distant horizon. The Green Mountain Anarchist Collective contends that the recent history of the Vermont labor movement, and specifically the long term strategies carried out by class struggle anarchists (namely that of the former #10 Collective) can serve as a partial model for NEFAC activities across the northeast. If we keep our eye on the prize we assert that NEFAC can move to create the necessary conditions for, and then build workers' councils in all our areas of operation. Too speculative to base our federation's strategy on? We would say 'no.' If we are successful, we have much to gain. And if this transformation is not pulled off? Well, we still will have lost nothing and will have gained the continuing victories of stronger labor movements in our areas of activity. Emma Goldman once said "to the daring belong the future." Comrades, the future is at hand. Let us, NEFAC, venture into the unknown that is tomorrow, and let us risk victory as the bet against failure!

[4] Here it is worth noting that achieving a directly democratic structure within such bodies will be a more natural direction throughout the areas of New England where a Town Meeting culture still exists.

Proposal

Each member collective, individual, or, where it pertains, local federation unions of area collectives, individual members and supporters who are not presently engaged in activities that relate to building of directly democratic peoples' assemblies, or building of directly democratic farmer organizations:

1.) Pursue the creation of area workers' councils as the overall strategy of how, in part, we intend to build both duel power and real revolutionary potential within our class — the working class!

NEFAC, to the best of its abilities, will see that these councils are directly democratic, and will incorporate all unionized workers within the selected geographic area.

NEFAC, to the best of its abilities, will also see that they meet (a minimum of) twice a year, at which all unionized workers will be invited to decide all major policy and campaigns that the council shall pursue until the next general meeting. Votes will be made by simple majority opinion, unless the question is to call for a general strike, or any additional activity that can be considered as or more militant, in which case a two thirds majority is required. At this meeting a workers' select board of five persons shall be elected from (when and where possible) separate shops and separate unions. The election of this workers' select board shall be done by a public hand count of all assembled workers. The workers' select board shall be tasked with facilitating the general, voted on, council policy.

Recognizing that it is less likely that such a council can form without the official approval of effected unions (be that on the local, state, or provincial level), such an approval shall be vigorously sought by NEFAC collectives, and area union members. Where such approval cannot be reasonably attained, and where it appears that such formations are still possible, NEFAC shall continue to pursue the formation of such councils.

2.) In order to meaningfully achieve this end it will be necessary to build democratic unions in all these areas that include as members all the small shops that traditional unions do not seek to organize. NEFAC shall work towards, and prioritize the building of these unions. These unions should be made up of any non-union workers that seek to join. This union should seek to gain legal recognition in individual shops in which a majority of the workers join the union. This union shall not be considered even partially effective until it has official or effective recognition in a minimum of three different shops in the specific targeted geographical area.

3.) In order to build these unions, and recognizing the limited resources of NEFAC, each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters form an alliance with a progressive, proven, union, and work with them on creating such unions, where necessary under that union's name.

4.) In order to make such alliances both possible and likely each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters should develop a way to form strong and trusted ties with the labor unions in their vicinity. They will do this by committing themselves to doing consistent and effective solidarity work

on behalf of strikes, union drives, contract drives, etc.. In doing so they will be free to express their honest thoughts and critiques to both the rank and file, the elected officials, and the union staff. Such critiques shall be done good naturedly, and the severity of the critique shall depend on the severity of the complaint. This relationship shall be pursued in the earliest phases (or until mutual respect is achieved) with little or no attempts at large scale ideological conversion. From the onset, such relationships shall entail the full knowledge by all pertinent parties that we are anarcho-communists, members of NEFAC, and workers.

5.) In order to achieve effective social-political avenues for such conversations to take place it may be necessary for each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters to facilitate the building of an area workers' center. These workers' centers shall not be sectarian, and will encourage the official membership of individuals and labor and social justice organizations. These workers' centers shall be democratic as possible, while still retaining a broad base of support and potential support. While this may not be necessary in some regions, it may prove to be in others. The decision as to whether or not to implement point #5 will be left to the directly democratic discretion of the related parties in distinct areas. However, these related parties will seek advice of the federation as a whole, and will seriously take that advice into account in their decision making process.

6.) In some regions pre-existing workers' centers, Jobs With Justice chapters, Central Labor Councils, or other union based organizations may prove themselves to be a viable place from which to implement the above strategy. Where that is the case, each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters should seek to immerse themselves in these organizations in order to carry forth the above strategy. The decision as to how point #6 is implemented will be left to the directly democratic discretion of related parties in distinct areas. However, these related parties will seek advice of the federation as a whole, and will seriously take that advice into account in their decision making process.

7.) In order to be able to realistically build strong relationships with unions, and/or to be able to realistically build a workers' center, each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters shall work diligently to build their local unions and collectives into strong, well organized, self-disciplined, politically knowledgeable, tactically effective, and respected units. The means by which this should be achieved as well as the decision as to when they reach an acceptable level, shall be left to these units themselves. However, in regards to the above, these units shall diligently listen to the advice of the federation as a whole.

8.) Each member collective, or, where it pertains, local federation union of area collectives and individual members and supporters will include a detailed written account and analysis of the progress made in carrying out the above strategy in their monthly reports to the federation. We must all learn from the struggles and experiences of each other!

9.) Individual members of NEFAC who are not attached to NEFAC member collectives or local NEFAC unions, and who are operating in general isolation from NEFAC bodies will diligently disseminate agitational information throughout the ranks of the local working class about the progress of the related campaigns taking place in other towns and cities. In doing they will seek to sow the seeds of such organizing methods among their local population.

10.) NEFAC shall officially bring this proposal to the Federation of Revolutionary Anarchist Collectives —Great Lakes Region, the Pacific Northwest Anarcho-Communist Federation, and

any other regionally based North American anarchist federation which forms in the future, with the encouragement that they too consider this strategy for the advancement of the class struggle in their regions.

SOLIDARITY AMONG THE WORKING CLASS!

THE GREEN MOUNTAIN ANARCHIST COLLECTIVE, NEFAC-VERMONT, SPRING 2004

[2]2017 note from the author: In Vermont, just before the start of the invasion, 3000 rallied in the capital of Montpelier, making this the largest political protest up until that time in the capital. When the war began, 5000-6000 marched in opposition in Burlington; this equaled the largest political protest ever seen in the state also up until that time (a march also in Burlington against the Vietnam War in the early 1970s). Together with members of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective, I was at both rallies. At the Burlington rally the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective helped direct a break-away march that left the permitted route and held up traffic for some time. Fourteen years later both these rallies were dwarfed by the 2017 Montpelier Woman's March (against President Trump) which drew a record shattering 20,000 protesters (in a city with a population of 7800). I was pleased to have attended this rally too along with my wife Angela, our daughter Freya, and our son William.

[3]While such an analysis will likely be attacked by fringe elements of the American anarchist community, we must remain steadfast in our recognition that North America, and more specifically the northeast, is a very different place than Italy was in the 1970s, or Germany was in the 1980s, for that matter, Europe today [2004] (which is by enlarge composed of social democratic nation-states). Europe, for several generations, has been marked by a more advanced socialist movement, and within such a reality armed struggle, as well as the militant rejection of moderate trade unionism may make perfect strategic and tactical sense. However, where we live, write, and organize today (that being the northeast of North America) is a place where the trade unions only represent a minority of the workers and their numbers are declining, and other than in Vermont & Quebec, democratic socialists are not represented in government. While Italy in the 70s was a place where workers were militantly rejecting that state's transformation into a social democracy (instead in favor of a workers revolution), the USA and Canada are currently in a process of rolling back the modest class gains made by earlier generations. In the USA the incomplete victories of the New Deal are quickly disintegrating under the constant attacks of neo-conservative elements of the ruling class which presently is in control of the federal government.

David Van Deusen, Green Mountain Anarchist Collective
The Strategy of Workers' Councils
2004