



www.blackrosefed.org

ANARCHISTS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT



Produced by Black Rose Anarchist Federation



Interviews

June, Academic Worker	2
Jen Rogue, Social Worker	4
Xaquiri, Nurse	6
David, Nurse	8
Daniel Bovard-Katz, Metal Worker	11
Shan, Public School Library Worker	13
Alex, Librarian	15
GK, Food Service Worker	18

GK: When signing up coworkers to the IWW, I would show them our Preamble. The Preamble lays out the IWW's politics around industrial organizing, abolishing capitalism and seizing the means of production. Those can sound like pretty ambitious tasks, but if you boil it down to how those politics manifest in the workplace, it can be easier to have those conversations. For example, the Preamble starts by saying "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common..." This sort of language might sound abstract or confusing, but if you boil it down to workplace dynamics, it will make more sense: we as workers want a safe work environment where we can earn a living and feel like our jobs have importance. Our boss on the other hand needs to make a profit and will sacrifice our health, safety and well being in order to keep making money and having control over the workplace.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

GK: Step 1: Build committees across various workplaces. In the process of committee building, workers begin to learn tools for collective decision making, resource management and strategic planning.

Step 2: Committees begin to network and collaborate among themselves. Local branches and national organizing departments help with coordination and administration. This sets the stage for industry-wide organization.

Step 3: Industrial bodies coordinate further organization, direct actions and resource management across workplaces. They have the capacity to execute actions throughout supply chains and across various job sites at once.

Step 4: General strikes and other revolutionary tactics are deployed to seize the economy from the capitalist class.

Introduction

Building popular power by building unions

Since its emergence as a distinct branch of the revolutionary socialist movement, anarchism has understood the workplace both as a key locus of social and economic domination and as one crucial site where popular power can be built and leveraged for a broader revolutionary social transformation. This understanding has informed a number of anarchist revolutionary strategies. Of these, perhaps the most well known is that of anarcho-syndicalism, which seeks to bring workers together around a shared political ideology. The strategy of Black Rose / Rosa Negra (BRRN) diverges from this approach, instead embracing the concept of organizational dualism, first developed by Bakunin and later elaborated via the organizational-strategic approaches of platformism and especifismo.

Organizational dualism asserts the need, on the one hand, for a revolutionary political organization whose members are united around a shared program, and on the other, for mass organizations (like labor unions) whose members are united by their shared position within a structure of domination (like the workplace) and thus share the same needs. This approach eschews the aim to bring workers together on the narrow basis of a shared political ideology from the start, as is advocated by revolutionary syndicalists. Instead, organizational dualism argues that a militant minority acting within the mass organization can effectively articulate, argue for, and win the majority of members in a mass organization over to principles such as self-management, class struggle, direct democracy, internationalism, direct action, and class independence.

Varying strategic approaches notwithstanding, anarchists represent a small but active and growing pole within the US labor movement. The following series of interviews aims to highlight a tiny sliver of the recent activity undertaken by anarchist labor organizers around the country. This activity includes organizing the unorganized through new union campaigns, fighting for rank-and-file democracy inside existing unions, and finding ways to build foundations for collective action in industries with precarious work.

We reached out to eight anarchist workers, some of whom are members of BRRN, to better understand how their political commitments intersect with and manifest in their on-the-ground organizing.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

June

Grad student in a large established union confederation

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

June: Anarchism. Popular and direct democratic control of our communities is the only way forward.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

June: I am organizing with a university graduate worker union in an East Coast city with a bargaining unit of about four thousand members. The campaign started in the mid-2010s by a core of communist-leaning graduate students forming an organizing committee. After a few years and a series of problems and reversals (including disaffiliating from a large, well-known parent union that was being very unsupportive, and reaffiliating with a different one), we called a union election and won.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

June: We are working with an established parent union. We chose that route because they had a number of resources (full time paid staff, a lawyer, and the promise of independent funding) to offer. Some founders of our organization were not happy about this decision. The fully-independent option was, overall, too daunting for us, as we felt we would have to spread ourselves too thin with technical aspects of internal data management, IT for our website, fundraising, labor law, etc.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

June: My anarchist politics have a high level of correspondence with the key organizers in my union. We all want to use popular power to build worker control, equality, and dignity in the workplace. We have also seen that governments and union bureaucracies are a dead end of history, and these methods cannot be used to achieve our goals.

Many union members are in the vaguely socialist/libertarian socialist politics space, and most of them are either familiar with the politics of existing organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), International Socialist Organization (ISO), or were themselves former members of such organizations. Many of them burned out from this socialist party-centric organizing and turned to direct labor organizing as a way to act on their political principles.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk “politics” (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

GK

IWW organizer in the food service industry

BRRN: How would you summarize your political ideology in one sentence?

GK: I am an anarchist or libertarian socialist. I believe that working class power can and should be built by self-directed committees of workers both on the job and throughout their industries.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

GK: I am a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). I first heard of the IWW in the early 2000s, when public campaigns at Starbucks and Jimmy John's were happening. Detroit is known for being the home to large auto unions, but I was always told that unions were for workers in manufacturing-type jobs and not for industries like mine. Hearing about these campaigns in the IWW made me want to learn more, so I took an organizer training in 2012 and have been a member ever since.

The IWW's organizing model (Solidarity Unionism) is especially relevant to the restaurant industry because we tend to work in small workplaces with very high turnover. We eventually want to recruit every worker in the shop into the union, but there are still actions that a small committee of workers can pull off successfully as we build toward that goal. We might not ever get 100% of the staff on board, but we are developing more workers into organizers in the process.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

GK: In the IWW we use the phrase “building the new world in the shell of the old.” What this basically means is that we are not waiting until after the revolution to prepare workers to run the economy: we are building toward that as we organize.

When we collect dues from our coworkers and have meetings to decide how those dues will be spent, we are learning how to collectively manage resources and practice direct democracy. And by learning how to plan and execute small direct actions on the job around smaller demands, we are preparing ourselves to take on bigger actions around bigger demands down the road.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk ‘politics’ (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

and file union members to be politically active agents and learn to collectively run our workplaces. Step 3: expand this active, collective lesson to a wider, societal scale. Demonstrate that direct democracy and direct action can dismantle and reshape our systems of power across the board. Social revolution. Step 4: social revolution leads to political and economic revolutions, ultimately creating an anarchist, socialist society.

What resources have helped you most as you've organized?

Alex: As stated above, because we do not have the ability to collectively bargain, many of the traditional resources for labor organizing don't directly apply to our workplace situation. Our fellow UE 150 members in the wider local have provided a wealth of information about successes and failures they have experienced organizing public workers in NC over the past few decades. Speaking to other labor organizers outside of UE has also been helpful to better understand some of UE's own blindspots and shortcomings with their particular style of organizing. Early on in the campaign, we had someone from the nearby tenants union come and give us some "Organizing Tips 101" crash courses that were particularly helpful for starting conversations with our coworkers and dispelling some of the myths about "unions being illegal" in our state.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

Alex: Be patient and pace yourself. Union organizing is not sexy work. It's going to take a lot of long meetings, note taking, spreadsheet creation, and uncomfortable conversations before the ball starts rolling. Beware of burnout! So many of our most dedicated members in the beginning dropped out because they felt they were taking on too much of the work. And before people get trained and educated there absolutely will be an imbalance of workloads among members. If you are dedicated to committing time for meetings and extra work every week, that's great, but I promise you that most of your coworkers will not be at first. Something we are still trying to learn how to do is energizing people to continue participating when there isn't a burning issue pissing them off. After you win a demand, how do you keep momentum going? We're trying to balance intense periods of working groups with more fun, social, community building activities that will make people still want to show up even when the shop isn't hot. Think potlucks, movie nights, and group outings together to build a sense of solidarity that goes beyond just workplace issues.

“We're trying to balance intense periods of working groups with more fun, social, community building activities that will make people still want to show up even when the shop isn't hot.”

June: We talk frequently about world events and “political” topics because of our similar class background (we all work in the same job, after all) and the fact that we live in a socially liberal East Coast city. Maybe because their average age skews pretty young, most of them feel a justified distaste of capitalism. We have a high degree of agreement on hating landlords, bosses, and cops, and on wanting to live in a better, more equal, less violent world.

The biggest disagreement we've seen in our union is that a vocal minority (no more than 5%) of our rank-and-file seems to be supporters of Zionism, which has caused strife with our organizers and union reps, who all are anti-Zionist.

Does your campaign include others who see themselves as 'political', but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

June: Amazingly we have no strong presence of people who see themselves as “political” in a different tradition or organization. Our members who were previously in ISO or PSL have broken with those organizations and now disagree with their authoritarian positions (an ex-PSL member now helps run our Libertarian Socialist Reading Group), and our members who are also members of DSA do not have any contradictions with our union's goals, values, or activities. The only exception is that Socialist Alternative and PSL have reached out to us and offered support, but we voted to reject their advances, as many of us have come to believe that state communist parties are reactionary, parasitic, and historically obsolete political formations, with very little to offer the labor movement.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

June: We hope that organizing in unions will assist with advancing the goals of social revolution because it teaches workers to fight together, to count on each other, and to identify and hate the class enemy. However, unions in the U.S. and their parent labor federations are probably hopelessly integrated with the capitalist state and bourgeois political parties and will need to be either transcended, dissolved, or left behind in the movement forward toward a revolution and a new society.

Although I do not speak for all my fellow workers, some of us see unions as a preparation for skill-building, making social connections, and devising new political understandings, which is a precursor for forming the kind of “new” revolutionary organizations when the time is at hand for a serious rupture within society.

What resources have helped you most as you've organized?

June: Labor Notes has been an amazing resource. Shout out to LN for all their help. Also we read “Contradictions of Paid Staff in the Labor Movement” by Roger Williams,

“Class Struggle Unionism” by Joe Burns, and “Ready for Revolution: The CNT defense committees in Barcelona, 1933-1938” by Agustín Guillamón.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

June: Don't be afraid to talk to strangers constantly, every day of your life. Get used to it and get good at it if you're not very social. Also, something I wish I had known when I started: meet people where they are, be empathetic, and also be genuine about your beliefs (if not too direct about how much you want strikes, ruptures, and revolutions).

I don't always say the word anarchism around my coworkers, but they know I want workers and regular people to be in the driver's seat in society, and they know I hate the government and cops, and I think society should be run as a participatory direct democracy instead. Surprisingly, people can and do totally understand that and respect it. Even the liberals in the union who disagree with the radicals—including us anarchists—can't doubt our honesty, our conviction, and the success of our methods.

“Don't be afraid to talk to strangers constantly, every day of your life. Get used to it and get good at it if you're not very social. Also, something I wish I had known when I started: meet people where they are, be empathetic, and also be genuine about your beliefs.”

Jen Rogue

Anarchist communist working in community mental health in Central Texas

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

Jen Rogue: Anarchist-Communist.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

JR: I work in healthcare, specifically community mental health in Central Texas.

“I will always urge a more militant, direct action orientation towards our labor organizing, but I will not act as vanguard or dictator in our struggle.”

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk ‘politics’ (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

Alex: I do generally avoid any explicit talk of “anarchism” with most of my coworkers, in favor of more general “anti-capitalist” or “leftist” talking points. Because we are classified as local government employees, and our pay and staff are subject to the whims of the county commissioners, local politics is a common discussion among staff members. Since we cannot collectively bargain, one of our strategies is exerting pressure on local politicians who our bosses and administrators report to. Union members in particular are now much more tuned into which sectors of local power may be sympathetic to our cause or who may be swayed with aggressive PR tactics. International political affairs is a trickier subject where I do sometimes have to push back against the more “progressive NPR” talking points of some of my coworkers.

Does your campaign include others who see themselves as ‘political’, but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

Alex: I think many of our union members consider themselves “political” people, but not necessarily disciplined adherents to a specific political tradition. I believe the majority of our union members fall in the camps of “progressive liberals” or “DSA-style reform socialists.” Of this latter group I know a few members have worked with other labor or tenant organizing campaigns, but I don't think they are part of any kind of leftist political party. However, the ones who have done previous organizing work have been helpful in using their local contacts to set up organizing training sessions and provide advice to our members. We do have a few older coworkers who are more old-school 20th century Marxist types and, ironically, they have been some of the harder people to convince to join the union campaign.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

Alex: While labor is not the only sector necessary to create revolution, I believe labor organizing is an especially potent tool for empowering individuals and demonstrating the power of collective organizing. Step 1: organize a union. Step 2: educate rank

for our union recruiting efforts. This campaign started almost 2 years ago when library administrators sought to expand our operating hours and services without increasing staffing levels. We've been horribly understaffed since the COVID pandemic began and are already struggling to maintain operations with the people we have.

These unpopular moves by the administration pissed off enough people that myself and several other coworkers saw it as a ripe opportunity to begin formally organizing library employees! We are still a minority in our workplace but have successfully reversed several unpopular policy expansions like this.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

Alex: Whether to go with an established union or go independent is something our members debated for quite a while. We ultimately decided to organize with the North Carolina Public Workers Service Union — United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 150. UE 150 is really the only union in the state that has experience organizing public sector workers. Some city workers in our area are also organized with the local, so we thought that might be a good avenue to connect across sectors with our organizing work. UE 150 has mostly focused on organizing state and city workers in the past, so we as county workers have been a new challenge to strategize around.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

Alex: Class struggle and labor politics are important questions in any revolutionary struggle. Work is often where people are taught to feel disenfranchised, but also where many of us have the greatest potential to exert our influence over local systems of power.

For myself, labor organizing has reinforced three particular and important lessons: 1) we as individuals have the agency to act in ways that empower ourselves and those around us, 2) only as collective groups can individuals have the capacity to combat and change larger systems of power, and 3) acting as educated and empowered individuals in collective struggles with others is the greatest balm against isolation and alienation in our society.

As an anarchist, I believe any collective struggle should be organized horizontally, so I make a conscious effort to avoid any kind of “my way or the highway” attitude with my union comrades. I will argue my own stance from my political perspective, but if the larger group democratically decides on a different course of action, I will be there to support whatever we decide together. I will always urge a more militant, direct action orientation towards our labor organizing, but I will not act as vanguard or dictator in our struggle. Over time I hope to educate, argue, and by trial and error convince my coworkers that we have more direct power over our workplace than we realize, and that we should wield it together!

About how many people are in the bargaining unit?

JR: The agency has about 850 union-eligible positions. We are in the public sector, so no bargaining.

How did the campaign start and who initiated it?

JR: The conversations started in late 2019 and early 2020, initiated by a small handful of frustrated coworkers who got together at informal happy hours.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

JR: Early on, someone who ended up not being involved in the campaign reached out to Communications Workers of America (CWA) for advice, and they provided a lot of support and resources, so the option of being independent never really ended up being a conversation.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

JR: I am drawn to especificismo, and believe that mass work with broad social movements of my class are the true drivers of revolution. I have been involved in activist projects, and while I have found a lot of value in them and have seen good work done, I am not of the opinion that collecting the radicals together into small nonprofit-oriented groups is going to be the foundation of massive systemic change. Helpful bandaids, but not where our power lies.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk “politics” (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

JR: I don't talk much about my politics until I have worked with someone for a while, though I do make a point to discuss political topics from an anarchist perspective when topics arise naturally. For example, our agency has been paying lip service to DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) recently, and I have been talking about the differences between liberal diversity efforts, and revolutionary or abolitionist approaches to the subjects raised. I have found that building a bit of credibility through working together helps make people less dismissive if and when I ever talk about being an anarchist.

Does your campaign include others who see themselves as “political,” but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

JR: Thus far, this has not been much of an issue. Most of the people who are active in the union would probably describe themselves as lefty or liberal, but most are not involved in political organizations.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

JR: This is a big question that I don't think can be addressed in the space of this interview. The short version is: I think unions and neighborhood organizations and other mass organizations are the foundation of revolutionary change, and that as we build those we will organically see intermediary organizations spring up and specific political organizations will grow as well. I think that struggle, study and reflection will shape the development of these organizations toward revolutionary change, but as far as the "steps" are concerned, I don't think I have a cut-and-dry, clear and obvious path the "The Rev," and frankly, I tend to be skeptical of people who think they have the recipe to achieve communism.

What resources have helped you most as you've organized?

JR: Honestly, the Black Rose Labor Committee has been invaluable to me in helping break down organizing issues that have arisen, plan for how to address problems, and keep me on track as far as keeping my organizing faithful to my principles. I have also found Labor Notes very useful as well.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

JR: I think being committed to the job no matter what has been really important for sustainable organizing. I would be doing this job even without a union, and that helps me when I am feeling exhausted by the work. I used to work in the service industry, and it was always a struggle to organize because people would just hop to the bar/restaurant/shop a couple doors down if things got too shitty at their current gig. Wanting to work in community mental health – providing therapy for people who typically do not have access to mental health treatment – has made me committed to this particular agency (and union drive) because there really are not other employers that do the same thing, in my county anyway. I know that is not an answer that is easy to replicate in other jobs, but it is what has helped me stay vigilant with the union even when I'm fried. So I guess my advice is to dig your heels in and be patient: this organizing is hard, long, and usually not very shiny, so you have to be committed to the work even without obvious, quick returns.

“Labor has a significant power over society, as capitalism cannot survive without extracting value from labor. It is also a place where we can practice popular power and reshape how to relate to each other.”

What resources have helped you most as you've organized?

Shan: The most helpful resources have been people in the union and other organizers. Their on-the-ground experiences are the most valuable sources of inspiration, ideas and strategies. Of course, books always provide insight, knowledge, and theories that give me wider perspectives and better analyses.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

Shan: If there is a union, even if their politics may not align with yours, attend meetings and get to know people. The most important part of a union organization is people. If there isn't a union at all, build relationships with people at work and identify those who question the working conditions and are interested in talking about changing those conditions. Regardless of the way you organize, building relationships is the most important part of starting a union.

Alex

Platformist librarian in a “right to work” state

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

Alex: My politics are of the anarcho-communist persuasion with a platformist bent.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

Alex: I work as a public librarian in North Carolina. Because we are considered county government employees, and because of the particularly draconian labor laws in our state, we as public employees do not have the right to collectively bargain.

Practically speaking, this means we do not have many of the same tools that unions in other states do. We have to get creative about how we exert pressure on library administration and county commissioners in a way that protects us from retribution. Throughout the library system there are about 100 “non-supervisory” employees who are eligible

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

Shan: Established union. Even though I would like to join a rank-and-file organizing committee, my school site does not have one. Joining my union has helped me meet with other members who are in favor of more militant tactics.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

Shan: My orientation toward anarchist politics, and specifically organizing with coworkers, is building popular power through practice. Because people don't just inherently know how to build collective power, we must practice it by organizing with each other to win material gains.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk 'politics' (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

Shan: I don't mention specifically "anarchist" politics because words like that and others – like "socialism" – tend to be misinterpreted and shut down conversations. However, I bring up concrete examples and ideas that relate to such politics. For example, I often talk about how management and district leaders get significant raises while we get next to nothing. I also talk about how we can function as a school without administration. Many people resonate with these ideas because they are relevant to our jobs, not abstract theories.

Does your campaign include others who see themselves as 'political', but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

Shan: Yes. Many people in our union are centrist or social democratic. They often focus on electoral strategies and support democratic candidates, which I disagree with. However, because we are organizing based on material gains, even with ideological differences, we are united in the demands we have for all workers.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

Shan: Organizing unions is important because workplaces are one of the sites of struggle along with neighborhoods, prisons, and others. Labor has a significant power over society, as capitalism cannot survive without extracting value from labor. It is also a place where we can practice popular power and reshape how to relate to each other. I don't know the exact steps to a better society, but I know that we must know how to build power among ourselves for it.

Xaquiri

Anarchist communist building the first nurses' union in Louisiana

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

Xaquiri: Anarchist-communist: a communist analysis of political economy with an anti-authoritarian praxis regarding power relations and the state.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

Xaquiri: We are a group of 800 Registered Nurses at a level one trauma center in Louisiana that is the non-profit descendant of a large public hospital that was closed after Hurricane Katrina. I had dreams of unionizing since I started working there five years ago, but that accelerated after the obvious dire necessity of COVID. We have had several failed starts in organizing since then, but the most recent campaign really took off this past spring, after another group of nurses at a neighboring hospital were on the verge of filing for election right before their hospital was sold to the parent company of my facility, so a lot of the energy from that organizing was spread to us.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

Xaquiri: We are working with an established union National Nurses United (NNU) because they were already on the ground working nurses at the other hospital that got sold. I also chose to engage with them because they have a lot of resources to invest in supporting our effort, which is unusual for an established union to put resources in organizing new facilities in the South. I also found them to take a more militant approach to organizing than many unions — greater willingness to strike, aversion to worker-management partnerships, and engagement with intersecting justice issues instead of a narrow focus on building membership.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

Xaquiri: A big part of my politics is the belief in ordinary people to get radicalized and shift power relations away from capital right where they are. I'm excited to see people who have never considered themselves political before now becoming engaged with all sorts of struggles, and that is all based on recognizing their collective power and where they are positioned in relation to the ruling class.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk "politics" (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

Xaquiri: At this stage I generally try to avoid it because so many people are so new to this way of thinking.

“ I’m excited to see people who have never considered themselves political before now becoming engaged with all sorts of struggles, and that is all based on recognizing their collective power and where they are positioned in relation to the ruling class. ”

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

Xaquiri: I guess you can say I have an anarcho-syndicalist theory of change and popular power. Unions are the closest thing to a radically democratic organization with control over resources in our society. Showing people that it is possible to take power on a local level with broader implications over the whole society is one of the most important parts of building unions for me.

David

Syndicalist nurse at a large university hospital in the Southeast

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

David: I’d say nowadays the ideology most animating to me is syndicalism.

Share background about the campaign you worked on.

David: I’m a nurse at a large university hospital in the Southeast. During the height of COVID, people in my unit were pretty pissed off and I started to hear that folks were feeling similar elsewhere in the hospital too. I heard from a friend in management that the hospital thought there was a union push happening, so I thought that if there was, I wanted to be part of it. NNU had recently won an election at a hospital in our state, so I figured that if folks were organizing at our hospital it was probably them. I got in touch with NNU and asked if they were organizing at my hospital. They said no, but if I wanted to initiate something, they would be willing to help. I asked some of my co-workers what they thought, and they were all pretty on board, so we started. Now sadly, our effort was not successful. After more than two years of organizing, engagement

Daniel: I’m not sure. I would guess everyone who has joined the union sees themselves as some sort of radical leftist, while some more conservative workers have agreed with the need for change and even collective action, but have not yet been asked about joining a union. We’re in the beginning stages of organizing, so this may be a difficulty later on, but so far has not really been a problem.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

Daniel: Yes, as I said above, I think the core of my belief is democracy, in the sense of people having equal power, and unions are perhaps the only way to meaningfully shift power in the workplace, which is where most of the decisions in society are made. So my process would be something like (1) form unions in all workplaces, (2) build up those unions to the point of actually making decisions about what is produced democratically, (3) cut out the layer of management that no longer does anything, and (4) replace state control of society outside of workplaces with worker control by control of the industrial production that is needed for a complex society.

What resources have helped you most as you’ve organized?

Daniel: The IWW Organizer Training program is very good.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

Daniel: You have to build a relationship with people based on caring about them. Talk to your co-workers and learn more about them, even before you start having organizing conversations. Be someone who people like (or at least don’t hate) working with and talking to.

Shan

North Carolina teacher recruiting new members to grow from a minority to a majority union

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

Shan: I believe in the power of everyday people to build a collective society that meets basic needs and allows individuals to live fulfilling lives.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

Shan: My teacher’s union in North Carolina is working on a campaign called “Commit to Majority” where organizers across the school district are recruiting new members to become a majority union. This effort was organized collectively by union membership to push for district and statewide policies to improve working conditions.

Daniel Bovard-Katz

Midwestern wobbly in the metal & machinery industry

BRRN: How would you summarize your politics in one sentence?

Daniel: I believe in democracy, meaning all people having equal power to affect society.

Share background about the campaign you are working on.

Daniel: I have worked on a lot of campaigns, organizing in my own workplace and supporting others doing so. For my own workplace, I live in the Midwest and work in the metal and machinery industry, broadly defined. We're not pursuing NLRB recognition, so there's no determined bargaining unit. I started organizing over frustration with working significant unpaid overtime several years ago, but stopped after basically winning on that issue for myself and the one co-worker in a similar role as mine. A friend was hired into the company and recruited someone she worked closely with, which revitalized the effort recently.

Are you working with an established union or going independent?

Daniel: We're part of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). I was recruited to the IWW because they seemed to be the only people interested in organizing all workers.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

Daniel: There is an emphasis on democratic decision making throughout the union, including at the campaign level. Otherwise, politics don't come up much.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk 'politics' (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

Daniel: Very rarely, and usually pretty surface level. I did have one conversation with a co-worker where we discussed issues at work and how to address them, but afterward he brought up Narendra Modi, who he was a big supporter of, and said that Indian Muslims were all supporters of terrorism. I tried to gently push back on this, talking about how people in the US also have blamed Muslims for terrorist attacks they had nothing to do with, but I don't think I was very successful. In retrospect, I think that I should have worked harder at this conversation and spent more time finding out why he said that, but I was a little out of my depth.

Does your campaign include others who see themselves as 'political', but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

dropped to nil and NNU pulled out, I think rightfully. That said, the effort was not a total bust. My unit, which was probably the most fully organized, got new equipment we had been asking for for years, our awful nurse manager got removed and replaced with our great clinical team lead, and faced with the prospect of a union, the hospital gave us the biggest raises since I've worked there, removed some of the hurdles placed on clinical ladder advancement, and gave us a parking stipend. Without a doubt the effort to unionize, even while unsuccessful, yielded improvements for nurses at our hospital.

How did you decide between organizing with an established union and going independent?

David: We organized with NNU. What I found was that at our institution, in the South, there was a lot of fear around unionizing. People really had an impression that our institution was all powerful and could just crush anyone they wanted. Because of that, other nurses seemed to really want to be involved with a union that they felt was established enough to stand up to our institution. Organizing with NNU gave the nurses at my hospital faith that this was a serious effort that could actually make headway.

Sadly, I think organizing independently or with a smaller non-nurse union just wouldn't have gotten the traction to get us even where we got. That said, NNU was not perfect. I generally perceived a reluctance from their leadership to invest resources in our effort because of the size of our institution. It seems that after their loss at Hopkins, they're pretty gun-shy about large hospital systems and are focusing more on smaller institutions they think they can win more easily and with less perceived risk. I also think we would have benefitted from more organizers from NNU and more experienced organizers. They had a tendency to assign us organizers and then reallocate them frequently; hand-off was often not great and contacts were lost in the process. It created an air of noncommitment from NNU and unseriousness that definitely frustrated our nurses.

I wouldn't say these issues defeated our campaign though. Ultimately, the major issue we ran into was just the level of turnover our hospital experiences — but the lack of experienced organizers and the frequent trading out of organizers didn't help. Still though, I think NNU was probably the better choice for us because it opened door with nurses to have faith in the effort.

How do you see your anarchist politics as relating to organizing for power with coworkers?

David: To me, workplace organizing is the ultimate expression of anarchist politics. I affiliate with anarchism mostly because I believe in the democratic organization of our society and economy. I believe in building democratically organized popular power at our jobs. It's where we enlist ourselves into the application and production of power. So gaining power in our workplaces is one of the most direct ways for us to build popular power and change the conditions of our lives, and that's what I'm seeking.

Do you ever talk about your anarchist or anti-authoritarian politics with coworkers? Do you talk 'politics' (world events, local power structures) with your coworkers at all?

David: We talk about politics at work frequently. My coworkers are generally either apolitical or progressive/liberal. I often engage in these discussions; I enjoy talking and debating this stuff with them. I think they know I'm pretty far to the left, and I generally share with those I'm close with that I'm an anarchist. I try not to get into too much leftist rhetoric with my coworkers: I don't think they're very familiar with it so it doesn't connect with them. People are always willing to talk shit about our bosses and administration though. Folks are really animated by talk about controlling our own work, having power in our workplace, and what we're owed for the work we do. I also have found that talk about workplace democracy is an idea that can connect with people. Apolitical people already have an understanding of democracy, so it's not a big leap to be like, "Hey, why doesn't our workplace work like that? Why do we supposedly have a say in our government but not when we're at work?" People seem to get that.

Did your campaign include others who see themselves as 'political', but are part of a different political tradition or political organization (DSA, other political formations)?

David: I reached out to some left organizations around our city to see if they could help me with connecting to other nurses, but sadly they weren't much help. There were other political anarchist-aligned folks who were involved, some really actively and consistently and others not. I was honestly a bit disappointed at how some folks who seemed to profess our ideology didn't show up. I also have been kind of bummed to see how many anarchists just uncritically went into travel nursing. Travel nursing has acted at a release valve for our institutions, allowing them to shuffle nurses around without having to fire anyone. Staff leaving was what ultimately undid our campaign. We ended up at a place where many of the units had been cored out staff-wide, consisting only of very senior nurses just trying to get to retirement without issue and new grad nurses who didn't plan to stay, neither were willing to take on the leadership in their units to make the union happen. The people who could lead in these units, middle-experience nurses with years of work left and who know their coworkers, all left for travel positions, especially the political ones and those who were agitated about our working conditions. This may have given them a better paid deal for a while, but in the end it's leaving us all with a rawer one. I think all of us who align with anarchism need to consider what use having a political identity is if we are not willing to act on it.

Does organizing in unions fit into your vision for transforming society or for revolution?

David: So I've lost a bit of faith in the idea of "the revolution." I'm not sure it's coming. I think we need to be honest with ourselves that our movement is relatively marginal at

“What I found was that at our institution, in the South, there was a lot of fear around unionizing. People really had an impression that our institution was all powerful and could just crush anyone they wanted.”

this point, we have limited reach and even more limited power, and I mean that for the entire left. So I think we need to be looking for niches where we can build power and expand from, so that when crises occur we can leverage our positions for greater popular power. I think nurse unions are a great avenue for that, so say the next time a crisis like COVID occurs, maybe we take over the hospitals, and who knows from there.

What resources have helped you most as you've organized?

David: Honestly I'm not a big theory reader. I've been involved in radical organizing for a bunch of years now and I've learned a lot from my compatriots.

What advice can you share with anarchists looking to organize a union? What do you wish you had known when you started?

David: Oh, I wish I did so much differently. First, I'd say we were too cautious to start. We should have started much earlier, even a few months earlier may have made a big difference. Talk to folks right away. There were a bunch of people that I held off talking to and by the time I did while they supported and wanted to help but they were leaving. A lot of this delaying ended up being due to concerns for security, and while it's definitely important, we shouldn't let it slow us down. I'd also say reach out to political people of course, but don't count on them. I think it's important to just engage in a spirit of solidarity with your coworkers: you're all in it together, and you want to be reaching out to all of them.

I'd also say this probably applies to any union, but when working with NNU, try to maintain your own contact networks. The organizers try to route a lot of the connections through themselves, but can be kind of hit or miss on how good they are at following up. Further, it seems that once the union is formed, NNU doesn't provide a lot of structure. It seems to me that for power to remain with the rank and file and not just default to national leadership in the absence of a governing structure, we'd need to maintain our own networks that we can use to fill that void. Don't surrender the organizing to the organizers, we need to remain actively engaged to win and hold worker power.