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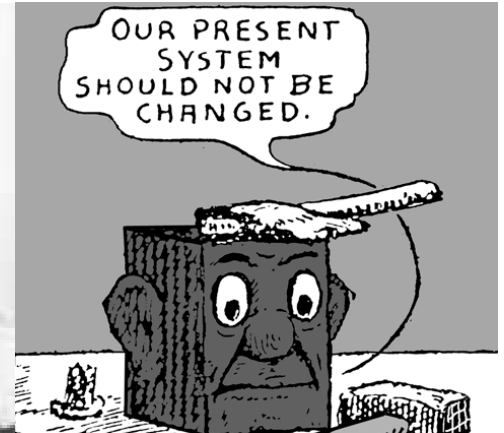
Washington ACORN locks out workers

Despite striker's offer to return to work, management refuses to talk to union supporters

SEATTLE. On February 26th, 100% of the Washington ACORN organizers went on strike to demand a stop to unfair labor practices by ACORN management and to demand the recognition of their union. The employer refused to bargain with the union, even though nearly 100 percent of the workers had joined the union, and had presented demands, which included a 40 hour week, paychecks on time and in full, a sexual harassment policy, safety on the job, and lunch breaks. Most of these demands are asking for the employer to comply with federal and state labor law. A week later, management brought in scabs from Portland, Oregon to cross the picket line. ACORN management put on appearances of "business as usual" to the Seattle community, as if no internal labor dispute existed. As the strike went on, it became obvious to the organizers that ACORN management could withstand the strike with scab labor.

The strikers decided to change their strategy. Instead of just staying out on strike and allowing ACORN management to continue to "permanently replace" their jobs with scabs, the strikers filed for an election with the National Labor Relations Board and offered an unconditional return to work. The strikers handed a written request to return to work to Washington ACORN Head Organizer, Doug Bloch, three weeks ago. They've called several times to check up on the request and have received no response. It is obvious that the striking organizers are locked out. Management recently brought in three more scabs from Portland to replace the organizers, and they are arguing that the organizers' strike is "illegal".

The strikers are continuing to picket outside the Washington ACORN office, chanting, "They call it social justice...We form a



A striking resemblance: Seattle ACORN manager Doug Bloch (left), and historic IWW cartoon character Mr. Block (right).

union and they BUST US!" and "2,4,6,8, Sign the form, negotiate!" Scabs and management continue to silently walk across the line with no eye contact.

The strikers have followed a "three-pronged strategy", as Julia Fitz-simmons, a striking ACORN organizer, likes to call it. The first goal is to get the word out to

ACORN members. Membership support has been strong from the very beginning of the strike. Over 30 members and supporters joined the five Seattle organizers when asking their boss, Bloch, to recognize their union.

"We are just out here today doing what

Continued on next page

From the picket lines...

Why We're Striking

We're on strike to demand union recognition. On Monday, February 26, we requested that management recognize our union, the Industrial Workers of the World, and begin bargaining in good faith.

We organized a union because:

- **We want a 40 hour work week with flex time.** The fifty-four hours we work each week is just too much.
- **Our pay checks must be issued on time and be paid in full.** We can't pay our rent with IOUs and promises.
- **Health care.** Our health insurance benefit be activated on time.
- **New hires need information.** When ACORN hires new staff, they must inform them of quotas, the canvass and fundraising schedule, and how "raising your own sal-

ary" works before the prospective worker is hired. It's not fair to keep people in the dark.

• **An end to discrimination & harassment.** There should be absolutely no tolerance of sexual harassment, and there must be a statement of employees' rights and responsibilities posted in the office.

• **No one gets fired for union organizing.** Two workers in the Philadelphia ACORN office were recently fired in retaliation for their organizing efforts. A "social justice" organization like ACORN must guarantee workers the right to organize.

• **Safety on the job.** Workers must be able to decide if they want to work in pairs, instead of alone, while in the field. We work at night, by ourselves, and are too vulnerable when we are alone and nobody knows our exact location. There must also be a clear policy of response to harassment incidents that occur in the field.

An eight-hour day, safe working conditions, and paychecks on time... Who deserves it?

As we organize our ACORN offices across the country, we hear the same objections from bosses everywhere. They say that we don't deserve safety, eight-hour days and timely paychecks because it would disrupt their movement. Whose movement is this anyway? Our boss' policies are paternalistic attempts to "organize" us into believing that we enjoy sacrificing our livelihood for a "movement" that they orchestrate.

The relationship between ACORN management and ACORN workers resembles an abusive relationship. It's like a woman abused by a boyfriend with liberal political clout being told to stay quiet and serve his needs because of the boyfriend's intention

to strengthen the woman's movement. In fact our bosses sound a lot like a hospital administrator would sound telling nurses that without short staffing and long hours the hospital can not heal patients. When nurses organize, though, hospital administrators find ways to improve conditions.

No worker likes getting late paychecks, working so much that that we can't see family and friends, or unsafe working conditions like being assaulted or robbed at gunpoint while working. As unorganized workers we have little power. Our boss can fire us if we don't obey his suggestions that he claims are in line with his movement's goals. If we were our own bosses we could assure safety, eight-hour days and timely paychecks. We can not let our bosses organize us. We need to organize ourselves to get safety, shorter hours, and timely paychecks.

– Gina Giazsoni, Philadelphia

A little corny...

(To the tune of "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad")

I've been workin' in the neighborhood
All the live long day.
I've been workin' in the neighborhood
Signin' up members each day.
Can't you hear the workers strikin'?
They're wakin' up early in the morn!
Can't you hear the workers strikin'?
Boss won't you sign the form?!

Boss won't you sign, boss won't you sign,
boss won't you sign the form?!
Boss won't you sign, boss won't you sign,
boss won't you the form?!

Someone's in the office with my boss.
Someone's in the office with my boss,
I know...

Someone's in the office with my boss.
Tryin' to bust up the union show.

Seattle lock-out

continued from cover page

these guys do for us in our neighborhoods everyday", says Nadine Baumbach, a member from the city of Kent, just south of Seattle. Another member Linda Moyer said she would do everything she could to help fight for the rights of her organizer, Kate Freeman. "Kate comes out to our neighborhood every day and works really hard to get our trailer park cleaned up and inspected. We won an inspection out here because of her. Now when I heard that she isn't getting paid for all her hard work and that she's sick and can't pay to go to the doctor because ACORN hasn't given her

"Now when I heard that [ACORN organizer Kate Freeman] isn't getting paid for all her hard work and that she's sick and can't pay to go to the doctor because ACORN hasn't given her the health insurance they promised her, then I got really mad. So when she called and asked if I'd come and support her in asking her boss to recognize their union, I was there in a second. She deserves better than she's getting at ACORN. I'm with her all the way and I'm going to help her fight in any way I can."

– ACORN Member Linda Moyer

the health insurance they promised her, then I got really mad. So when she called and asked if I'd come and support her in asking her boss to recognize their union, I was there in a second. She deserves better than she's getting at ACORN. I'm with her all the way and I'm going to help her fight in any way I can."

More than 200 members in the Seattle area either signed a letter or put their names

on a petition telling Bloch they would cancel their membership with Washington ACORN unless he recognized the union. Members called Bloch, urging him to recognize the union immediately. Over 40 members and friends showed up at a rally to support the strikers at the ACORN office, demanding that Bloch recognize the union immediately and telling him that they thought A C O R N management's use of scab labor was offensive. Thus, the first strategy of the strike – getting membership support – has proven very successful.

The second strategy of the strike has been to make it known in the Seattle community, especially the labor and social justice communities,

what Washington ACORN is doing to its own workers, and to enlist support. This strategy has also proven very successful. Not only did three papers in Seattle report on the strike, the strikers also received an endorsement and a standing ovation from the King County Labor Council at the Seattle Labor Temple. Organizers from the Boilermaker's Union, the local American Postal Worker's Union, the Ironworker's

Union, the Carpenter's Union, two Teamsters local, SPEEA, AFSCME, Jobs with Justice, and the Longshore Workers have all joined the strikers on the picket line or written strong letters to ACORN management condemning their behavior and urging them to recognize the union. Organizers from the Tenant Union (a social justice group similar to ACORN that voluntarily recognized its own staff union a year ago) and Radical Women came down to the picket line to support the strikers and had their respective presidents write a letter to Doug Bloch, Washington ACORN's head organizer.

The third, and most difficult, goal of the strikers' campaign is to put pressure on national ACORN to allow Doug Bloch to recognize his workers' union. The Seattle strikers sent copies of letters of support from unions in Seattle to Wade Rathke, chief of national ACORN. The strikers have also contacted SEIU, a union in which Rathke holds an official position, to ask for their support.

The strikers are working with Gina Giazsoni, an ACORN organizer in Philadelphia who was fired for unionizing, to plan a national week of solidarity. This will help raise awareness among ACORN organizers nationally of management's union busting tactics and of the struggle for union recognition in Philadelphia, Dallas, and Seattle.

Some good news: the *Wall Street Journal* recently put the news of ACORN's labor struggle on its front page. That will help to raise national awareness of the strike and the struggle for ACORN workers' rights.

For more information on the strike, contact the IWW in Seattle: 206-706-6250.

– Alexa Gilbert, Seattle & Mitch Chanin, Philadelphia

Help Wanted

Immediate openings. Have you always wanted to be a martyr? ACORN is currently hiring community organizers to dedicate their lives at the expense of everything else for at least a year for a minimum of 54 hours a week. Job duties include door-knocking by yourself to sign up members (sometimes at night); developing leadership; planning meetings, protests, and rallies; running campaigns and fundraising. Working for ACORN is a position of privilege, so if you are single, young, can go for weeks without a paycheck, and you think you have what it takes, call us at 555-ACORN. Fluency in Spanish and the willingness to neglect your own well-being a plus.

I wish I could say this ad is a parody. But the truth is that as an ACORN organizer, you are expected to sacrifice your entire life for the cause. After seeing so many people come and go out of the Dallas office in the six months I was there, I understand why hiring martyrs doesn't work. The high turnover rate at ACORN does tremendous damage to the relationship between the members and the staff. The result is losing quality people before they have a chance to prove themselves, in addition to discouraging others from taking the job in the first place. The tone of the office in Dallas was that anyone not willing to make their work their life was just a wimp who couldn't cut it, or a lazy person who didn't really care enough. Any questioning of the internal structure of the organization would lump you in the wimp/lazy person category.

Don't feel comfortable door knocking alone at night? Too bad, that's the way we do it. Miss lunch and dinner? Who needs to eat? Want to do a combined action with another organizer in the office? No, that's not the way we do things. In a

slump and want to door knock with a senior staff member? Better just be a day, because that neighborhood already has an organizer. Go for a couple weeks without a paycheck? Sorry, we just don't have the money. What's that? Corporate (whoops, I mean National) is giving away thousands of dollars to anyone who wants to open a new office but won't take care of the organizers already on staff? Every business is a growth business!!! Wait, that's the line those big nasty corporations use that don't pay their employees enough and don't listen to what they have

to say! A non-profit title does not make an organization democratic. It seems as though we work to insure that other people don't have to live the way we do.

If we're really working to turn America into a democracy then the test run is how we handle our own organization. ACORN management is failing miserably. Why is an organization that is supposed to empower the low income communities have so few members taking jobs as organizers? It's a shock to come from the democratically run neighborhood group to the hierarchical world of ACORN staff! Members who were used to making decisions on the way their group ran quickly find out that they have very little decision making power when it comes down to how the office is run.

A few weeks ago I discussed the union with my head organizer. The next day she laid me off. Since then I have been asking whether our martyrdom is necessary to build strong communities for ACORN members? Certainly the communities need

people who are dedicated, passionate, caring, and who are willing to do the work. However, allowing workers who are excited about doing the work to burn out and leave is not an effective way to build power in cities or in the country. Neighborhood groups don't have the support from staff to build campaigns if there is a different organizer every few months.

You don't have to be a martyr to be a successful organizer. Giving organizers raises isn't enough. Raises don't do any good if you don't get paid half the time. Opening up more offices and expanding existing offices doesn't do any good if you can't take care of those employees. And offering

slightly higher pay is not going to make up for the fact that people have lives, and sometimes they are not in a position to give those up.

I reject the belief that the only indication of dedication is being underpaid and overworked. It is time to re-evaluate what the goals of the organization are. If the goal is to make America a democracy and empower low-income

communities, then who better to work for ACORN than the members of those communities? That so many members-turned-organizers leave ACORN is a clear indication that something is fundamentally wrong in the way management treats workers. As it stands right now, the only way to suggest changes is to go to the head organizer in your office, and then from there up the chain of command. The problem is that all the management is organized together, and all say the same thing. I see no other way to level the playing field than for the organizers to be organized as well. And if I remember correctly, this is something we tell people when we door knock them..."Companies are organized, the government is organized, and if you want to have a voice you need to be organized!"

The only way to make that happen is by forming a union. But by all means please know your rights, contact us and form a union before talking to your head organizer about it!

If you are interested or need help contact the Industrial Workers of the World General Headquarters at 215-763-1274 box #5 or email us at acornunion@iww.org.

- Sarah Stevens, Dallas

Know Your Rights

Your boss cannot legally:

- Ask you if you have signed up with a union.
- Interrogate you on what you think about the union.
- Threaten you with discharge or punishment for union activity.
- Threaten, coerce, or harass you through a supervisor or fellow employee.
- Threaten you with the loss of present or promised benefits.
- Threaten to close the facility if you form a union.
- Promise you benefits if you reject the union.
- Spy on or interfere with your union activity.

If your employer does any of the above, let us know immediately. We can help you fight the union busting and file charges with the National Labor Relations Board.

Why I quit

An open letter to members concerning the union-busting in Dallas

Dear ACORN leader,

The purpose of this letter is to make you aware of a situation within ACORN which threatens the sanctity of the people's organization. This situation began when community organizers across the country sought to organize themselves into a union to promote better working conditions, democracy and equality within the ACORN workplace.

As you know, ACORN is an organization that for 30 years has fought to bring democracy, solidarity and equality to low and moderate income neighborhoods in the United States. However, ACORN management is failing miserably in practicing these ideals which they preach. In fact, they are responding to this challenge to their authority by firing and threatening any organizer that advocates for, or is sympathetic with an organizer's union.

In Dallas, two very dedicated and hard working organizers, Sarah Stevens and Erin Howley, have had their employment terminated due to their desire for a more democratic workplace. This is a blatant violation of federal labor laws, not to



Seattle ACORN workers and supporters picket for union recognition on February 27, 2001.

ACORN striker Honey Anofian says, "Here in Seattle we are all women, women of steel. And the thing about steel is steel will bend but it will not break. And neither will we because we are all women of steel. Boss, sign the form to show you recognize the union!"

mention outrageously hypocritical. I quit as lead organizer of Dallas ACORN as soon as I became aware that organizers are being fired across the country for having union sympathies. If ACORN management has such a low opinion of their organizers, I fear that their opinion of the members is not much better.

I strongly urge you as ACORN leaders to stop ACORN management in their illegal and fratricidal campaign to crush workplace democracy. This is your organization. You have the ability and responsibility to end ACORN management's campaign against their own workers.

It is my strong belief that by confronting Dallas ACORN head organizer Kimberly Olsen, you can force her to do the right thing and end ACORN union-busting in Dallas. She is under enormous pressure by ACORN national management to engage in illegal union-busting tactics. For two years Kimberly was my boss, colleague and dear friend.

She is the most tireless champion of social justice I have ever known, and Dallas is certainly a better place to live because of the work that she has done the past five years. However, her blind obedience to national management and personal ambition are poisoning the organization. It is up to you to save her and ACORN from herself.

Also, please begin a letter writing campaign to ACORN's National Headquarters and demand that they put an end to illegal union-busting.

Write to National Head Organizer Wade Rathke at 1024 Elysian Fields Ave., New Orleans, LA 70117, Tel. 504-943-3842, fax: 504-943-3842 and National Field Organizer Helene O'Brien at 88 3rd Ave. Brooklyn, N.Y. 14217 Tel. 718-246-7900, fax: 718-246-7939.

I will end this letter by expressing what an honor it was to serve as your community organizer for two years. Although ACORN was by far the most difficult and challenging work I have ever encountered, it was also the most rewarding. However, I feel that I can no longer work for an organization that persecutes people for having the very ideals that brings them to the organization in the first place.

In solidarity,
John Rees, ACORN Organizer

Dear Wade Rathke:

I support the right of ACORN workers to organize unions to guarantee safe working conditions, reasonable hours, and timely paychecks. I demand that you:

- Allow all locked-out ACORN workers in Seattle to return to work.
- Recognize the chosen union of the workers in Seattle, the Industrial Workers of the World, and begin collective bargaining immediately.
- Rehire workers in Dallas and Philadelphia who were fired in retaliation for their union activity.

Thank you,

Please respond to my concerns by writing back to me.

Copy this postcard (four will fit on a sheet), get them signed and send them to: IWW, PO Box 13476, Phila., PA 19101 by April 5th & we'll deliver them to ACORN's Headquarters