



Occupy your union bureaucracy: An insider's call [1]

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by Diane Kalen-Sukra.

I always figured the labour movement was the right sort of social force to ensure a society stays free and democratic. It belongs to working people, is paid for by working people and champions values worth dying for – justice, solidarity and dignity.

What a great testing ground for building a new world and propagating a critical cultural antidote to the "greed is virtue", war is profit, trickle-down globalist mantra. Organized labour, it stands to reason, could be a permanent bulwark to ensure our world never again descends into barbarism.

Like so many that grew up with the lessons of the world wars marking our souls, I determined from a young age that I would never be that German citizen that turned a blind eye, that I would never stand by while the courageous were purged for speaking the truth by cowardly, petty and power-hungry officials, that I would have no part of a world that dehumanizes, oppresses and uses violence to achieve its self-seeking aims.

How fortunate we, the people, are to have the liberty to organize our very own active standing army, a powerful advocate in defence of the basic rights of all people to safely earn a decent living wage, to be treated with respect in the workplace and to have the freedom of speech to stand up for ourselves, our co-workers, our family, community and country against often large and powerful corporate and/or government interests.

SOLIDARITY INTERRUPTED

These views were reinforced in the mid-90s when, during my university years, I found myself in my first unionized job in an autoworker plant known for its solidarity and strength. My heart warmed every time someone called me 'sister', considered another's interests ahead of their own, or sacrificed a personal privilege for the common good. The family-oriented shop floor culture was such a relief from the world outside that championed competition, individualism, and self-gain to the point of ruthlessness.

It was striking that many of my autoworker "brothers and sisters" were far more 'political' – in the sense of being engaged in the world around them and prepared and willing to sacrifice to do something about it – than many of my political science graduate school colleagues and professors. I had little patience then, and less patience after this experience for academic pontification, word-coining and brain games. During our one-hour breaks in the lunch room, my coworkers didn't theorize about the impact of anti-worker government policies, they shared their real-life stories and those of their families and friends and charted a plan of action. They were able to do this because they believed in the values of the labour movement and thought their union leadership "had their backs".

In a province-wide protest against government austerity in 1995, cross-pickets were posted far and wide by various unions in an effort to shut down the province. Our plant was the only one that did not need cross-pickets to "excuse" the workers from their jobs that day. Despite threats of sanction against individual workers and the loss of a day's pay, we voluntarily and unanimously did not appear for work in solidarity with the struggles of all working people, the unemployed and the poor in the province.

A fire was lit that to this day won't go out. I felt a sense of belonging that since entering the union bureaucracy has entirely eluded me.

Among vast portions of the labour aristocracy, solidarity is replaced with a stasi-like defence of the status quo; loyalty is redefined to mean blind allegiance to the governing officialdom, rather than to the dues paying membership and their constitution; and workplace and union democracy is no longer a goal, but a potentially treasonous nuisance. To enforce these redefined "values" the bureaucracy purges non-conforming ideas and individuals in a swift, coordinated and merciless way. Not the kind of modus operandi folks like me signed up for. Definitely not the kind that is capable, in its current state, of building a better world.

These are just the internal symptoms or mechanisms, if you will, by which the workers' army finds itself today, for the most part, in utter denial of the severity and urgency of the threat to working people, our democracy, and our world. This is how they manage to remain virtually silent against the ever-encroaching corporatist police-state, banker control of our economies, the violations of our civil liberties, and the intensifying wars of aggression, while desperately clinging to electoral parties that will do little more than further enforce the status quo, hopefully sparing some space or security for the labour bureaucracy that supports the party most.

Sadly, this is not the story of just one union. Over the past 20 years I have been a member, activist, leader, national and international union representative in six private and public sector trade unions and I can solidly say that the sun is about to set on the labour movement unless the people take back their unions, specifically their centralized labour bureaucracies. Occupy them.

SIGNS OF A SETTING SUN

Everybody knows that union density and power has been on a steady decline for the past 30 years. Like a fighter past his prime, we spend a lot of time remembering and reminding others our past battles and achievements – the eight hour work day, employment insurance, and social security to name a few.

Trade union policy papers endlessly blame this decline on the severity of the neo-liberal attack on the social welfare state, unions and workers' rights and encourage ways to address this by supporting progressive politicians, organizing the unorganized and encouraging young workers to "get involved".

While these external forces are formidable, they do not answer the question of what role the union bureaucracy or officialdom itself plays in facilitating this orderly march backwards of the very people they are charged with the responsibility to represent and whose interests they are compelled to advance. Wasn't it Canadian Labour Congress President Bob White who said: "You don't need a union to help you march backwards"?

Why is it, for instance, that the Occupy movement was able to do more to educate, inspire and change the public discourse around social and economic inequality, the corporate agenda, the casino economy and threats to our democracy, in the first few months of its relatively unorganized and unfunded existence, than the entire labour movement, with its wealth, army of researchers and octopus-like communications apparatus, was able to do in a generation?

Why do labour bureaucracies, despite historical as well as recent evidence of labour, social democratic and even socialist parties pursuing neo-liberal policies of globalization and austerity – forcing working people to pay for the crisis caused by the bankers – wed itself to electoral parties that repeatedly betray the interests of their members and of working people in general?

How do labour bureaucracies justify “turning a blind eye” to the injustice of aggressive wars being fought overseas, with our money and our blood, as well as the steady implementation of domestic laws that violate our basic rights to freedom of speech, association and due process? Laws that had they been implemented by the Republicans, for instance, would have been branded as fascist.

How is it possible that the most formidable movement against the rising corporatist police-state and the military industrial complex in the U.S. is coming from Republicans like [Ron Paul \[2\]](#) and the Christian libertarian right rather than the organized left? What again is the labour bureaucracy's strategy for ensuring we never again descend into barbarism? That the working people would never again be used as cannon-fodder for murderous wars of Empire?

Working people, the unemployed and the poor – [America's piggy bank \[3\]](#) – are being crushed under the weight of a thousand taxes, penalties and fines as their daily lives are criminalized and debtors prisons make a resurgence in a third of U.S. states, and the best we can do is call for itsy-bitsy increases in taxes on personal income over a half a million dollars? Who blessed that demand that has become so popular throughout our continent as well as Europe? The IMF? Is that how the elites would like us to vent our frustration while they push forward with endless austerity? Where is the challenge to corporate power and the bankster agenda?

Why is it that a 12-year old girl in Canada, Victoria Grant, did more to educate Canadians about our criminal banking system in a five minute [Youtube video \[4\]](#) than our central labour body and national affiliates, which were fully aware of this shift to a debt-based monetary system, not to mention the policy of structural unemployment, for the past quarter century? Imagine ignoring that annual \$60 billion pot-of-gold lining the pockets of private banksters while your union “negotiates” and lets you strike over scraps, accepts the loss of members jobs, declining real wages, funding being cut from vital social programs, and public infrastructure being privatized to meet budget shortfalls. Could it be that the status quo is sweeter for the union officialdom than challenging it? Even Henry Ford knew a century ago that “if the people understood our banking and monetary system, there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning.”

How do we reconcile demanding transparency, accountability as well as protection for whistle-blowers, when these are the very things the labour bureaucracy too often works to protect itself against? Any honest observer can witness this on full display at labour conventions, which with few exceptions, are stifling, well-orchestrated affairs that lack spirit, inspiration and vision. Everybody knows what to say, when to say it, when to clap, and perhaps more importantly, when not to. Above all, don't rock the boat, don't ask any unscripted questions, listen to the “experts”, stay within the prescribed debate, and be a good sport at the socials.

How do we justify pointing fingers at employers and politicians for failing to be democratic, principled or effective when we betray our own values and purpose by the very culture we foster and tolerate?

How do we explain away the shameless efforts to purge dissent, control leadership succession as though it was a monarchy ruling by divine right, consistently choose legalistic means over member mobilization, and elect power over principle. What ever happened to: “An injustice to one, is an injustice to all”? How dare we speak of loyalty, when we betray ourselves?

OCCUPY SOLIDARITY

Our opponents, as well as cynics within the labour movement, argue that this is simply the unavoidable bureaucratic curse. That it's human nature that all who enter are doomed to ultimately serve their narrow self-interests over the broader interests of the membership.

If this is true, then we should really abandon this form of organization and seek out other means to secure the well-being of the majority. It's hard, however, to picture a scenario where labour bureaucrats who've invested so much in padding their nest would just abandon their posts all together and join Occupy.

The alternative is to Occupy our labour bureaucracies. There are many good leaders and fighters besieged within its web, as well as battalions of researchers and lawyers who for too long have had their work substituted for real struggle.

Resurrect this standing army of the working-class by holding its leaders accountable. The good ones will applaud and welcome you. The ones that have got to go will organize against you.

Steer the troops away from its tragic path towards a future independent of the agenda of the elites, of their electoral parties, open to all types of ideas of alternative economies and sustainable ways of living, committed to direct democracy and the working class values of community, mutual support and protection.

There is no need to organize a formal opposition. Just speak the truth, do right by your principles, represent your membership with all you've got, and you will find yourself surrounded, as though by magic, with many powerful opponents inside and outside the union. It is in this way that you will discover your allies, as well.

Wherever possible, unleash the power and creativity of the membership and reach out to the public with the basic assumption that everyone is a potential ally. We are, after all, the 99%.

Accept nothing less than genuine solidarity and a culture of servitude, empathy and love. Be aware and guard your heart against the myriad of ways that power has of corrupting.

Be an example. Stand against opportunism. Despite what society has been telling you all these years, it is wrong to sell-out a sister for a corner office or a promotion, to abandon a fighter because you'd “gain more” by trading in your coins, or to betray a friend for an international junket.

Keep building that counter-culture of solidarity. Live simple. Avoid being a debt slave to the banks. And never ever turn a blind eye against injustice, no matter what the earthly reward for ignoring or inflicting it.

Solidarity is a living thing. If you don't occupy it, it dies and so will our hope for a better world.

- Stay tuned for “The making of a union bureaucrat”, “How polishing your shining armour off the battle field for too long can turn you into a useless narcissist”, “To kill a fighter” and other sordid tales from the trenches of the working class.

Diane Kalen-Sukra is a repeat survivor of internal union purges and is currently waiting for member- reinforcements to ignite and occupy Canada's labour bureaucracy, of which she is a part. Over the past 20 years, she has coordinated and led countless successful community and labour campaigns, most recently, the Water Watch Mission-Abbotsford campaign which defeated the largest proposed water privatization scheme in Canada's water sector.

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[1] Occupy your union bureaucracy: An insider's call

<http://t.co/sM7iiBfF>

[2] Ron Paul

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coOWmN_Opiw

[3] America's piggy bank

<http://billmoyers.com/2012/05/17/preying-on-the-poor/>

[4] Youtube video

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/05/15/victoria-grant-12-canadian-banking_n_1518953.html

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