

Summation of Recent Work

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Since this summer, Mass Proletariat engaged in a work place struggle in Boston. The struggle comprised two fronts: struggle against the oppression of the workers at the hands of the reactionary capitalists, and the struggle to show the basis for revolutionary politics among the workers in the face of the dominant ideology of reform and trade-unionism. Before we joined the struggle there were positive elements in the workers' ranks. They had recently overwhelmingly voted down a poor contract that management claimed was their "best and final offer." This confrontation displayed a sharpening of contradictions in the workplace. Also, several comrades had participated in actions organized by the workers at the site. Through this work, these comrades had developed links with the workers, which enabled them to coordinate initial meetings and investigation of the situation.

Our engagement in the struggle made clear to us that the strengthening of proletarian organization and development of mass struggle are two separate processes, mutually reinforced and dialectically related by the united front. In this document we describe how our understanding of developed through the course of the struggle.

The Development of the Struggle

Our involvement in this struggle can be divided into three periods, an early, middle, and late period. The early period saw the initial development of contacts with the workers and the beginning of organized protests. The middle period saw qualitative changes in the character of the protests, the development of a united front, and expanded outreach and participation among the workers. The late stage saw further developments in the protests and a setback in the local situation, in the form of signing a 'sugar coated bullet' of a contract.

Background

In the mid 1990's the workers successfully completed a drive to join a big mainstream union, pushing against major opposition by management. Shortly after-

wards, however, the parent union's collaborationist policies were exposed when it went over the workers' heads to make back-door deals with the bosses. The workers decided to call a vote to de-ratify the union, and they formed an independent union instead, which just represents their shop. This is the union which still represents the workers today.

When we began our involvement, the workers had been without a contract for over a year, and management had put forward a series of contract offers which would have gutted the union and rolled back gains won in earlier struggles. The capitalists were using scabs to replace the unionized staff. The existing workers were in turn given the false choice of acceding to demands to work overtime—supposedly to slow their replacement by scabs. In addition, their former “privileges” were methodically eliminated, including using the bathroom without permission, and the ability to sit down while on the job. Workers were under increased scrutiny by management, who tracked them by increased video surveillance. They were also repeatedly written up on phony charges. These disciplinary measures coupled with a hiring freeze reduced the workforce by one third. These oppressive tactics were justified by management's claim that workers were not “doing a good job.”

Prior to our involvement, the union (and the leadership of the union in particular) had organized weekly protests to advocate for their cause, saying they should receive a “fair” contract. Other outside forces (leftists and parts of the local anarcho-syndicalist scene) also had been a regular part of these dominantly trade-unionist rallies. After the union voted down the workplace's so-called ‘best and final offer’ the union leadership largely withdrew from the struggle, and these protests were also halted. When we started meeting with the staff at the site, there were only 2 or 3 workers who would come out to protest, with the rest of the workforce retreating from the struggle, dispirited by the long stretch without a contract, and dominantly not enthusiastic about resuming the fight.

Early Stage

After hearing about the contract vote we reached out to our contacts among the workers and coordinated meetings to develop a greater understanding of the situation, to deepen these links, and to plan our strategy. Through early meetings we developed a relationship with a relatively advanced worker who had been urging his coworkers to oppose the injustices and oppression that they faced at the hands of management. We also met with some workers from the union leadership, in the hopes that, despite a dominant trade-unionist orientation, these individuals could play a positive role. They initially expressed excitement about our engagement, but quickly dropped contact with us, representative of a dominant pattern of opportunism that was relatively consistent throughout our engagement. The union's established practice viewed the protests primarily as a matter of outreach, aimed at garnering public support for the workers' “economic” struggle. This trade-unionist approach placed certain limits on the

efficacy of protesting, and especially on its ability to address internal contradictions among the workers. Workers were encouraged to behave as good bourgeois subjects, who avoided pushing the limits of “acceptable” action, while simultaneously framing the struggle as primarily about acquiring a contract rather than about the content of contracts or about the wider struggle. This dynamic was further reinforced by the fact that many of the rank-and-file workers were first generation oppressed nationality immigrants of proletarian class origin, whereas the a majority of union “leaders” were white, college educated and from a petite-bourgeois class background. The union leadership also organized bi-monthly meetings, but they were not well attended and skirted around the central political issues that were on people’s minds. We identified the inability of workers to engage with the struggle based on their own initiative and correct ideas as a primary contradiction. Through meetings with a relatively advanced worker, we mapped out a plan to regularly discuss these ideas with workers at weekly protests.

Thus, one of our first struggles was over the orientation of these protests; against the trade-unionist line, we pushed for the protests to be primarily oriented towards developing internal clarity over the nature of the struggle. This included focusing on opportunities to develop further links with other workers who attended the demonstrations (primarily during their lunch breaks at this point in the struggle), developing new signs, fliers, and chants with a more militant orientation, and seeing engagement with the public as secondary to internal discussion and confrontation with supervisors and administrators. Later, we would push to redraw the lines of acceptable limits for protests, but at this time we were still developing a basic understanding of the contradictions at play.

Discussion with the workers had a two-fold character. It was necessary to develop the political understanding of the workers and to discuss their correct ideas about the situation, and also necessary to develop links among the workers through building relationships. These two objectives are in contradiction. Many of our mass links felt isolated, facing and reproducing a general unwillingness to challenge the status quo, on the job and in the union. As a result, we spent a good deal of time discussing the revolutionary basis for them to put forward correct ideas in the struggle, even when in the minority. The contradictory role of discussion led us, at times, to overemphasize the difficulties and barriers to developing the initiative and participation of workers in the struggle. The impediments to the development of mass initiative can appear as objective constraints, but this is merely the appearance-form; militant subjective intervention can overcome these barriers and transform the situation in the process. Through sharply rendering the contours of this contradiction individual comrades were better able to grapple with developing and emerging contradictions in discussions and protests.

At this point we were mainly organizing protests with a small group of the workers independently of union leadership. Although the union leadership was aware of the work we were doing, and had shown up to a few events and meetings,

their participation was minimal and lukewarm. They would suddenly take a frantic interest in organizing, scheduling events and actions, only to show up at the very end of the event or not at all. We determined at this point that we could not rely on them to play the consistent role necessary to build and sustain initiative over the course of a struggle.

While we saw the workers' initiative as primary in the development of their power, we also understood that in order to develop a proletarian pole it was necessary to incorporate outside forces. Prior to our involvement, union leadership had encouraged outsiders to display "solidarity" at pickets. This trade-unionist strategy relegated "support" to a slot in a formalistic technical division of labor, which could not play a positive role. Together with our core contacts we developed a strategy for engaging students, progressive intellectuals, and workers from other workplaces, emphasizing qualitative aspects of participation over quantitative accumulation of forces. Our hope was that outsiders could participate in a manner which facilitated all around political development and built up mass initiative.

Middle Stage

The regular participation of a few other workers provided us with the basis to coordinate a more comprehensive strategy. While we had made some progress, there was a need for the workers to take a leading role. In order to address this contradiction, we developed a newsletter which featured content written by the workers. We also shifted the time of our protests from the middle of the day (when only a few workers could join on their lunch breaks) to the transition between first and second shift. This allowed us to engage with the second shift workers as they arrived and the first shift workers as they left.

During these protests (which took place by the staff entrance of the workplace) we also sought to push the limits of acceptable action. One means of doing so was protesting in the driveway, instead of on the sidewalk, but moving to allow vehicles to pass. This drew the immediate attention of management, who sent a supervisor out to tell us to move. While one of the workers quickly acquiesced, another stood up, and told the manager that we weren't doing anything wrong. Comrades and other workers quickly joined in, and the manager retreated back inside the workplace. This confrontation, and others, began to expose divisions among the workers, and demonstrated the importance of understanding how people, including those in our group of militants, have the potential to play positive or negative roles depending on their overall clarity of the situation, and on their class orientation.

As participation in protests increased, so did the oppression the workers faced. Black, Latinx, female, and older workers all began to face a greater degree of scrutiny in their daily work and were often written up on phony charges. One worker was placed on final warning for "sleeping" during role call, despite the

fact that he was standing up and camera footage showed that his eyes were open. Additionally, two of the workers who played a leading role throughout the struggle were written up on phony charges, likely in response to their involvement.

At this time we deepened our outreach to other forces in the area, including radical students engaged in other mass struggles. A number of students got involved in the workplace struggle when we joined an occupation to protest climate change at a nearby university, arranged for a worker to speak at the encampment, and invited the students there to join in the workplace demonstrations. We strove to clarify the difference between a revolutionary and reformist approach in both our respective struggles through discussion and debate. This helped us to identify advanced elements in the student movements, and helped clarify to the student contacts the importance of discussion and debate to determine political line and provide a way forward for political action.

Around this time a larger protest was organized at an all-night session at the workplace. This was a key moment in the struggle, in part because these all-night events were staffed by scabs instead of the union workers. Galvanized by the testimony of a worker, a number of student contacts attended this protest, and it played a key role in their political development. Shortly after the protest began we were confronted by one of the scabs who told us that we had to move our signs, which were on the workplace's property. A few of the students immediately went to comply, but we stopped them and instead began to yell "scabs go home." The scab was quite surprised by our militancy, and was briefly driven back, only to return a few minutes later with another scab. Again they were shouted down, with some of the students joining in. The scabs then retreated. This is one example of the two line struggle that played out among our comrades at the event.

After shouting down the scabs, there was a question of how to go forward. Through some quick discussion we decided to surround a table that the scabs had set up to promote positive public relations; this forced them to pack up their table and retreat off the sidewalk. We then blocked the entrance and covered their signs with our own. This was a key protest for the political development of our contacts and comrades, clarifying the need for struggle over the contradictions at hand to discern the way forward. It also helped them to understand the importance of struggling to push the limits of acceptable action at protest, and challenged the petite-bourgeois ideology of uncritical acceptance of authority.

Late Stage

To this point, the union leadership had only been marginally involved in the struggle. A few brief appearances at protests (often staying for 15 minutes or less) and an occasional Facebook comment about the development of the struggle was the limit of their presence. Participation by the rank-and-file workers,

in contrast, had grown significantly, with a number regularly attending protests and additional workers joining our weekly discussions. A pending arbitration meeting, and the deepening contradiction between the active participation of the rank-and-file workers and the non-participation of the leadership, pushed the leadership to be more active. Their role was fundamentally divided; while they encouraged more workers to get involved in the struggle, they also pushed their backwards line of trade-unionism, and opposed the initiative of the workers with technocratic decision-making and “leadership.” This became a key aspect of the struggle.

Comrades, workers, and student contacts worked together to plan a protest at another all-night event. Union leadership decided that it was time for them to take a “leading role” in the struggle, and called a union meeting to discuss contract negotiations, promote the protest—which they falsely claimed to have thought up—and to formally assert their position as the leaders of the struggle. A few comrades were able to attend this meeting, which began with union leadership sharing their “expert knowledge” on the current state of the contract negotiations with the rank-and-file workers. They did this by taking up almost all the meeting to dispute the legal minutia of management’s claims. Trade-unionist “leadership” of this sort, pushes the rank-and-file workers to play “follow the leader.”

During the meeting, one worker—a known spy for management—argued that the workers should just give up and accept whatever management offered them, lest they anger the managers. In response to these vitriolic anti-worker statements, other workers defended the strategy of organized resistance to the oppression they face daily at the workplace. The comrades who attended the meeting play an important role in challenging the reactionary orientation of the spy, and promoting a proletarian line.

At the protest of the all-night event there was a significant increase in worker and student participation, and some comrades from other cities attended. This quantitative increase in participation also came with new challenges, in particular, a much stronger presence of union leadership and their supporters, who sought to push the protest in a reformist direction. This led to struggle over the direction of the event overall, with union leadership consistently turning the event into a display for the crowd, while the advanced workers, comrades, and students pushed for more focus on internal political development and on increasing the level of confrontation with management. Comrades pushed for a more revolutionary character at protests through numerous interventions. These actions highlighted the stories and advanced political ideas of the workers, presented revolutionary ideas, and reorganized the location and division of labor at the protest.

By putting proletarian politics in command we were able to clarify lines of demarcation between reformist and revolutionary politics, among the workers and contacts. Several outsiders, who identified as “leftists”—and some cases even as communists—engaged briefly with our efforts. However, this and other

events clarified the differences between “left”-politics as usual, and the difficult realities of communist organizing in the U.S. at this moment. These “leftist” people soon lost interest when their fantasies of quick victories in the struggle were confronted with the objective situation and the need for sustained political work to develop proletarian consciousness and build proletarian power among the working-class. The events highlighted the necessity of collective action, accountability, and struggle in order to overcome the ideological dominance of trade-unionism and other forms of “left politics as usual.” A professed comrade dropped out of the struggle when faced with the necessity of resolving differences through collective discussion and debate. Others though were enthusiastic to engage in principled politics.

A few days after this large protest, one worker was fired and another was placed on final written warning, presumably to retaliate against the growing protests. These two workers did not attend the protest, so it is likely that this was a tactic used by management to instill fear and garner negative sentiment against those who were more politically active. To counteract these reactionary tactics, we reached out to the worker who was placed on final warning and coordinated a protest the next day against these measures. This helped to clarify the stakes of the protests, and demonstrated the importance of standing up for the interests of all the workers, even if they had yet to get involved.

Shortly after this, we put on an event with the help of a progressive intellectual from a nearby university, in which the workers and a comrade shared their experiences. This event primarily served as a means to clarify relative political stands and promote initiative among the workers. Some workers put forward the line that their struggle was not reducible to the economics of a new contract, and that, depending on the content, contracts themselves can play a positive or negative role in the class struggle. Others shared their experiences of brutal oppression and put forward mixed ideas about the way forward. Union leadership claimed that the situation at the workplace was primarily an economic struggle for a better contract. Discussion with workers who attended the event highlighted these different analyses and lines, and promoted the need for democratic discussion and debate to clarify relative positions and discern a way forward in the struggle. This position was in contrast to that of union leadership who implicitly advocated that workers simply play “follow the leader.”

At this point, we encouraged contacts to plan subsequent events as part of a build-up to a strike. A few voices in union leadership entertained this approach in statements at protests and in discussions with us and fellow workers. In retrospect, such statements were revealed to be situation-specific posturing, that served to buttress their image as militant, while concealing their real conciliatory stand. At a subsequent protest, two-line struggle with union-leadership over the nature and direction of the demonstration played out again. This culminated in two comrades and one worker using a banner to block vehicles exiting the facility. Other comrades and workers cheered them on, but union leadership attempted to rope them back onto the sidewalk. This high point, though, was

just on the cusp of a reversal.

On November 30th union leadership attended what was supposed to be an arbitration meeting over management's illegal decision to unilaterally change the workers' schedules, forcing them to come into work two hours early and stand in the dark until the workplace opened for business. However, instead of attending this arbitration meeting, union leadership met with management and worked out a back-door contract deal. The contract cleared the disciplinary records of all of union leadership (the vast majority of whom had been placed on final written warnings on phony charges), provided a slightly better wage agreement than the last contract offer, and reinstated the most recently fired worker.

The union leadership agreed to sell this contract to the rank-and-file as a victory. This sales pitch highlighted the role we played in helping to obtain a relatively better offer. We agree that our involvement helped to pressure management and secure a relatively improved deal for the union. However, the contract did nothing to address the major issues in the workplace, such as the oppressive disciplinary tactics used by management, the subcontracted scabs, and the under-staffing. What's more, while this contract erased the disciplinary records of the union "leaders," it didn't eliminate the phony charges brought against dozens of rank-and-file workers. There was little time to discuss these issues because the union leaders had agreed to hold the contract ratification vote five days after receiving this offer. This was despite the fact that the union constitution called for a minimum of two weeks between an offer and a ratification vote. In order to further silence discussion and debate, the so-called-leaders refused to share the details of the contract with the members until the day of the vote, but repeatedly insisted that this contract was a "great victory." We met with workers who disagreed with the contract and formulated a response, focusing on the need for more time and for an open all-around discussion of the terms of the contract. Despite holding protests, passing out a handout written by two workers that called for democratic discussion of the contract, and having numerous discussions with workers about the issues, the 'sugar-coated bullet' contract was voted in, with just a few workers voting against it.

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

The ratification of the contract transformed the situation at the workplace. Objectively, it weakened the workers' power. It was an economically worse contract than their prior one, and it eliminated their ability to legally strike or call for a boycott. Subjectively, at present, many of the workers feel that they have won, and therefore do not have to take further action, at least until the next round of contract negotiations a few years in the future. In our view, this subjective disposition will begin to change as management continues their union-busting tactics, and oppresses the workers to greater and greater degrees. We are currently working to develop greater unity with the workers with whom we

organized throughout the struggle, as well as the students and other contacts who played a positive role in the struggle. This must occur through discussion, debate, study, and political practice. We are also planning to link-up and share experiences with workers at this and other locations as well as with those involved in other mass struggles .

The process of the struggle was complicated and impeded by our internal confusion over the terms of victory, and by a lack of clarity about the importance of building up proletarian organization beyond the immediate engagement. Several cadres and contacts failed to differentiate between the success of the development of proletarian force and the outcome of the workers' struggle. This led them to see the contract vote as an abject failure. The relative isolation of the positive forces in the situation—both in terms of the dominance of trade unionism, and the lack of revolutionary forces more broadly—made short-term defeats in the overall struggle in the union somewhat inevitable.

After the union voted in the contract, a few comrades even asked “does the betrayal of union leadership mean that our struggle was lost?” The answer should be a resounding no. This questioning reflects a lack of clarity of the key tasks at hand. A setback in a particular struggle can occur concurrently with a deepening of political commitment and clarity, and with a consolidation of greater forces to the proletarian pole. Our struggle is a long and difficult one, and the road to victory is not paved with success after success, but instead with the disciplined work of many revolutionaries and members of the masses, guided by materialist analysis of our successes and failures.

In the course of the struggle, we were not clear enough that such defeats could occur concurrently with the overall development and qualitative growth of positive forces within the movement. Our collective success in these endeavors is visible in the foundation of ongoing mass work and organization that did not join the camp of the union leadership's economist politics. Clarity on the nature of sustained growth in the creation of proletarian power was and is essential.

The process of building proletarian organization is separate from, but dialectically related to, the development of mass links through involvement in the struggles of the masses. Building a powerful and ideologically unified proletarian political organization strengthens our ability to participate in the struggles of the masses and make concrete gains. Victories in mass struggles demonstrate the basis of organizing for proletarian revolution. However, to fuse these two separate processes into a single unified process is to substitute an idealist dialectic for a materialist one. Without clarity on this point, every setback in mass struggles appears as a setback in the proletarian struggle, even when this is objectively not the case. In the workplace struggle, the workers ultimately voted for a contract that weakens their fighting power, and now that the union has a contract, its leadership is opposing protests and demonstrations. This is clearly a setback and defeat in the local situation. Nonetheless, the fact that a number of workers stood their ground and took a stand against this sugar-coated-bullet was a victory of a different sort. It reflected a deeper unity with

these workers, built through regular meetings together, and the early formation of a united-front organization with them and other workers and students.

All of this constitutes a modest but significant advance in the organizational capacity of proletarian forces in Boston. Through continued two-line struggle, study, and organizing efforts we can engage with other workers at this workplace and throughout the city. This is all the more necessary because even our contacts who took strong proletarian stands at other times deviated toward opportunism. Through pursuing two-line struggle at all times and avoiding the temptation to fetishize those who, at times put forward advanced ideas as “the advanced” we were able to bring forward the correct ideas of masses and put proletarian politics into practice. We are also learning from the set-backs in this struggle and promoting the need for a revolutionary politics to address the contradictions of capitalism.

We are now more clear that the development of proletarian organization is separate from but dialectically related to the development of mass struggles. We go forward having learned from our failures and seeking to apply these lessons in our future practice. This clarity is opposed to right-opportunist deviation which sees existing organization as the basis of emerging proletarian power, and hence tries primarily to win over the leadership of such groups. This sort of fetishization of existing organization fails to account for the objective reality that—with exceptions—the advanced members of the masses are often divided and weakened precisely by the leadership of such organizations. The role of revolutionaries is to create a basis for proletarian power, not to opportunistically cozy-up to the appointed leadership of a “leftist” or trade-unionist organization. In the case of our political work, there was a need to work with the advanced workers to create a minority opposition to the backwards politics and trade-unionist line endorsed by the union leadership. Given their backwards political orientation, there is no basis to believe that focusing our efforts on the union leadership would win them over to a proletarian political line anytime soon.

Putting politics in command means that organization should be a tool for political development. Thus, developing political participation and proletarian subjectivity is primary over growing membership. This understanding guided us in our engagement with outside forces, and is in contradiction with the approach of getting people to “sign up” for a mass organization, or to “listen to leadership.”

As Maoists, our central task is to build powerful pre-party formations and eventually a Maoist party here in the U.S.—a proletarian class organization that promotes mass-line politics and is dialectically related to mass struggles in a manner that spurs the independent revolutionary initiative of the thousands and millions of members of the masses. However, this process is a dividing line in the struggle, and needs to be seen as primary over the economic victories achieved through organizing efforts. To say otherwise is to lapse into the economism and a vulgar form of “productive forces determinism.”

The mass-line we are describing was synthesized by Mao's work in 1942, and is what allows the masses to truly make history, through spawning revolutionary power everywhere. In the present we can see this process occurring in the work of the Maoists in India. However, in the U.S. and elsewhere there is still a great deal of confusion over the mass line. The mass line is not reducible to improving our ability to serve the material needs of mass contacts, nor is it reducible to conducting agitation, propaganda, and education among the masses. Engaging with the advanced elements among the masses, winning victories in concrete struggles, and promoting proletarian subjectivity are all key preconditions to practicing mass line politics, and should be conducted by all Maoist collectives. However, concentrating the correct ideas of the masses on the scale necessary for the masses to make history is not objectively possible at present in the U.S. Qualitatively transforming a situation in a manner that furthers proletarian power is not the same thing as "making history." Without a Maoist party with deep ties among the masses, we must focus our efforts on building the preconditions for a mass line politics.

We can only make qualitative advances toward the creation of pre-party formations through developing a concrete understanding of this political conjuncture in the U.S.—which is marked by the lack of a viable communist party—and through understanding that such a party must be built through putting into practice the dialectical relation between mass-work and cadre development. Clarity on this point, is necessary to understand the present basis for a proletarian politics that advances towards revolution and communism.