

1. Power on the Job

by Jane Slaughter

EVER SINCE THE FIRST BOSS hired the first worker, workers and owners have struggled over how hard we would labor, for how long, with which tools, and with how much skill.

We care about what goes on during the work-day not just because we spend half our waking lives on the job. The way we spend our working hours determines so many other facets of our lives, not just individually, but as a society. Do we work so long that our employers can lay off other workers? Do we work for so little that we can't afford decent housing or to buy the products we make? Do we work with such dangerous chemicals that our neighborhoods are polluted? Do we work so intensely that our families and community life suffer?

The struggle for power at the workplace is about more than money and more than working conditions. It is about who wields power over some of society's most important decisions: What are we going to make? How are we going to make it? And who benefits from our labor? We struggle at the workplace so we can have a say in those decisions. The workplace is where we learn either that we have power over our lives, or that we don't.

Tug of War in the Workplace

EMPLOYERS "GET IT" ABOUT THE WORKPLACE—it's where their profits come from. So they're always trying to increase their power vs. ours. Today they are:

- Speeding up work, through new technologies that set our pace and then monitor us.
- De-skilling our jobs by putting our brains in the machines or giving our skilled work to people outside the bargaining unit.
- Demanding longer hours (without overtime pay) and irregular schedules, in the name of "flexibility."
- Controlling the way we work more tightly, with "lean production" schemes. Telling us not just what to do but how to do it, every little step.
- Changing jobs from lifetime to short-term, from full-time to part-time.
- Outsourcing jobs, both inside this country and overseas, to places where working conditions are worse.
- Sowing division in the workforce with "two-tier" contracts—hiring new workers at much lower wages and benefits.

With these attacks, management undermines two sources of workers' power:

- The first is our job knowledge—we're the ones who do the work, who are the experts about our jobs, who know what the patient needs or where to kick the machine to make it go. If work is standardized, computerized, robotized, it's easier to outsource it—say to a call center across the country or across the world. When management harvests our knowledge and embeds it in software, we lose the skills that give us leverage. It's harder to dissent, to make trouble.
- The second source of power that's undermined is

Is This Where 'Apathy' Comes From?

The best unions not only run an efficient operation and get out the vote; they have a presence members can feel inside the workplace. But in too many unions, elected leaders are far removed from the shop floor and the hogwash that workers put up with every day. They tend to be concerned with gains that they can count—new members, wage increases, votes for a candidate—rather than working conditions, which are harder to put a figure on. Staffers who've never worked in the industry may not understand just how important working conditions are.

But when unions neglect the workplace, they teach defeatism. If we don't fight back collectively against harassment, monitoring, layoffs, we learn through experience that there is little we can do to control our lives at work.

What's the result? Union leaders are inclined to call it "apathy." "Why don't the members come to union meetings?" they say. But workers who haven't been helped to fight over the day-to-day basics aren't likely to heed the union's call to come out for the "bigger" issues. One local president said, "I have seen it often in my own local, where I think we are doing great stuff in the outside world (where I am focused) and so many members think the union sucks because of things in the shop (where they are focused)."

If we don't know how to fight as a group, instead we look for individual solutions—a different job, a promotion, going back to school, scratching the supervisor's back, alcohol. We decline the union's invitation to volunteer on an organizing drive—why should we think we can win? And second-tier workers wonder why they should have a union at all.

Apathy is something you're trained in, not something you're born with.

What Does Power on the Job Look Like?

by William Johnson

Like hospital nurses everywhere, nurses at Los Angeles County hospitals were understaffed and overworked. Managers would assign them to care for eight, 12, 20, or more patients.

Joel Solis, a registered nurse and shop steward in Service Employees Local 660, says that such workloads are unsafe for both nurses and patients. “We were so understaffed and tired,” remembers Solis. “We decided we had to do something.”

So Solis and another Local 660 steward, Fred Huicochea, began meeting with their co-workers to develop “a strategy of resistance.” The two stewards focused first on meeting with nurses on wards that were chronically understaffed, and where there were nurses who were already involved in union activity.

To avoid management, they had their first meetings on the night shift. “Managers leave at five o’clock,” Solis explains, “so we’d have really good meetings around nine p.m., after the patients had their dinners and went to bed. We wore our county badges and our scrubs, so management wouldn’t notice we were there. In our initial conversations, we just listened to the other nurses voice their frustrations.”

After weeks of meetings on different wards, a strategy began to emerge. The nurses began discussing how to confront management and refuse to accept unsafe assignments.

“We did a lot of role-playing—manager versus nurse,” says Solis. “We knew that when we refused the unsafe assignments, managers would be threatening, claiming we were insubordinate. We told the nurses, ‘If they threaten to discipline you, there’ll be union reps outside. Demand to have a union rep present.’”

One tool the nurses had was a new California law (AB 394) that nurses’ unions had fought for. AB 394 mandated a maximum ratio of six patients to each nurse in most areas. Though the hospital had been ignoring it, the law also gave nurses the right to determine what is and isn’t safe in caring for patients.

Showdown

On September 7, 2004, the nurses on a medical-surgical ward at Harbor/UCLA Medical Center told management they would care for no more than six patients at a time. To do so, they explained, would violate AB 394 and jeopardize patient safety. When management threatened to discipline them, the nurses told management they couldn’t be forced to break the law. They called in their union reps, who were waiting outside the hospital.

The reps backed the rank and filers up—even when management called the police to throw them out. During a four-hour confrontation, nurses refused to accept unsafe assignments, union reps stood their ground, management fumed, and the police scratched their heads. Finally, management was forced to hire temp nurses to care for all the patients.

“We caught them completely off guard,” says Solis. “All of a sudden, they were not in control. The nurses were in control, and that drove management up the wall.”

Meanwhile, SEIU 660 members were leafleting nurses on other shifts at other hospitals, letting them know about the campaign at Harbor/UCLA. Soon, more wards there and at Los Angeles County/USC Medical Center were refusing unsafe assignments, and as this book was being completed, management had been forced to staff within the ratios or close to them—but only on the floors where nurses had demanded their rights.

What’s more, Solis says that the nurses’ success led them to question other safety hazards. “Nurses are looking into what needles are being used on a ward, asking, ‘are they safe?’ Nurses are checking out ergonomics, looking into things they never had the courage to question management about before.”

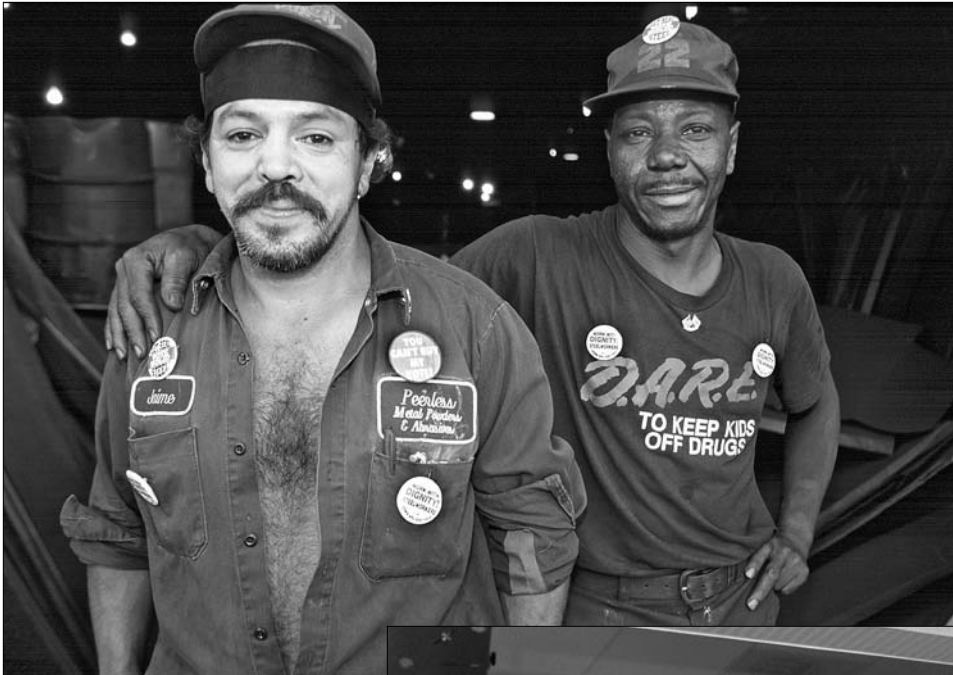
More Involved in the Union

And the shop floor organizing has gotten nurses more involved in the union. “We’ve got a bunch of new stewards, and more people are showing up for meetings,” says Solis. “Nurses are engaging with management, saying, ‘We want meetings, we want to come up with solutions to these problems,’ when it used to be management saying, ‘We’ll meet once a month, and here’s what we’re going to do.’ Nurses want a greater say in how things are decided.”

Though AB 394 was a useful tool for the nurses in this campaign, it was their ability to talk with each other, decide on a joint course of action, and stick to it in the face of threats that gave the law some teeth. Solis notes that once the nurses began organizing around staffing ratios, they discovered that, under hospital policy, they already had the right to determine what is and isn’t safe. “All along,” he says, “nurses had those rights, without knowing it.”

What laws or clauses in *your* contract aren’t being enforced? What do you need in order to work safely and without going home exhausted? How would your job be different if you and your co-workers got organized to demand your rights?

[Read more about the members of SEIU Local 660 organizing on the job and in the community in Chapters 3 and 12.]



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our solidarity. Workers who are sped-up and monitored can't socialize with each other; we can't organize. We become electronically tethered to the work process but not to each other. And when we accept a two-tier contract, we're voting for daily tension and resentment on the floor. If we tell younger workers that we're not concerned about their future, why should they fight for decent pensions for us?

So employers want to set new ground rules for the next round of struggle. Two-tier, in particular, sets some very bad terms—if newer, younger union members are angry enough, the next battle could be over whether it's worth having a union at all.

Troublemakers at Work

AS LONG AS THERE ARE WORKERS AND BOSSES, there will be resistance to the daily grind-up. Even before there were unions, workers organized on the job to protect themselves.

Labor historian David Montgomery says, "Unions had their origins in the attempt to get some sort of collective control over the conditions of work.... The workplace is both where the union movement had its birth and

where the daily conflict lies that makes it impossible to snuff the union movement out."

Workers' power at work has ebbed and flowed over the years, but resistance never disappears. The stories in this book prove that. While management was busy working to remake the workplace and disorganize these sisters and brothers, they were working to preserve their relationships and push back. The troublemakers you'll meet in this book:

- Created informal friendship groups at work to keep themselves informed and to lay the basis for action.



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- Organized small workplace actions to resist supervisors' bullying and challenge management authority.
- Constructed formal organizations such as union organizing committees or stewards committees or workers centers.
 - Took direct action in the form of job actions and strikes.
 - Formed rank-and-file alliances to act together when their union would not.
 - Worked to build economic power by organizing new members strategically.
 - Spread their movement from the workplace and the union hall to the community and to society at large.

On page 2, hospital nurses in Los Angeles provide a terrific example of how to take power on the job, protect workers' health and sanity—and make common cause with the public (their patients).

If it's strong enough, shop floor organization like the nurses' can be maintained even after defeats and in the worst of times. It can provide a lifeline. In Chapter 8, on

Contract Campaigns, you'll read about the flight attendants at Northwest Airlines, whose "shop floor" is all over the world. They learned how to connect through a Contract Action Team and to mobilize themselves for a decent contract.

Then when September 11, 2001 hit the airline industry, the flight attendants had a system in place to talk to each other by phone, for instant crisis counseling. Facing huge layoffs, they mobilized to convince management to make the rules flexible so as many flight attendants as possible could keep their jobs. They could do these things because after their contract campaign, they had kept their rank-and-file network in place.

We Have Power

THE NURSES AND THE FLIGHT ATTENDANTS had power because they had built daily relationships of mutual trust, cooperation, and common courage. These relationships lay the basis for bigger actions—getting a union, contract campaigns, strikes. When workers have this sort of power in our workplaces, we can affect production, profits, services, public relations, and political power, as well as our own working conditions. The fight starts in the workplace, the only place in our segregated society where we are brought together with people of other

Organize, Not Just Unionize

It's not enough just to make your own workplace strong, of course. One gutsy local union in a sea of non-union competitors can't hold out alone. As everyone knows by now, we need to bring our non-union sisters and brothers into the fold.

But although organizing drives for new members are crucial, they don't always answer the question of power in the workplace. Organizing needs to be more than just unionizing.

It works both ways. Unions that are strong in the workplace are likely to be more successful in organizing: they can point to their gains as reasons to join, and they have enthusiastic members who can look prospective members in the eye and spread the word.

And when we get a bigger chunk of our industry into the union, we need to remember that the job's not over. We shouldn't tell new members that they can sit back now and leave it to the negotiators. They'll need to be organized at work, if the now-larger union is to make good on its promises.

racess, generations, genders, and religions. It's where we learn from our sisters' and brothers' experiences and pass on our own.

When we're organized on the job, we can establish relationships with community groups and social movements that multiply our collective power inside and outside the workplace. Such coalitions aren't built on the basis of weakness, but on our ability to take our strength from the workplace into the community.

Teamsters Local 174 in Seattle provides one example. Reformers won office and set about building up the union on the job. They started new-member orientation, set up member-to-member workplace structures, taught members how to fight management's "team concept," and recruited a volunteer organizing committee. Before too long, they began alliances with environmentalists and with global justice protesters battling the World Trade Organization (see Chapters 12 and 23). Would 600 members of Local 174 have come out to march against the WTO if they hadn't had confidence in their union on the job?

In the last chapter we will look at how the labor movement needs to change if it is to build on grassroots organizing like the truck drivers' and the nurses' and the flight attendants'. Between here and there, you'll meet a host of troublemakers who fought to recruit new union members, stop discrimination, keep their jobs from killing them, end two-tier wages, slow down the pace of work, win a solid contract, set an example for the next generation, build ties overseas, welcome immigrants to this country, connect with each other in cyberspace, build equal relationships with community allies, throw out rotten union leaders, do smart research, run their locals without burning out, and poke corporate power in the eye.

If we've done our job right, their examples will inspire you and educate you. You'll be an educated troublemaker—an organizer.

Authors

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On the Troublemaker's Website

"Surrendering the Shop Floor Means Surrendering the Future," by Charley Richardson. Go to www.labornotes.org.