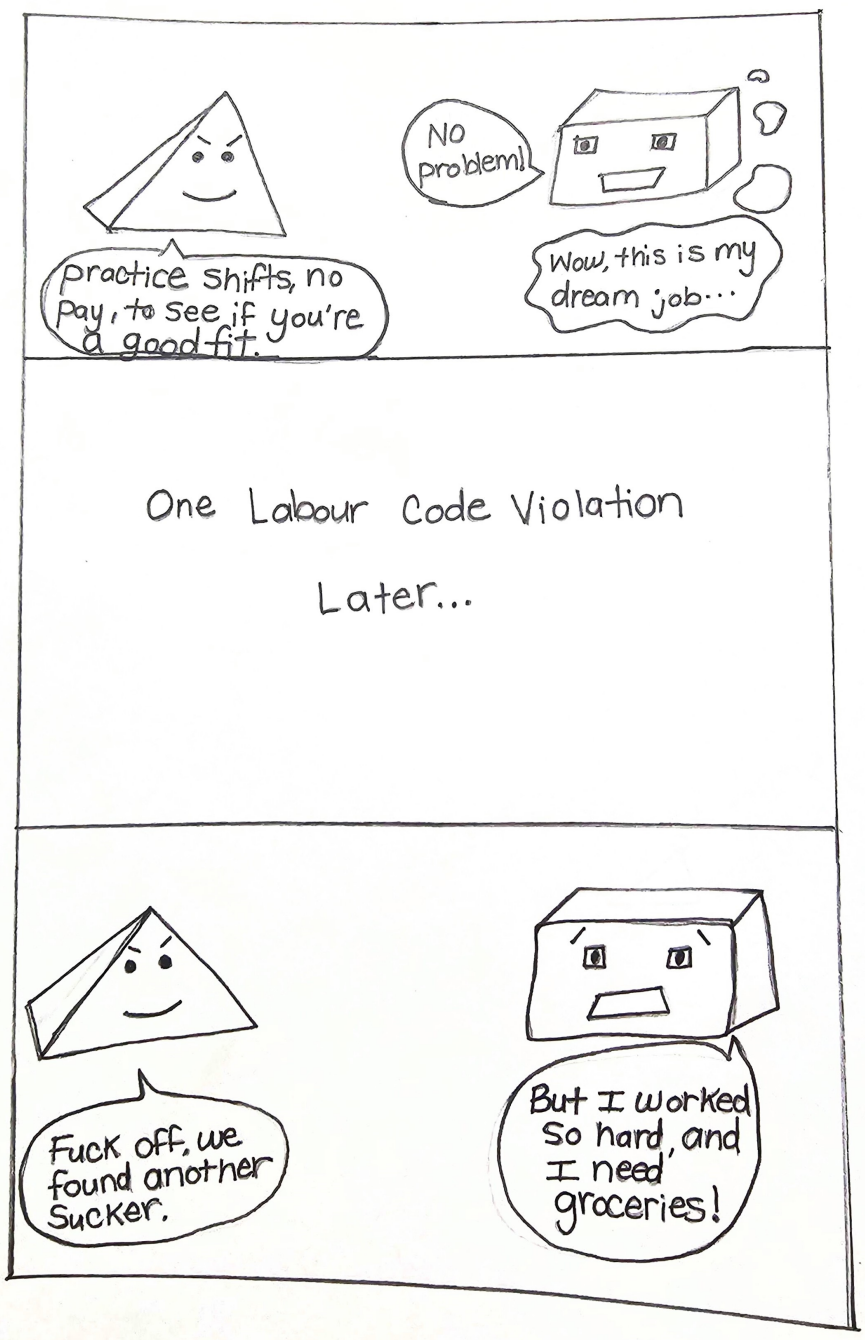
THE WORST OF TIMES

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The Worst of Times is a publication of the Industrial Workers of the World—Kjipuktuk (Halifax). Our goal is to empower you—our neighbours, coworkers, and community—to write about your everyday lives in order to discover common issues and strategies for collective action.

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War is (still) a Racket

As we approach the 100th anniversary of Major General Smedley D. Butler's 1935 book, *War is a Racket*, we are reminded how its warning fell on deaf ears. Butler, a celebrated US Marine, ended his career denouncing his actions as an American soldier. He concluded he fought for the interest of big business, not democracy and human wellbeing.

The 21st century has proved that while Butler himself has not been forgotten, his warning and regrets have been all but lost. As American strikes fall on the people of Iran, even the lessons of Afghanistan are forgotten. Afghanistan represented an utter failure. Events proved the NATO puppet regime was tethered to power by external force alone, with a cast of elites and gangsters dedicated to drug trafficking, child rape, and thuggish oppression. Under the American-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the opium trade flourished, poisoning Afghanis and Americans alike, and the government became utterly mired in corruption. None of this was a secret to those on the ground. The mission to "win over the hearts and minds" of the Afghani people showed those in charge to be out of touch, incompetent, cynically insincere, or perhaps a dark combination of all. When the NATO regime collapsed, a Canadian soldier grimly asked* "What was the point?"

Any speculation that a NATO-led regime change in Iran would fare any better is remarkably naive, particularly with genocidal monsters like Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu at the helm. In the words of the Iran Labour Confederation:

"We must also be alert to a crucial fact: a rupture at the top does not automatically mean the people's will is being realised. It is precisely in moments like this that projects designed to contain society become active — "controlled transition," reshuffling of elites, and the promotion of top-down alternatives meant to hijack the revolution and take the direction of events out of the people's hands. Backroom deals, reproducing the same structure with a new face, or imposing client governments under the slogans of "stability" and "transition" are all attempts to neutralise revolutionary momentum and block direct popular power. These scenarios do not represent the end of the Islamic Republic; they represent the continuation of the same repressive order in a new form."

As for Canada's role, Mark Carney swiftly showed his Davos speech to be hollow. His support for the American strikes was said with regret, but regret for an elusive international order, not regret for the human suffering of war. The Canadian Government continues to expand contracts with American companies, such as General Dynamics and Lockheed Martin, and Canadian companies and banks have profited from investments in Israeli arms companies, such as Scotiabank's only recently terminated investment in Elbit Systems. Yet, the human cost of conflict remains an unaddressed poison to society.

Since the start of the war in Afghanistan, Canadian Armed Forces veterans have seen their administrative and health supports cut, and mental health crises and suicides worsen. Without adequate healthcare, many are left scarred and psychologically damaged. The damage to wider society is broad, leading to domestic violence, addiction, absent parents, and fractured communities. Bullying, sexual violence, and extremism within the Armed Forces have been left in pockets to fester. 2015's Operation HONOUR, a plan to end sexual harassment within the ranks, ended in disgrace, showing even the leading general, Jonathan Vance, to be an abusive thug himself. Other attempts at reform, such as a 2022 report from former Supreme Justice Louise Arbour, was largely dodged by the defence minister, Anita Anand. Yet millions of tax dollars flow to defence contractors and arms companies, while people are left to suffer.

Butler's warning against big business has been proven to be correct. Politicians speak of needing to "tighten belts" while war profiteering skyrockets. Make no mistake, if history and recent memory teach us anything, stories of patriotic duty and liberation are little more than the mask for the stench of money, suffering, and death.

*In a private conversation with this article's author.

Are we the union?

In organizing, workers build relationships of trust with coworkers, learn about each others' struggles, and test their collective strength against that of their bosses. Practically speaking, in order to secure certification as a legal bargaining agent, unions have to support organizing. There is no way to win an election over bosses' opposition other than the knowledge, trust, and power that comes from organizing. Organization, however, doesn't just win elections. It is also the means by which workers are able to change their day-to-day lives at work and move from being passive subjects to active participants.

After an election and legal certification of a union, however, the union's legal responsibility becomes negotiating and enforcing collective agreements. Once the workers involved in an initial certification drive have moved on, there is often nobody on the shop floor that has been trained to talk with their coworkers; to agitate, educate, or organize, let alone to take action. Under these circumstances, a union can start to function more like a service that its members purchase and less like a democratic organization run by and for the members themselves. Many of the decisions in such unions tend to be made by professional union staff, to whom members turn for leadership. Often there is usually only a small level of engagement by the rank-and-file.

When workers in such staff-dominated unions take initiative and pursue organization without formal blessing, they are likely to be treated as disruptive or seen as a threat. This is not least because Canadian labour law places a positive legal obligation on unions to prevent "concerted action". Union staff and high ranking officers (i.e. those who have left their positions in the workplace to be full time in the union) have a material stake in the union and in its legal compliance regardless of the interests or desires of the broader membership. All of this ultimately weakens unions in terms of their ability to threaten and take collective action (their primary leverage against employers), as well as eroding the confidence, capacity, and trust of members.

None of this is merely theoretical. Several stories from Nova Scotia's largest union, the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU) are illustrative.

For example, there is a group of workers who have been represented by NSGEU since the 1980s. By the 2020s, most workers had never even met a worker who had been involved in the initial organizing drive. Over the course of those years, wages stopped keeping pace with inflation and what was once seen as a "good job" became just another place where workers lived paycheque-to-paycheque.

In 2024, some workers decided to organize on their own without NSGEU's support. The collective agreement had expired and was being renegotiated, and the workers felt it was time to push for real improvements. These workers drafted a letter to the bargaining committee, saying that "we, the undersigned, plan to vote 'no' on any contract that does not provide at least [a living wage] for permanent staff, with an equivalent raise for casual staff." This letter ended up being circulated across several job sites, with over 100 workers signing.

What was NSGEU's response? They were furious. Staff members tracked down the organizers and accused them of "spreading disunity" and "undermining" the union. Union members were explicitly told by officers, who traveled to their job sites, to not sign the letter. Rather than embracing grassroots mobilization, the NSGEU worked to shut it down.

Somewhat over a year later, the bargaining committee recommended that membership vote to approve a deal that included a decrease in real wages compared to 2020. This concession contract passed, but it is not clear how many members voted for it. Members who asked staff for details concerning the rate of participation were rebuffed, and told that it was the prerogative of staff to deny membership this information. This is not unique. At another NSGEU-represented job in an unrelated field, understaffing had become a serious problem, not due to lack of staff but to management's refusal to call workers in or offer overtime. In some cases, workers were on shifts with half the number of hands that had previously been seen as necessary. In one particular job area, workers planned to stage a midshift walkout in protest.

Word of this plan reached the local's chief steward who intervened and insisted that they not take any such action, and that the problem had to be resolved through "the proper channels." The proper channels, of course, were not able to resolve the issue, since the collective agreement did not contain any provisions about staffing levels. The chief steward's intervention therefore amounted to telling workers to "suck it up" on behalf of the employer.

While these shop-floor stories may resonate most directly, the problems of staff-driven service unionism manifest elsewhere as well. For example, on February 25th, the NSGEU held a rally in response to the new provincial budget. The rally was, in some ways, well-organized. About one hundred people gathered with signs, NSGEU flags, musicians, coffee and snacks, and speakers. The media were present and NSGEU leaders had the chance to speak about the issues with Conservative Party's attacks on public services and public sector workers. In some ways, it would seem to be a great success.

Appearances, of course, may be deceiving. For one, NSGEU's membership is over 30,0000 workers, so even if there were one hundred NSGEU members present, this would constitute 0.3% of membership. Of course, among those present were also a number of NSGEU staff and supporters from other labour-aligned groups, meaning that, as a proportion of membership, NSGEU may have managed to effectively mobilize one tenth of a percent. This is unsurprising, since members were not educated or trained to speak to one another about the issue, were not provided with educational material to share with their coworkers, were not provided with promotional materials for their workplaces, and, in the case of at least one local, were only notified of the demonstration by an email less than 48 hours in advance. We see here that the great majority of members are not treated as planners, educators, or even the primary protagonists of their struggles, but, at best, as pawns to be marched out for photographers.

In unions, one often hears the phrase, "We are the union." This is meant to say that all of the dues-paying members "are the union" and that it is not a separate, outside organization. If, however, this phrase is rarely said by most members and the actual activity of the union is dominated by staff and officers, the phrase could be seen to take on a very different meaning.

IWW members believe that, when a union has become like the NSGEU, that workers should form independent committees that make decisions together as workers in their workplaces. We believe that workers need an organization which does not limit itself to enforcing collective agreements, but makes real ongoing organization both its purpose and its strategy. We believe that "we are the union" means that "we" make the decisions and "we" carry them out. If you are in a union, ask yourself and your coworkers, "Are we the union?"

What is fascism and how do we fight it?

Short pamphlet in English, French, and Hindi available at this QR code link, or contact halifax@iww.org.