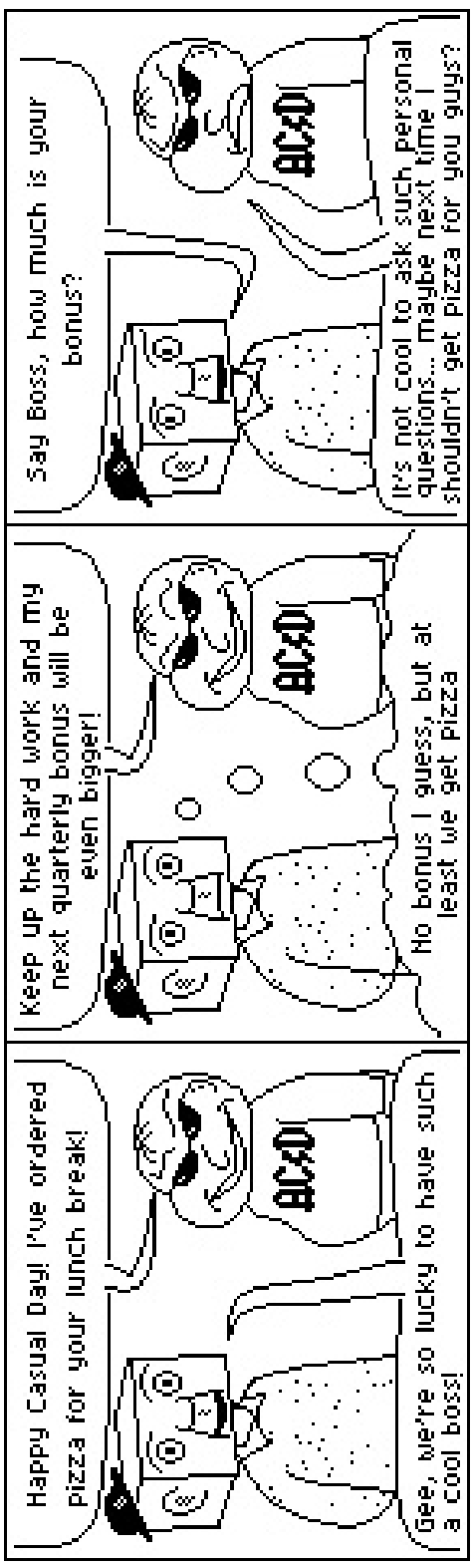
THE WORST OF IWW TIMES

Summer 2026

Mr. Block

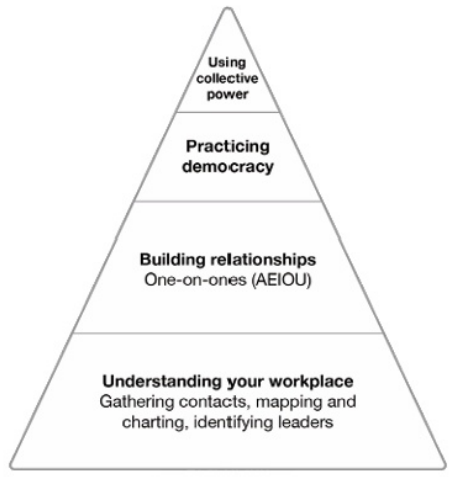
He Asks his "Cool Boss" a Question



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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Building the Committee: The Pyramid



The path to changing the balance of power in our workplace consists of many steps, which culminate in a workplace committee—the foundation of a democratic union. The Industrial Workers of the World's model of workplace organizing uses a conceptual pyramid to describe and map these steps.

At the base of this instructional pyramid—and the foundation on which the rest of a campaign rests—are tasks that can be broadly characterized as **Understanding your Workplace**. This stage includes **Gathering Contacts**, **Workplace Mapping**, and **Social Charting**. **Gathering Contacts** means building a comprehensive list of our coworkers, and ways to contact them that cannot be impeded or intercepted by management (e.g. personal phone numbers). It introduces questions like "Who do I know at work? Who don't I know? Are there departments that are mysteries to me?"

Workplace Mapping is surveying and creating a replica of the physical workplace. This includes noting not only the physical space, but also workflow (where do people, products, and money move) surveillance (security cameras, spaces where management are more likely to see/overhear staff), and social spaces (the literal and figurative "water cooler", break rooms, smoking spots).

Finally, **Social Charting** includes documenting social ties and commonalities that bring people together. Do coworkers carpool or take the same bus route? Maybe a group of people regularly go to trivia or karaoke together. Are there folks who are brought together by shared demographics or life experiences (language, immigration experiences, parents, students, etc)? Social charting also allows us to identify leaders. Leaders are the ones who, for example, people go to with questions or for support (about work and otherwise), who organize events, or who have experience in the workplace for example.

The next level in the pyramid—the heart of the process—is **Building Relationships**. This stage consists of many one-on-one conversations, outside of work time, with our coworkers. These conversations are arranged intentionally, according to what we have discovered in the "understanding your workplace" phase. The conversations themselves are based around a series of questions and considerations explained via a mnemonic, "**AEIOU**."

A, E, I, O, and U represent the words **Agitate**, **Educate**, **Innoculate**, **Organize**, and **pUsh/Uplift/follow-Up**. They are a way of structuring conversations with coworkers based on asking questions and learning how they think our workplace should and could be changed. They progress through discovering what our coworkers' issues are, how those issues could be fixed, what the consequences of trying to fix them might be, figuring out the immediate practical steps to be taken, and ensuring those steps happen. To do justice to each letter of "AEIOU" is an article unto itself. What is important is that this process builds trust, lets us demonstrate our reliability and willingness to really listen to and care for our coworkers, and tests commitment.

Workers who have demonstrated their commitment to organizing by doing a task are invited to participate in a workplace committee. Workplace committees are where we **Practice Democracy**. This stage entails the committee making decisions together, having meetings, and being accountable to each other. We intentionally act in ways that give all members of the committee a voice and a clear way to participate. These steps avoid the committee being driven by a few active members, and make it so that everyone involved has a chance to weigh in on decisions and contribute to the work that keeps the committee fair and functional.

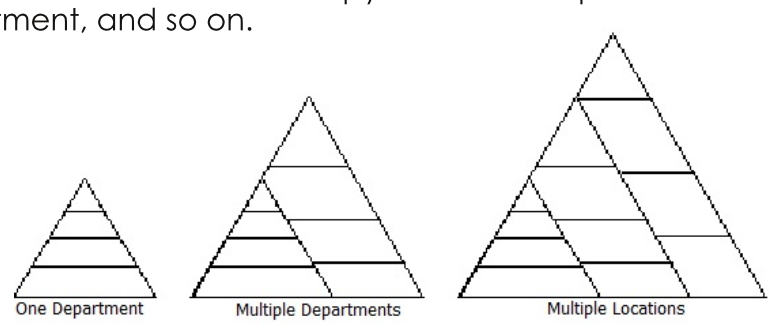
The tip of the iceberg, resting atop the solid foundation built in the previous stages, is **Using Collective Power**. This stage includes using **direct action** (in its various forms) to make demands and make change in the workplace. **Direct action** is the shiny, marketable part of workplace organizing, but it sits at the top of the pyramid for a reason. Actions are impactful and sustainable when a committee has done the work laid out in previous steps. This involves using the knowledge the committee has about the workplace, choosing issues that have buy-in from committee members, and making sure folks involved have been adequately inoculated against the ways management may respond. Actions should be decided using processes of collective decision-making established by the committee, instead of decreed by an exclusive group. In this way, a committee identifies a winnable issue, a clear demand, a direct action tactic that appropriately matches the goal, and plans for escalation.

Continued on back.

Continued from front.

Beyond the content of each section, the pyramid reflects that the steps at the base and middle are essential building blocks for a committee to be able to sustainably practice democracy and use collective power. If the pyramid is tipped over, with early emphasis placed on direct actions, those actions suffer from a lack of understanding which issues matter to our coworkers and which tactics will be most impactful in our workplace. A group who is well-inoculated (prepared for potential consequences) and trusts each other will not wither when confronted with union-busting. Skipping any of these steps gives more power to management's attempts to squash organizing efforts.

The pyramid can also be used to reflect how to approach this organizing model in terms of scalability. One can begin by going through these steps with a smaller segment of their workplace. Maybe initially we create a contact list, begin doing one-on-ones, and tackling problems with collective action with people from a single department. As that group builds capacity, they return to the base of the pyramid and expand to another department, and so on.



The above way of conceptualizing moving up the pyramid then returning to the base once more also captures how the steps of organizing are necessarily cyclical. Organizers are constantly dipping back to the foundations of understanding their workplace as new people are hired and as organizing alters social dynamics. Even seasoned organizers benefit from having a fellow worker ask them questions about their concerns, ideas, fears, and goals. The methods laid out above are recurring, ongoing, and effective.

This article is a mere snippet of the process. In-depth discussion and experience with the concepts discussed here can be gained by attending an Organizer Training 101. See the included handbill for more details.

The IWW and the Left

Two recent articles published in Industrial Worker*, "Rebuilding the IWW" and a short response piece are starting points for an important discussion about the relationship between the IWW and organizers from other unions, the left, and labour-oriented left groups (which I will shorthand as "the left" for simplicity's sake). The former identifies real problems of the IWW's insularity and relatively small size. The response piece emphasizes the IWW's uniqueness with respect to the left and the danger of orienting ourselves toward the left rather than to workers.

I believe there are essential truths in both pieces that we need to grapple with. On one hand, we must take steps to break the IWW's isolation. On the other hand, we should not allow the goal of breaking our isolation to compromise our unique focus on building autonomous workplace committees and shop-floor power. We must take seriously the practical hurdles we face as a group of, at most, a few hundred serious workplace organizers and competent functionaries (larger official membership numbers aside). We have to accept that there are a far greater number of skilled and committed organizers outside the IWW than within it.

However, we must also take seriously the risk of drifting toward becoming a group of labour activists, indistinct in our activity from numerous others except in our branding as a union and the historical cachet of our name. If we allow our focus to become growth among those who are politically sympathetic rather than among our coworkers, we are undercutting our very raison d'etre. We need to acknowledge that many skilled organizers leave the IWW for other unions due, at least in part, to an internal culture that sometimes emphasizes posturing over real workplace organizing.

What I would propose is making a very particular appeal to the left that is rooted in our fundamental differences organizationally, strategically, and tactically from both service unions and activist groups, parties, etc. Our goal should not simply be visibility as one option among others, but rather as a unique vehicle for a very specific form of organizing that the left is otherwise lacking. The appeal I have in mind, whether presented as a pamphlet, from a podium, or (likely best of all) in one-on-one conversations will likely need to touch on some or all of the following three points. I base this on conversations I have personally had with non-IWW organizers, so it should by no means be understood to be exhaustive, nor universally applicable. Nevertheless, I think what follows are useful starting points.

Each point of this appeal also has a practical corollary, rooted in the best things the IWW already does, but not as reliably as we ought to, with significant differences between various campaigns, branches, committees, etc.

First, I've found that many "card-carrying" socialists see the IWW as an anarchist group that is necessarily exclusive vis-a-vis whatever organization or tendency they may already be a part of. Contrary to the idea that IWW's "No Political Alliances" rules gives the organization an "anarchist" character, it actually ensures space for a diversity of "political" allegiances among wobblies. By ensuring that the IWW can not be allied to any particular party, it serves as a guarantor that wobblies of any party or group will not find themselves beholden to any other. This gives the IWW, among socialist organizations, an unusually open character, while eliminating the need for any "lowest common denominator" basis of unity. IWW organizing is non-exclusive—even a valuable supplement—to whatever else an organizer might be already involved with.

The practical corollary to this is that the IWW must genuinely be open to a diversity of ideas. Whether a given campaign, branch, committee, is numerically dominated by those with one particular political perspective or another, its members should strive to emphasize the distinction between members' views and the aims and purpose of the union. If a person shows up to an IWW meeting and finds discussions of anarchism (or autonomist Marxism, or whatever) front and centre, they can hardly be blamed for thinking the organization is not for them if they do not share these views.

Secondly, the IWW must emphasize the wide practical applicability of our unique organizing strategy, and its distinction from service unionism. In other words, we must not present ourselves as a union which is "better" than other unions, but a fundamentally different type of organization.

I have had many conversations with organizers who argue that the IWW approach "splits" the labour movement, that it deprives workers of access to resources, and that it ignores workers' real "democratic" desire to participate in the mainstream labour movement. This reminds me of my high school's (gridiron) football coach, who insisted that the school should not have a rugby team. Now, while it would be dishonest to deny that there are numerous similarities between football and rugby, they are nevertheless different games with different rules, different equipment, playing in different leagues, and they are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily at crosspurposes.

At risk of stretching the metaphor, what becomes important from a perspective of working class organizing is whether we want people to become football players or rugby players; what rules, skills, tactics, ways of thinking, and so on are we aiming to develop among the working class in the course of our activity? If we believe people must become rugby players, we can only get so far by organizing them into football leagues. If our goal is the development of class consciousness, capacity for revolutionary action, the ability to exercise democratic control over production, etc., we need to organize on this basis.

For IWW organizers, this means we have to seriously "walk the talk" of developing membership such that every member is genuinely capable as a class-conscious workplace organizer. If we are to present ourselves as something genuinely different from the mainstream trade unions, we cannot simply imagine that a red flag and revolutionary branding are sufficient. Conversely, we should seek to avoid needless confrontations with the mainstream trade unions and their partisans, since building IWW committees in our workplaces is not, in the final instance, any business (pun intended) of those unions.

Third, and finally, we must foreground the utility of the IWW as such. Over the past decade, other organizations have begun to emerge which take shop-floor organization seriously. This is certainly a welcome development, but it does beg the question of why we ought to advocate for IWW organizing specifically. In short, the IWW uniquely possess institutional knowledge embodied in our organizer training programme, the theoretical-organizational development and continuity embodied in our constitution, and real logistical capacity that allows us to "punch above our weight class". While the IWW may currently struggle to fill committee positions and officer roles, we nevertheless have a structure which is prepared to accommodate organizing on a mass scale, i.e. to move personnel and resources throughout North America, to train thousands of organizers, to carry out agitation, education, and action in a way that most other groups oriented to shop-floor organizing cannot. While it is not impossible that another group might be able to achieve this in time, it is absolutely certain that the IWW has these resources right now.

For those of us who are already wobblies, this means working to clean up the organization; to make sure that its practical promise can be easily realized by organizers who are willing to avail themselves thereof. It means fostering an internal culture wherein every member is aware of resources and how to access them, where training occurs regularly and often, where meetings are run according to clear and simple standards, and where membership does not feel like a clique or sect. We must make sure that what we offer is what we deliver: Money and tools for workplace organizing, structures for democratic participation and holding leadership to account, and a strategy made to scale to our struggles.

In conclusion, my foremost hope is that our growth will increasingly be in workplaces and through consistent application of our unique strategy for workplace organizing. However, I also hope that we will attract more already committed organizers who otherwise lack what the IWW can provide. We face a real necessity of bringing in more persons whose attraction to the IWW is practical rather than historical, moral, or ideological. I do not believe these goals are in contradiction, and, indeed, I believe they will be mutually reinforcing.

*Publication of the North American IWW, available online at www.industrialworker.org