

FIGHT
FOR
15

STRATEGIC
AND CRITICAL
CONSIDERATIONS

Better Wages on Our Time

All over the country workers are standing up in a campaign for a fifteen dollar an hour minimum wage. Everyone has to work for a wage, and so the cause of labor, the struggle for a decent living, a sense of dignity, and control over the labor of society is of tremendous importance for the freedom of all humanity. Such struggles are never easy, and are often fraught with problems. These problems are both internal to movements, and external. Whenever workers try to stand up for themselves, they come against pressure not only from their bosses, but also from the hostile reactionaries in society, and even from the government. These kind of struggles are not new, and workers have been dealing with them since the beginning of capitalism. These histories have often been suppressed and swept under the rug in the hopes that their lessons are forgotten, and that "outside agitators" will stop disturbing the peaceful balance of "managers and labor." The kind of problems that we come up against in labor struggles are always changing as capitalism changes, and so we must learn and grapple with those problems together if we are to achieve any real change.

We are a group of people interested in the history, theory and implementation of such struggles. The purpose of this pamphlet is to offer some perspective, and to look at some problems workers face in attempting to organize today, based on our experiences and studies of these issues. First we will consider the demands of the Fight For 15 campaign, then we will discuss the nature of what a union is, and finally we will look at the relationship between work hours and wages.

In Solidarity,

Communist League Tampa

Fight For 15, run by the SEIU promises a 15 dollar minimum wage and a union. But what exactly does this mean? Does this mean all workers will be paid 15 dollars an hour once the demand is won? In Seattle the 15 dollar minimum wage demand is not being enacted immediately, but is instead being phased in over a series of years. **Yet workers need higher wages now.** So what if that's not convenient for the capitalists? Our demands shouldn't be phased in according to what is convenient for the bosses but what our needs as workers are.



What about the promise for a union? What exactly does a union mean? Today many unions require workers who join to sign a no-strike clause. This means workers can join the union and receive the benefits but in the end sacrifice an important source of their power over employers - the right to strike. A union that doesn't allow

workers to strike is nothing more than a bureaucracy.

So what exactly does this mean? It means that workers will have to take action into their own hands, even if it means going outside and against the union bureaucracy. This might mean taking up more militant tactics to build power and win demands, forming strike committees autonomous from the SEIU, or it can simply mean holding the SEIU accountable to what they promise. Workers power isn't something that can be bought like a dollar menu cheeseburger; it's something that has to be built over long term struggles to take control over our lives.

What is a Union, Anyway?

Fifteen an'uh' unnnION!" This is the chant we hear as we march up and down the street, between a Wendy's and a McDonalds, the Florida heat making waves off the concrete, the humidity pressing in against us.

"Fifteen an'uh' unnnION!"

I work for \$9.25 an hour. I can get behind the 15 part. Does it even need explaining? I could finally get new work shoes. I could take a little time off and not worry about making rent that month. I

could take my girlfriend to the movies or out to eat more.

"Fifteen an'uh' unnnION!"

But what do they mean by a *union*?

Union suggests unity, unity around what? Unity of *McDonald's workers*? Well, that doesn't quite fit, we're calling for a 15 dollar an hour minimum wage, so that must mean we're looking at a *national unity*! 15 dollars as the floor beneath which no full blooded, hardworking American ought to have to *work*, in order to survive. That sounds good!

Before we get distracted, let's take a step back. What is a union? What are *union people* doing, and who are they? Well, to be short, they're *workers*. People who *work every day, usually to earn just enough money to get up and go back to work the next day*. In the past, a lot of the unions were organized in workplaces that produced steel, cars, clothes, or in construction and transportation. Workplaces that manufactured things. They created a lot of *money* of which they saw almost none. Naturally they thought this situation was pretty suspect, and so they fought back. They got together, *as a union* and demanded better



working conditions and wages. So the history books tell us. All you do is *flip burgers*.

But wait. They didn't move mountains *by choice*. They didn't produce the steel that still holds up skyscrapers across the world, and carries trains full of things people need, *by choice*. They had to, just to get enough money to eat something else besides stale bread, sleep somewhere else than the gutter, and maybe have enough to send their kids through school. They were *wage workers*. Just like us, they got what they needed *by selling their ability to work, in order to take care of themselves*.

In a lot of the old unions, they didn't just fight for better wages. They fought *against this way of organizing society*. They struck for less hours,

higher wages, sure, but *when the iron was hot*, and they saw their chance, they would *strike for power*. They would fight for control

“ Plain and simple a strike is the withdrawal of labor-power from the production process. ”

over the workplace itself. In some cases they were even able to extend their strike over entire cities. They would set up neighborhood councils to organize the production and distribution of needs for people, when they were really successful, or to simply better carry own fighting the companies for control of society. It was *democratic*. That is, everybody came together to make decisions.

And these unions, though they varied in structure, most of the *revolutionary* ones, the ones aiming to make some gains now but ultimately to *change society for the better* they were radically democratic. Here's an example:

In the 1910's the workers in Philadelphia who unloaded and loaded ships (longshoreman) were paid next to nothing, and were abused often by their employers. There was racism of "native" whites against more recent European immigrants as well as against black workers. But they got *organized*. They went on *strike* for recognition of their *union* from the companies that managed the port in Philadelphia, and they won some concessions. The union had about 3500 members and roughly half were white and half black. Every important officer position had a white and black counterpart. Perhaps the most prominent organizer, revered by

every member of the organization was Ben Fletcher, a black longshoreman. But back up a minute, what's a *strike*?

Plain and simple a *strike* is the withdrawal of labor-power from the production process. The workers *stop working* which means the business stops producing, which means the bosses stop making *profit*. This is key, because a lot of labor union fights since the 60's or so have relied on just about anything *except a strike*. And when they *did* strike, they didn't block access to the workplace, or make sure that the flow of profit stopped, they just appealed to public pressure and media. Well that's one *tactic* but it is by no means the most useful or exhaustive.

The Philadelphia longshoremen were a part of a larger union, the Industrial Workers of the World, that also organized agricultural workers in the Western U.S. They would strike, slow-down, and in general, interrupt the working process, *anytime they needed* to get the bosses' attention and defend another worker. They had a *system* whereby a worker *elected* to the position of *delegate* would be the point person for any trouble started by the boss. Not getting your pay on time? Contact the delegate. Not getting a proper break? Stop work, and immediately go talk to your delegate. Boss threatening you? Find the delegate! From there, the delegate would get with the worker who was having a problem, and other workers, and work out a solution. And this usually involved the above-stated interruption of work, until a demand was met.

The willingness to strike and workers control of the union are key. But that was 100 years ago. Have things changed? Who do we sell our labor-power to now? To Wendy's, to McDonalds, to Wal-Mart. And those companies use our ability to work, our labor-power, to *make profit*, just like the shipping companies in Philadelphia. Without workers, there is *no profit*.



Organization at work, *of workers, by workers, for workers*. The only real weapon that workers have against their bosses is the interruption of the flow of profit. As the bosses get more and more organized, so we too have to be better organized. We have to be able to cause them so much pain in the wallet at the *mere suggestion* of attack on a co-worker. And this will begin to put us in the position to really change things.

There is a final point I'd like to make. Workers need to stop seeing themselves as "Target vs. Wal-Mart workers" or even "American vs. Iranian workers" The bosses *don't care*. They just need *somebody* to work. Sure, if they can, they'll pit us against each-other to get *more work out of us for less pay*. But that's about the only reason they'll reference nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability. This is true as well for "lazy" vs. "hard-working." Those of you "hard-working" people are just making it *harder* on yourselves and the rest of us. Slow down. You get paid by the hour. If a boss sees that he can get 2 or 3 workers to churn out a sandwich every 15 seconds, he'll get the idea he can make that "company policy." The same goes for *immigrant workers* or "native" workers. Let's stop fighting each other and start fighting *the capitalists*.

WAGES AND HOURS

Working for a wage (being paid by the hour) was not always the main way that people earned their living. The wage form became dominant with the rise of capitalism. Early on, during the rise of industrialization, it wasn't uncommon for workers to work for as much as 12 or even 16 hours a day. Many of the earliest labor struggles, in which workers campaigned politically and across industries, beyond individual strikes in factories, was based around reduction of the length of the working day. But workers did not simply campaign for a shorter work day due to the duration and intensity of exploitation that a 16, 12, or 10 hour day necessarily entails. Labor time is integral to the development of value.

In order to understand why, let's take a look at things from the position of the owners. Suppose you were running a factory, and you could run

the machinery in the factory for up to 16 hours a day. Now suppose that it took an average worker up to 8 hours to produce enough value to exchange to meet their needs. As an owner, you now have two options. You can hire two sets of workers and have them each work for an 8 hour shift and pay them the full value of their labor. Or you can hire one set of workers, have them work 16 hours, and only pay them for 8. They'll have enough to meet their needs, and you'll have an extra 8 hours for free. In essence, this is what capitalists do across the board. We argue that labor is what produces value in society, and when workers struggle for higher wages, or shorter hours, they are only fighting for a claim to what is rightfully theirs. The profits that different firms accumulate are built upon the unpaid labor time of the company's workers.

But there's more. Suppose that the capitalist purchased some new machinery that allowed him to double his output. Now he has more options. He can double his output, and keep on the same amount of workers. Or he can continue to produce the same amount of goods, but throw half of the workers out on their ass, and pay the other half the same low wages they were getting before. There is a third option, that capitalists don't pursue, and really can't. Keep the same amount of workers on, but reduce work hours as productive machinery reduces the necessary amount of work.

Whenever workers strike, especially today, they are threatened with automation. Many who have promoted the demand of 15 dollars an hour have heard about this. They are reminded of new machines that are being developed by the fast food chains to replace workers in the restaurants. This is not simply malice on the employers part (though there is never a shortage of that), nor is it the result of laborers simply asking for more. Capitalism has a set of inner dynamics that drive it toward this kind of development. But for us it shouldn't be a problem.

There is nothing wrong with machines in and of themselves. The problem is a *system* which creates machinery that ought to save everyone time, and instead makes everyone's living more difficult. If the working class can organize itself to be a force in society, not only in the shop but politically, we can work to reduce the amount of work

hours as automation develops. This will involve raising wages while reducing work hours. Today this might sound counter intuitive, since so many people who are working part time would like more hours but can't get them. To be clear, we are not saying that employers should simply reduce people's hours. They will do this on their own. We are saying that when hours are reduced due to increased efficiency, workers should simply work less hours, but make enough from it to earn a living. This has been accomplished before, and with the right political organization, we believe that it can be done again.

The struggles of the working class, then and today, have been struggles for the basic dignity and humanity for all. The fight for the 8 hour work day began in 1817 with the slogan "Eight hours' labor, Eight hours' recreation, Eight hours' rest." But we argue that the productive capacity of society has grown. After almost 200 years of global development, there is no reason that we should be stuck working at minimal pay for whatever the maximum hours are that the capitalists think they can squeeze out of us. Now we must struggle for a world in which work is a secondary function of our lives. Where people have time to pursue their interests, spend time with loved ones, and to develop themselves and their communities.

