

“A STRIKE BY ANY OTHER NAME”

Natasha Moss-Dedrick

Take a close look at the badge on the grocery worker’s chest next time you go to pick up toothpaste at a Safeway (Vons), Kroger (Ralphs, Cala, Bell), or Albertsons. You might see one that reads, “I’m the property of [store name].” That’s how some of the 70,000 southern California grocery workers are expressing their feelings about their recent strike and lockout and the resulting contract. Some workers are biting their tongues, others are fighting among themselves, and nearly everyone is talking about quitting. But Doug Dority, the president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) International until the end of the strike, called it “one of the most successful strikes in history.”

Last winter’s grocery workers’ strike was the biggest strike in almost a decade; not since the Teamsters’ 1996 UPS strike have so many workers been out on the picket line. The way this strike was handled speaks volumes about the (dis)organization and orientation of the UFCW—the union representing the grocery workers—and the labor movement in general.

My interest in analyzing the southern California grocery worker’s strike comes from sadness about what is and a desire for what can be. I want people, workers, to organize their collective power, taste that power, and use it successfully. I tasted it once, when I was a bicycle messenger in San Francisco. In 2000 my co-workers and I organized against very crappy wages and conditions and for worker control at the company. We actually won big, and we did it outside union channels and without negotiating a written contract. To my surprise, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (the official union trying to organizing bike messengers in San Francisco) impeded us in many respects. My “union, yes” attitude was shaken up by the experience, leading to important questions and interesting possibilities.

The UFCW “strategy” employed in the southern California grocery workers’ strike was dead on arrival. Many strikers and observers believe the union didn’t do enough before, during, and after the strike to organize the workers, broaden the fight, and hurt the companies. Ray Rogers of Corporate Campaign, Inc., a firm that helps unions strategize, put it bluntly: “With that number of workers idled full-time..., with the proper direction, support, and strategy, they not only should be able to win a strike, they ought to win a revolution.” The UFCW is the AFL-CIO’s biggest union, with 1.4 million members. It has enormous human and material resources, and yet it led its strong and determined members to defeat.

“Now it’s just another job, not like it used to be. It’s no career anymore. Everybody lost respect and trust in the union, and of course, we don’t trust the store.... We didn’t win anything; in fact we lost a lot,” says Lydia Baouni, who invested almost 30 years of work in the unionized grocery

store industry. Things haven’t worked out the way she expected. She worked full-time at Safeway until two years ago, when she moved to Ralphs after being dismissed from Safeway for pursuing charges of sexual harassment in the workplace. At Ralphs she started at the bottom, working part-time as a courtesy clerk, bagging groceries and servicing the deli. She went from making \$19 an hour as a daily manager and training coach to making less than \$7 an hour.

Lydia was a shop steward for UFCW Local 770 at the Silver Lake store in the Los Angeles area until just before the recent strike. She stepped down from the position because she didn’t like what she saw in the union. “When you ask questions [of the union] and they don’t have answers for you and are completely rude to you, why do I have to force myself to be 100% with them?”

Even so, at the urging of her fellow workers, Lydia took on the role of picket captain at her store when the strike began in October 2003. She is very proud of her picket crew for the tenacity and strength they showed in holding the line for four-and-a-half months. They faced many hardships, including losing homes and cars, facing eviction, and going for months without health care. For working 30 to 40 hours a week on the picket line, strikers were paid \$240 in the beginning, and later \$100, while enduring winter rains, black smoke-filled skies from the raging southern California fires, threatening thugs, and an unprepared and uncommunicative union.

Lydia says the union’s “lack of communication is the number one reason things are falling apart” for the workers. The lack of communication and accountability from UFCW officials to union members came up repeatedly in my interviews with workers and community-based strike supporters. The union didn’t communicate to the workers about what was happening with the strike, so as Lydia spent each day and night on the picket line, her friends shared with her what they learned from the television news.

You might expect a union to provide its members with all information pertinent to making an informed decision about their future in the workplace. You might also expect a union to allow time for members to consider the details of a contract and to hold meetings to answer questions about it. That did-

n't happen with the UFCW in southern California. Eighty-six percent of the workers voted "yes" to a contract at the end of February 2004. The contract was nearly 30 pages long, but the members say they only received a partial summary. The union said it was the best contract workers were going to get and suggested they vote "yes." Workers were asked to vote on the contract on the spot or by the next day without any union-wide discussion.

What disappointed Lydia most during the strike was the union's decision to pull pickets from Ralphs stores a month into the strike. She was told, as the picket captain, to come to a late-night meeting regarding a secret that would be revealed the next day. At the meeting she learned that her crew would be moved from picketing their own store to picketing a Vons store because the union wanted "to give consumers a shopping option." At noon the next day, a union official told everyone to leave Ralphs. "I asked why and refused to leave, so he said, 'If you don't move the police are going to put you all in jail.' We were tired and mad. I said, 'I'm not going to move and my people are behind me.' So he asked everybody to move and they said 'No, we're behind her.' They brought a lawyer and all these people from the union. They tried to explain to us that they had made a contract with the store that if we didn't move they'd put us in jail. They even had our [strike pay] checks at the other store."

At Vons, her crew had to fight with customers, managers, and scabs as if it were day one. Saying the strikers were in their territory, thugs intimidated them by firing guns into the air, throwing eggs at them, and threatening to beat them up. Lydia says she stayed at the picket line from 7:00am until midnight because she didn't want anything to happen to her "girls," as she referred to the many single mothers on her crew. According to Lydia, the union did nothing to help and said there was no better location to offer them. Union officials, though, say they dispatched people to handle many of the frequent reports of violence against picketers. The strikers remained at Vons for nearly three months before they returned to picketing their own store. The union returned pickets to some Ralphs stores in mid-January after it became clear that the "big three" stores had made a deal with each other to share profits, thereby softening the financial impact of the strike, and taking advantage of the increase in sales at Ralphs due to the removal of the pickets. The strike and lockout ended just over a month later.

The Contract

The contract signed at the end of February made many concessions. The union made no gains; they just staved off some of the cuts the companies wanted. The average southern California grocery worker makes less than \$22,000 annually. It's the benefits and pay progressions which come with unionized grocery store positions that have made these jobs desirable for working-class people, especially women, young



people, and single mothers. All that has changed with the new contract. A two-tier plan has been instituted in the stores, with one benefit and pay scale for new hires and one for current workers (those workers who were already employed by the companies when the strike and lockout began).

Multi-tier systems have become commonplace in union contracts. These systems effectively create a hierarchical work environment with people doing the same work for different pay. Upon returning to work, many grocery workers found their hours cut, with new hires given the cut hours at less pay. The new pay scale gives new hires as much as \$4 less an hour for the same work. To make matters worse, the duties of lower-paying positions have been expanded to include work formerly completed by workers in higher-paid positions.

While the union managed to prevent the creation of separate health benefit funds for new workers and current workers, the contract significantly reduces the health care costs of the employers at the expense of the workers. First, not only did the eligibility rules change so that new hires are ineligible for health benefits until the end of their first year of employment, but they also have to wait a year-and-a-half after that before their dependents can be covered. Second, insurance premiums are to be paid by all new hires, and beginning in the third year of the contract, current workers will be expected to pay premiums for their coverage as well. Finally, the employers now contribute approximately \$3 less per hour worked to the employee health benefit fund. These and other changes mean less, or no, health coverage for workers and their families. (For more information on estimates of the impact of this contract on workers and Californians in general, see <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/press/index.shtml>.)

As for the pension fund, again the union managed to prevent the companies from creating separate funds for new hires and current workers, but big reductions were made in employer contributions. Although very few new hires will likely stay with the companies long enough to get a pension, new hires now earn about half (80¢ per hour worked) of what current employees make.

The most devastating aspect of the new two-tier system is



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something that many workers themselves did not understand when they voted on the contract. As current workers accept promotions into new departments, they are now paid the new employee wage! For example, under the old contract Cornelio Higuera, another Ralphs employee and a Local 770 member, was working between 30 and 40 hours a week, making \$17.90 for half of it and \$7.50 for the other half, depending on which position he was scheduled for. After returning from 141 days on strike, he was offered and accepted a promotion to the seafood department where he now works fewer hours and makes \$7.55 under the tiered system.

When I asked Rick Icaza, the millionaire president of Local 770 (the largest UFCW local in southern California, with 20,000 grocery clerk members) why strikers say they are finding out the hard way that they, too, are subject to the two-tier system, he said such knowledge was “clear and unequivocal” before the signing of the contract and that Cornelio “shouldn’t have accepted the promotion.” I told him that when Cornelio tried to retract the promotion after he got his first paycheck, management told him it was too late. Icaza suggested he file a grievance. Cornelio and many other strikers and strike supporters said the union totally ignores its members. If the union responds at all, it is to blame the contract and claim its “hands are tied.”

Besides the pay and health care cuts, the grocery workers (unless they are among the many who have already quit been laid off) are also being harassed at work using provisions of the new contract and the strike settlement agreement. The companies were given a 21-day period to do whatever scheduling and logistical changes were necessary to get stores up and running again. The contract also allows the companies to relocate workers to stores within a 25-mile radius of their home, and there’s nothing the workers can do about it. Those who were more militant on the picket line are feeling the heat, with transfers, shift changes, fewer full-time positions, and layoffs. One shop steward was transferred to three different stores within 24 hours. The strike totally altered the work environment, with low morale, feelings of betrayal by the union and the companies, and exhaustion. Adding fuel to the

fire, strikers are working alongside scabs, as allowed by the contract. Workers say at least two scabs remain at each store, with many more working in the bigger stores. Furthermore, management forbids any talk about the strike, and even the use of the word “scab” is prohibited at jobsites.

In brief, the result of the contract is that workers who struck got the short end of the stick, losing what they had and gaining nothing. Unionized grocery work will change as the two-tier system is fully implemented: relatively decent wages and benefits will be largely replaced by unlivable wages and benefits. All this happened while 70,000 workers put themselves on the line for nearly five months, hoping the power of their collective actions, and their union’s strategy, would prevail. Maybe it should be no surprise that they didn’t.

What’s History Got to Do with it?

The UFCW is an amalgamation of many kinds of workers. It was formed in 1979 by the merging of the Retail Clerks International Union and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters union. Since then it has absorbed many others, from the Insurance Workers International Union to the United Garment Workers of America. The southern California UFCW locals are not used to fighting; last winter was the first time they were engaged in a serious battle with the grocers. But some of the union officials had previously been involved in big UFCW struggles.

Ex-International president Doug Dority had been with the UFCW for decades. His name is closely linked to the infamous 1985 Hormel meatpacking struggle in Austin, Minnesota. The UFCW local there, Local P9, leveraged its considerable power and spirit in order to win higher wages and address the serious safety issues at the plant. The International urged the members of the local to go on strike, and they did, for nine months. They created a strong community of workers and worker-supporters. They used the union hall as a community center where they shared skills and resources with one another. Apparently, however, P9ers were becoming too autonomous by trying to raise their wages several dollars above the standard pay of other UFCW meatpackers. So the UFCW got organized—they put the local into trusteeship and negotiated a concessionary contract.

According to Ray Rogers of Corporate Campaign, Bill Wynn, then-UFCW International president, sent Doug Dority to undermine P9’s efforts. Seven years ago, at a Laborers International Union conference, Dority made an eye-opening admission. Rogers explains what happened:

“I walked up to Doug, and said, ‘Ya know, you still have a terrible situation in the whole meatpacking industry, and you could really use our help.’ Doug responded, ‘The problem with you, Ray, is that you attack the people you work for.’ I said, ‘Wait a minute. I was working for and representing Local P9. Are you talking about that situation?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Why was it that an international union that couldn’t spend

one penny to help out these workers who were fighting so hard against concessions but they could spend millions of dollars [on] 30 organizers, 30 rent-a-cars, and 30 hotel rooms to undermine and destroy everything that this union and my organization were fighting for.' He looked at me and said, 'I'm the guy that sent them in.' So, I looked at him and said, 'You should be real proud of yourself, you set the labor movement back decades.' He was then real anxious to get away from me."

Dority isn't the only UFCW official with a duplicitous history. Joe Hansen, the man who recently took over as International president, was also in Minnesota at the time of the Hormel strike, working as assistant to the regional director. According to Jim Guyette, the president of Local P9 during that strike, "Joe Hansen was the guy who sold the Austin workers down the road." He was involved in negotiating the contract that meant many of the strikers wouldn't get their jobs back and created a two-tier system in the plant. "Unfortunately," Guyette says, "the most militant trade unionists find themselves without a job. They're the ones that buy the union line on how to win a strike, and those are the ones the union never gets back to work." After working for over 18 years in a plant, Guyette himself became one of those workers. Ray Rogers says the meatpacking industry has never recovered from the concessions made by the union and is still one of the most horrendous and dangerous industries in the United States (for more on this, read *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*).

Comparing the Hormel strike with the southern California grocery strike, Guyette says the "same method of operation" was used by the UFCW. His advice to UFCW workers who are considering a fight-back strategy: "You have to understand your union doesn't always have the same interests that the membership has. You have to look at the UFCW in the context of what's best for them. Their method of operation has been retrenchment and trading full-time jobs for part-time jobs."

The Devil in the Details

Everyone, even UFCW officials, agrees that the fight should have been a national one. Union officials, however, told me that the necessity of employing a coherent, multi-faceted national strategy only became obvious in hindsight. For the most part, the struggle was isolated to southern California, even though other UFCW contracts expired at the same chain stores around the country, and other UFCW grocery worker strikes took place around the same time and over the same basic issues. No attempt was made to use the national power of the union to fight the national companies and their national resources. The union handled, and continues to handle, each contract negotiation individually or regionally. Both Rick Icaza and Ron Lind, secretary-treasurer of San Jose Local 428, declared that the grocery stores "are no longer regional," family-owned operations—as if to suggest that prior to this, it hadn't dawned on

them that they represent workers at stores that are giant chains stretching across the country and, in the case of Safeway, into Canada. Although union officials acknowledge that the need for a national campaign is now obvious, the union's actions around the country show otherwise.

Both Icaza and Lind said the companies' hard line was out of character, implying that that's why the union was caught off-guard. "Safeway and the union had a bond. [Safeway CEO] Steve Burd changed that," said Lind. Sounding a little forlorn and still surprised by the companies' approach, Icaza lamented, "We had a working relationship with the industry that was a win/win situation."

Icaza even told me that it wasn't a surprise that the stores intended to make big cuts during these contract negotiations. In fact, the UFCW had over a year's advance warning that the companies planned, as Burd put it, "to narrow the gap in every single negotiation without exception" by freezing wages or offering lump-sum payments; establishing a market-based rate for new hires; offering voluntary buyouts to senior employees; redesigning health-care packages; containing pension increases; and striving for more liberal work rules. Those are Burd's paraphrased comments as they were posted on the UFCW website, and excerpted from the November 18, 2002 issue of *Supermarket News*. Furthermore, Bernie Hesse, head of organizing for UFCW Local 789 in Minneapolis, told me a real campaign "should have been set up two years ago when Safeway started sending out VHS tapes to workers saying, 'This is the economy we're in, and we're paying X amount an hour more than our competitors and we need to survive.'" So, the union knew it was coming, but didn't prepare for the fight. Workers say they didn't even know they would be striking until three days beforehand.

In explaining its hard line, the grocery industry said it needed to reduce wages and health-care costs because of the "Wal-Mart threat" and the need to be able to compete with the low-wage, non-union employer. The UFCW in southern California countered that Wal-Mart plans to build "only" 40 stores in California over the next four years, taking just 1% of the market share. Even so, a short time before the strike and lockout, the UFCW raised membership dues in order to build a fund to prevent Wal-Mart from coming into the region. In April, a campaign in which the UFCW participated successfully prevented Wal-Mart from building a store in Inglewood, California. The UFCW has embarked on union drives at various Wal-Marts around the country, but hasn't won a battle with the giant yet. So instead, they're spending union money to fight Wal-Mart's expansion. (Wal-Mart is the biggest private employer in the United States, with over one million workers. Its record on labor issues here and abroad, environmental issues, and the destruction of locally owned stores is atrocious.)

Union officials also point to Wal-Mart when discussing the cuts in the southern California contract. Minneapolis's

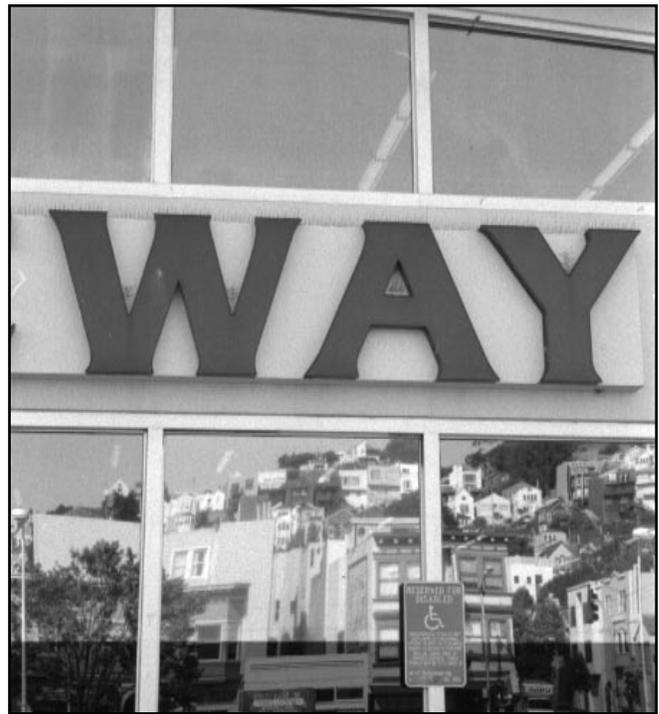
Bernie Hesse said, “These jobs, even though they took an ass-kicking, are still the premier jobs in retail because they’re organized, they have benefits, and for the most part these jobs pay a living wage. If you go to the unorganized side of retail—Wal-Mart, Target, Kmart—most of these jobs are not even close to this.” Unfortunately, as a result of this contract, there are significantly fewer grocery jobs paying a living wage. Unlivable union wages are a bad advertisement for unions. It’s no wonder many potential union members reject unionization on the basis of paying dues—it’s hard to make the argument for dues when many union members make \$7 an hour and others are laid off after taking collective action.

The executives and shareholders of the grocery stores lost more than \$2 billion in collective revenue as a result of the strike, but they consciously took such a hit in order to lower their labor costs and divide and conquer their workforce with a two-tier wage and benefit system. In fact, Steve Burd called the losses an “investment in our future.” Last year, while the supermarkets cried “Wal-Mart,” they profited in the billions. Now, they’re hoping to impress shareholders and raise stock prices with lowered costs of doing business in southern California and the presumption that they will produce similar results as more contracts expire around the country.

The UFCW leadership defends this strike as a victory. The fact that the workers held the line and stuck it out for as long as they did is a sign of solidarity and determination, for sure. Icaza says the economic hit the stores took as a result of the strike is a victory for the workers. But let’s not forget that Safeway and Albertsons are Fortune 50 companies. Safeway’s annual revenue (not profit) is larger than the revenues of corporations like McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and PepsiCo. Who truly, tangibly took a hit from the strike is the workforce that stayed on the picket line, not the shareholders of the companies, or the local union officials who make up to \$200,000 annually. Though Doug Dority said that employers everywhere got the message “that attempts to eliminate health care benefits will come at a high price,” that price isn’t high enough! (For more information on tactical and operational lessons learned, see the April 2004 issue of *Labor Notes*.)

Many workers and community supporters were disturbed that so many goods made it onto store shelves during the strike. The UFCW didn’t put up pickets at the distribution centers until over a month into the strike, when the stores were already stocked for Thanksgiving, and those pickets stayed for only a few weeks. Why this happened isn’t exactly clear; Icaza says the union waited for the go-ahead from the Teamsters, the union representing the workers who drive trucks from the distribution centers to the stores, and that pickets were removed when the Teamsters’ strike funds ran out. This situation highlights the lack of coordination between the two unions.

Most of the time, when the distribution centers weren’t being picketed, truckers drove to the stores and turned their



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engines off near the picket lines instead of parking at the loading area as they normally do. Some drivers didn’t go any further, while others left ignition keys on the seat, allowing managers or scabs to take the truck the rest of the way. Some Teamsters called in sick and showed solidarity with the grocery workers in other ways.

“It doesn’t matter how much stuff gets into the stores,” according to Ron Lind of the San Jose local. He is also the spokesperson for the UFCW Bay Area Coalition, which represents eight locals with contracts expiring September 11, 2004.

If a union is a structure within which workers build power and solidarity together, then efforts to encourage that must happen all the time, not just in reaction to a particular negotiation period. The work of a union is to defend the immediate interests of the workers, but even within this limited framework they didn’t deliver. The excuse that they were unprepared for the fight because grocery industry negotiations have always been smooth ignores that they had over a year’s warning that the companies planned something different this time. It also reveals huge holes in the union’s overall mission.

Union, Yes?

Most unions in this country, including the UFCW, appear to be purely on the defensive—struggling to maintain what they have, not pushing for more. This is a sad reality. Workers make the world go round, while a small, wildly demented, and shortsighted elite direct which way it spins. As long as thinking critically about unions and rethinking working-class strategies for gaining economic, social, and political power are regarded as either anti-union or a handshake with the bosses, the working class will suffer from a lack of strategy and vision.

A labor union is nominally an alliance of workers set up

to advance the interests of wage earners, and those interests can be defined narrowly or broadly. I'd like to see new kinds of unions, ones that are understood as organizational bodies from which workers not only build power to determine wages and benefits and to ensure safe working conditions, but also that function as power bases in alliance with the communities in which workers live. As it is now, a clear dichotomy exists that asks us all to see our lives in at least two parts—as workers, and then separately as people living our lives. In that separation, we lose power. If we look at our work and ask, “What purpose does this job serve?” and “Does this job support the development of the kind of world I would like to live in?” we will often find that we are working against ourselves. This realization can help us determine how to focus our collective energies not just on immediate needs, but on long-term visions as well.

There are many repetitive, dangerous, and meaningless jobs that serve only to maintain the capitalist system while creating inequality and destroying the environment. Unions today don't address how the narrowness of their struggles actually works against the people they claim to represent. When workers' struggles focus only on specific working conditions, keeping their immediate work interests separate from all other interests, they actually reinforce the system that enslaves them.

A lot of important work doesn't get done, while a lot of destructive work does. Teachers and nurses are being laid off everywhere, not because we need them less but because there is less profit in caring than in killing. Creating sustainable food systems; ratcheting up the development of new energy systems; developing more options for recycling and reusing “waste”; facilitating the spread of new and old practices for revitalizing polluted water, air, and soil; designing more public space for arts, education, and recreation—these are all endeavors that a visionary society might choose to undertake.

But as working-class people, we don't have conversations about the value or the appropriateness of the work we do, nor is it in the interest of unions in their current forms to promote these conversations. At their (rare) best, union decisions are made democratically, participation by the rank and file is high, and workers make gains on the job. At their (all-too-common) worst, none of this is true, and instead unions like the UFCW seem to purposefully work against even the immediate interests of workers.

At first glance it may seem paradoxical, but unions have more in common structurally with the bosses than the workers. Neither would make money if not for the workers, and both rely on the predictability of the workforce in order to maintain their positions. Just as employers aren't interested in workers gaining the collective power needed to make changes to the current set-up, neither are unions, because they lose credibility as workers act outside the established protocols. A really organized group of workers is likely to come up with its

own demands and tactics, which would create problems for the union officials whose job it is to make sure that workers play by the rules. In other words, it's not in the interest of union officials for workers to become a strong and unified force; it's not in their interest to truly organize the workers. This is easily seen in the UFCW struggle: with all the human and material resources at their command, if the UFCW had truly wanted to organize workers, they certainly would have.

The UFCW, and most unions today, attempt to increase membership by promising “job security.” Not unlike “national security” in a capitalist-run world, “job security” is propaganda. It's a fraud. When the power of unions has been largely curtailed by labor laws to the advantage of bosses; when most contracts contain no-strike clauses; when the legal way to handle an unjust firing or demotion is to file a “grievance” that won't find its way through the National Labor Relations Board process for years; when, in short, all aspects of the relationship between bosses and workers are made predictable through the union contract, there can be no promise of job security. When companies pick up and leave the country to reap the benefits of some other workers' cheaper labor, there is no job security. To suggest otherwise is a lie, and yet unions do it all the time.

We could be deciding what's important to us, and what we'd like our lives to look and feel like. But instead of talking about what work is worth doing for the sustainability and health and joy of all life, the discussion is about which jobs we want to protect from being mechanized or taken to workers across the border; it's about keeping crappy non-union jobs out, so we can maintain our often crappy union jobs. No wonder union membership continues to diminish—there's so little vision, so little connection made to the other aspects of our lives.

70,000 people in southern California experienced a long strike and all that comes with it. Those workers saw their bosses and their union in action. The vast majority of them had probably never been involved in anything like it, and many say they were changed by it. People tasted solidarity and felt the hierarchies of class like never before. Craig Bagne, from a Manhattan Beach Ralphs store, tells a story about a box boy who was a troublemaker on the picket line. “A union representative and I were on our way to another store and we asked the box boy to come with us. The union rep told him if he wasn't willing to fight then to get out of here. Weeks later, he began to show up at rallies, then he wanted the bullhorn, and after that he was out there leading the charge. It's incredible to see people change.... a box boy, a natural born leader.”

What kind of organizing will bring the “box boy leader” and the rest of us working-class folks into strong, strategic, and visionary movements that work together to up-end the system? Are there ways to change unions and make them strong advocates and organizing bodies for all working-class concerns? Or do we need to scrap them altogether and create

new organizations with new ideas and strategies? Or is doing some of both the answer? What we largely have now in the labor movement is not just bad leadership, but institutional stagnation and backwardness. The world has changed a great

deal since trade unionism began, and a reassessment of unions is overdue. I hope it starts by discussing our visions of what we want our lives and our communities to look like.

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PHOTO: ZOE NOE

Neighborhood protests in San Francisco's Noe Valley have met the closing of a local organic food market with steady opposition.