

Working Peoples' Assemblies

Sam Gindin

In Canada and elsewhere there is currently a wide range of impressive constituency-based struggles around specific issues. But without some broader coherence to these movements, this fragmented politics leaves us frustratingly marginalized in terms of reversing and reshaping the larger agenda. The lack of a sustained political response to the financial crisis from the Left or the labour movement in North America has been illustrating all too starkly our current organizational limits.

Because it has no transformative vision of society, the New Democratic Party (NDP) cannot be the solution. The notion of 'mobilizing' that dominates in the NDP reduces to an electoralism that ignores – and is often even threatened by – building the kind of popular understandings, political capacities and organizational forms that can actually win substantive reforms, let alone change the world. The socialist Left, whether 'independent' or in formal groups, is also at an impasse; the same goes for the anti-globalization and social-justice movements. There are no political tracts waiting on a dusty shelf somewhere to provide either conceptual or practical answers. And so, the question is: What kind of new organizational experiments can we initiate that might hold out some promise?

NEW ORGANIZING CENTRES

In the spring of 2006, a small but impressive group of American activists came together to initiate a 'Center for Labor Renewal' (CLR). The group included long-time union activists, local union leaders, representatives of worker centres (in the U.S. there are some 135 such centres servicing unorganized workers) and a smattering of academics. Of the thirty-or-so participants, one third were women. And, of the group as a whole, a slight majority were people of colour. The meeting took place in Washington, D.C., but included people from New York, Miami, Seattle, the Midwest and two Canadians. The larger context of the meeting was the combination of heightened attacks on working class standards and the failures of the formal U.S. labour movement to develop a matching response – whether in specific unions, via an AFL-CIO reform group that came to power with much promise in the mid-nineties, or in the recent split in the AFL-CIO itself. These frustrations with the stagnation in the formal U.S. labour movement led to the CLR discussions about a fresh organizational form based on "new strategies, new alignments and new objectives." That organizational form was dubbed "Working Peoples' Assemblies."

There have of course been multiple examples of similar-sounding initiatives around for some time in the developing world, especially in Latin America (Argentina, Venezuela and Bolivia).

As well, the World Social Forum and its regional spin-offs seemed to represent the embryo of just such a project. And, ever since the free trade debates of the mid-eighties, Canadian activists like Tony Clarke have thrown around the possibility of establishing a 'Popular Assembly.' So, what makes this latest initiative any more interesting or promising?

It's useful to step back and review the core thinking that is bringing us to this point. First, the traditional left identification of the 'working class' with the unionized sector simply won't do any more – especially in the U.S., where only about one in ten American workers belong to a union, or in Canada with less than one in three. The need to broaden the scope of whom we include in working class activism couldn't be any clearer. To hammer this point further home, the largely non-union Latino section of the American working class has been crucial to labour mobilizations in the last several years. Second, even among unionized workers, workers' needs and potentials have been narrowed to their role as wage earners. But the experience of class oppression is experienced in our communities and homes, as well as at work, and the making of the working class into a social force depends upon recognizing and developing the capacities of workers as more than sellers of labour power. Third, and overlapping the above, a movement that truly aims to contribute to building a working class that can transform itself into a collective agent capable of transforming society needs a vision. Absent such a vision, talk of reform and revival has no anchor to sustain or orient struggles.

NECESSARY STEPS

This perspective led to the fresh take on popular assemblies. The starting point is not to launch a pre-formed set of local assemblies, but to begin a process of organizational connections and developments (the following indicative of the steps the Workers' Assembly in Toronto has followed over the last year and a half). Step one might be to identify, in a range of urban centres, all those groups currently involved in actions and activities to defend or extend working class rights and needs. This would, for example, include local unions, anti-poverty and unemployment groups, groups servicing immigrant workers, those fighting anti-racism or involved in women's shelters, groups working with street youth, international solidarity groups, etc. A second step might engage these groups in a discussion of the limits of their own struggles and how we might, within a larger collectivity, address those limits. This would include one-on-one discussions initiated by members of the initiating group, discussion papers circulated to groups for their input, and small meetings for frank and sober exchanges of goals, strategies and tactics.

Out of that experience, it might be possible to identify a few urban centres where there is genuine interest in establishing a 'Working Peoples' Assembly.' This assembly would not simply be another 'forum' for the occasional meeting, or focus upon a particular campaign with the consequent tendency to dissolve as everyone returns to her/his own world at the campaign's end. Rather, each city-wide assembly would be a permanent structure made up of representatives of the various groups that met regularly, had an elected and accountable executive and began moving toward pooling resources for mutual support (like a common newsletter, website, educational forums, pamphlets), initiating new campaigns (for example, improving and expanding public transit as part of a worker-environmental-equality coalition) and eventually moving toward developing an independent political platform. Whether this would lead to supporting candidates who endorsed that program or running independent candidates is something that would be resolved later – the focus of unity being the importance of developing that independent working class platform collectively. Though the assemblies would be built locally, the dynamics of their functioning would force the crucial question of a national coordinating body, since job issues, immigration issues, environmental issues and the impact of American imperialism upon human rights at home must all reach beyond the local. As well, the ideology of solidarity and the need to learn from other struggles implies an internationalist sensibility and incorporating support for these struggles.

A political point needs to be made here. No particular group, such as the Center for Labor Renewal, could or should try to make, the Assemblies into its 'political arm.' Rather the intent is to act as a catalyst for the creation of new kind of working class organization that can contribute to the rebuilding of the working class movement and to the creation of a space within which socialists might play a role in influencing where that movement goes.

Two questions immediately crop up. First, is it at all realistic to think there is the capacity to make such an ambitious project possible? Second, is this relevant to Canada, where our unionization levels are so much higher, where the NDP provides a political choice beyond the Republicans and Democrats, and where there is no comparable base below of diverse worker centres?

BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Of course, no group currently has the capacity to pull such an initiative off. However, there exist an impressive amount of educational resources, some funding and a great deal of activist experience from the battles against the neoliberalism since the 1980s in virtually every urban centre of modest size in Canada. But such a perspective and needed capacities do not appear magically, but might be developed in the very process of building the assemblies: attracting new people to an exciting project with possibilities; convincing progressive union locals that this is the project that carries hope (and there are a good number of them locally in spite of the general crisis in organized labour); discovering more about the lay of the land through the political mapping of communities and the corresponding exchanges with vari-

ous groups; learning how to work collectively and democratically with diverse sections of the working class; rejuvenating movements already out there, but struggling alone, and pooling some of our collective resources; overcoming the fatalism that saps the mobilizing energy of workers and activists; and so forth.

It would, on the other hand, be a serious mistake to rush into any such project and underestimate the difficulties that will surely emerge. Even if we were able to get it started, it could not be sustained without a great deal of creativity and organizational work. Our history is littered with projects initiated amid high expectations and newfound enthusiasm, which then floundered because of a lack of preparation and direction.

Yet, what else shows any promise? At a minimum, the idea seems worthwhile to pursue and explore with others. And any serious Left will at least have to take the first step in such a project – whatever its overall strategy – mapping the various dimensions of working class struggles that already exist in our communities. As part of this process, discussions would need to begin on some potential common campaigns. These might vary from place to place, but could include the example raised above – access to and extension of public transit – as well as city-wide mobilizations to support immigrant-based struggles in the hotel sector; getting rid of temp agencies and replacing them with union hiring halls; addressing the right to adequate housing; taking on hospital privatization through P3s; mobilizing to establish city-wide elected job boards to link community needs with underutilized community capacities; and education campaigns to revive, within each of our particular struggles, broader national and international struggles (from free trade to justice for the Palestinian people to opposition to the imperialist interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq).

BUILDING A LARGER PROJECT IN CANADA?

As for its relevance to Canada, it is true that our labour movement is not in as bad shape as the U.S. movement, but the problem of scope (reaching beyond those unionized or likely to be unionized) is clearly also of crucial importance, here. So, too, is the need to rethink the expressions of class resistance beyond the workplace. It is equally evident that the NDP is not the answer, ideologically or organizationally, to bringing the working class into motion. And though we do not have quite the base of local worker centres that the U.S. does, there are certainly a good number of groups doing impressive work in each of our communities.

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It's in this context that the idea of 'popular local assemblies' has been proposed. The essence of the idea is straightforward. Given the scale and scope of what we face, organizing around specific issues and particular constituencies—as impressive and energetic as all this has been — cannot add up to the kind of strength we need to bring about change. Can popular, community-based assemblies, which would bring various movements together into a democratic and permanent structure, become the first step toward building a larger project? Are popular assemblies the way to link these local structures into social forces of regional and national significance?

Of course, the creation of structures that crisscross these fragmented struggles has been tried before. And in this sense it is necessary to concede that the outcome has generally been mixed. For this reason, we need to spell out what might be different this time.

First, coalitions around particular issues or particular constituencies in movements tend to fade as the issue or movement fades. While leaving some important experiences and lessons behind, they have rarely built something permanent. The emphasis on creating permanent structures on the Left is therefore critical.

Second, the insistence on the local as a starting point reflects a rejection of a politics that tends to outsource its initiatives to distant meetings. In this way, we end up replacing taking action with simply meeting each other or in working on publicity campaigns. The assemblies must be based on directly acting and learning as we discuss and plan, so that movement skills and capacities are broadened and deepened.

Third, though such a structure would include pooling resources to support each of our specific struggles, the goal here is much more ambitious. Ultimately, it is to get each of these movements to identify with struggles beyond their particular concerns. On the one hand, this means the assemblies introducing initiatives that any individual group simply couldn't put on the agenda by themselves. The idea of a radical extension of affordable public transit, raised above, was an example put forward by John Clarke, of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), as an issue that could bring together environmentalists, anti-poverty groups without access to private transportation, immigrant workers who spend hours commuting to their jobs in the centre of the city and transit unions concerned about jobs.

CHALLENGING THE SUBORDINATION OF EVERYTHING TO THE MARKET

Building assemblies is not just about broader but still specific campaigns. It is also about facing up to the larger ideological, economic and political barriers that confront us. Whatever the issue — the environment, poverty, health care, or jobs — we come up against the dominant push of the last quarter century to subordinate everything, including democracy, to the needs of profits and competitiveness. If we're not building a capacity to challenge this form of social rule, which has penetrated all political

parties, then our particular struggles will inevitably remain limited.

Moreover, rather than retreating from the notion of class politics, the assemblies would explicitly recognize that what we are primarily — if not exclusively — resisting is an attack on the working class, broadly defined. This is clear enough with regard to the groups and issues local movements are generally focusing on. And it means recognizing that, unless the most organized sections of the working class — unions — are involved, it will be hard to sustain any radical movement.

For their part, unions must begin to redefine how they address the issue of class. The commitment to unionization must be based not on numbers alone but a commitment to building all working people into a social force. What is more, existing union members must be seen as more than wage earners, but members of a class whose lives and potential development are—in a thousand everyday ways, both inside and outside the workplace—devalued, narrowed, distorted and even ultimately shattered. We have to start to change that.

POLITICAL MAPPING OF ONGOING STRUGGLES

Of course, the very concern with which we started—the fragmentation of movements within our communities—also applies to the assemblies. This is particularly true if they remain isolated from each other. We are convinced that as 'Working Peoples' Assemblies' grow in urban centres in Canada, and each of the assemblies develops a presence and set of priorities, they will naturally come face-to-face with what many of them already know: no issue is local, nor can be resolved locally — think of immigration, jobs, living wage, climate change, funding for child care, public transit and so forth. But the experience of the Assemblies will also point to the possibility of bringing the local Assemblies together — as they also inspire new ones to form — without losing the strength of their local orientation. As assembly of assemblies will therefore become fundamental to this project—and in turn raise further questions about the politics of change.

One place to begin such a project might be through 'political mapping' — that is, to work to identify in each community those groups doing progressive work and noting who and what they are addressing, the form this takes, their relative successes and barriers, where anti-neoliberal alliances might be deepened, and so forth. Such a mapping process, followed by small-group discussions around the interest in and potential of moving to a new stage of organization and activism, might serve as the catalyst for the local assemblies. **R**

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