

The essay below was written in 1987 by Harry DeBoer, a participant in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamster strike. Harry was among those wounded on "Bloody Friday." DeBoer remained true to his principles throughout his life, and in later years counseled many young workers. He died in 1992.

Corporations are increasingly taking advantage of workers. Despite huge profits, companies are demanding – and getting – big concessions. Where unions are able to get wage raises, many times the increases are small and don't keep pace with inflation. The standard of living is falling. Many workers can barely get by and their debts continue to climb. Non-unionized workers are especially hard hit. Low paid jobs are proliferating. Without the job protection of unions, unorganized workers face all kinds of attacks on their job conditions. Their hours are cut. They are laid off at the employers' whim with no seniority rules in force.

A New Mood

It need not be this way. The era of concessions, can, must and will come to an end. There's evidence of a new mood among workers. Unions report that some unorganized workers are asking for organizing drives. They want higher wages, better working conditions and on-the-job protection that come with union membership. One senses a greater desire among rank-and-filers to fight back. Big battles are ahead and I predict a major labor upsurge in the near future. This pamphlet is aimed at the leaders and participants of the battles to come. Strikes can be won.

A strike is always a last resort. That's how it should be. But these days, unless workers are prepared to strike, employers will not give workers a fair deal at the bargaining table. Workers need to be prepared to withhold their labor in order to obtain a just settlement. In the past few years, significant strikes have been lost. Workers who walk off the job are replaced by scabs. Major strikes have been broken. Workers have permanently lost their jobs. This has led some in the labor movement to wrongly conclude that strikes can no longer succeed. They point to the recent defeats and say, "What's the point of fighting?" As a result, unions have signed contracts with wholesale concessions, even though the employer could afford good wage raises and improved working conditions. Some unions, fearful of strikes, have resorted to alternative tactics such as public pressure campaigns. Some union leaders have proposed such tactics as a substitute for strikes. But while public pressure campaigns can help, if the employer knows that the union is not prepared to strike, such campaigns have much less chance of success. The employer will squeeze the union dry if he knows the union is not going to strike.

The 1934 Strike was a Model

I have confidence in the new generation of workers. I believe they will begin to turn toward labor militancy in order to achieve a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. The 1934 truck drivers strike in Minneapolis was a model of how to fight and win. We brought truck traffic to a standstill in the city,

we drove the scabs off the street and we won a decisive victory. We gained union recognition, won our first contract and came away with wage increases and improved conditions. Strikes in Minneapolis, Toledo and San Francisco in 1934 set off a wave of militant job actions that led the way to the formation of the great unions in this country. Those militant strikes of the 1930s forged the industrial unions that exist today. But during the 1950s, '60s and '70s, unions became more complacent. The picket line battles of earlier times subsided. Unions set up picket lines, generally expecting them to be honored and they were. But in the late 1970s and the 1980s, that changed. Employers became more aggressive. They tested the waters and found they could break strikes without too much trouble. Scabbing became more common. Years ago, no one dared cross a picket line. Today, in cities across the nation, workers can recount stories of employers who broke strikes by sending in scabs.

A Brief History of the Strike

There is only one way to win a strike: Shut the operation down. If it is a factory or other business, it cannot operate. If it is a transportation industry, it cannot move. A strike means all work must stop. It means that supervisors cannot be permitted to keep things going. It means scabs must be prevented from taking over the workers' jobs. Today, a strike cannot be won with a handful of pickets. It requires mass action in the street, led by the striking union. The 1934 Minneapolis truckers strike was, in reality, three strikes: the coal drivers strike in February, a broader strike in May, and a resumption of the strike in July in which we finally achieved victory. In the coal drivers strike, we did not have enough pickets at the beginning of the walkout to successfully close all the yards that were being struck. I organized what became known as cruising pickets. We could picket a gate, and let trucks that were still operating out of the coal yards so police would think the trucks were home free. We'd let the trucks get two or three blocks from the yard, drive up in cars, force the trucks to stop and pour the coal on the street. In several days, virtually all the coal truck driving operations had come to a halt.

It was a bitterly cold winter, families and businesses needed coal. The companies caved in and we won. Farrell Dobbs, another young Teamster leader and myself, were assigned to stay at the union hall in the evenings and sign up new members. They came by the thousands to join our union, Teamster local 574 (it's now called local 544). When workers see a leadership that knows how to fight and win, they will not hesitate to join. The February victory had made our union considerably stronger. In the May strike, the police recruited several deputies and handed them clubs to drive the strikers off the street. In one incident, some of our pickets were ambushed by police and a number of men and women pickets were beaten badly. We got some sticks in self-defense and, in a major street battle, drove the special deputies off the street. It became known as the Battle of Deputy's Run. In the July strike, which began after the companies reneged on their agreement with the union, the police opened fire on unarmed strikers. Two workers were killed and nearly 60 strikers were wounded, many of them shot in the back. This brutal attack backfired. Instead of weakening the union, it strengthened the workers' resolve, and drew even more public support to our side. Finally, in August 1934, the company accepted a

settlement, a giant victory for the Teamsters and the entire labor movement. The strike put Minneapolis on the road to becoming a union town, spurring organizing drives throughout the city and state and across the Midwest.

The School Books

The school books today don't tell much about labor's story. They have little to say about the rise of unions and the enormous sacrifices of workers in order to make this a better world. The employers would like workers to forget their past. Indeed, the bosses like to say that things are different now. They contend that the old fighting days are behind us, that militancy is ancient history. Some companies show workers expensive films, touting labor-management cooperation and "quality circle" meetings that encourage workers to meet with managers to solve the company's problems. Work faster, produce more, and above all, don't fight us – that's the company's line. These employers, with their slick appeals for collaboration, are invariably the same ones who go to the bargaining table to demand concessions and wage freezes from the union. The truth is that nothing has fundamentally changed in the relationship between employer and employees. The boss is still the boss. Only today, he hires high-priced union busting consultants who coat the union busting messages in syrup. "Collaborate with management" are often code words for undermining and breaking the union. Union leaders should understand the capitalist system. Our leaders in 1934 knew that the profit system drove the business leaders to try and break our union. While the union leadership did not attempt to press its revolutionary perspective on the membership, that perspective – and organization – were important to winning the strike.

What Workers Learned

What workers learned in the 1930s was that standing together in large numbers, they could beat back the union busters and win the necessary wage increases and improved conditions. Fifty years later that still applies. Workers today must take a militant stance in order to achieve success. Token picket lines are insufficient. Unions must organize mass picketing with hundreds or thousands of workers to stop any possibility of scabbing. Some union leaders say that's impossible today. Within a day or two, they argue, the employer will go to court and obtain an injunction to limit the number of pickets to three or four per gate. My answer: In 1934 we papered the wall with injunctions. The employer can always find some anti-union judge to sign a piece of paper. But strikes come down to a relationship of forces. If our forces are bigger and more powerful than theirs, we will win. But if we ignore the injunction and continue to mass picket, the police will arrest us, some union leaders argue. My answer: So be it. Let them fill the jails to overflow. The union should bail them out and get the mass of workers back on the picket lines, joined by fresh forces that have been angered by the arbitrary action of the authorities. We must keep the workplace we are striking shut down.

Leaders Can Make a Difference

Some union leaders contend that we cannot turn out masses of workers these days. The workers are too passive, such leaders say. But that is not so. There have been a number of major strikes in the United States in recent years where thousands of workers and their supporters have marched and rallied outside their plants. It's a reflection of the new militancy we see developing. Unfortunately, though it is clear in some cases that workers prepared to take action, the leadership in some strikes stop short of closing down the plant. The scabs keep going to work and the strike is lost. The leadership must take a fundamental step: Organize mass picketing and prevent scabs from entering the workplace. "How do you get thousands of workers out on the street to take such action?" you might ask. It's a good question. First, it requires leadership willing to take such steps. If you don't have fighters for leaders in your union, then you are going to have to elect new leaders. You need to put up slates of candidates who believe in union democracy and are willing to take on the employers. Second, you must develop a comprehensive strategy. No pamphlet can spell out all the problems and all the solutions to win a labor struggle. I can only lay out a method. However, there are some key factors to any comprehensive plan.

Successful strikes require the participation and support of the entire labor movement. Building that kind of broad-based support can actually prevent strikes. If the employer thinks that he is going to have to take on the whole labor movement of a city or state, he may think long and hard before forcing the workers out on strike. Local union leaders should approach city and state labor officials, explain what the bosses are trying to do to their union, and seek the support of these officials. Ask them to help and give them full credit when they do. Think big. Hold one or more mass rallies before the strike deadline with prominent labor speakers, using well-made leaflets and posters. Invite all the labor unions, not just your own. Be conscious of all aspects. Be sure that women and minorities play a big role. In some of our labor organizations in the 1930s, we sent organizers in among the unemployed and organized them as unemployed contingents of our union to join us on the picket lines. That should be done today. If the unemployed are organized on our side, it is far harder for the boss to use them as scabs. And they are the group employers approach first to break strikes. Placing big ads where possible in commercial and labor press to explain the union's case and list the unions that support you. Send representatives from your union to meetings of other unions to explain what you are fighting for. Get top labor leaders to write letters to all unions in the state, spelling out the issues, and ask them to endorse the rally, to send members to the rally, and to join union picket lines if a strike occurs. Think big. Then think bigger. Have workers throughout your plant and city wear buttons with slogans of support. See that articles about the issues are placed in the labor press and other news media. Hold news conferences with prominent labor people backing you up. Present union members to the public who are examples of workers who can barely make ends meet on the wages they are paid. A strike should be well organized and the 1934 Minneapolis strike is a classic case.

A book, *Teamster Rebellion* by Farrell Dobbs, gives the full story, and I highly recommend it to you. We had a commissary to feed strikers and their families. We served hot meals daily with food donated by sympathetic farmers and

grocers. This became a way of sustaining the strikers as well as a means of deepening solidarity among workers. The strike committee had a doctor and nurses on hand at the strike headquarters for workers who might be injured in the picketing. This proved extremely valuable. For the first time anywhere in the country, we put out a daily strike newspaper. It was called "The Organizer." During the strike you can frequently count on the editors of the pro-business media to try and distort the issues. You need your own publication to explain the issues and get out the truth about the strike. A daily strike newspaper can be a means to rally the strikers and their supporters and educate the public, winning new allies to the strikers' side. All kinds of solidarity efforts will be necessary.

You will want to approach other local unions, women's groups and community organizations. The object is to isolate the employer until the mass public pressure forces him to back down. Indeed, the greater the planning before the strike and the more solidarity you have from the rest of the labor movement, the less likely there will be a strike. The company may see that you are prepared and see the array of forces on your side and will be less inclined to take the union on. There also needs to be special concern for the welfare of the workers facing the most severe financial plight. A welfare committee should be prepared to meet with bill collectors or mortgage companies to forestall any problems. Workers should be reassured on these issues. Looking after the neediest workers becomes a top priority in a strike. I have seen walkouts where militants neglected those workers who then tried to go through the picket lines. What a tragedy! Such people would become the stoutest defenders of the union if the union took the time to be concerned about them. And that is the union's job.

How We Can Activate Our Union

"How can we activate our union?" you may ask. "Many of our members don't attend union meetings. All these ideas are great but our members won't participate." I believe the backbone of any union should be union democracy. The more democratic the union, the stronger it is. Frequently, members don't attend meetings because, when they do, it seems that all the decisions have already been made. Meetings must be opened up and made more democratic. All major decisions of the union should be made only after a discussion and vote of the membership. If you have undemocratic leaders, you must vote them out and elect democratic ones. Leaders who are fighters with a commitment to union democracy will attract increased activism from the rank-and-file. Union leaders should discuss their strategy openly with the membership. Rank-and-filers should be encouraged to take on major responsibilities in a comprehensive strategy. Discuss, plan and vote! As you find your union becomes more democratic, you will find many of your members wanting to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In Teamsters local 574 we had elected stewards that represented members in the various shops. We had an elected grievance board that met twice a month and listened to any worker who had a potential grievance. We had an elected negotiating committee.

And in the 1934 truck drivers strike in Minneapolis, we had an elected Committee of 100. This committee was a sounding board that met between regular union

meetings. Proposals by the leadership during the strike were first brought to the Committee of 100. The committee sifted through the proposals and reached decisions and carried those decisions back to the mass of workers. This democratic process strengthened the strike and kept the leadership in touch with what the membership wanted. Some union leaders disagree with this open style of democracy. During a strike or negotiations, they argue for the utmost secrecy. Often, I've found that such secrecy is really a ploy to make an unsatisfactory compromise behind the backs of the workers. Every settlement involves compromise. But the decisions of the union must be made by the membership. The demands should be voted on by the members. The members should determine when a demand is removed by the union from the bargaining table. The more democratic the union, the more involved the workers will become in the union. The less democratic the union, the less enthusiasm the members will have in the leadership when the employer forces the union into a showdown.

Shutting it Down

There are various ways to shut down a business and this pamphlet can't begin to address all of them. But here are some key methods. - Mass Picketing. This should be part of all strikes. By your very numbers you can prevent the plant from operating. - Sit-downs outside a plant. Sometimes to overcome the presence of large numbers of police or National Guard, the best tactic might be to set several thousand people down in front of the key doors or gates. They may haul you away in mass arrests. The union bails you out and you sit down again. - Sit-downs inside the plant. Sitdown strikes, a tactic used in the 1930s, ought to be considered a viable strike method today. It's much harder for bosses to get workers out of the building, once they are sitting inside. - Fink drives. Finks are scabs and fink drives were something we used when employers used scabs to reopen plants that were on strike. We took some of our best militant workers, entered the plant and drove the finks out. - Mass marches and rallies, as a way of building towards the mass picketing and other actions to shut the operation down.

Talking to Workers

Carl Skoglund, who later became president of our local, was the architect of the 1934 Minneapolis strike. He had been through many labor battles. He had a bad leg and I remember the night before the coal strike in February 1934, he put his arm on my shoulder for support as we walked back to our apartments. "Harry," he said to me, "a lot of workers may not understand what we are fighting for at first. We'll need to talk to them. Explain to them what this strike is about. Give them a chance to understand. Don't write them off before you've given them a chance." One of the first non-union drivers we stopped the next day proved Carl's point. We had followed a truck out of the coal yard and a few blocks away we converged on it. We explained to the driver what we were fighting for and why we were on strike. The man got angry. He told us that his boss had lied to him about what we were striking for. He jumped out of the truck and helped us dump his own load of coal on the street! That night, he went down to the union hall and

joined the union. After the strike, he became a loyal union steward. There is a lesson in this. It's necessary to explain to workers why you are on strike. And that goes for workers who have been hired as scabs. Many times, if you talk to these workers, they will end up siding with you. If they don't, of course, it is another story. But many times in this society, with so much anti-union propaganda, people develop hostile attitudes toward unions. Often times, explaining the issues can turn them around. That same open-mindedness is important in dealing with your co-workers who may not at first recognize the necessity of militant action, but will come around, once they see that it works.

Organizing the Unorganized

Many of the most important battles of the future will be waged on behalf of the unorganized workers. New mass efforts must be made to organize these workers into unions. Unions today tend to be made up of higher paid workers and union leaders sometimes forget where their unions came from. The same mass approach to victory on the picket line must extend to union organizing. Mass mobilizations of workers is needed for organizing drives. There should be rallies and participation of the entire membership in these drives, and efforts to get the support of the rest of the labor movement. During contract talks, bosses sometimes try to terrorize workers into submission. Employers threaten unions that are demanding higher wages with the possibility that the company will move away and seek cheaper, non-union labor markets elsewhere. If the company has a trained workforce locally, it may be nothing more than a scare tactic. But the union's response should be quick. If the boss moves his plant somewhere else, the union leaders should say, "We will send union organizers to your new location and organize them, there. If you go abroad, our international union will work to see that you are organized wherever you set up shop. Wherever you go, we will follow you. We will not allow you to exploit your workers. So you better put a reasonable package on the bargaining table, because it is not going to get any better for you elsewhere." A clear commitment to organizing is the best way to assure good contracts at workplaces that are organized. We had a motto in Local 574: "Every member an organizer." Over-the-road drivers would encourage workers to unionize wherever they went throughout the Midwest. It's a motto we should adopt today. The more workers we have in unions, the harder it will be for the employer to find workers who can break strikes. And it will help to make the union a greater force for progress and social justice. The union must be the champion of the underdog, the poor and the suffering. We must be concerned with single-parent families, the child who does not have enough to eat, the disabled, the victims of discrimination. We must speak out for the elderly, many of whom cannot eke out a living on their small pensions and social security. Fighting for them, we can restore the union to greatness. Their cause becomes our cause when we stand up for decent wages and conditions for all.