

100-Plus Labor Activists Assemble For Troublemakers Conference

By Daniel Gutiérrez and Victor Herzfeld
October 30, 2014

On Saturday, October 25th union members, community leaders, and student organizers gathered at Lincoln High School to attend the San Diego Troublemakers Conference, hosted by Labor Notes and the Coalition for Labor & Community Solidarity (CLCS).

The event attracted a wide array of attendees from multiple unions, neighborhoods, and campuses to address burning questions that face labor today. Speakers included various organizers, like folks from SEIU, United Taxi Workers of San Diego, Unión del Barrio, ARE, AFT, UAW, IWW, the Seattle Education Association, and a slew of others that deserve mention.

What made the event more remarkable than the list of invited speakers was the fact it was so well attended. More than 120 people gathered on an early Saturday morning to address the future of the labor movement in San Diego, nationally, and internationally.

The room sectioned for the opening remarks was chock full of people who sat in chairs, stood along the sides, sat in the aisles and waited at the door. Personal information was passed all around as people said to one another that we need solidarity and we need to work together.

They were willing to do this from 9 in the morning to 3:30 in the afternoon on one of the few days they have off. This should cause a good deal of excitement. More than a hundred working class folk were interested enough not only in talking about the problems they face, but in learning new strategies and perspectives.

A Sea Change is Possible:

The attendance and excitement of this event is indicative of the general mood in San Diego and the country, that people are ready to break with past patterns and set out in a path marked by a move to the left, and move toward direct independence.

You really should have seen the tangible excitement of people gathered for the opening remarks. There were cheers, claps, slow-claps, and some of the finest poetry I've ever heard, all at 9:30 in the morning. It became quite clear that a sea change is possible when one of the organizers from Labor Notes said, "We have to break the rules!" to a marvelous roar of cheer and clapping.

And just as impressive as everything else, was the acknowledgement by the workers themselves that there exists a need for a Left direction in labor, expanded into issues of social justice for all, and a return of a unionism based on the principle “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Furthermore, it was clear that labor should no longer play a defensive, reactive role, which is subordinate to the interests of business and politicians. Rather, labor should work in solidarity with other oppressed communities and strike an independent and defiant posture, to deal with the issues that confront working class communities today.

Recent examples of success when labor forces take an independent position are plentiful: In Seattle, not only was the minimum wage increased to \$15 but teachers also [organized to end standardized testing](#) at Garfield High School and sparked a wider movement against the practice. Meanwhile, in San Francisco, People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) [won free public transportation](#) for working class youth through the city of San Francisco.

Here in [San Diego both AFSCME Local 3299 and UAW Local 2865 secured contracts through solidarity strikes and direct action](#). The UAW won a bargaining campaign that secured a series of workspace rights to mothers, care-givers, immigrants, and transgender folk. And, of course, the Chicago teachers union through building community coalitions was able to defeat the privatization pushed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel in [2012](#).

Organize to Seize the Moment:

One of the more intriguing panels was held by CLCS, entitled “Building a Labor Left.”

The question the panel asked was: “How do we build a concerted, democratic, bottom-up, and politically independent coalition to advance the causes of working class people and communities?” Put more simply, “How do we work together in a democratic and united way?”

Who do we unite? We must unite the fragmented sectors of the working class. We unite workers from labor unions, students from universities and high schools, teachers everywhere, communities struggling to fight against their eradication, oppressed identities, sub-cultures, and peoples. We must also remember and assert that the working class is not uniformly or even of a majority made up of straight white males. We are women. We are migrants. We are LGBTQIA. We are Black. We are Brown. We are everything under the sun, and following the motto, “an injury to one is an injury to all” means that a victory for one should be a victory for all.

What are our issues? We must be guided through concrete political goals that serve to enthuse and mobilize even more workers for ever-greater mobilization and organization. These victories should be based on direct need of all workers, and not simply bread-and-butter issues. Not only would wages be on the table, but the unionists would stand in solidarity with communities and other exploited and oppressed groups and sectors of the city to fight for a variety of specific needs not just in the workplace.

What form should our organization take? But the most pressing issue is how? How do we do all of this? As said previously, through meetings such as these. We come together to see each

other face-to-face, and create new democratic structures that are driven by ourselves. Let us imagine, then, a bottom-up council of labor unions, and progressive organizations. A congress of workers, if you will, based on a city-wide level. Members of this council will be in committees representing unions, and community and activist organizations, including identity based associations and organizations.

The council will do two things: first, plan and execute its own organizing initiatives; and second act as a clearinghouse of resources for the actions of its member unions and organizations. Such a council would coordinate workers on one end and a clearinghouse of organizers and volunteers on the other. Thus, workers and community members could coordinate together, build trust and solidarity, share resources, and use the labor and expertise of volunteers that lack organization.

The concept is noble. Workers get together and meet to draw up plans that mobilize populations around concrete political goals. The workers that organize in this bottom-up labor council would mobilize workers at their unions and in their communities. This will allow us to deliberate together, work together, get out of our silos, but not surrender our very real and necessary concerns and work.

What Do We Face?

That is clear: Politicians and the business-class work together in very similar fashions. Their ideologies are formulated in think tanks such as the Cato Institute, and are put into practice through business associations, chambers of commerce, and the like, leaving us, the working class, out of any participation and decision-making processes, often co-opting labor leaders to hand down the bad news.

We see the lack of democratic participation everywhere, not only at a local level (such as the vote to protect the interests of Barrio Logan against the interests of the business class) but also at a (trans)national level as well when we hear whispers of plans for the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. We, workers, have to bring democracy back and we have to bring it into the streets through new institutions that counter modes of oppression and exploitation.

The time is ripe for more organization. The time is ripe to band together and forge solidarity through struggle and unity. Our interests are many but only together can we create a better tomorrow. It is time to join, today.