

The Peter Kwong Immigrant Workers Learning Center brings working people together so that they can learn from one another's organizing experiences with the intention of creating greater clarity of direction to push our organizing work. The goal of the learning center is to liberate the thinking of working people and to create a space where we can identify our struggles and build strategies to move our work beyond mere survival.

The following are questions discussed in the Learning Center, with a sum-up of conclusions drawn.

- I. What is the current state of working people in the U.S.?
- II. What Do We Consider As Our Community?
- III. How Do We Define Workers And What Is The Role Of Workers?
- IV. Who Is Our Friend, Ally, And Enemy?
- V. Is Something Better Than Nothing?

## **I. THE CURRENT STATE OF WORKING PEOPLE IN THE U.S.**

Concepts of a just government, a better way of life, and a hopeful future have become false illusions for working people in this country. Instead, what they face are escalating exploitation and systemic racism that subjects working people to daily violence: racist attacks in the streets, longer work hours—most extremely, 24-hours work days—wage theft, intensified work, sub-contracted jobs, scant health or retirement benefits, skyrocketing rents, school closures, and displacement from their homes and communities. The gap between the richest one-percent and working families is dramatically widening. To bolster its ability to exploit working people, the ruling class continually finds new ways to fuel divisions among us and to brainwash us into

scapegoating others, and thinking and negotiating within the pre-defined limits of the system.

Recent reforms have left people disillusioned. The election of people of color and the proliferation of non-profits headed by people of color has not helped communities of color rise out of poverty and exploitation. Even after the election of a Black President Barack Obama, Black mayors like Byron Brown of Buffalo and Eric Adams of New York City, Latino officials like Sheriff Vic Regalado of Tulsa, and Chinese City Councilmembers like Margaret Chin in New York, people have seen how these elected leaders collude with developers and banks, see their conditions for their communities deteriorate, displacement intensify, and deportations and abuse of immigrants increase. This all results in working people questioning the system, the worsening conditions bringing the reality into sharper focus.

After the hopeful campaign of Bernie Sanders and the propagation of socialists of all stripes, actual policy stances and demands reveal the same old two-party reformist politics that strengthen the system: tax the rich, eviction moratorium, legalize the immigrants, defund the police, raise the minimum wage. Defend a few, take what we can from the rich, and divide the working class.

Unionization is another of these reforms and many people like those in high-density old-school unionized cities like Buffalo, N.Y., are excited about the organizing at Starbucks, Amazon, museums, and offices. But the mounting crises facing working people have led some to ask, is it enough to defend what we have or to plead for a little more?

Many are searching for a new direction, something that goes beyond defensive reforms and small concessions to realize

fundamental, systemic change. For example, even after sustaining and defending their community in El Paso, Tx., for three generations, organizers ask, “How do we go beyond these measures?” It is critical to unite the working class and to develop the leadership of the working class to lead with a clear long-term vision, perspective and strategy -- to turn this decaying capitalist system upside down.

Following are questions discussed in the Learning Center, with a sum-up of conclusions drawn.

## **II. WHAT DO WE CONSIDER AS OUR COMMUNITY?**

To organize, we need to identify our community.

For instance, many of our communities across the country are being exploited and displaced, whether it be by universities like Grand Canyon in Phoenix, Yale in New Haven; wealthy developers or corporations like the Kaiser Foundation in Tulsa, or L & M in New York, in cahoots with the local government, and with the aid of so-called non-profits.

*Who do we see as our community and how does that determine how we organize with others?*

Many groups define their community as tenants, the people who live there. Others say it is the people who share a culture (say, indigenous). Others define it as a political ideology (say, socialist or Democrat). Or ethnicity, Blacks or Latinos, or Chinese. Or immigrants or undocumented immigrants. Or public-housing residents, or welfare recipients. But all these divisions serve the interests of the ruling class, which include unfettered command of society's resources, abuse of power in maintaining and further entrenching violence upon workers, and the general exploitation

of working people. Divided, we can be pitted against one another and fight among ourselves for resources. The ruling class constantly fosters these divisions. For example, in Houston, Tx., the government builds low-income housing for new immigrants while displacing citizens.

Defining our community says something about how we see the nature of this system and what we think needs to be changed. If we think this system is not working humanely but can be tinkered with to provide more benefits—to lessen the exploitation and oppression—then, all these groupings make sense. Let's postpone evictions—until after COVID. Let's get a buyout for being evicted. Let's get repairs for our building. Let's form a co-op, a land trust.

These reforms tide us over for a moment until it runs out or gets overturned or undermined. Meanwhile, luxury development, skyrocketing rents, and displacement continue unabated. If we win the stop-gap measure, we won't get evicted today—but maybe tomorrow.

We need to move beyond compartmentalization. Our communities are the people. The people are part of the environment of the community: those that live there, work there, study there, do art there, organize there, and raise their families there. The organizations are also part of the community: the churches, non-profits, family associations, democratic clubs, small business owners.

But who is key to make change, to challenge the status quo, to stop exploitation and displacement? It is not the small businesses even though they are displaced because of big developers coming in; they are strapped in competition with one another. It is not the non-profits, churches, political clubs, or other entities that are focused on their own survival or narrow interests. It is the people,

the ones who are exploited every day by their employers, landlords or the system. It is the ones facing oppression every day, the systemic racism and sexism that serves exploitation. It is especially the ones perceived as the weakest—the people who have worked hard producing wealth for their employers or caring for their families, and have been looked down upon as cheap labor, victims, parasites, or as garbage. These members of the working class have the potential to be agents of change.

Through organizing, the working class can be the leading class, providing direction to other sectors of society, including small businesses. For instance, in the battle against displacement, the working class can provide leadership by uniting the community to go beyond defensive tactics and demand measures that put people before profit, changing the class relationships within the community in the process.

### **III. HOW DO WE DEFINE THE WORKING CLASS AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE IN MAKING CHANGE?**

Many people do not think they are a worker because they don't have a boss. They are injured or retired. They are caregivers for their families. They are welfare recipients. They are independent contractors. But if we are exploited—sweated in whatever work we do for the profit of the ruling class; if our hard-earned pay goes to enrich the landlord; or our public land is given to profit developers, then we are members of the working class.

As the ones who do the work, we can come to see how our labor contributes to the economic and social welfare of our communities and society as a whole. As we become more aware of what this implies, we increasingly realize that our voices can no longer remain silenced, we develop working-class consciousness.

But identifying as a worker does not necessarily mean that you identify as a member of the working class. Moreover, workers' leadership is different from working-class leadership. Workers' interests often are economic in nature, limited to one person, or one's family, or one shop, or one industry. Workers' leadership means individual workers leading other workers. Working-class leadership is collective. The interests of the working class are political in nature; they unite the class to battle the ruling class. When the working class is united, it is capable of giving direction to other sectors of society to challenge the ruling class.

#### **IV. WHO IS OUR FRIEND, ALLY, AND ENEMY?**

As working people, who are our friends, allies, and enemies? If we are unable to clearly see who our friends, allies, and enemies are, our work will be repeatedly undermined and defeated.

As stated above, we identify our friends as other workers who have the same interest as us. As working people, we are exploited by the system; yet we build the wealth in society. This identification crosses the boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, geography, etc.

We recognize that the working class can be the leading class. We make strategic alliances with other sectors of society, such as small business owners and social movements that tend to divide working people up by identity—Black, women, LBGT, students, poor people--and we can give direction to these sectors. We have common interests in standing up against monopoly capital, against systemic racism and sexism. In the fight against displacement, for example, immigrants have aligned with African Americans in Phoenix; elsewhere we've made alliances with small

businesses and even small property owners who may have a shared interest to protect the community. However, this does not mean that we do not struggle with these sectors when small bosses steal wages, for instance, but these struggles are of a different nature than the struggle against monopoly capital.

We are and have been in a prolonged period of capitalism's decay. As economic crises intensify and class inequality becomes more stark, whatever limited social and economic gains we won in the past are beginning to crumble under the pressure of economic crisis, under capital's death grip to squeeze profits from workers.

How should we consider nonprofit organizations, traditional labor unions, and social democratic parties that have historically been able to extract crumbs from the ruling class and stave off workers' rebellions? A layer of the labor aristocracy now controls the labor movement, and because these entities receive privileges from the system, they identify with the ruling class' interests and not with the working class. For example, in Tulsa, Ok., non-profits have been co-opted by Kaiser Foundation. More and more such entities capitulate to the ruling class and tell the workers- *accept less to save your job. Be grateful for this money from our oppressors. We need them to live.*

There are those who say- *why fight against these groups? We should just focus on the state and the ruling class, and still try to unite with these groups.*

This layer of opportunists do their best to undermine, quash, and buy out the fighting spirit of the working class at every point of the struggle—affordable housing groups and construction unions who clamor for a few units or jobs, and in exchange, aid developers to displace the community at large; nonprofits and leaders who accumulate money purporting to be anti-racist, turn

around and exploit and displace their own community members. As workers, we must expose the perspective and actions of these groups to liberate the fighting potential of the working class.

Given all this, how can the working-class lead the struggle?

When the disaster of September 11, 2001, struck our country, many activists and advocates were paralyzed. Many became focused only on stopping the war in Iraq or demanding more economic benefits for those affected. The government and business interests seized upon the World Trade Center attack to step up displacement of working people and small businesses by pouring billions into “rebuilding,” meaning the high-end businesses, corporations and Wall Street. Low-income and poor families and small businesses were left out. When working people in New York organized, uniting as residents and Ground Zero clean-up workers whose health and/or apartments were damaged by the toxic fallout and the Federal government’s lie that the air was safe, they demanded that the local and Federal government address their health needs and called for reparations. In calling out the government’s war on working people in this country, they provided leadership to the small businesses, health and legal advocates, hospitals, churches, and other organizations. After numerous protests and a march on the White House, the government had to respond. Free medical treatment is provided to anyone exposed to the toxic fallout, and 9/11 medical clinics still operate at three public hospitals. Workers whose health was permanently damaged could apply for money (reparations) from the Federal Victims Compensation Fund. By coming together and bringing attention to the attack on working people—their health and their lives—the working class completely changed the political landscape and lay groundwork and developed leadership

for on-going battles today against displacement, systemic racism, and for the health of working people.

## **V. IS SOMETHING BETTER THAN NOTHING?**

We are constantly told: *We need to fight for something winnable. We need to be more pragmatic. We will get there little by little. Let's just take what we can get now.*

This begs the question-after so many years of narrow, economist thinking- where is the labor movement now after the decades of the labor aristocracy steering many labor unions to narrow workers' struggle to fight only for increases in wages and benefits rather than systemic changes.

Underlying this narrow reformism is the belief that the working class has no power. That we are helpless victims, reliant on the beneficence of the ruling class. That we have no food to eat if we don't beg, no job to work if we are not exploited. That we can only hope to cushion our exploitation and make our imprisonment in this system slightly more comfortable.

Unionization is another of these reforms. For example, in NY State, 1199 SEIU refused to take action to end the 24-hour workday for home healthcare workers, and even undermined their own union members fighting for control over their time. The union pushed for the Fair Pay for Homecare Workers Act, getting an increase of \$3 an hour over 2 years. This minimal increase distracts from racist violence of the 24-hour shift and the massive wage theft that the union encourages by helping agencies and insurance companies maintain the 24-hour shift at 13 hours of pay. Teacher unions, which have won raises, still find that masses of teachers are exiting the field because their class sizes and

workload are increasing, state censorship growing. More than a third of nurses across the country said they plan to leave the field because of high burnout, even after receiving raises in recent years.

However, structural changes like new leadership or independent unions are limited in the face of widespread sub-contracting and independent contracting and the criminalized under-class of undocumented immigrants created by the Federal government that undermines organizing and unionizing. This has compelled many to ask, is it enough to defend what we have or to plead for a little more?

Tenant organizations who fought for rent cancellation and rental assistance during the pandemic are still finding working-class residents displaced from their homes and communities. Money for these programs made their way into the pockets of landlords who still displaced their tenants.

Money for more racial-bias training, body cams, and even more prosecution of cops have not ended police brutality and systemic racism.

Amnesty for a few undocumented immigrants have not eliminated the underclass status and super-exploitation of undocumented workers in this country today.

Yet reformism is still pervasive. Democrats and other immigrant advocates persist in calling for legalization of immigrants so they can remain in this country to be exploited. Meanwhile, American-born workers turn against these immigrants, competing for the same exploitative jobs. Construction unions secure jobs for their members building luxury high-rises, while working communities face mass displacement from such speculation. Years of accepting

“winnable” reforms have only weakened the working class and made the system of exploitation stronger.

On the other hand, there are those activists who propose we accept no reforms. *We need to smash the system now.* They go from protest to protest denouncing capitalism, but find few working people joining them. These activists also look down on workers. They do not see the working class as the potential leading class, but as a group that needs to be taught and empowered through their knowledge. They fail to learn from the everyday experiences of working people. They make no distinction between reforms that unite the working class and weaken the system and reforms that divide the working class and strengthen the system. Thus, they inevitably end up burnt out, tailing behind the reformists because they do not know what it means to win.

*What does it mean to win? How do we know we are going in the right direction?*

Let’s re-define “winning” and propose an alternative long-term goal: to liberate ourselves from the exploitation and oppression that we face every day. Liberation does not mean only from material needs. Exploitation is a violent extraction of wealth that we produce. It relies on dividing us, using racism, sexism and other forms of oppression to do so, and to super-exploit people of color, queer, older, disabled and other oppressed people. Liberation also means casting off the chains that bind our thinking—of what kind of life we want, of what is possible. Many of us only know the survival mode. We don’t dare dream of the life that we would want for everyone because we’d be called unrealistic. Liberation means rejecting the label of victim and taking up the role of catalyst of change. Liberation means developing the leadership of the working class to unite working people, lead other sectors of society, and undermine the existing

system, to pave the way for us to eliminate exploitation and oppression.

Home healthcare workers, organizing to end the 24-hour workday, have realized that no win in terms of backpay or wage increases, will ever bring back their health lost, their time with their families lost, and their lives lost. What was won, rather, was their ideological and political transformation, their liberation. Despite all the obstacles thrown in their path by their employers, insurance companies, and “advocates,” these workers realize that they are the ones who build the society and thus have the power to transform it. They realize they have nothing to lose, and so will fight for their own liberation, and invite all other workers to join them. Their leadership gives other workers a fighting example of workers perceived as the most powerless—women of color, immigrants, non-English speaking—demanding the valuing of their health, their families, their work—in effect, their lives. Young workers—especially women—have come to join this struggle as their own, seeing that the systemic racism and sexism that they face in their lives can only be rooted out by joining with women who are hit the hardest yet leading the call for an end to this racist and sexist violence. This is one small example of how working people can stand up to the systemic racism and exploitation that working people face every day, and how the working class can lead.

So instead of asking if something is better than nothing? We should be asking- how do we fight for our collective liberation from this exploitative and oppressive system?