

Militant Minorities and Union Unity

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Steve Early. *Save Our Unions: Dispatches from a Movement In Distress*. Monthly Review Press, November 2013. 304 pages. Notes. Index.

Union struggles are more than leaders issuing marching orders from afar; they are rooted in the lived experienced and activities of countless individuals who seek justice on the job – and whose joining others in collective action for dignity, security and a decent standard of living touch on issues fundamental to the underlying structures of our society. The frequent losses registered in those struggles during recent decades underscores the point; as unions have weakened, our society has become more unequal, more unjust, less democratic. Steve Early's *Save Our Unions* (Monthly Review Press, 2013) presents a powerful portrait of rank-and-file members and labor activists battling against the tide. But with that, he puts forth an analysis built on an assumption of an implied inherent antagonism between active members and existing labor institutions that fails in its goal of pointing a direction out of our current impasse. The strengths and weaknesses of his position can be seen in the following quote from the book:

Employment conditions in restructured industries, like auto manufacturing, or deregulated ones, like trucking, are trending backwards toward those that prevailed in the pre-union era. When the difference between union and non-union shops became harder to distinguish, the appeal of unionization begins to dim. When members are angry, alienated, or disengaged the internal and external organizing needed to strengthen unions is much harder, making overall labor moment survival (not to mention revival) more difficult. Even if the locus of workplace struggle today has shifted from the industrial hot spots of the 1970s to other sectors of the economy, the need for bottom up change – through creation of new unions or, where possible, transformation of older ones – is no less urgent. (p. 24)

The premise is accurate; the shift in the focus of labor activism in line with shifts in the locus of economic activity has not shifted the fundamental nature of the issues behind that activism, of the need for bottom up change. In fact, in a period combining industrial restructuring and employer anti-union offensive, the need for unions to be open to membership engagement is more important than ever. The extent to which unionists see organizations as their own will be the measure that determines whether it will be possible to develop forms of collective action capable of countering the financial and political power of employers, a point that runs like a red thread throughout Early's book.

Within that generally valid perspective, however, lies a questionable note; the implication that bottom up change might mean creation of new unions, for the transformation of old ones may not be possible. Even apart from forming new organizations, Early favors structures of union activists – the militant minority – over existing bodies that exhibit less clear purpose. This preference is reflected in Early's frequent contrasting networks established by the independent monthly, *Labor Notes* and rank & file movements to most unions with their bureaucratic structures, comparative immobility and timidity. The comparison, however, is a false one, for these are two different kinds of vehicles. Networks of like-minded individuals who share a stated commitment are key to progress in any society or institution, unions and other broad working-class and progressive organizations amongst them; otherwise, they tend to become ossified, fall under the ideological sway of the dominant institutions in society and tend to move away from their object. Although some few unions have done better jobs than others of maintaining rank-and-file engagement and a critical view of society, most do not because negotiation with management, the signing of contracts, the very logic of

capital, tends to reinforce division and compromise. The needed radicalism and militance of workplace networks, however, can only be transformative when a part of rather than apart from the unions they criticize. And organizations – rank and file networks, militant unions, or mainstream/conservative unions – can only be successful in advancing working class interest if organically connected to organizations and movements (mainstream and radical) outside the workplace, for only through that linkage can a broader view of worker interest and needs be maintained.

This is a difficulty that faces those involved in “salting,” – taking a job for the express purpose of organizing the worksite. One of the most informative chapters of *Save Our Unions* provides a view of the activities and perspectives of several young people so engaged. Taking jobs as bike messengers, in hotels and in food service, their direct experience of life at the sharp edge of exploitation gives them an appreciation of working peoples lives far removed from the abstractions that those who organize only from a distance, only as staff, might project. This experience, in turn, gives them a sense of workers’ capacity, and thus of the value as well as the necessity of a strong steward network, of membership participation, if unionization is to take hold and survive. It is a lesson to those in thrall of “strategic” organizing which looks at labor relations almost as a business venture, filled with opportunity, loss, market share, while forgetting that unions are a voice of working people or they are nothing. That is a truth at the heart of Early’s entire book.

Yet, though more militant, though critical of union top-down attitudes, the outlook and actions of the “salts,” Early discusses seem strikingly narrow – the workplace becomes to them an almost closed world. Full-time union officers and staff may sometimes lose connection to the world of work their members live, at the same time they may have time and perspective to gain a broader, wider view of the issues facing workers as part of the labor movement as a whole. The individuals Early discusses seem unaware of that possibility, or perhaps reject it out of hand. Focused on the direct organizing tasks before them, “extraneous” issues, even one step removed are absent except insofar as they might directly help or hinder the campaign. And, in that sense, their view is analogous to those with a “top-down,” view of organizing. Clearly most have a left politics that must have involved reading and engagement with the broad issues of society – war and peace, environmental justice, repression, but these seem to have little place in their time or thoughts. That may in part be because it is not possible to integrate into a community the way it is into a workplace – and why salting, for all its genuine value, has generally not led to sustained success; strong unions rely on a broader sense of the justice of labor organization within the wider communities (community defined in many different ways) to which workers belong. Absent that, the discontinuities in employment means discontinuities in labor politics. The “salts” discussed in the book don’t see that, which reflects in a rejection of electoral politics and legislative battles as being somehow removed from workers concerns – rather than seeing that organizing to make those battles relevant is directly relevant to internal and external union building.

Early’s outlook is more well-rounded but the fact that he doesn’t note that absence reflects his similar focus on workplace union struggles, with other concerns seemingly secondary. Labor’ strength lies at the point of production – true in today’s post-modern world of temp jobs in service industries as it was in the days of manufacturing ascendancy. But that point of production strength has always relied on a broader engagement out of which a class understanding grows and takes shape on the range of issues of everyday life – housing, school, crime, prison, taxes, war, presidential politics – and out of which comes the sustenance that can allow an alternative understanding and forms of action come to life. That was the basis for the mass protests, demonstrations, strikes in immigrant communities in 2006 and of the Occupy movement in 2012 – bookending the period under review by Early. No doubt it influenced those “salters,” no doubt they were sympathetic to those outbreaks – but there does not seem to be any connection between their organizing and those wider

movements. It is a weakness in that model of action and it is instructive that Early does it address it as such.

Another sign of this is in his accounts of bargaining, organizing, rank & file and strike struggles of the Communications Workers of America (CWA); the union he served as an International Representative for 27 years. Based on direct experience in confrontations with Telecom and Verizon, these are the most detailed and nuanced sections of the book, giving a full picture of how a strong, progressive union is nonetheless often forced to retreat due to the combination of employer aggressiveness and government indifference or complicity in the ensuing attacks. For those who only see labor from the outside, it provides a picture of how much work so many have to do to simply survive and hold onto past gains. For active trade unionists, it raises important questions about how to make that work effective. Describing a long campaign directed at Telecom, Early writes:

The main defenses of the past have included systemic membership education and mobilization based on high functioning steward networks, aggressive contract campaigns, community-labor coalition building, IBEW-CWA unity, "bargaining to organize," and open-ended strikes. These fortifications may not hold unless there is continual reassessment of what works and what doesn't followed by better organizational adaptation to an ever-changing industrial battlefield. When national or local union hierarchies fail to provide the coordination and institutional support necessary for new or old forms of resistance, more union reform initiatives of the sort described in this section will be necessary, if not always sufficient, whether they succeed initially or not. (p. 179).

What follows details the ups and downs of that Telecom campaign (assisted by the German union Verdi), and descriptions of organizing, bargaining and strike strategy at Verizon and ATT. CWA faces an uphill battle, pitting the localized strength of unions against globalized corporate structures ready and willing to use the power capital mobility gives them – and aided by technology that enables them to limit the effectiveness of most strikes. The union's tactics, level of membership involvement and community outreach are well-described – and so too are the independent rank-and-file movements Early sees as needed to give backbone to CWA's action plans. One such initiative led to a long-time shop steward challenging a "preferred" candidate for a national leadership spot after a serious bargaining setback at AT&T. Unlike reform efforts fighting organized crime, this campaign makes use of existing democratic procedures in CWA to push for a more aggressive bargaining, mobilizing strategy rooted in members (and thus pitting rank-and-file workers against staff/officers who have become too comfortable). Strong support is not enough to win, but the extent of the support is a clear sign that a significant number of active members are open to change – and a positive reflection of CWA's internal culture that the issues could be argued out without the opposition fearing leadership retribution. That was not the case at Local 1101 – a large local representing Verizon workers — in which corruption and, consequently, the sacrifice of members interests was at issue. A strong steward network within the local mobilized members who had been left defenseless, and the challenge was successful.

In both instances the efforts are examples of the kind of internal engagement unions need. But they also indicate Early's preference for such movements almost in distinction to the wider unions of which they are a part. What is unclear, however, is whether such movements by themselves are sufficient to be transformative. Rank-and-file movements cannot substitute for the union as a whole; rather their effectiveness depends on their being able to move the entire structure. And that depends on their focus remaining on corporate capital not the union leaders (or misleaders) who block action. If they lose that focus, they can become too inward. Division over internal union politics and elections is viable only when the impetus for a more aggressive union also makes a broader unity possible. Otherwise hope for change is blocked. Early's account of Local 1101's new leadership advocating rejection of a contract is a case in point.

The arguments against the contract appear sound – but by themselves can never be enough. Any call for a “no” vote needs to also project how something better might be won. Narrowly defeated by that local, the contract was ratified by 55 other CWA locals and 8 IBEW locals – whose members were likely just as aware of its inadequacies. From all appearances then, the rejection is a statement unconnected to the core question of how to develop a base for an alternative strategy which, especially in the telecommunications industry, requires something more than industrial strength; it requires political strength in every sense of the word – political strength both in the immediate sense of legislative action and in the more basic sense of connection to transformative social movements. Mobilizing more members and communities allies are a needed part of gaining that strength but alone will not get the union the strength it needs. But such politics does not seem to an integral component of the rank-and-file movements under discussion.

Health reform – discussed at length — reinforces the need to do so. The negative impact of the Affordable Care Act on many existing union-negotiated agreements is a serious problem for labor as a whole; Early’s criticisms of it are cogent. Good union plans weren’t gifts, they were fought for – and often negotiated in lieu of wage increases or accepted instead of some other benefit. The strength of forces opposed to universal social insurance drew a line in the sand when it came to health care; workers were forced to rely on their own strength at the bargaining table to get good coverage, it is the height of demagoguery of the sort promoted by the National Right to Work committee and other business groups to imply otherwise. Worse still, the decision to tax existing plans in order to help pay for health reform falls into the category of sowing division – forcing one group of workers to pay for a program for others – a logic that flows from the limitation of any reform that tries to gain acceptance by not challenging – by not taxes – the wealthy. This has divided private sector from public sector workers, the organized from the unorganized – and behind it, often white from black, Latino, immigrants, and is one of the reasons for labor’s weakness, for the political weakness of progressive social reform movements.

But Early never looks at the other side of health reform – it provides benefits to millions who were without, helping those without benefit of union protection, helping prisoners and homeless, helping dispossessed communities. And reflecting that, community activists in many parts of the country are busy enrolling and educating people about health reform, thereby also challenging right-wing distortions of “Obamacare.” Unionists who keep their eyes too narrowly on the loss to their members wind up falling into the trap of strengthening the walls of division. The response to this by many, Early included, is to counterpose the advantage of single-payer, of a genuine national health insurance system, to the reforms enacted on the initiative of the Obama Administration. And, absolutely, it would be a change for the better for all working people, for our entire society. But universal health care is not going to be won if those who benefit from the current change see its advocates as opponents of the change made that they support. By viewing the world of labor in isolation, a perspective is offered that fails to propose the steps that need to be taken to build unity across people divided in viewpoint because divided in circumstance, fails to address – like the perspective behind that no vote on a contract – the path from rejection to advance.

It is an outlook that leads Early to sometimes miss the point of what he describes. A chapter on Vermont gives an account of Bernie Sanders fending off tea-party inspired critics at a town hall meeting, gives an account of the patient and principled work of the Vermont Progressive Party to build a successful independent electoral statewide party. The fact of the VPP’s success over many years, the fact that Sanders has repeatedly won elections in the House and Senate as an independent socialist are reasons to be hopeful that US politics is not doomed forever to a choice between lesser evils. But the fact is that to be successful, Sanders has had to caucus and work closely with Democrats, to be successful he has had to defend health reform while also advocating something better, to speak to the mixed bag of politics and emotions of constituents because only by

engaging people across existing lines of division can have an impact. Early's description of the means by which the VPP is working to establish a single-payer system in Vermont points to the same; their ability to move the state's politics leftward is connected to the ability to compromise and principle, the ability to work with Democrats (and Republicans too where possible). Independence is used as a means to achieve greater unity not more division (and, though it isn't the view of the book - and perhaps not of the partisans on either side - it is not all that different from the strategy of the Working Families Party in New York, even though the nature of its arena forces more compromise).

Save Our Unions concludes by posing that alternative in different form - perhaps independence and division is the only way forward. The epilogue describes and analyzes the bitter conflict that developed after SEIU put a large local representing Kaiser medical center workers in California under trusteeship over their differences in the union's policy and direction. Rather than accept the imposition, the local leadership split off, creating the National Union of Health Care Workers (NUHW) as an independent union. SEIU has for many years functioned much the way the Teamsters did in the 1960s and 1970s; organizing to grow on the basis of any agreement possible. Sometimes these have involved militant, direct action campaigns rooted in worker involvement, but more often (and more frequently over time) the approach has been "bargaining to organize," which, as Early describes, means that employer agreement has become more important than worker engagement, employer agreement more important than the gains a contract should bring. The inevitable result of that approach is to make the union dependent on employer good will - and thus has set SEIU on a course of conflict with others unions during negotiations and during legislative campaigns - which is behind SEIU's conflictual relationship with the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Union. Behind this strategy is the belief that workers are not strong enough in today's economy, in today's political environment, to organize themselves in numbers sufficient to regain labor power.

Thus any approach that seeks to push demands further than industry (in this case, hospital management) is ready and willing to concede becomes a threat. Kaiser provided the perfect backdrop for that conflict - for SEIU's leadership it is a model of collaborative labor-management relations, whereas many workers experience that collaboration as pressure to do more for less. NUHW's strong base of support is indicative of the degree of discontent that stemmed from acquiescence to that pressure in the name of cooperation. Yet it is extremely hard to dislodge an existing union with existing contracts, to win representation rights from a union that is already in place; just as it is hard to displace incumbent leaderships in a union no matter how bad a job they have done.

SEIU's victory over NUHW in a hard-fought contested representation election, for Early, is symptomatic of a deeper problem - despite the steady erosion of union strength, despite the accompanying decline of workers' living standards and workers' rights, the labor movement has not been able to transform itself into a fighting body, has not been able to provide clear-cut leadership in struggle against the global corporate juggernaut. He takes aim at the "exclusive representation" clause of US labor law - the clause that means that once a majority of workers at a particular worksite vote for a union, only that union can represent those workers, thereby preventing other unions that might represent a minority of workers from also having bargaining rights. Although this appears natural, it is only a consequence of how the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act was written and is by no means the only way union presence can be constructed. Early explains,

If the United States were a country like France, Kaiser workers dissatisfied with SEIU would simply quit that organization and make their voluntary dues payment to NUHW instead. In many countries, national labor law does not grant any union exclusive bargaining rights, which means that multiple unions or labor federations can compete for members and play a representational role in the same enterprise or workplace. But ... this is not how the Post-Wagner Act system of labor relations works in this country, for better or worse. Everyone represented by a Kaiser union in California is required

to pay dues instead. The thousands of workers at Kaiser and other hospitals who want to leave SEIU are forced to remain captive members or fee payers. Their own dues money continues to be used against them ... (p. 301).

Leaving aside the fact that multiple union federations in France (and Italy and Spain) have often been used to undermine militant labor and that these workers strength (itself badly eroded in recent years) come from parliamentary systems and other labor laws far from what we have, the point still remains – how do we in the US transform our labor movement into the fighting vehicle it needs to become. Early advocates a form of parallel or minority unionism – used now at unorganized sites to press workers rights even without contractual protection – as a vehicle of struggle at already organized workplaces when the union in place is not fighting sufficiently hard for members' interests. He thus concludes his book with the following call to action:

The goal of “saving our unions” is best pursued in ecumenical fashion from the bottom up, with no false dichotomy between “external” and “internal” organizing. Activists trying to expand the labor movement by building “alternative institutions,” should not neglect or, worse yet, reject the struggles of union members to create alternatives to their existing unions. Wherever the traditional route of union reform is blocked and workers remain trapped in labor-management relationships that deprive them of any meaningful, independent voice, the militant minority will soldier on. Its usual friends and allies will continue to lend a hand because they know that the magic kingdom of labor-management partnering is no laboratory for creating a more democratic, inclusive, and social justice-oriented labor movement. It is far more likely that elements of such a movement will emerge from worker resistance to company unionism, where the first glimpse of something better are already visible and inspiring at Kaiser.” (p.307)

Workers can and should organize to take independent action no matter what the circumstances; certainly Kaiser workers after being put in trusteeship had the right to attempt to form their own union. But the key to any such strategy is the ability of new organizations, of that militant minority, to create unity with those they have left behind. And so while reading Early's book, my thoughts returned to a part of family history that I think bears repeating.

A coal miner since the age of 12, my grandfather took part in revolutionary action in Germany after World War I – when the tide shifted, he was amongst those blacklisted and so emigrated to the US in 1926 for what he thought would be a temporary sojourn. Like other German miners, he wound up in the Western Pennsylvania mines and took part in the desperate struggles waged at that time, including participation in the formation of the Communist-led National Miners Union. The union – established as an alternative to the seemingly vanquished, unreformable, United Mine Workers – led a bitter, hard-fought strike that ended in the workers' defeat, the organization's destruction, and, for him (and others) another blacklist. It was 1932, he then moved to New York where my Grandmother was taking part in an organizing drive amongst her fellow domestic workers. A year later, as family members were being carted off to concentration camps, it became clear that a long-planned return to Germany would be impossible – my mother, who had remained awaiting that return, now came to the US then too. At that point, my grandfather became a building engineer and took part in some of the hard fought organizing within the gangster-ridden BSEIU (Building Service International Union the predecessor of today's SEIU) to establish it as a fighting instrument for its members.

In bits and pieces, he told me of those times when I was young, and drawing on that experience (as well as the defeat suffered by the German working-class in 1933) to made clear his deep opposition to “dual unionism,” – a term, I grant, I did not understand at first – forcefully arguing that we could not build our own “perfect” organization away from all others, as it left workers divided and the most militant isolated. The fight for a democratic union, for a union based on class-struggle not

class collaboration, could not be separated from building unity amongst all workers within existing ones, no matter how bad they might be.

The clock turns, after yet another period of the blacklist, this time McCarthy-era 1950s. Eventually, he finds his way back to a unionized job, becoming the head of the maintenance department at Montefiore hospital in the Bronx, and a member of 1199 – a union he appreciated and respected. But he had one sharp criticism at the time: 1199 was buying cooperative housing for its members as a shield against the rising rents which was then beginning to make New York City unaffordable for working people. He told me that at a union meeting he explained the fate of the Austrian working-class: the Karl Marx housing built to replace tenement slums in Vienna became a trap, destroyed in 1934 when labor was defeated after taking up arms against home-grown fascists. An adult now, I did not need to look up the history of Austrian social democracy, and he simply assumed I knew the context of which he spoke.

He would not have expected his much younger fellow workers with roots far from Central Europe to know that particular past. Instead he broke down what he meant – unions either fight for all workers or only the portion they represented; either New York unions fought for affordable rent-controlled apartments for the entire city or they accepted a partial solution that might look good at the moment but which would ultimately leave workers divided, members isolated. He knew that most workers wouldn't, couldn't see it that way; the concrete prospect of a decent place to live would be hard to give up, especially against the drift of the times which would soon lead to the election of Koch as Mayor – an exemplar of the hate-filled stratagem “divide and conquer.” But the real question was when those houses were built, would the union use it as a step for all, or would it see protecting its members in isolation from others. That is, it wasn't the reform that mattered; it was how it was used. Moreover, for him the question was not idle, support for integrated housing and integrated public schools for him in the 1960s were every bit as much a question for unions to support as higher wages or a grievance procedure.

And this was the other side of his opposition to dual unionism – unions had to be politically engaged, had to fight for class-wide solutions to particular problems. For this was the way to change unions – racism, national chauvinism, the faux patriotism of war had to be challenged in every instance. For him, these were bigger obstacles to working-class gain than the most bureaucratic or bought and paid-for union leader. That was the lesson he drew from US union defeats in the 20s, progress in the 30s retreats in the 50s, from the fate of the German workers movement too. Behind it was something else, his core confidence in the strength and ability of working people if so united.

Much has changes in the years since then, but the points he made remain valid. He was a proponent of the militant minority but in a different sense than that which Early uses the term – for that militant minority cannot separate itself from other workers in competing organizations and – more important can't lose sight of the capitalist system that pushes unions into being sectional organizations. Once bad leaders and bad practices, once “backward workers,” become seen as the chief obstacle to forward movement, than the system itself becomes a secondary not a primary target.

Early, no doubt, would not disagree with most of the above, at issue is how to get there. And that returns us to *Save Our Unions* – all criticisms above notwithstanding, it is an important book, one worth reading, examining, debating.