

ART CAN HELP CREATE A NEW LABOR MOVEMENT

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By Mike Alewitz

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The following article is based on a speech by Mike Alewitz, Artistic Director of the Labor Art and Mural Project (LAMP.) It was delivered to the Collective Bargaining Convention (CBC) of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP.) The convention took place in Washington DC, on December 6, 2002.

THIS MEETING TAKES PLACE at a critical juncture in history. The US government stands poised to launch a horrible new war against the people of Iraq. Actually "war" is something of a misnomer - that term implies the capability of both sides to inflict damage. This is really going to be a massive bombing campaign and invasion of a virtually defenseless country.

The war is occurring in conjunction with serious new assaults on working people here at home. It's going to create some big changes in this country. It's going to change the labor movement, and force us to confront who we are and where we come from.

We are going to have to relearn some lost traditions. One of those traditions is using art and culture as a method of struggle. Art can help create a new labor movement. As we discuss this tonight, I am going to use slides of murals and banners from recent projects to illustrate these ideas.

The tradition of labor art and culture in the US.

There is a rich tradition of labor art and culture in the US.

When the Paterson silk workers struck in 1913, John Reed, the famous journalist, organized Greenwich Village artists to create the Paterson Silk Strike Pageant. Workers marched from Paterson, New Jersey, to Madison Square Garden. They strode onto the stage, reenacted the strike to a packed crowd and led them in singing strike songs. The pageant told the story of the strikers to the world.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, known as the Wobblies,) had a cultural life of humor, poetry, song, cartoons and theater that made a lasting contribution to American culture.

When autoworkers staged sit-down strikes in Buffalo in 1937 they formed an orchestra to serenade assembled supporters from the rooftops of the occupied plant. When they won the strike they transformed the orchestra into a brass band and marched through the streets of the city in a victory parade.

The P-9 Strike

More recently, art was utilized when workers of Local P-9, United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) struck the Hormel Meat Company in 1985.

The workers performed brutal, dangerous and repetitive work. They took the bold step of leading an important struggle against concession contracts that galvanized union support from around the country.

I traveled to Austin, Minnesota to attend a solidarity rally, and worked with them to create a glorious mural on the side of their union building - an image that symbolized the strike. The mural was dedicated to Nelson Mandela, who was then imprisoned and being subjected to a vilification campaign by the US government.

Unfortunately, this heroic local was attacked by its own international union officials, placed into receivership, and the mural was sandblasted off the wall.

Recent Labor Strikes

In 1989, when the United Mine Workers (UMWA) struck the Pittston Coal Company, artists traveled to Camp Solidarity in Virginia to join the pickets and create music, murals and banners for the strikers. This 100' long mural of UMWA history highlights a contribution of John L. Lewis. When threatened with federal troops for striking, he pledged that "Bayonets in coal mines will not mine coal." In that slogan he summed up a too-often forgotten fact - that workers hold the ultimate power in their hands - the power to withhold their labor.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s workers waged a series of defensive struggles: the Eastern Airline Strike, the Daily News Strike, Staley and many others as illustrated by these banners. And while these actions occurred, labor activity of another type was taking place. Immigrant workers were self-organizing themselves and winning important labor struggles.

Immigrant Workers

In 1995, mostly Mexican mushroom workers in eastern Pennsylvania struck the Kaolin Mushroom Company and organized themselves into the Kaolin Independent Workers Union. Artists organized by LAMP traveled to Kennett Square PA, where we created banners and signs to march in the Mushroom Day Parade. Workers carried puppets and used musical instruments to create an exciting public presence, create confidence for undocumented workers, and win the sympathy of the surrounding communities.

Similar organizing efforts took place among other workers. In Southern California, Mexican workers shut down drywall production on construction. Up to 7000 workers participated. They were self-organized.

To rebuild our movement, we must learn from, and address the concerns of millions of immigrant workers. We have to stop thinking of ourselves as Americans and start thinking of ourselves as workers. There are American workers and American employers. There are Iraqi workers and Iraqi employers. American workers have more in common with Iraqi workers than we do with American employers. For example, we have no interest in slaughtering each other.

For their part, U.S. employers have no problem palling around with and promoting Iraqi employers. In fact, that's how Saddam Hussain and Osama Bin Laden got to where they are today.

The quote on the banner is by Malcolm X. To paraphrase he said "I'm not a Democrat, I'm not a Republican, I don't even consider myself an American. I am one of the victims of Americanism..."

Unions Don't Organize Workers

The struggles of these immigrant workers point to another oft-forgotten fact: UNIONS DON'T ORGANIZE WORKERS - WORKERS ORGANIZE UNIONS.

Workers are ready and willing to engage in struggle. They are ready to join unions. Whenever given an opportunity they have responded enthusiastically. They are not apathetic. Workers abstain from elections because they are unwilling to swallow what their "leaders" are feeding them. Look how people responded to Ralph Nader - and even he's a rich lawyer. He repeatedly had rallies of thousands of students and workers desperate for something different, What if those workers had been given a choice of a clear voice of labor - a labor party or other independent formation?

Workers would respond to organizing efforts as well. But despite the millions of dollars and hundreds of young organizers provided by the AFL-CIO, there has been no significant growth in that organization. Why? It's not an organizational or financial problem; it's a political problem.

This portable mural, called "Bureaucracy," illustrates the point: Most unions function more as dues collection agencies than as social movements. There's a difference between workers empowerment through organization and simply signing up members.

Workers organize unions when they are inspired to do so. Think of the great periods of union growth. The Knights of Labor didn't have staff or money. The IWW, which claimed the allegiance of hundreds of thousands of workers, had two staff people. When millions of workers engaged in sit-downs and other forms of militant struggle, when they organized industrial unions in the CIO, they did it themselves.

After the recent elections, [AFL-CIO President] Sweeney explained the failure of their electoral strategy by saying "Bush was too much for us." How embarrassing! Can you imagine George Bush being too much for anyone?

The Role of Educators

The mural you see was painted at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. Highlander, a popular education center played a key role in the organization of the CIO, and later the civil rights movement in the south. The banner reads "Without Action there is No Education."

As educators we can play a special role in helping to relearn our movements history. But it needs to be an organic process. This mural is "The Resurrection of Wesley Everest." I painted it in Centralia, Washington, where a local labor coalition decided they needed a mural project as a way to reach out to immigrant workers. Wesley Everest was an IWW labor organizer lynched in Centralia. He was a great martyr of our movement, yet most workers would have no idea who he was.

When I painted a mural at the Frente Autentico Trabajadore (FAT) in Mexico City, union leaders asked me to portray Lucy and Albert Parsons. Albert Parsons was one of the Haymarket martyrs - anarchists framed up and executed for their role in the eight-hour day movement. Lucy, along with Albert, was a leader of the labor movement in Chicago. She was also an early feminist an outstanding revolutionary leader throughout her life. Mayday, the international working class holiday, is in commemoration of the Haymarket events.

The Mexico mural was part of a cross-border project. I painted a similar mural in Chicago shortly thereafter - it was a celebration of the Teamster strike victory over UPS. At a large rally of the strikers, I asked the crowd if anyone knew who the figures were. Nobody knew. We have been robbed of our history. As educators we can help to bring it back. And we can bring it to life through action.

Historic Program

There is a history to our movement - we don't have start all over again. That's Marx and Engels on that banner. We don't have to be afraid of them. We don't have to be afraid of the ideas of socialism or anarchism. It's part of our history.

This is the backdrop from the founding convention of the Labor Party. We haven't succeeded yet, but it is critical to promote this idea. Until the last 50 years, the labor movement had a position of independent political action. The idea that you should support the employers candidates, the Democratic or Republican candidates, is a new idea. That concept has always pretty much been rejected by the world working-class movement. Voting for your boss doesn't work. It hasn't, and it won't.

A World in Crisis

Today we face a renewed period of political and economic crisis. There are 800 million hungry people in the world. There are 40 million people infected with HIV. According to a recent UN report, we could solve the basic problems of food, clean water and health care for those millions. Know what it would take? 4% of the combined wealth of the richest 225 people in the world.

Would the wealthy even notice if it was gone?

Instead, congress has voted 150 billion to wage war - just for this year. It was a virtually unanimous bipartisan decision - with no questions asked. Next year the budget will increase from 329 to 400 billion. There will be an additional 38 billion for so-called Homeland Security.

These vast resources will come out of the pockets of working people - especially the poor.

Artists and Workers Form One World Without Borders

The gluttony of the employers has no limit. But workers have become a larger, more compressed and more international class. We have the power to stop the warmakers.

"Artists and Workers Form One World Without Borders" was painted as an act of solidarity in 1998 in Baghdad. It illustrates the basic foundation of the labor movement since the industrial revolution: the primary weapon of our defense is solidarity.

Unfortunately, our national union leaders have been quiet at best and jingoistic at worst in regards to Bush's war plans. They refuse to recognize that the war is against both Iraqi and American workers.

The labor movement must take the lead in this struggle, and we must fight to get the AFL-CIO to take on that task. If the AFL-CIO does not transform itself, it will be replaced by other organizations that workers will create.

Artists and intellectuals can and must play a special role in helping to inspire and rebuild a militant new labor movement. Art can be a powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressed.