

12-28-2015

Bust Out without Breaking Up

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Recommended Citation

Oswalt, Michael M., "Bust Out without Breaking Up" (2015). *College of Law Faculty Publications*. 6.
<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/clglaw/6>

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Michael M. Oswalt

Response to “Careful What You Wish For: A Critical Appraisal of Proposals to Rebuild the Labor Movement” by Lance Compa

Lance Compa is right: alt-labor relies heavily on union support, and it’s not self-sustaining. But the conclusion he draws—that it’s a lot of flash and no fix—is only half-right. The truth is, we should feel optimistic about “traditional” labor because of alt-labor, not in spite of it. The two futures are linked, and supporting alt-labor may be the smartest way for unions to put fuel to the flashes and get to the fixes.

Consider, to start, some alt-labor victories so far. Defying all early punditry, Fight for \$15 has spread a fifteen-dollar-an-hour fever that’s touched five cities, a slew of companies, and shows no sign of stopping.ⁱ In 2010 the National Domestic Workers Alliance won precedent-setting rights legislation in New York that’s hit 4 states and counting.ⁱⁱ ROCUnited’s lawsuit settlements function as essentially mini-contracts.ⁱⁱⁱ OURWalmart protested its way to raises and meaningful maternity and scheduling changes.^{iv}

There’s more, but here’s the real key: that these and other alt-labor projects rest on union backing isn’t a bug—it’s a feature. It’s proof that unions are willing to take the best part about institutionalization—resource stability—and put some of it on the line for unconventional causes using a diversity of tactics, from the tried-and-true, like lobbying and community-building; to the edgy, like civil disobedience; to the totally new, like running into stores to see who’s up for striking. This is busting-out without breaking-up, and it’s working.

Of course, to keep going, people need to get and stay mobilized, including many at the margins of labor’s usual field of vision. That’s where social media is crucial, and it’s a much more vibrant tool than Compa suggests. OURWalmart’s virtual “strike kit” sparked Black Friday walkouts at locations untouched by organizers; a Coworker.org “Let Us Have Beards” campaign at Publix hit CNN.com and three other sites in nine days;^v when fast-food or Uber activism Twitter-trends, the left is following, but so are millennials and the media. Not only does all of this magnify labor’s reach beyond its numbers, it makes workplace activism look incredibly cool. It’s compelling, consciousness-raising stuff, and it forms a foundation for the later work of institution-building.

And that gets to the kicker: as exciting as alt-labor’s progress has been, there’s still time to double-back on sustainability. In fact, it’s happening now. Cabbies, day-

laborers, care assistants and other NLRA-orphans are affiliating with unions and encouraging voluntary dues structures or getting contracts under state law.vi A recent Board decision on the test for joint-employers may make unionizing fast-food franchises feasible.vii When supermarket workers see what an on-line petition can do, they'll wonder what could get done across a table.

In short, when headlines like “Fast-food workers walkout in N.Y. amid rising U.S. labor unrest”viii appear, it's time to accelerate, not pull back. Workers do want “somebody to back me up” at work, but if we've already learned anything, it's that a whole lot of “somebody's” are ready—they just need an invite. If alt-labor and “traditional” labor are both invested in all the varied RSVPs, that's a great thing.

Originally appeared at <http://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2015/12/28/response-to-careful-what-you-wish-for/>. Downloaded May 3, 2016.