

Resurrecting Bob Fitch: Recovering Solidarity, Reclaiming Souls
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Last year, I wrote a piece for the Counterpunch website¹ memorializing Bob Fitch in the course of which I made the fairly obvious observation that Doug Henwood, last year's inaugural Fitch lecturer, would be a tough act to follow. I also made the prediction that the organizers might have some difficulty lining up a successor since relatively few would be sufficiently knowledgeable about and/or sympathetic to Bob's work to be willing or able to commemorate his legacy. I should stress here that I was not pulling a Cheney, as it were: unlike the former Vice President, not for a second did I imagine that I would be asked to do the job. My initial response when I was contacted was to wonder whether there was a mistake. So I need to begin with the obvious caveat that I don't have anywhere near the erudition, breadth of knowledge or depth of insight which one should reasonably expect of a speaker commemorating Bob's legacy.

What I can offer is a deep admiration of Bob's work, especially his work on labor and its relation to the broader left and, partly due to his influence, a commitment to positions on the fringe somewhere near to his. As I just suggested, this is a marginal, or more precisely, marginalized region of the left. One reason for this can be found in the remark of a labor bureaucrat on Bob's passing to be "spared the self-righteous crap (about) the resurrection of Bob Fitch, whose work is marginal in its influence because it is so remarkably thin in its insight." The same bureaucrat also describes Henwood as "a pontificating ass (who) has never organized any organization of any sort, but is always prepared to offer his expert advice to those who have some actual experience in that work."²

Neither the content nor the tone of this should come as a surprise. Institutional power never takes kindly to criticism from apostates within its own ranks or from critics on the outside. And insofar as they can do so, it's a safe bet that they will attempt to suppress it, privately by sanctioning those issuing it, or externally by issuing the kinds of public denunciations on display here.

As for the criticism itself, it is not only natural but absolutely necessary that there will be apostates such as Bob: leadership needs be held accountable for its failures-and that goes in spades for labor. None of the huffing and puffing of its enablers will change the fact that the Wisconsin recall debacle (which precipitated the bureaucrat's ire) was just that, the latest in a string of failures going back decades which have resulted in what was once

¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/12/07/the-resurrection-of-bob-fitch-and-the-post-occupy-left/>

² <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DemocraticLeft/message/44652>

called "big labor" now being close to irrelevant as a social force, with less than 7% of the private sector workforce represented by union contracts.

The surest sign of a dysfunctional leadership is not that it reacts badly to apostates but that it succeeds in squelching them. And, as I discuss in the Counterpunch piece, the almost universally hostile reaction to Bob's work was an indication of its success.

All too often, in the academy in particular, labor advocacy has been conflated with turning a blind eye to some of unions' less attractive features, most notably around the topics which were central to Bob's work, union incompetence, capitulation and corruption. That these are conspicuously under-represented can be confirmed by a perusal of the archives of the major journals of labor studies, *Labor History* And its competitor *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*. Specifically exemplifying this point is a JSTOR search which finds ur-Fitchian rogues almost completely absent with the notorious "Greedy" Gus Bevona returning only a single hit.

The attitudes and assumptions among academics with respect to labor tend to be reflected by journalists covering labor at agenda setting liberal and left media outlets. As labor journalist Mike Elk has written:

Left writers also tend to view labor leaders as allies, instead of the people they are assigned to cover. I've met a number of reporters from left-leaning outlets who in private will voice criticism of union leaders, but dare not print these criticisms, fearing loss of access or being seen as "left anti-union," as a *June Nation* op-ed infamously labeled left reporters critical of union leaders. This mentality has lead many left publications to not cover widespread union corruption or the perspectives of rank-and-file union workers who consider union leaders unresponsive.³

I would add as a complement to the blind spots Elk mentions a tendency to see through rose colored glasses unions' conduct of what should be among their core functions: their direction of organizing drives. These are rolled out by the unions, usually with great fanfare on the left, but almost invariably, after a few weeks or months, are abandoned or scaled back with little recognition or notice of their failure. The real story, the continual pattern of failure and the factors which were implicated in it, is effaced from the record. Rather than becoming a central topic of discussion, as it should be among the left, it is consigned to an obscure labor/technocratic corner and soon forgotten.

A good indication of this pattern, one which I will focus on here, are some of the issues involved with the Walmart Black Friday actions instigated by the ad hoc, unofficially UFCW sanctioned and staffed organization OUR Walmart.⁴ I was personally involved in

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-elk/huffpost-apologia_b_2648497.html

⁴ <http://forrespect.org>

these in having responded to their call, organizing a protest at my local Kingston NY store and finding it a pretty easy matter to induce some 70 or 80 others to join me on less than two days notice. While the action was in some ways inspiring, no one was under any illusion that it came close to what we took to be our ultimate objective: exerting sufficient pressure to force Walmart to recognize the union. Despite our leaflets, chants and decent numbers, we saw no sign of any worker considering joining in the walkout and while reports differ on how many workers from around the country did, at most these represented, as a Walmart press release noted,⁵ only a tiny fraction of the total workforce and made not the slightest impact on the company's bottom line. Reports in *The Nation*⁶, *The Progressive*⁷ and *In These Times*⁸ were universally focused on the half-full reality that an attempt to organize Walmart had been launched, while having little to say of the half-empty reality, first, that the numbers involved were comparatively paltry and secondly, that the unions have for a half century failed to organize a single worker of the nation's larger employer.

This is not to suggest that Black Friday, wasn't worth covering. It surely was but from the perspective that what was significant was not its concrete impact but the education it provided in the kinds of strategies which would be necessary to achieve mass walkouts and boycotts on the scale necessary to force Walmart's hand. For what became clear to those of us involved was two things. First, that while the resources which the national unions have at their disposal constituted an asset, their direct involvement was at the same time a liability. This became apparent several weeks later when, in response to a Walmart lawsuit, the UFCW was required to agree to a 60 day moratorium on picketing.⁹ The threat for their not doing so, substantial penalties up to and including jail time and even the ultimate "death penalty" of decertification, was sufficient to force the UFCW leadership to pull the plug on the strikes. Just as the call to strike came from the top, so did the call to back down.

Furthermore, even if the national union were able to continue its support, there is reason to believe that no strategy devolving from the top would succeed in fomenting mass walkouts of the size which would register on Walmart's balance sheets. To see why, it is necessary to recognize that due to Walmart's success in crushing the union, Walmart employees are already on the edge of the precariat. "Discipline", which was sure to be meted out to those engaged in the work stoppage would take the form of reduced hours or termination, amounting to a leap off the economic cliff.

⁵ <http://news.walmart.com/news-archive/2012/11/23/walmart-us-reports-best-ever-black-friday-events>

⁶ <http://www.thenation.com/blog/171447/josh-eidelson-walmarts-failing-strike-suppression#>

⁷ <http://www.progressive.org/massive-nationwide-protest-by-walmart-workers-on-black-friday>

⁸ http://inthesetimes.com/article/14226/the_walmart_black_friday_protests/

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/business/labor-union-agrees-to-stop-picketing-walmart.html>

Striking under these circumstances requires a degree of personal courage bordering on recklessness. Workers in the past, and in the present have shown that they have that courage but only when it is combined with an awareness of an unshakable network of support and real trust—a firm belief that a community would reliably have their back. They would need to know that it could beat back near-certain retaliation by Walmart management to be assured that it was willing and able to support them including financially—help with rent, groceries, child care and transportation—for as long as the action would take. In short, a real, demonstrable, not just rhetorical, commitment to mutual aid on a person-to-person basis.

The resources which can provide this are necessarily local, starting with primary networks of friends and family, and moving outwards from there. Most prominent among secondary networks of support are those churches whose congregations are often home to Walmart shoppers and employees (the pastor of one of these joined in our action) as well as anti-poverty groups, left/labor alliances at local colleges and universities, and racial justice groups such as local chapters of the NAACP. Other members of a de facto coalition supporting the walkout could include preservationists appalled by the devastation which Walmart has wrought on the built environment and environmental organizations aware of the Walmart's role in promoting carbon intensive development patterns. Also potentially included are local politicians, at least those who have not been successfully courted by Walmart, who are in a position of being able to set limits on the aggressiveness of tactics employed by the local police force. Finally there are the remnants of Occupy which I'll have more to say about later. Assistance to strikers, which is to say the collection and disbursement of a de facto strike fund, would be a central component within this campaign.

In any case, there was no attempt by OUR Walmart to lay a foundation through coordinated organizing among these groups. Outreach went in the other direction with individuals initiating contact with OUR Walmart, receiving announcements of the times and locations of the protests and then appearing, if one managed to navigate the website, with downloaded instructions and talking points prepared by OUR Walmart/UFCW organizers.

As it was, Black Friday, while a qualified success, left the feeling among those I talked to at the action that it could have been much more: converting the huge reservoir of ill will from numerous constituencies into concrete action with a massive and sustained attack on Walmart's bottom line. Furthermore, now that Walmart has gotten wind of the UFCW strategy, the element of surprise which could have been used to our advantage then is no longer available as one can be sure that Walmart consultants are at least one step ahead of what the union is planning.

It should be mentioned that OUR Walmart remains in operation though its scale seems to have diminished, the most recent action from a few weeks back according to the Nation's

Josh Eidelson, having targeted 150 stores, down from over 1000 on Black Friday.¹⁰ A more recent Eidelson piece also indicates scaled back ambitions: It appears now the UFCW is not aiming at the goal of achieving union contracts but will initiate public confrontations with management with the goal of addressing employee grievances such as reduced hours and inconsistent, unpredictable scheduling imposing a major hardship on associates.

It is not impossible that small but significant improvements along these lines will be achieved: Nelson Lichtenstein is quoted by Eidelson as suggesting that, "sufficient sustained pressure could establish de facto 'arms-length negotiations' in which OUR Walmart members made public demands, and Walmart, without crediting the critics, made concessions in order to tamp down discontent."¹¹ Achieving this would, according to Lichtenstein, constitute a "breakthrough" in the authoritarian culture of Walmart and may set the stage for further concessions in scheduling, benefits and wages.

But these fall short of what which those of us participating in Black Friday were hoping to be a part of: the recognition of all 2.2 million Walmart employees, insodoing bumping rates of unionization back into the double digits, drastically reducing poverty rates and the strains on social service organizations like our local soup kitchen at the aforementioned pastor's church which supports and enables-as the pastor is aware-Walmart's near starvation wages.

This was not mere impatience on our part but rather reflected the historical reality that radical change is almost never gradual but often occurs with lightening speed, shocking not only not only those trying to prevent it but those advancing it: The UAW was formed in 1935 and within less than 18 months had achieved recognition from two of the big three auto manufacturers. The seminal achievements of the New Deal, famously, were undertaken within the first hundred days of the Roosevelt Administration. The Berlin Wall fell while opposition leaders were discussing (with journalist Chris Hedges) the possibility of limited free travel in a few years time.

As suggested above, a massive community mobilization would differ from the incremental, piecemeal campaign which OUR Walmart has adopted both in scale and timing. But underlying this difference is something more fundamental in that the OUR Walmart campaign was based on what Sam Gindin in a recent Socialist Register article¹² calls "sectionalism," traditional organizing of workers in the workplace. A community-based strategy goes beyond the bargaining unit to include the active support of the

¹⁰ <http://www.thenation.com/blog/172748/walmart-workers-back-strike-over-new-wave-alleged-threats>

¹¹ <http://www.thenation.com/blog/174180/inspired-freedom-riders-workers-plan-caravans-walmart-convention>

¹² Sam Gindin, "Rethinking Unions, Registering Socialism" Socialist Register, 49:1 pp 26-52.

Walmart workforce by Walmart customers and all those constituencies negatively effected by Walmart's business model. As such, it would require a rejection of the go it alone, self-reliant stance of most unions. Most conspicuously, unions would be required to relinquish control taking on faith that by making it an equal partner, a mobilized community could and would take the necessary initiative, setting up its own campaigns to support work stoppages, store boycotts and civil disobedience up to and including the blockading of stores. The latter, in particular, a decentralized community movement could do on its own initiative, while unions, subject to severe legal sanctions and institutional constraints cannot without putting their organizations and their staffs in jeopardy.

Is it Polyannish to believe that a massive outpouring of protest like this could succeed if it were attempted? Maybe. But it is now easier to conceive of. For as in many other areas where it extended the realm of the possible, Occupy Wall Street provided us with a concrete albeit small scale premonition of this possible future. This occurred on Nov. 6 of 2011 when the OWS general assembly voted to support the Teamsters locked out by Sotheby's, dispatching an impromptu protest delegation to crash a Sotheby's auction in lower Manhattan.¹³ Sotheby's, stung by the negative publicity among its core market and concerned about the potential for further disruption, eventually settled.¹⁴

Subsequent to this, Occupy established the 99 Pickets working group, a strike force of activists which is available to be dispatched in support of labor actions, initially striking Verizon workers and which has been activated on many occasions since, most recently in the current Cooper Union protests. Of course, a serious Walmart campaign would require more like 99,000 pickets. But as Occupy became established in more cities, numbers of organized activist supporters of labor in this range could have materialized. And there is little doubt that the potential challenge these could have posed to major corporations, including Walmart, had plenty to do with the militarized, federally directed crackdown on Occupy.

Consistent with his advocacy of class based, as opposed to sectionalist, organizing, Gindin also is one of the few figures credible within union circles to have recognized, in his Socialist Register piece, the potential of OWS along these lines for having "demonstrat(ed) that audacious action can touch a populist nerve." And Gindin went further, criticizing labor for its "failure to build on the golden opportunity offered up by Occupy." That's not to say that the labor movement was entirely unaware of Occupy's potential to advance its agenda. In the brief period when OWS was receiving grudgingly favorable mainstream media attention some labor leaders were eager to be publicly associated with OWS, with AFL-CIO head Richard Trumka having visited Zuccotti Park in early October. This was followed by the shining moment in mid October when the New York Central Labor Council responded with a mobilization of its membership to

¹³ <http://occupywallst.org/article/occupy-wall-street-and-teamsters-occupy-sothebys-t/>

¹⁴ http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20120531/LABOR_UNIONS/120539969

thwart Bloomberg's first eviction attempt, helping to swell the ten thousand strong amassed on the streets in the early morning hours to beat back (literally)-police attempts to access to the park. Unfortunately, subsequent history showed that unions could only engage Occupy on their own verticalist terms, finding themselves either unable or unwilling to support it in the ways would would have arrested Occupy's slide into dysfunctionality. Ultimately, when the final assault on OWS was ordered, labor leaders did not renew their call for support either in New York or innumerable other cities where OWS had established a presence.

Again, we are confronted with more what might have been questions. Could a more enlightened union leadership have recognized OWS's potential, working with Occupiers to, for example, allow them the use of union facilities for General Assemblies and working groups during the winter? Would OWS have agreed to withdrawing its encampment under these circumstances? Could these have developed into the kind of hybrid "worker assemblies" along the lines of what Gindin proposes in his piece?

These questions, it must be admitted, seem more or less idle. Despite the clear mutual benefits which could have resulted from an alliance, the cultures of the two are at present too distant to imagine bridging. Occupy is explicitly counter-cultural, famously refusing to issue demands of institutions it regards as fundamentally illegitimate. In contrast, labor unions have proudly defined themselves as operating within the mainstream consensus. American flag logos adorn the AFL-CIO website and Richard Trumka's lapel; the slogan "unionism is Americanism" was adopted by the UAW in the thirties to attempt to turn the tables on the reactionary right by staking a nationalist, even jingoist, claim and setting the tone for union rhetoric ever since.

But has the steadfast commitment to rock-ribbed American values served the unions well? That the answer to the question is an obvious no suggests an equally obvious direction for unions to pursue, albeit one which will be unpalatable (for some): unions need to start talking and acting not as mainstream but in opposition to it. In other words, they need to embrace their history as "counter-cultural" institutions. As those who have read it will recall, that unions were just that was the essential conceit of Thomas Geoghegan's classic *Which Side are You On?* which saw them as

a black hole in American culture, with all the American values except one: individualism. And here, in this black hole, paunchy, middle-aged men, slugging down cans of beer, come to hold hands, touch each other, and sing "Solidarity Forever." OK, that hardly ever happens, but most people in this business, somewhere, at some point, see it once, and it is the damndest un-American thing you will ever see.¹⁵

The "essence of (unions') counter culturalism" inheres in their rejecting what is perhaps the defining quality of the American character: competitive individualism. In the years

¹⁵ Thomas Geoghegan, 1991. *Which Side Are You On? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on its Back*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

since Geoghegan's book appeared, as a winner take all/devil take the hindmost neo-liberalism having assumed grotesque, soul destroying ascendancy, the unions' bedrock foundation on solidarity has become even more marginal within the mainstream. And, as Gindin notes, the unions themselves have capitulated to the mainstream, with predictably catastrophic consequences. Catastrophic because "For workers . . . competition undermines their most vital asset— their solidarity— and so leaves them weaker as a class."

Gindin continues by noting that

unions have all too often internalized competitiveness as a goal . . . Once making concessions becomes central to protecting jobs in the name of the 'new reality', unions themselves become vehicles for lowering the expectations as well as disciplining recalcitrant workers. . . Occasional flights of radical rhetoric aside, union leaders have all too often come to play a disturbing role in socializing workers into accepting the limits imposed by the constraints of competitiveness.

Or, as Bob Fitch's book titled his now classic book, "Solidarity for Sale".

The problem which Gindin and Fitch recognized has its ultimate roots not so much in ideology, but within labor's self-definition: of those officials who have become accustomed to their institutional role in administering neo-liberalism, to rank and file unionists who have tolerated it, and even to those of us who have been in a position to challenge it, at least rhetorically, but have not done so.

Given that these self-imposed obstacles have at their root a impoverished understanding of the realities of the economic system, Bill Fletcher and Jane McElevey among many others have suggested, that "unions need to reinvest in mass participatory education— sometimes called internal organizing in union lingo;" and relearn how to "kick down the walls separating workplace and non-workplace issues by going all-out on the broader agenda of the working class and the poor."¹⁶

But education seems insufficient. Rather, what is necessary is to address the deep seated attitudes which prevent real learning from taking place. This requires not education but rather, to resuscitate an admittedly problematic term, re-education. For while we might not recognize the extent of our failure, our class enemies have recognized the extent of their triumph. Margaret Thatcher famously noted that "Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul." Given the territory neoliberals have conquered, the battle goes beyond labor, economics, and even politics. What we are no longer fighting for wages, working conditions or even respect. Our real battle is to reclaim lost souls including our own.

¹⁶http://www.alternet.org/story/156123/there_is_no_substitute_for_organizing%3A_how_unions_might_help_win_future_battles

Bob's work, which represents a profound and prescient understanding of this cultural pathology, will be perpetually resurrected until such time as it is no longer necessary to do so.