

Organise local, strike global

Valery Alzaga talks to Rodrigo Nunes about the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) global organising approach

Rodrigo Nunes In November 2006, cleaners of office buildings in the business centre of Houston, Texas arrived at the end of a month-long strike, escalating their campaign for better pay and working conditions. In October, the Berlin, Milan, London, Amsterdam, Moscow and Mexico City offices of the same companies these Houston janitors were striking against were picketed, sometimes visited or occupied, by union and social activists demanding a solution in support of the US workers. The Houston campaign, which had already made history by being the first time janitors had their union rights recognised in Texas, made history again by being the first big union victory in that state. It was definitely an update to the 'global day of action' model – instead of the abstract international solidarity of the counter-summits, these were targeted actions with a very specific goal. Is this a model for the future?

Valery Alzaga For us, for sure. First of all, because it shows that you can connect struggles laterally without it being only in an abstract way. In some places, like London, it was mostly the workers in the Justice for Cleaners campaign who were involved in the actions; in Berlin, it was a mix of union activists and autonomous groups; but in Milan, where there are no similar union campaigns, it was comrades from Chainworkers – a group which has been doing very interesting work developing forms of organisation among precarious knowledge workers, but which is very different from and even skeptical of, unions. Secondly, because it shows that the companies we're fighting against are everywhere in the world and that the only way to stand up to them is by going global as well. It is only then that we will 'win'.

RN It's important to explain what these companies are, and how the cleaning industry is organised. At the top you have the owners of the office buildings, which are banks and investors like HSBC and Merrill Lynch. These can be found in any financial centre of the world. Below them you have the building management companies who take care of the daily running of the buildings. Many of these are also global. Finally, you have the cleaning companies, many of which are also global. So when workers get organised, they are fighting against the cleaning companies directly, but the money comes from the top – corporations with a much higher public profile, which want to be known for their investment in the arts or their charity work, not for making a profit by squeezing the wages of those who keep their offices clean. So these companies are the ones who actually have the power to force cleaning companies to raise the standards of the industry.

VA That's it. And it's all about building leverage against them. If a company has a thousand people working for them in a city, it's pointless to organise fifty workers. You have to have the majority of the overall number of cleaners involved to make the companies, and the workers themselves, believe that a change is inevitably going to happen, standards are going to be raised. But of course, a victory against

ISS in Houston doesn't change the conditions of ISS workers in London. So you have to organise there as well. Now imagine if we get to the point where there are campaigns like Justice for Janitors (J4J) in all the big centres of the world acting in coordination to force a change in the whole industry. Not just cleaners, but all workers in building services. This is what the global project of the SEIU is about: it's 'Justice for Janitors goes global'. That is, moving from defensive to offensive struggles. Trade unions are big institutions with lots of resources and political weight, but there are very few seriously organising on the ground. It's painful to see so many unions complaining about the loss of rights and the precarisation of labour relations, seeing years of workers' achievements rolled back without figuring out how to fight back.

This is because organising at the ground level stopped a long time ago. We make a distinction between the 'organising' model of J4J and the traditional 'service' model. In the latter, the workers sign up for legal protection, advice, etc. but the relation is individualised: I'm a worker, I have a problem, I call up the union who comes and solves the problem for me. In the organising model, you have people from the union on the ground to help workers get organised. So when there's a problem, it's not 'the union' who comes around and solves it. The organiser is there to help people organise around the problem – pass a petition, organise a meeting with colleagues, produce leaflets – so instead of getting solved by a third party, what you get is a change in the balance of power in the workplace. The managers will know better next time: they'll see these workers can stand up for themselves. At the same time, it's not a matter of just getting a small victory, such as getting someone reinstated – although that's very important to build up confidence and send the bosses a message. But what you really want is people active in a larger campaign to change the industry; and of course, in order to change the industry, they'll have to change the balance of power in their workplaces, and help export their experience there to other buildings, to workers in other companies. This is why we can afford to be on the offensive, while other unions are losing members: our goal is to build organisation, capacity to act, rather than have lots of card-carrying members who only turn up when they have a problem.

RN You spoke of leverage, measuring the balance of forces and knowing what you need to produce change. A huge part of the J4J model is about research.

VA Research is the first step, before the organising begins. First, you need to identify a 'universe'. What is the size of the market? Who are the players involved (owners, building management, cleaning companies)? What share of the market do they have? How many cleaners work for each one? How many cleaners are there in total? This will give you an idea of where to build strength. It would be pointless to have all the workers in one company join the campaign, and none everywhere else, if that company only has a tiny fraction of the overall market. This particular company could decide to pay more, which is good, but in the long term it will lose all contracts to cheaper companies and thus the workers will lose their jobs to other exploited workers. This is why density matters. This is what being on the offensive

is also about: identifying targets, and how to affect them; and then having the means to move in.

RN Then you start mapping this universe onto the territory: which are the buildings with the highest density of workers? Who owns them, and what companies clean them? But also: what are the conditions and pay in this and that company?– Bearing in mind that even within a single company this can vary a lot.

VA Yes. So after a good deal of the research is done, the organisers move in. Hang out in front of the buildings to identify when shifts change, and try to speak to workers as they go in or out. Get more information about the workplace (how many people? how much do they make? where are most of the people from?), and start a conversation just by questioning the conditions they work in. They listen, talk about the reason for those conditions (lack of power), discuss possible solutions – this we call ‘agitation’. And then we pose the question, or they pose it themselves: what can we do about it? That’s when you tell them about the union, explain what the campaign is about, and show them that it’s not some pie-in-the-sky utopia, but something that has been done before and can be done again. Make them think about how the industry is organised, where the leverage is, who you need to put pressure on, and how the workers from different buildings can make it happen. If they’re up for it, you get their phone number and call them up again a few days later to arrange another meeting, see if they can bring some colleagues. If they do, you know they’re committed, and that’s where the organising begins.

After gaining critical mass in some key sites, you have organising committee meetings, which is where the organic leaders and activists from different places come together. For almost everyone it’s the first time they meet each other, and it’s very empowering to see other people who are in the same position, and that you probably wouldn’t have met otherwise. It creates the feeling that *sí, se puede!* [‘yes, we can!’, slogan of J4J in the US, where the majority of members are Hispano-American]. At these meetings, people discuss and exchange information, including tips on how to talk to their colleagues, and plan next steps. It’s both a space for education and for strategy.

RN Even at this moment, the research element is still present – it only moves from the union researchers to the organisers and workers. A huge part of the organising work is mapping the social networks inside and around the workplace: finding out how many people there are in the workplace, where they are from, what languages they speak, how they feel about the campaign. Inside, you start working out who’s close to whom, who might be closer to management than to the other workers, who are the people that everyone respects, who are the people who are committed, who is indifferent, who is against the campaign. You keep charts and notebooks that are constantly updated, first by the organiser, then by the workplace leaders themselves.

VA Lots of people don’t like it when we speak of ‘leaders’ – they think we go around appointing our favourites. If it were that, there would be no future. It’s by

mapping these social networks, as you said, that you identify organic leaders. We don't appoint them, the other workers do.

RN They're the point where these networks overlap, the most connected nodes.

VA And they can be for or against the union, or indifferent. If they're against it, you need to try to make them neutral. And you need to find other people in that workplace who'll be able to get everyone active.

This, like everything else in a campaign, is done incrementally. Has this person come to organising committee meetings? Then they're obviously committed. Did they bring people with them? Then they're capable of moving the others. It's the same thing with actions: you start with something small, leafleting or a picket with the members of the organising committee. As the committee grows, you start planning bigger actions, and stressing to them that it's their responsibility to make it grow, to get others active.

When the campaign kicks off, you must have a body of members ready for taking action, but you must keep an eye on many other variables. You need to find political support outside, among politicians too, but mostly the workers' communities, religious groups etc. You must develop reliable media contacts, as well as prepare leaders to deal with the press. You must keep an eye on the agenda, because timing is crucial – like knowing how to exploit it when banks announce their annual bonuses, or taking advantage of symbolic dates. All these variables run in parallel lines, and you need to coordinate them in order to create a build-up, and get to the point where these companies are getting phone calls from members of the public, being criticised in the newspapers, having religious leaders turn up on their doorstep...

RN Or having their offices in several different countries visited on the same day...

VA Until it becomes unsustainable for them. Then when one of them folds, the whole industry in that city follows. Eventually all companies sign an agreement with the union. After that, the campaign is over and what we call 'internal organising' begins: absorbing the new members into the union, creating strong representative structures in every workplace – and hopefully, from the people who became involved in that campaign, some will become future leaders of the union.

RN You mentioned the communities; a lot of the mapping is about identifying which are the areas where large numbers of the workers live, which are the churches they go to, how their national or ethnic community is organised, what are the media of communication (newspapers, radios) the community has... Activating these transversal lines can produce support for the campaign, but can sometimes produce a lot more. In London the Justice for Cleaners campaign had a clear impact in groups working around migration; it created new possibilities, providing access to infrastructure, opening channels of communication between people inside and outside institutions. It's still too early to say if it will have the same impact as J4J in

the US, but one can see the differences – also in the fact that the union [Transport and General Workers’ Union, host of Justice for Cleaners] has become a lot more assertive in its defence of migrants, and taken a public position in favour of regularisation.

VA It depends on the context, too; in the US, very often we have members who already have a memory of struggle in their countries of origin. I worked with former Sandinistas, for example! Also black and Hispanic churches in the US have a long history of involvement in civil rights struggles, and are important nodes of political organisation in the community.

RN This is the most important element of J4J, I’d say. A campaign in itself could be described as business unionism, but it is part and parcel of the J4J model that you activate the community, you create new, transversal connections – which is what you could call social unionism. For me that’s the most important element: at the end of the day, with J4J as with anything else, there’s no guarantee that relations won’t become crystallised, that you won’t just create a new representative class. But if a campaign successfully feeds into a lively movement around it – a movement that can also, to some extent, reclaim the union as its own – then you have more chances of there always being enough pressure ‘from below’ to keep things moving.

VA Not just that; the movement can do things that the union can’t. The union is limited in various ways by legal or structural constraints. So if something needs to be done that the union can’t do, it’s important to have the support of those who can. Almost all our members are migrants, often with an irregular status. They can’t do a sit-in and risk being arrested, but others can. If there are housing problems in a place, it’s not our direct job to start a campaign, but we can support those who do. At the same time, it’s important that these relations are very clear and open. I helped organise J4J marches supported by the Black Bloc, and they knew there could be no trouble because of people’s legal status – so you had all these kids in black marching alongside Mexican grandmothers, pacifists, American Indigenous Movement members, university and high school students, migrant rights organisations.

Also, what you say about reclaiming the union... A union victory has the effect of spreading this feeling of possibility to everyone else. This was certainly one of the things that led to such a vibrant migrant movement in the US in the last few years – people saw their friends and family organise and win, and started organising too. J4J has had an important role in the struggle for migrant legalisation in the US. A direct role, by participating in coordinations, co-organising marches, building alliances.

RN You mentioned legal constraints. I think this is one area where the approximation with something like J4J also highlights something important. For example, many ‘activists’ of the ‘autonomous’ kind criticise unions for accepting given legislation; but that also shows that autonomy is always to a certain extent

staked against the State, and on that level legislation does count a lot. A friend and I were talking about it: there's recently been highly publicised cases of local governments moving to evict squatted social centres that have lasted for decades (Umdogshuset in Copenhagen, Les Tanneries in Dijon, Köpi in Berlin). When this happens, people go there from all over Europe to try and defend what they already have. But wouldn't an offensive way of doing it be to collect the most progressive bits of squatting legislation in different countries, and start campaigning for a progressive European legislation on the subject, while keeping on squatting at the same time? It's similar to what the MST (Landless Peasants Movement) is doing in Brazil: if the legal definition of 'productive' land is changed, there will be a lot more land that can be rightfully occupied.

VA It's always best to take the initiative, particularly in areas like European legislation that are still to be invented, and in the hands of bureaucrats. Every territory is important in the struggle; the legal territory is crucial. If we get back to the point where unions can mobilise people, we can revert the negative legislation passed when unions were impotent; this will mean we can do more, go further. It's like a campaign, you go step by step. Our rights to organise are under attack in the US and everywhere, and this is one of the biggest fights for the next few years. Everyone assumes we have the right to organise in our workplaces, but the reality is very different. You might have the right but no power to enforce it. In the US existing rights are minimal. So you need a two-pronged strategy: you need a strong movement, and that strong movement needs to sustain people who will fight on the level of legislation and institutions.

RN Perhaps this is where one distinction between 'radicals' and 'reformists' could be drawn: 'reformists' will always work under the given legal constraints; 'radicals' will take them as limits for the struggle at this moment, but work to build up the struggle so that those limits can be overturned.

VA What people who see unions as reformist should do is work with them, from the inside and the outside, to push them towards being more radical.

Valery Alzaga has worked for the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) as a labour organiser in the Justice for Janitors (J4J) campaign for over nine years, but she defines herself first of all as a 'global justice' activist; she has been in Europe for two years, working for the SEIU global department, having collaborated in the setting up of campaigns in London, Hamburg and the Hague. Rodrigo Nunes, also on the editorial collective of Turbulence, worked in the Justice for Cleaners campaign in London from 2005 to 2006. He worked as a community organiser and popular educator in Brazil, and now lives in London, where he is finishing a PhD in philosophy with a grant from CAPES – Brazilian Government. More info on J4J at <http://www.seiu.org/property/janitors/>

Quelle: <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/organise-local-strike-global/>