

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES IN WINNIPEG: THE WORKERS ORGANIZING AND RESOURCE CENTRE

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“The union movement must again become the moral, strategic and political center to build a movement dedicated to fighting for the rights of all workers, defending workers' democracy and improving the lives of the ever increasing numbers of people forced to live in poverty.”

Mission Statement of the Workers
Organizing and Resource Centre

In a city rich with traditions of working class struggle the location of the Winnipeg Workers Organizing and Resource Centre (WORC) should come as no surprise. Winnipeg labour has always claimed its right to locate its institutions in prime locations. So it was natural that WORC would be located in the very shadows of the bank headquarters that tower over the intersection of Portage and Main. Upon arriving at the Centre one realizes that the choice of location was not an act of political defiance, but more reflective of the pragmatic nature of Winnipeg's confident and established labour movement. The hustle of parcel couriers dropping in for a coffee and the steady influx of people confirm the accessibility of the location.

This is a place where working people are welcome. Unlike the nearby glass palaces of finance capital, WORC offices are not plush. There is no sense of hierarchy. Opinions are not rated on

the basis of job title. Everyone is expected to tidy up. There is an unmistakable vibrancy here. The intensity of purpose is palpable.

But like the nearby bank towers, important decisions affecting the future of WORC are made miles away, in central Canada. This paper will examine the performance since it was first opened in November 1998. It will discuss the implications of the current financing structure and relationship to its sole source of funding, the national office of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW).

The Winnipeg Workers Organizing Resource Centre is a storefront operation, comprised of several small offices and a large meeting hall, aptly named after Helen Armstrong, a leader in the 1919 Winnipeg General strike. It is funded by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and structured as a collective. The staff at the Centre consists of one paid part-time position and a network of volunteers drawn from the progressive community and the organizations that use the Centre. The Central Committee, which governs the operations of the Centre, is comprised of representatives of the groups using the Centre and CUPW. Where possible, decisions are reached through consensus, although a vote may be called to break a deadlock. Although CUPW holds a majority of seats on the

Central Committee, it has never used its majority representation to impose a decision.

The initiative for the Centre came from CUPW activists and leadership located in Winnipeg where CUPW has a large local and a Regional Office. It was not solely a union initiative. Community activists from many constituencies were involved from the beginning. This integration of union and community interests was itself the result of a longstanding commitment to community unionism on the part of the Winnipeg CUPW local and also a consequence of the progressive political culture which exists in the city's left community.

During the initial discussions on the Centre, activists identified many areas to be addressed: outreach to youth, especially those unemployed, underemployed, non-unionized and students and assistance to workers with problems associated with labour standards, employment insurance, workers' compensation, and human rights. The need to work with both community coalitions and social justice groups as well as with organizations representing ethnic groups in their struggles to achieve equality, recognition, education and employment opportunities was identified. For union members it was agreed that the Centre should foster an understanding that the union and its membership are an integral part of our communities and therefore must actively participate in the struggle to bring about changes that benefit workers, their communities and society as a whole. There was agreement that the Centre should promote community campaigns to fight

unemployment. Outreach to schools for both labour and community groups was seen as another role for the Centre. Finally, promoting the organizing of the unorganized was seen as one of the chief objectives of the Centre.

From this process emerged the Workers' Organizing Resource Centre mandate:

- 1) To help establish, maintain and facilitate community organizations that represent and enforce people's rights within our community;
- 2) To advocate on behalf of unorganized workers for protection of their rights in the workplace and beyond; and
- 3) To organize the unorganized.

Initially the organizers of the Centre identified three major objectives included in the mandate. These are to work with and strengthen local progressive coalitions, to do advocacy work for individuals and groups, and to assist in the unionization of workers.

HOW THE CENTRE HAS REALIZED THESE OBJECTIVES?

Coalition Work

How has the Centre assisted local coalitions and progressive organizations? How has the Centre contributed to enhancing the understanding of union members that they and their unions are an integral part of their communities and that their success greatly depends on the strength and vitality of local working class movements? Has the Centre contributed to greater cohesion and effectiveness

between different progressive organizations in Winnipeg?

While the Centre's contribution to the political developments in Winnipeg is difficult to quantify, it is easier to examine how the Centre's facilities have been used by progressive groups and coalitions. This is especially true for the main meeting room for which a monthly calendar is kept listing the bookings that have been made. Likewise it is easy to quantify the number of organizations that use the Centre as their "office" keeping their files and using it as working space. Included among the wide range of diverse organizations using the Centre for advocacy, political and union organizing are:

- The CUPW Red River Local. A union local of couriers working for Dynamex Courier
- The Delivery Drivers Alliance of Manitoba (DDAM). Group of delivery drivers from various workplaces which addresses working conditions of delivery workers
- Canadian Association of the Non-Employed (C.A.N.E.). Local organization mandated to address unemployment.
- The Low Income Intermediary Project. Conducts advocacy work for people on welfare.
- The Public Service Project. Their goal is to promote the benefits of public ownership of public services and counter the myths concerning privatization .
- Workers' Initiative. Provides advocacy and information on Workers Compensation claims and appeals and a variety of disability problems.
- Industrial Workers of the World

General Membership Branch

- The Winnipeg Labour Choir
- The Latin American Arts Council
- Harvest Collective
- Mayworks
- The Direct Action Group: Formed by unionists and community activists to support and promote independent political action by labour and community groups.
- The Nicaraguan Cultural Association
- The Structured Movement Against Capitalism (SMAC).
- The Manitoba Coalition for Economic Justice. An organization promoting the economic and political issues surrounding poverty.
- The Manitoba Cuba Solidarity Committee. Organization promoting friendship and solidarity between the people of Canada and Cuba.

The above organizations all have an institutional relationship with the Centre, providing support in the form of volunteers or representation on the WORC Central Committee. Several other groups and unions use the meeting room on an ad hoc basis.

The Centre is a very active place with the meeting space and offices are regularly in use. A survey of the booking calendar reveals that the Helen Armstrong Meeting Hall was booked for meetings an average of four nights weekly. This does not include numerous meetings arranged on short notice. Altogether there are 24 people who regularly volunteer to work at the Centre. WORC has achieved its mandate to establish, maintain and facilitate community organizations that

represent and enforce people's rights within the community.

WORC has also helped solidify relations between progressive organizations and activists. Although it is difficult to quantify the ways in which WORC's work has contributed to greater cohesion within Winnipeg's progressive movement, WORC has definitely played an important role. It is more than symbolic that Mayworks and the Structured Movement Against Capitalism hold their meetings and functions at WORC. The United May Day Banquet, which is the "kick-off" to Mayworks, filled the hall to capacity in 2001. The synergies of left energy generated by such diverse activities have a real impact on the coming together of the progressive movements.

Uniting the left is seen by many participants and observers as an extremely important part of WORC. Ken Kaltornyk, a veteran political activist, is involved with Workers' Initiative, a group providing advocacy and information on Workers' Compensation claims and appeals as well as a variety of disability problems. Kaltornyk has been involved with WORC from the beginning. He believes it has played an important role providing space for activists to come together and organize within their respective areas of interest and also to cooperate to address the broader political issues affecting working people. According to Kaltornyk, "it would be difficult to overestimate the role WORC has played in building the left" (Kaltornyk 2001).

Advocacy

It is much easier to quantify the amount and quality of advocacy work at the Centre. Here again the mandate of WORC appears to have been completely fulfilled. The major areas of advocacy work are in the areas of welfare (Low Income Intermediary Project), workers compensation (Worker's Initiative) and labour standards (Delivery Drivers Alliance of Manitoba, the WORC Coordinator and several volunteers). Information is also provided on other issues, such as tenants' rights, human rights violations, and immigration problems. However, advocacy work on these issues is usually referred to other organizations with specialized knowledge.

Initially the two most common areas of advocacy work were employment standards and workers compensation. A study of intake calls and walk in cases during the first 10 months of operations reveals the following:

WORC Caseload: December 1998 to September 1999 (Source: Richmond, 2000)

Issue	Number of Calls or Walk-Ins
Employment Standards	113
Bad Boss Problems	37
Workers Compensation	53
Health and Safety	18
Employment Insurance	85
Human Rights	15
Welfare	5

Approximately 52% of the people seeking assistance were women. Since this study the caseload has increased

considerably with an average caseload of 60 clients per month in 2000 and 2001.

Welfare advocacy is one area that has expanded greatly. When the centre opened it was common to receive one or two requests for assistance per month concerning welfare claims. By the summer of 2001 requests for assistance had risen to 20 per week. Several reasons account for this. The number of people on welfare facing difficulties has increased. The individuals performing casework for welfare clients have organized their services on a very professional basis, modeled after the traditional grievance procedures common in trade unions. The very high success rate of pursuing claims has led to increased demand. The reputation of the Centre's advocacy work on behalf of welfare claimants has led several social service agencies to refer clients needing advocacy services to WORC. As a result of the increased demand for assistance, two persons are working on a full-time basis only dealing with welfare advocacy with the assistance of several part-time volunteers (Dick, 2001).

In order to deal with the ever increasing workload, the caseworkers have banded together to create an organizational structure. The Low Income Intermediary Project (LIIP) now represents almost 80 workers each month with welfare claims issues. This organization was created out of the practice developed at WORC. It is highly unlikely that LIIP would exist if it were not for WORC. Currently LIIP is seeking government funding, and, if successful, will contribute to WORC's efforts to become financially self-sufficient by renting the space, which it has been receiving free for one year. The

anti-poverty efforts centered in WORC have not been totally focused on advocacy and claims work. There is recognition that poverty must be addressed through political struggles. Many of the same individuals involved in LIIP banded together to form the Manitoba Coalition for Economic Justice, to address economic and political issues surrounding poverty. Many of the individuals doing advocacy work are involved in the Structured Movement Against Capitalism.

WORC is also the home of organizations performing advocacy for injured workers and unorganized workers requiring assistance with provincial and federal labour standards and human rights legislation.

Worker's Initiative provides information and advocacy for injured workers experiencing difficulties with Workers Compensation. Disabled workers have become targets for governments interested in reducing costs at the expense of some of the most vulnerable, and often least visible members of society. Worker's Initiative has been involved with the Centre from the beginning.

Requests for assistance with labour standards issues are handled by the Centre's part-time coordinator or volunteers who staff the Centre on a regular basis. Often these issues are presented by individuals visiting or calling the Centre. Almost one-third of requests for assistance now come through the Centre's website at www3.mb.sympatico.ca/~worc.

The major economic issues not addressed by groups located at WORC are complaints covered by collective agreements and issues related to

unemployment insurance. Workers covered by collective agreements are advised to contact their union and may be provided help in locating the appropriate union office. Clients requiring representation on unemployment matters are often referred to the Community Unemployed Help Centre, where WORC staff and volunteers were originally trained and with which WORC still has a very cooperative relationship.

Delivery workers have developed a very close relationship with WORC, using the Centre as an informal meeting place during the working day. The Delivery Drivers Association of Manitoba (DDAM) is located at WORC and provides support, information and advocacy services for unorganized delivery workers. Likewise the CUPW Red River Local, representing couriers working for Dynamex Courier Company, is located at WORC. The presence of these organizations, combined with the strategic location of WORC, has enabled it to become a place for delivery workers to regularly drop in to chat, obtain information, organize, seek assistance on labour standards issues, or simply to use the facilities and have a coffee.

Organizing

WORC has a mandate to contribute to the unionization of workers. Indeed, part of CUPW's motivation for funding the Centre was the hope that the advocacy work of the Centre would inspire workers to start organizing drives in their workplaces. The CUPW leadership was clear that it did not wish

to use the Centre as a means of organizing outside of its traditional jurisdiction in the transportation and communications sector. Organizing leads in other industries were to be forwarded to unions associated with the sectors.

Unlike coalition support and advocacy work, it is more difficult to quantify the contribution WORC has made to organizing the unorganized. While it is impossible to attribute any one single successful organizing drive to the existence of WORC, there is significant evidence of its contribution to the success of CUPW's local organizing efforts.

Altogether, nation-wide, CUPW has 16 non post office bargaining units and is bargaining first contracts for many more. These units are comprised of postal cleaners, paramedic dispatchers, parcel delivery companies on contract with Canada Post, mailing houses and courier parcel delivery workers. Most units are small and situated within CUPW's traditional jurisdiction. The CUPW Winnipeg local has been a trailblazer within the Union concerning organization of courier drivers. In fact Winnipeg is the only location in Canada in which the union has established a separate non post office local, The Red River Local, comprised totally of courier workers employed by Dynamex Courier.

The organization of these workers was a long drawn out process in which the Employer challenged the employee status of the owner operators all the way to the Supreme Court. The legal maneuvers were a transparent attempt to wear down the resistance of the drivers and generate significant

employee turnover. During this period of more than seven months WORC played an invaluable role providing a place for Dynamex workers to meet regularly and plan their organizing strategy.

Following the successful certification effort the newly created Red River Local decided to locate its office within WORC so it can provide assistance to its sister organization, the Delivery Drivers Alliance of Manitoba, and build upon the recognition WORC has earned within the community of courier workers. WORC has provided a home for the Red River Local, and the local frequently assists the CUPW Winnipeg local and the national union in other organizing drives.

At the time of writing, CUPW is involved in two organizing drives of couriers in Winnipeg using WORC as the organizing center. Many activists within the CUPW local believe the union's involvement with WORC contributes to the local union's willingness to organize other units. Indeed the Winnipeg local has organized more non post office workers than any other CUPW local. There is no doubt that WORC remains a significant source of pride for local activists and has reinforced their involvement with the broader left community within Winnipeg.

It is difficult to directly identify a causal relationship between WORC and organizing drives of other unions. However WORC has made numerous referrals to other unions of workers wishing to organize their workplaces.

THE FUTURE

The WORC pilot project is already in its third year and it appears to be a total success. Hundreds of workers' lives are dramatically improved resulting from the advocacy work located and fostered at the Centre. WORC shows every indication of a vibrant center of progressive working class activity. However, it remains precarious because it has not generated financial support to enable it to become less reliant on funding received from the National Executive Board of the CUPW. Within CUPW, WORC remains an exception. Traditionally the national union has not funded local or regional initiatives of this type and it is doubtful the National Union will make the project permanent unless significant strides are taken to diversify its funding base.

Several options may be pursued together or independently. Obtaining core funding from other unions would seem like the easiest alternative. WORC has earned an excellent reputation within the labour movement and activists from several unions associate with the Centre. To date efforts to broaden the base have not proven successful, in part because the unity of the progressive union block has been somewhat fractured as a result of jurisdictional disputes.

Another avenue would be to increase the rent charged to participating groups. There is limited capacity of the groups to pay and charging user fees might result in the most needy organizations abandoning the Centre.

Fundraising within CUPW local unions is another method by which the Centre could diversify its funding base.

There is no precedent within CUPW for one local to seek sustained core funding support from other CUPW locals. However during the mid 1980's the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) obtained commitments for sustained regular contributions for the SACTU strike fund from many CUPW locals, and it might be possible for WORC to adopt this approach. The Centre may also look to the public sector to seek any grant funding that may be available.

Most likely the road to financial independence and stability is to be found in some combination of the above scenarios. The only other solution would be to demonstrate that the existence of the Centre is directly contributing to the organization of significant numbers of new members and to seek permanent funding from the National union on this basis. The difficulty with this approach is that there is no definition of what would constitute a "significant" number of new members. Also it must be acknowledged that organizing new bargaining units is a long term project, especially for a union such as CUPW which is only now developing the required experience and expertise.

Is This a Useful Model?

In its three years of operation WORC has provided assistance to thousands of workers, assisted in the development of new and existing working class institutions, and gained the respect of organized labour and the progressive community within Winnipeg (Doyle, 2001). A number of factors contributed to facilitate its development. The solid

support received from the Winnipeg CUPW local and regional office, and the dedication of the large number of volunteers have been essential. Likewise the non-sectarian character of the left community has provided the political framework enabling WORC to develop.

If similar projects are to be undertaken in other cities they will have to correspond to the political realities and level of development of the labour and progressive movements within these communities. Hopefully WORC will only be the first of many such initiatives, as we believe that the fate of the union movement depends on its relationship to the broader struggle of working people.

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