



Education

Key Takeaways

- The Union needs to train new and current union members in labor theory and union tactics
- A well-educated rank and file will be able to implement bottom-up dynamic strategies

Executive Summary / Introduction

UAW 4121 currently lacks an educational apparatus to instruct new and current members on labor and union theory. Consequently, members at all levels of the organization struggle to understand how the Union operates, where the Union's power comes from, and where they fit within the Union. This poses a significant barrier to achieving the Union's goals. For example, during the 2023 / 24 bargaining period, the bargaining committee called a strike authorization vote without having made any of the typical preparations, including discussing what a strike meant with the larger membership. Over the course of the strike, it came out that many members did not agree about what striking meant, with many thinking an intended long-term strike would still be effective if their commitment to it was limited. A parallel problem that emerged was the popularity of the 6 AM shift among strikers, who signed up for picketing duty early with the intention of having a full day to work after their shift ended. These examples were undoubtedly major contributors to the strike's failure after just a single day and illustrate a lack of ideological clarity among members.

It is a particular problem for the Union that both its representational system and broader self-conception suffer from hierarchical ideologies often induced through misguided theoretical understanding. This is seen in union rhetoric which often positions leaders as the only people with the authority to make decisions and thus empowers them to act with little consultation with general membership. For example, members are often told that their absence from a particular meeting renders their comments irrelevant to further discussion of a given matter. This leads to a broader inability of the Union to brook dissent or to consider dynamic strategies informed by the rank and file.

These hierarchical ideologies appear to be rooted in a service model of unionism that many members, especially those in positions of trust, seem to maintain. Broadly, unions' self-conceptions can be divided into two irreconcilable camps: union as a vehicle for class conflict or union-as-a-service. The class conflict conception sees the union as the institutional representation of workers' interests, who, through the union, are organized against a boss whose interests are permanently and structurally against those of the union. The union-as-a-service conception views



the union as effectively a third-party provider of technical negotiating and contract enforcement expertise. Most active members of the Union appear to hold the service view, although this is obscured by their frequent use of rhetoric associated with the class conflict conception.

Adherence to the service model conception of unionization often manifests as more active UAW 4121 members viewing and publicly presenting themselves as uniquely qualified to lead. Less active members are led to believe that their role is to take a back seat in Union planning and governance and they are provided with an ideology that encourages them to do so. To operate as an effective fighting force, however, the Union must adopt a class conflict ideology and run itself in line with the principles contained therein. Doing so will encourage member participation, the democratization of union structures, and aggressive contract negotiations that fully utilize the Union's collective power.

The paradigmatic shift required to pull this off will necessitate the founding of a strong educational apparatus. The Union must adopt a training program in union theory, history, and tactics and set up expectations that members, especially the more active ones, attend the program. Doing so will empower the Union to root its decisions in best practices, orient members with a class conflict ideology that deepens their commitment to the institutional union, and provide a starting point for planning and taking effective labor action.

Extended Analysis

Lack of Strike Preparation/Knowledge

Unions have a large array of potential tactics to draw on to achieve their demands. A strong union will have thorough knowledge of these tactics. It will understand what actions are appropriate to engage in under particular circumstances, and it will have operational knowledge of how to execute these tactics.

UAW 4121's most recent bargaining period makes it apparent that the Union lacks knowledge of tactical potentials and how to execute them. A clear indicator of this is the limited repertoire of tactics employed over the course of negotiations. Throughout the bargaining period, the main tactic members drew upon to pressure administration was sit-ins. The Union sat in all kinds of places - libraries, administration offices, department buildings - to little avail. At no point prior to the strike was an alternative tactic (like a petition or call in campaign) suggested to increase pressure. This failure appears to be rooted in a dearth of knowledge of what tactics are available to the Union and how to execute them.



It also appears that UAW 4121 has an insufficient understanding of the tactics that it chose to deploy and how to do so effectively. For example, the typical goal of a sit-in is to render a space unusable for normal activities. The idea is that by taking up space, protestors can disrupt the routine of day-to-day life and use the threat of continued disruption to achieve demands. To accomplish this goal, sit-ins must be committed to remaining in an occupied space for an indefinite period, or at least to reoccupying space as often and as long as protestors believe is necessary. This requires careful planning to ensure that a) people are available to occupy the space indefinitely, potentially in shifts, b) that necessary supplies are readily available throughout the sit-in, and c) that all participants share an understanding of the sit-in's timeline and goals.

At every step of the sit-ins organized by the Union during the 2023/24 academic year, each of these precepts were ignored. Sit-ins were always time limited with no plan to extend them or reoccupy space once the sit-in ended. Planning for several of the sit-ins was done on an extremely short-term basis, leading to a lack of communication between union members, supply shortages, and disunity of goals. Sometimes, ad hoc sit-ins were announced without forewarning during another action, leading potential participants to feel that they had been tricked into participating in a different, riskier action than the one they had signed up for.

Typically, sit-ins were conducted with an explicit directive to ensure that the occupied space could still be used in the way it was intended while the sit-in was ongoing. Additionally, several of these sit-ins were paradoxically framed as work-ins, where members were encouraged to bring their laptops and other work materials to continue laboring in the midst of an act of protest, further denigrating the goal of disruption. In the failure of appropriate organization and directing actions counter to effective protesting, UAW 4121 demonstrated a weak understanding of how to use the sit-in as a tactic.

The eventual one-day ASE strike demonstrated similar gaps in the Union's understanding of how to effectively deploy tactics. When the strike vote was called, it became apparent that leadership had taken little action to prepare for a strike if the vote succeeded. Effective strike preparation begins months before a strike vote is called, with organizers talking to each and every member to explain what a strike is, how and why it is effective, and what kinds of participation are needed from the members for the strike to succeed. None of this had been done, which was admitted by leadership in the planning meetings days before the strike, and was apparent in members' disagreement on what it meant to be on strike. For instance, some members even signed up for the early strike shifts so they could work a full day after leaving their shift on the picket line.

Once people were on the picket line, more lapses in knowledge became apparent. For instance, whoever was in charge of strike planning seemed to lack knowledge of the possible ways



striking members could be used to improve the Union's position at the bargaining table besides standing on street corners with picket signs. Proven tactics the Union either neglected or was ignorant to include strike members pulling people out of work; calling campaigns off the picket line; displaying posters to catch the attention of the public; and public teach-ins about working conditions. UAW 4121 showed no apparent understanding of how the Union's copious community support could be used to enhance the effects of the strike. These failings must at least in part be attributed to ignorance of how to strike.

The Union must deploy a wider range of tactics throughout the duration of a bargaining year that strategically escalate the pressure applied to the Administration (as opposed to the sudden yet limited escalation in the final months of negotiation). In addition to currently deployed tactics like rallies and sit-ins, pre-strike tactics would ideally include actions such as the following:

- Launching a centrally organized community support campaign that gathers signatures and contact information from faculty, staff, undergrads, and other units to be used for future community organizing
- Initiating call-in campaigns to union members (using the phone tree model of communication) to drum up support for upcoming actions
- Posting flyers around the university and the greater Seattle area to increase wider public awareness and support of Union bargaining demands
- Hosting teach-ins in our sections to educate our students about the issues at stake during our upcoming contract negotiation, and to communicate the role of labor organizing more broadly

Moving forward, it is clear that the Union must improve its understanding of all available tactics and how to deploy them. This includes developing tacticians within the Union who have a grasp of what tactics are effective in which situations, and what resources and plans are needed to implement these tactics. It also means proactively educating members of what tactics are intended to accomplish and what is needed from the membership for these tactics to succeed. Ideally, these aims would be reached through institutionalized training programs and regular outreach.



Overreliance on Formal Metrics

Data can be useful in any number of ways. It can reveal underlying patterns, help interpreters understand quantities at hand, and help contextualize wider patterns of social movement. At the same time, data can, quite famously, be used to lie. And even when it is not used maliciously, it can never capture the whole picture. Quantitative analyses are by nature conservative, as they are unable to see what could come next other than what has come before. Hence, data, while not useless in union organizing, should be used sparingly and only in conjunction with qualitative understandings that complement the quantitative ones.

Throughout the bargaining period, the Union relied extensively on quantitative data to both formulate its bargaining proposals and determine its action plans. This proved to be a grave mistake. At the bargaining table, it led to what were essentially appeals to the administration's better nature. Rather than being stated as measures the Union would fight for and win if need be, demands were couched in the University's "need" to "match peer institutions," be "more efficient" on these issues, and the like. What this missed was a qualitative recognition that the administration did not care about comparative statistics as much as it cared about a single, other number: the bottom line. It was, however, in action planning and execution that the Union's overreliance on formal metrics most thoroughly harmed its cause. Two key statistical obsessions that determined the Union's action decisions were particularly damaging: membership rates and strike participants.

During the bargaining period and the lead-up to the strike, leadership revealed a fixation on membership rates as determinants of union power. Indeed, it went so far as to widely display a PowerPoint slide claiming that certain membership rates *directly* and *irrefutably* translated to power at the bargaining table. Aside from the fact that this simply isn't the case (on the one hand, minority unions have succeeded in struggle while, on the other, unions with full membership have been driven out by employers), the emphasis on membership rates led the Union to focus almost the entirety of its efforts over the Fall 2023 and Winter 2024 quarters on signing up new members. At the same time, it failed to give potential members a reason to sign up. Other than vague, incorrect assertions that high membership rates would pay off in the future, potential members had no incentive to join. They did not face social sanction from their peers, they were not provided with robust services for their dues, and they were not given means to participate in the Union. Hence, UAW 4121 forewent numerous opportunities to build power in other ways in order to throw union cards in people's faces. Predictably, this strategy did not work: the Union only hit its membership targets in the days immediately preceding the strike, almost certainly due to the momentum established by striking rather than as a result of consistent potential member outreach.

A similar emphasis on strike participation numbers limited the Union's potential during the most recent strike, eventually "compelling" (by force of ideology) the bargaining committee to



accept the disastrous Tentative Agreement. For reasons that, to the best of the authors' knowledge, have never been explained in much detail, union leadership was under the impression that a certain number of ASEs needed to be on the picket line at any given moment for the strike to provide leverage. The exact numbers needed were not disclosed so far as we can tell. Nevertheless, the fixation on exact numbers of sign-ins or RSVPs ignored the dynamic situation that a strike creates. The strike could have been used in any number of ways to gain leverage, including potential ways to increase specific participation metrics, but this was foreclosed as a possibility because magic algorithms did not generate desired outputs. By ignoring the qualitative situation in favor of quantitative data, the bargaining committee foreclosed the Union's potential leverage in favor of conservative, unprincipled, and undemocratic decision-making.

As the Union continues, it must abandon its obsession with quantitative data in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how worker power is created and leveraged. This will give it a clearer picture of what its true potential is, thereby enabling it to plan actions that fulfill this potential instead of systematically underestimating it.

Lack of Theoretical Knowledge

Union or labor theory refers to the body of knowledge about what unions are and how they operate. Understanding this theory is imperative to successful labor actions. For one, it helps members contextualize the place a union occupies in their life and the place they occupy in their union. Moreover, it helps members evaluate what actions the union can take, what gains it is possible to win, where the union can be stronger, and where the union should refrain from action. Obviously, lacking this knowledge leads to unsuccessful structures being built and unsuccessful strategies and tactics being deployed.

Both the rank-and-file members and leadership of UAW 4121 seem almost entirely ignorant of union theory. This is observable through an examination of the Union's structure and strategies, which have already been examined above. If the Union, and especially the leadership, had a grasp of labor theory it presumably would have addressed these problems long ago. Hence, it can be inferred that the Union lacks theoretical grounding.

Two examples of the Union's divorce from labor theory, however, deserve special mention. The first is the widespread miscomprehension of what a strike is and how to prepare for one among members at all levels of the Union's hierarchy. During rallies leading up to the postdoc strike of 2023, speakers at Union rallies repeatedly urged people to vote "yes" on strike authorization to present a "credible strike threat," apparently ignorant of the fact that these urgings made the strike threat less credible in and of themselves. During the most recent bargaining period, the bargaining committee called a strike authorization vote without having made any of the typical preparations including discussing what a strike meant with the larger membership, contacting community allies, or making preparations for a strike. Furthermore, over the course of the strike it came out that



many members “did not agree about what striking meant,” with many thinking a strike that was not called for a limited time would still be effective if their commitment to it was time limited. These ideological lacunae were a major reason the strike failed.

A major reason for the Union’s ideological failings is its complete lack of an institutional theoretical education apparatus. Of course, the Union does offer its members trainings. These are, however, strictly technical, covering topics such as how to handle grievances and how to safely engage in direct action (and report backs from these technical trainings indicate they are severely lacking). As it stands, then, there is nowhere for most members to gain the knowledge they need to effectively engage in labor activism.

To remedy this situation, the Union must establish a theoretical education system to train its members in basic union theory. Given the lack of adequate knowledge among existing active members, the Union should reach out to currently inactive members in the economics, history, political science, and sociology departments who study this topic professionally. Furthermore, the Union should establish incentives for members to participate in theoretical education. Only when sufficiently deep theoretical knowledge is widely available and disseminated will the Union become an effective force for class struggle.