

# The Louisville Workers Brigade's Glossary of Working Class Terminology

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*In formulating this zine, The Louisville Workers Brigade considered the numerous ways of defining commonly used working class terms. We have attempted to contextualize these definitions within a historical framework using everyday rhetoric whenever possible to make this document accessible. Most importantly, the Brigade has utilized a scientific approach, evaluating these terms through the lens of class analysis.*

*As with all of our work, the purpose of this glossary is to educate, support, and unite working people with the intent of raising class consciousness. We hope that this resource proves useful to you!*

*If you have any suggested edits or additions, please feel free to reach out to us by emailing us at:  
[contact@louworkersbrigade.org](mailto:contact@louworkersbrigade.org).*

*\*\*\*Words that are underlined can be found with their own definition within this glossary\*\*\**

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**Alienation**- the feeling of estrangement that arises from the division between the worker and the product the worker makes. Alienation is a consequence of exploitation whereby the worker is used as a profit-making instrument and has no ownership or control over the product of the worker's labor.

**Arbitration**- a method of settling a labor dispute whereby a supposedly impartial third party mediates and determines the outcome of the issue.

**At-Will Employment**- the ability of a boss to fire a worker for any reason and without warning so long as the reason is not deemed illegal (such as terminating a worker for their gender, race, religion, etc.).

**Authorization Cards**- forms in which a worker states that they wish to be represented by a union. Authorization cards are typically collected prior to an NLRB election and must show at least thirty percent support for a union among the workforce seeking union representation. These cards are submitted to the NLRB and the workers' names are kept confidential.

**Boycott**- a refusal to work for, purchase from, or handle products of a company. In instances where the boycott is directed against a company directly involved in a labor dispute, such a boycott is called a *primary boycott*. In instances where the boycott is directed against another company with the intent of getting it to cease doing business with the company involved in a labor dispute, such a boycott is called a *secondary boycott*; secondary boycotts were classified as illegal under the Taft-Hartley Act.

**Capitalism**- the current economic system of the U.S. and most of the world. Under this system, factories, land, tools, and financial institutions (sometimes called the *means of production*) are held by a minority—the owning class—forcing the majority—the working class—to sell its labor in exchange for a wage in a coercive relationship characterized by exploitation.

**Captive Audience Meeting**- a meeting called and conducted by management, held on company time and property, used to intimidate workers into voting against unionizing.

**Certification**- also called *recognition*, this is the step in organizing a workplace where a union is formally and legally recognized as the collective representative of the workers; certification of a union usually occurs after a secret-ballot union election is held.

**Class Collaboration Unionism**- the view of unionism which seeks "peaceful coexistence" with the owning class. This ideology is devoid of an understanding of *class* and *class dynamics* and seeks labor-management conflict resolution through prescribed legal avenues as opposed to struggle. This view of unionism is sympathetic to the owning class because it ultimately serves the owning class's interests and weakens the position and class consciousness of the working class. "When the company does well, the workers do well, too!" is a common phrase spoken by class collaboration unionists.

**Class Consciousness**- the understanding of one's placement in our class society, along with the interests of that class. For working people, class consciousness arises with the realization that the owning class grows wealthy by exploiting the labor of the working class.

**Class Struggle Unionism**- the view of unionism which understands that our present economic system is designed for the minority owning class to become wealthy off of the labor of the majority working class. This ideology seeks to heighten the conflict between these two classes—whose interests are diametrically opposed to one another—so that workers may secure economic, political, cultural, and social power for themselves through struggle.

**Closed Shop**- a workplace where all workers are union members, as agreed to between the company and the union. Closed shops were classified as illegal under the Taft-Hartley Act.

**Collective Bargaining**- the process through which workers, represented by their union, negotiate wages, benefits, hours, and other working conditions with their boss. The result of this negotiation is a legally binding collective bargaining agreement, or contract.

**Collective Bargaining Agreement**- also called a contract, this legally binding agreement is the result of the collective bargaining process and dictates the negotiated terms of employment between the boss and the workers within the bargaining unit.

**Company Union**- an employee association dominated by (and often created by) the boss to prevent an actual union from organizing a workplace. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (also called the Wagner Act) classified such “unions” as an unfair labor practice (U.L.P.).

**Craft Union**- a union whose membership is restricted to workers possessing a specific skill or craft. Craft unionism, as an ideology and approach to organizing, historically falls under class collaboration unionism as workers within these unions do not typically organize from a class struggle approach, but tend to seek only what benefits their membership.

**Dues**- union dues are contributions workers make to support the work of their union. These collective funds support organizing efforts, enforcing contracts, strike funds, and the various resources a union provides its membership.

**Exploitation**- the theft of economic power and value inherent in our present economic system whereby the minority owning class becomes wealthy off of the labor which working people sell to them in exchange for a wage. This wage never represents the value of the labor sold, but is simply the scraps the owning class tosses to the working class after a sizable portion—called profit—is first stolen and extracted.

**General Strike**- a largescale labor action whereby all or most organized workers in a community or nation conduct a mass work stoppage.

**Grievance**- any type of worker complaint, dissatisfaction, or harm.

**House Call**- Also called a *home call* or a *house visit*, this is a visit by a union organizer or representative to the home of a worker they are in communication with in an attempt to organize the worker’s workplace. These visits offer the worker a relaxed environment, secure from the prying eyes of the bosses.

**Injunction**- a court order which either imposes restraints upon an action or directs that a specific action be taken; in either case, this order is backed by the court’s power to hold disobedient parties in contempt of court. Injunctions are often issued by the NLRB or a court body during labor struggles and can hinder the effectiveness of either the bosses or the workers.

**Labor Union**- ideally, a labor union is a collective of workers who have banded together for their (and their class’s) mutual benefit and progress. Contemporarily, and characteristic of class collaboration unionism, most unions would define themselves as institutions that *represent* workers creating a crisis of disconnect between union establishments and the rank-and-file in many workplaces. Today, due to the growing and unnecessary demarcation between the union institution and the will and democratic involvement of the workers, many workers see the union as separate from the working people of a company.

**Lockout**- a work stoppage initiated by the boss during a labor dispute, denying workers the ability to work and provide for themselves and their families.

**National Labor Relations Board (N.L.R.B.)**- an agency created by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (also called the Wagner Act) who regulates labor-management relations in the U.S. This agency is responsible for defining bargaining units, conducting union elections, certifying unions to represent workers, to rule on unfair labor practices (U.L.P.), etc. This agency ushered in an approach to labor-management relations that relies almost exclusively on legal maneuvering and jurisprudence. By the agency’s very nature and origin, it opposes the class struggle view of labor-management conflict.

**Oppression**- a situation of unjust exclusion, usually from resources such as education, healthcare, citizenship, economic rights, etc. Tied closely with exploitation, oppression is used by the owning class to divide workers against one another by scapegoating societal and economic ills on vulnerable groups, such as women, Queer folk, people of color, immigrants, etc.

**Organizing**- the work of uniting individuals together around a common cause or ideology. Organizing can generally be classified into three categories, though there is much overlap as these three arenas are intricately connected with one another: labor organizing, political organizing, and community/social organizing. Historically, class struggle unionism understands that it is incumbent on **all** workers to be organizers.

**Owning Class**- also called the *employing class*, *bourgeoisie*, the *bosses*, or the *exploiting class*, the owning class is the current ruling class within modern society, having seized power during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. This

class does not labor or produce, but becomes wealthy by exploiting the working class through its monopoly ownership of the factories, land, tools, and financial institutions.

**Picket Line**- a boundary established by workers on strike, usually situated near the entrance to the company who is being targeted for the labor action. Striking workers typically take shifts on the picket line and will usually carry signs and will chant, publicizing the reason for their work stoppage.

**Piece Work**- pay determined by the number of units completed. This unjust pay system is defended by claiming that the more one works, the more one is paid. In reality, piece work is easily manipulated by the bosses, sliding the scale of pay and/or units required to further exploit the workers.

**Private Property**- sometimes called *the means of production*, private property is property owned by the owning class and includes the factories, land, tools, and financial institutions within society. Private property should not be confused with *personal property* (property owned by an individual such as a house, automobile, toothbrush, etc.) or *public property* (property owned collectively by society).

**Profit**- the value produced by a worker that is unpaid to the worker and is kept by the boss. Profit represents stolen, unpaid wages for the worker. This theft of value is what enriches the owning class and enables its continued existence.

**Rank-and-File**- the workers organized within a union.

**Ratification**- the formal approval of a newly bargained contract by vote of the organized workers the contract covers.

**Reform**- efforts made to ameliorate the suffering of working people and to improve their material conditions. While reforms can be helpful in the short term, reformism can never abolish exploitation and oppression, but simply seeks to minimize their impact and destruction.

**Revolution**- a changing of the ruling class. Under our present economic ordering, revolution ought to be the goal of the working class: to abolish the system of exploitation and to secure economic, political, social, and cultural power for themselves. Revolutions take on many forms and characteristics: for instance, the current ruling class of the U.S. ascended to its position through the American Revolution by overthrowing British monarchical rule and establishing a new nation which enshrines the owning class as rulers.

**Right to Work**- legislation which prohibits union from negotiating closed shop clauses into their contracts. These unjust laws allow workers to benefit from the union at their workplace without participating or contributing to the union. Right to Work laws are determined by individual states and there are currently twenty-six states that have such legislation, including Kentucky.

**Runaway Shop**- a company that transfers to another location, usually moving to a different city or state, in an effort to destroy a union or to evade bargaining duties.

**Sitdown Strike**- a type of strike which involves the takeover of a workplace by the workers through a work stoppage and refusal to vacate company premises. Such labor actions demonstrate the productive power of the workers, build solidarity among them, and prevent the use of scabs during a strike. The National Labor Relations Board (N.L.R.B.) declared sitdown strikes to be illegal at the end of the 1930's.

**Scab**- also called *blacklegs* or *strikebreakers*, scabs are workers who betray their class by working during a strike, weakening the power of the working class. Scabs can be workers brought in by the bosses to take over the jobs of those on strike or can be already-employed workers who refuse to go on strike with their fellow workers.

**Solidarity**- the awareness of shared interests and objectives held by working and oppressed people, forging unity and singleness of action within the working class.

**Slow Down**- a tactic used by workers to protest grievances whereby the workers intentionally slow production, cutting into profits and garnering the attention of the bosses.

**Speed Up**- a tactic used by management to intentionally speed up production to increase profit without an increase in wages and compensation.

**Strike**- a tactic used by workers to protest grievances whereby the workers withhold their labor in a work stoppage. Usually a picket line is erected outside of the workplace where the work stoppage has been launched. This is one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of the working class because it halts production, therefore depriving the bosses of profit.

**Strike Captain**- a union member assigned to a picket line during a strike. Responsibilities of a strike captain include educating picketers on where picket line boundaries are, ensuring proper behavior among strikers, providing needed supplies during the strike, and being the point of contact for media, law enforcement, and supporters.

**Strike Pay-** compensation provided to workers by the union during a work stoppage. These funds are meant to provide for basic necessities during the strike and come from the union's *strike fund*, a reserve of money for such instances.

**Supervisor-** also called a manager, a supervisor is a worker who has exchanged their loyalty to their class for some extra pay and benefits from the bosses. Their responsibilities include hiring, firing, and disciplinary action. They primarily serve as the buffer between the owning class and the working class, situated to enforce the will of the bosses on the workers.

*\*\*\*Some workers are wrongfully termed "supervisors" or "managers," despite not fitting this description; one tactic of management is to wrongfully classify pro-union workers as supervisors in order to prevent them from participating in organizing a union.\*\*\**

**Taft-Hartley Act-** The Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, commonly known as the Taft-Hartley Act, is legislation passed in 1947 in response to a major strike wave between 1945-46 and the then-escalating Cold War. The law made illegal wildcat strikes and solidarity strikes, along with secondary boycotts and picketing, and closed shops. Because of this legislation, Right to Work laws were introduced to the states and union leaders were made to file affidavits with the federal government declaring that they are not members or supporters of the Communist Party. The Taft-Hartley Act was made possible due to the Wagner Act which positioned labor-management relations almost exclusively within the legal framework of the courts and other federal agencies.

**Trade Union-** also called *industrial unions*, trade unions are unions which seek to organize workers within an entire sector of the economy or industry. As opposed to craft unions, trade unions do not seek to divide workers by "skilled" and "unskilled" categories and do not focus solely on workers within a specific craft. Trade/industrial unions are not necessarily class struggle unions, as they can still be devoid of class analysis and struggle, but all class struggle unions are classified as trade unions.

**Unfair Labor Practice-** U.L.P.'s are activities classified as "unfair" by federal or state labor legislation. The NLRB has declared company unions, secondary boycotts, and sitdown strikes as unfair labor practices.

**Union-Busting-** any and all activities undertaken to disrupt or weaken the power of a union or its attempt to organize a workplace. There is an entire industry dedicated to union-busting, including such infamous terrorist groups as the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Today, most union-busting firms are consulting groups which a company hires when the prospect of a union is first expressed at a workplace; today, the owning class spends approximately half a billion dollars annually on union-busting.

**Union Election-** the process by which workers vote for union representation. These elections are conducted by the NLRB and are typically set up at the workplace. The union and company have seven days after the election to challenge the result. A win for the workers results in certification of the union as the collective representative of the workers.

**Union Local-** sometimes called a branch, hall, or lodge, the union local is the local branch of a union which represents members in a particular area, workplace, or industry. Union locals have their own governing bodies which coordinate information between the national union and the rank-and-file of the local.

**Union Steward-** rank-and-file workers who represent and defend the interests of their fellow workers within an organized workplace. These union representatives voluntarily hold the position of steward while maintaining their job as a worker at the company. Their responsibilities include monitoring and enforcing the implementation of the collective bargaining agreement, ensuring the company adheres to national, state, and local laws and regulations, defending workers from company persecution and discipline, communicating information from the union to members, and building class consciousness and solidarity among workers.

**Voluntary Recognition-** a rare, but occasional situation in which a company acknowledges the will of the workers to organize a union and accepts that status willingly. In such an instance, an NLRB election is not needed, but the union must provide documentation for majority support of the workforce for the union.

**Wagner Act-** officially the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, this piece of legislation transferred labor-management relations squarely into the realm of jurisprudence, establishing the National Labor Relations Board to oversee labor-management disputes, organizing campaigns, and to rule on unfair labor practices claims. Though many claim the Wagner Act was a major step forward for organized labor, the law handicapped class struggle unionism at a time of major economic upheaval and a growing class consciousness among the American working class and paved the way for anti-worker legislation like the Taft-Hartley Act which would become law a little over a decade later.

**Weingarten Rights-** the result of a 1975 Supreme Court decision, these are the rights of a worker to have union representation during an investigatory interview by management. Weingarten Rights state that a worker may request union representation prior to or during an interview and cannot be punished for making such a request; it also states that a union representative may be informed by the supervisor of the subject matter of the interview, may take the worker aside for a private conference before questioning begins, may speak during the interview, may request clarification for questions, may

give advice to the worker on how to answer questions, and may provide additional information to the supervisor at the conclusion of the interview.

**Wildcat Strike-** a strike conducted without official union authorization. In general, these strikes are classified as illegal under the Wagner Act. Historically, wildcat strikes have been important weapons to utilize in local grievance cases and in situations where the rank-and-file have adopted a class struggle approach to organizing against the wishes of a national union that prefers to resolve labor-management conflicts through the courts.

**Working Class-** also called *laboring class* or *proletariat*, the working class represents the vast majority of the population of the world today. Working class people are those who sell their labor to the owning class in exchange for a wage because the owning class holds a monopoly on the ownership of the factories, land, tools, and financial institutions. Under our present economic ordering, the working class is exploited by the current ruling owning class. Though the working class is diverse in numerous aspects—gender identity, race, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.—the shared interests of workers is a unifying force which builds solidarity and overcomes these social divisions.