

Why Union Activists Write Good Stories

Pourquoi les activistes syndicaux écrivent de bonnes histoires

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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WHY UNION ACTIVISTS WRITE GOOD STORIES

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ABSTRACT. The representative structure of a union is a maze which, when travelled as a narrative, has drama at every turn. It sets up expectations, pits good against evil, involves many characters with different interests, keeps the clock ticking, and offers opportunities for happy endings (and disappointments) at every level. Union members who are not experienced writers can produce good stories by writing about their lives at work and in the union.

POURQUOI LES ACTIVISTES SYNDICAUX ÉCRIVENT DE BONNES HISTOIRES

RÉSUMÉ. La structure de représentation d'un syndicat est un véritable labyrinthe qui, lorsque parcouru comme un récit, propose un drame à chaque détour. Celle-ci établit les attentes, dresse les bons contre les méchants, implique de multiples intérêts, souligne le temps qui passe, et offre des chances de fins heureuses (ou de déceptions) à tous les niveaux. Les membres d'associations syndicales, sans être des écrivains expérimentés, peuvent écrire d'excellentes histoires en témoignant de leur vécu au travail et au sein du syndicat.

Last year, six people started writing short stories in a creative writing class. None of these people had written short stories or any fiction before. Yet they produced stories that were full of action and conflict, animated by characters and personalities, and fleshed out with real-world details. These people included a nurse who is president of her local union, an ex-steelworker who now drives a tanker truck and is a member of a big Teamster local, an instructor at an electricians' apprenticeship program, a janitor who is now a business representative for the janitor's union, a union staffer who used to work for Chicago Animal Control who is now an organizer for the public sector union American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and a freelance journalist who is on the National Writers Union national executive committee. Why did these people produce such good stories so quickly and apparently easily?

The class was called “Writing about Labor and Literature,” and they were all writing about work, but from their own experience in unionized workplaces. I was their teacher. Here are some thoughts about why they had a leg up on writing good stories.

I. THE UNION AS A SOCIAL CONTEXT PROVIDES A STRUCTURE OF EXPECTATIONS THROUGH WHICH THE STORY MOVES.

The work narratives of people who are in unions are likely to sound like stories even before they get written down as stories. Take a grievance, for example. If everything goes as it should, the person who has been fired without just cause gets their job back with pay. The name of the ideal outcome is “made whole,” which is better than anything that can be won in the criminal court system. That’s a happy ending. There is a process by which this happens. This process is written down and known to those who implement it. If the process is not known or implemented, that itself becomes the conflict and thus a story. There can also be tragedies: concessions, layoffs, bad elections, strikes that are called off. Either way, the union generates a set of expectations and actions to implement those expectations, which become the things that the characters do. The union itself, in other words, is a structure of expectations. So is a plot; so is a genre. The convergence of these two structures makes for good stories.

This may seem so obvious that we should stop for a moment and think about some alternatives. What are some other plots that are so familiar that we could call them a structure of expectations? The Cinderella story is one; the abused but virtuous little girl who marries the prince. Then there’s the peripatetic romance, in which a young man (usually) has one clever or funny adventure after another. The Horatio Alger story takes an honest, enterprising boy from poverty to wealth. Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey is the most complex: it involves setting out on a quest, conquering temptation (represented by a serpent, a woman, an ocean or the need for sleep), and gaining a trophy or honour. When we read these stories, we feel we know what we should expect to happen. But by comparison, even though these stories (called archetypal stories for this very reason) call up familiar patterns that dialectically shape whatever version we are telling or reading, they are set in contexts that are less specific than, for example, the story of a steward who has to try to get someone’s job back. The story of the steward processing a grievance moves forward through more precisely defined stages than the story of the ragged stepdaughter who marries the prince. Or does it?

The condition under which the steward’s efforts will make a good story is that, to the degree that the context of the union is understood only by insiders, that context has to be made explicit and natural. This is not easy to do, either for insiders or outsiders of the labour movement. The most natural telling

of a contemporary union story that I have come across is Timothy Sheard's (2002) novel, *Some Cuts Never Heal*; right behind it is Barbara Kingsolver's (1989) story, *Why I am a Danger to the Public*.

2. THERE IS GOOD AND EVIL, WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH, BUILT INTO THE SITUATION

The existence of the union is predicated upon there being an essential conflict between capital and labour, in which capital tries to extract surplus value from labour and labour organizes itself to resist and to retain as much surplus value as it can. This conflict is never far away, whether it is the nurse who is denied overtime, the foreman who pushes for speed-up, the corporation that distinguishes between regular employees and permatemps, or the cap on the number of apprentices who can be admitted to an apprenticeship program because of the need to provide work for the entire union workforce. If you're in a union, you learn to discern this conflict in its many manifestations. But if you're not in a union, that conflict has many ways of being masked. In creative writing classes that I have taught with non-union adult students, workers or not, the conflict often has to be drawn out from the shadows, sometimes with great difficulty, in order to construct a plot. Sometimes drawing it out can't be done.

3. THERE ARE PLENTY OF CHARACTERS INVOLVED IN THE STORY

The stories written by these students are peopled with characters in action. Not one was a meditation on a solitary experience. There were always coworkers, more experienced workers, less experienced workers, bad and good supervisors, union reps or union members, people at home who depended on the worker to keep her job. The union activist writing about a union experience immediately summons up a situation in which an array of people are engaged in helping, teaching, cooperating with, competing with or fighting with each other. There is no difficulty naming these people or bringing them into the narrative in a living way. They all have something to say, just like in real life. Again, this is not always the case in creative writing classes, where it is common to find people writing stories with only one character or where the plot has to do with a memory or re-framing an important issue, all done mentally, with no contact with even one other person.

4. THERE IS A SEQUENCE OF THINGS TO BE DONE

The grievance process, or an organizing drive or an application process, all lay out in the abstract a sequence of things that need to be done. There are deadlines, communication devices that have to work properly (faxes, emails), offices to go to, emergencies, interruptions, meetings that have to happen. All of these create a railroad track for the story to run on and move the plot

along. If an inexperienced writer has a hard time figuring out what happens next, the dispute resolution procedures of the union will provide him / her with the answer. A writer who has never been in a unionized workplace may describe a bad situation that seems suspended in time or eternally deteriorating and not seem to have any sense of “what comes next” except quitting.

5. HAPPY ENDINGS CAN HAPPEN AT MANY LEVELS

Newsworthy victories occur, of course – winning an organizing drive, an election, or a strike. But my students did not write about those big victories. In the stories they wrote, someone is accepted into a program; someone learns something; the rookie steward becomes a good steward; a bad boss learns a painful lesson; an abused worker sees herself being effectively represented; a bad policy is revised. These are the small day-to-day victories, the ones that keep a union rep busy answering the phone. It’s the small, incremental steps that move toward justice or at least hold abuse at bay that constitute happy endings in these stories. Even when there is a big loss, like losing an organizing drive, there is some comfort in the collective sense of purpose that remains after the sacrifice is finished. The collective reframes individual defeats as times when we say “We’ll live to fight again.”

6. AS CHARACTERS, UNION WRITERS SEE THEMSELVES AS AGENTS, NOT AS PASSIVE OBSERVERS

The social context of the union is also a moral context. People who are working within that context see themselves, no matter how small or peripheral their role is to the main conflict of the union, as agents of the overall moral purpose of the union. They are agents of justice. They have the overview and sense of purpose, the ability to select details and make an argument, of people who believe themselves capable of making the wheels of something larger turn in the right direction. Their work involves making moral choices and they know it. They do things, and what they do matters to other people. Even small choices, like which phone call to return next, are moral choices, not trivial ones.

7. THE UNION ITSELF IS A TEACHER

The union itself not only structures the human relationships of work, it teaches people about them. Fairness is made concrete. Disparate treatment? This gives racist or sexist behaviour a label. People know what it means, can recognize it and base a defence on it. A few years as a union activist and you see things differently because you have been shown things differently and you’ve learned to do things differently. The practice of labour union activism articulates the conflict between labour and capital in concrete, specific ways. Good and evil, justice and injustice are made visible and identifiable. This conflict is

dramatized. This drama becomes embodied in people who act it out. In order to carry out the work of the union, people learn to see this drama. The step from seeing the drama to writing it down is not a big one.

WHY AREN'T MORE STORIES LIKE THIS IN GENERAL CIRCULATION?

Union activists know stories already, because they enact them. Union situations, adequately described, fully told and nicely embellished, easily make as good reading as detective or crime situations. A union steward is just as interesting as a detective. What union activists need to learn, in order to write these stories, is fairly simple. They need to put in a lot of description, follow plot lines all the way through to the end, and not be afraid to make things up a little in order to get at a larger truth (which starts with using the third person instead of the first person). A little encouragement makes this happen.

But very little good union fiction is out there. When preparing the reading list for this class, I had a hard time finding literature that reflected the life that we know as union activists. Stories about work, yes, and the life stories of people who have various kinds of jobs. Stories about poverty and debt. Stories about class, yes – often suffused with despair and anger. In fact, stories identified as “working class” are often mainly about how miserable it is to be working class. The working-class character is depicted as a bit grotesque, unredeemable or cartoonish. The majority of working-class literature depicts poverty and injustice but does not pick a fight with either. When it does pick a fight, it’s an individual fight, not a collective fight. There were a few exceptions, including Suzan Erem’s (2001) *Labor Pains*, John Steinbeck’s (1938/1989) *In Dubious Battle*, and Robert Tressell’s (1955) *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, in addition to the writing of Timothy Sheard and Barbara Kingsolver mentioned above. But these all together do not add up to a full literature about working union, which takes up at least eight hours a day for at least thirteen million people in the United States.

So there is a lack of union fiction, and a need for it, and it appears to be not all that hard to produce... so what’s the problem?

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