

FORCE, from page 9

is one front on which no changes, however necessary many of us think they are, can be made without violating provisions that PPA has gained in their contract negotiations.

Something else police unions have in common with others: Many unions also act as stalking horses for their employers, taking positions or lobbying on behalf of their corporation or administration, in the case of police unions even "forcing" the chiefs to do what they really want to do but can't admit publicly.

Something that might be cited as distinguishing them from other unions is their contractual prohibition of striking. But this seems to me a false issue. There are very few strikes of public employees in any case, and police have ways of applying on-the-job pressure that really amount to strikes.

M.G.: So here in the PPA contract, Article 14, we see: "The Association agrees that during the life of this Contract, there shall be no strikes, work stoppages, slowdowns, speed-ups, or any other non-protected concerted action to bring pressure on the City." And you're saying this is typical of police contracts. Yet we did see a work slowdown in New York in January.

When Robert Siegel interviewed New York Police Commissioner William Bratton on *All Things Considered*, Siegel began by pointing out the 90% decline in criminal summonses issued. Though Patrick Lynch, who is head of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association - the New York City police union - denied any slowdown. So Siegel asked the police commissioner: "Is there a police protest, a job action, now underway or isn't there?"

And Bratton told him: "There is. We've had the opportunity over several days now to take a close look at the numbers and we are quite clearly - or were in a slowdown. It is being corrected. We've been taking management initiatives to identify where it's occurring, when it's occurring. ... We're coming out of what was a pretty widespread stoppage of certain types of activity."

N.D.: Yes. I was thrilled when the police stopped writing tickets and stopped petty

enforcement actions in New York. All measures of crime actually diminished. Ever since the Boston police strike of 1919, cops have invoked the specter of increased crime if they weren't out there doing what they do. This recent experience, and there have been others like it, raises fundamental questions about whether we need the kind of police forces that we have, whether we wouldn't be better off with a different vision of policing.

Which gets us back to the major distinction between police and other unions: It's not in the wording of any labor agreement, but centers on the role police play in society as violence-ready guardians of the existing social order.

This creates a tension for cops who mainly come from working class backgrounds when ordered to control acts by other people of similar class origins. How police departments re-condition their workers is a fascinating question, which bears on the circumstances when police officers might - I say "might" - act in solidarity with other workers. This, however, may be a different and larger discussion than you have in mind.

M.G.: It is probably the most baffling thing about police unions: Who actually employs them (technically, taxpayers, I would think). But whose side are they on when they are dispatched to a picket line?

When we look at the unions we are more familiar with, say longshoremen (ILWU) or electrical workers (IBEW), we see the customary solidarity between them: neither would go cross an SIEU picket line if a hotel was on strike. But we don't see find police in that same worker fraternity.

I was living in San Francisco in January, 1970, when hundreds of members of the International Typographers Union went to the aid of 45 San Rafael ITU members striking against the San Rafael Independent Journal for a new contract. There was a terrible riot on Valentine's Day, when the police brutally attacked them. So was that the police union?

N.D.: The tension of class identification, the ambiguity of police identification with labor, surfaces with some regularity. One instance was in the year 2000, when we

re-established May Day in Portland, reconnecting it with its 1886 origins in the American labor struggle.

Remember, this was shortly after the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. And the police used military tactics against the demonstrators here, beating people, breaking us up into small groups, running some down with horses. Toward the end of the day a few of us gathered near Powell's Books, kind of maintaining some semblance of a demonstration.

M.G.: *Powell's Books, right. That was when the ILWU was negotiating their first labor agreement for Powell's workers.*

N.D.: Right. There was a line of cops facing us right down Burnside, up and down Burnside, east to west. And we were on the north side of Burnside and the police were closing in.

And, just coincidentally, the ILWU was in town for their national conference at the Hilton. And all of a sudden, just as the police were closing in on us, 400 ILWU delegates marched up Southwest 10th toward Burnside. It was a huge mass of these big, burly guys. And the police now were between them and us. And Brian McWilliams, who was president of the ILWU at the time, said two things to the cops. He said, "Remember, you wouldn't have your union if it weren't for us." And he said, "Keep that in mind, and we're coming through."

And the cops just dispersed.

M.G.: *This is the riot that Chief Kroecker took such heat for. He had those officers out there in riot gear. I remember hearing about arrests, injuries and even people being clubbed.*

N.D.: Another example, going back further, we had that "possum incident." Well after those two cops were fired, the PPA came to the Labor Council here in town, which is the political organization of all the different unions, and affiliated with the national unions. They came asking for support from these other unions. "This is a labor issue, these guys were fired without going through the contractual procedure, without due process, essentially. And, as a

labor issue, we want the backing of the Labor Council." And the Labor Council, eager to have the PPA identify with the larger labor movement, supported them unanimously at first.

I intervened. I wasn't a delegate but I had some standing at the time, and I said, "Racism, too, is a labor issue. We can't just unequivocally give our support to somebody saying they're a union, over and over again, when they don't act like it in real life." My recollection is that the Labor Council still backed the PPA, but on a much closer vote.

M.G.: *But they were actually part of the Labor Council?*

N.D.: They started out as members, back when they were still AFSCME. And for awhile, after they got their independent union, their PPA contract, they were still part of the local Labor Council. But they've since broken away from all of that.

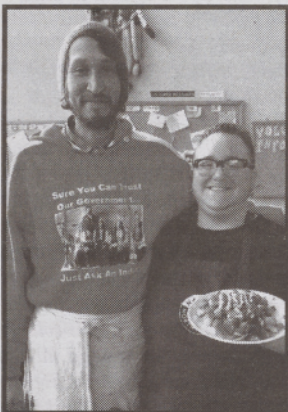
I think that's pretty much true nationally. I think it's fairly universal. This is part of why I find it hard to think of the police associations as unions or labor organizations anymore. But when they need it, they still play the union card.

M.G.: *But in the case of this particular union, the safety and rights of all Portland is at stake. For decades, communities of color, of disenfranchisement, have felt under siege. Meanwhile the whole police force is imagined to be responsible for the actions of a few.*

N.D.: It's undoubtedly true that some cops are worse than others, some more blatantly racist or more brutal. And being able to fire them would be good. But as I've tried to say, the problem goes well beyond a labor contract or a few bad apples. Police departments were created and exist to maintain a society that itself has issues of racism (and exploitation and unfairness). The discussion we need to have is about the kind of policing we'd like to have, the responsibility and oversight of police, and ultimately, the kind of society we'd like to live in.

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