

# USA: 2,000 Workers Swell Labor Notes Conference in Chicago

Tuesday 3 June 2014, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 16 April 2014).

Labor Notes, a publication and an educational center, brought together some 2,000 worker activists from across the country (and some from several other countries) at its biannual conference held on April 4-6 in Chicago. The first Labor Notes conference held in Detroit in 1981 was attended by 400 people. This was the largest, most diverse, and youngest in average age of any Labor Notes conference, and according to many participants one of the most exciting in the group's history. One young labor activist told me, "The conference two years ago was organized around the Occupy movement, but it was at this conference that the spirit and ideas of occupy were actually having an influence and being discussed."

Founded in 1979, the Labor Notes journal and its website [labornotes.org](http://labornotes.org) act as a voice for rank-and-file movements and union reformers. While not affiliated with any labor federation or union and not itself a membership organization, the Labor Notes conference brings together like-minded activists from labor unions, workers centers, other worker groups. Those who attend include rank-and-file members, union stewards, and local union officers. Among the groups at this year's conference were auto workers, bus drivers, fast food workers, nurses, postal employees, telecommunications workers, teachers, truck drivers, and university employees among many others. While earlier conference focused on organized workers, in recent years there is greater emphasis on the unorganized, such as the Walmart and McDonald's workers.

Over the years, Labor Notes has helped to support rank-and-file efforts to reform and democratize unions such as the Teamsters, the United Auto Workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Service Employees International Union. The conference provided a space where those concerned about democracy in their unions and a more militant stand against the employers could meet and share perspective.

While Labor Notes has plenary sessions, most of the conference takes place in one of the 140 meetings and workshops. The workshops deal with every imaginable labor issue, from organizing unions to carrying out strikes, from the problems facing immigrant workers to the issues facing African American and women workers, from workers legal rights to the creation and management of cooperatives. Many of the workshops allow activists to share experiences and their best practices.

In addition to the workshops there are also area meetings, that is, gatherings of workers who belong to the same industry or union. This year there were area meetings for ten different groups: Telecom, Teachers, Postal workers, Food workers, Teamsters union members, Railroad workers, Health care workers, Graduate employees, Transit workers, Academic adjuncts. The area meetings allow union activists to share experiences and discuss strategies to deal with the issues in their particular sector.

Labor Notes always has sessions that feature international labor developments. This year's conference featured Hong Kong dockworkers, Indian auto workers, and Bangladeshi garment workers, and Argentinean subway workers. There were also presentations on labor in Palestine and on the labor protests against the government's enormous and extravagant expenses at the World Cup in Brazil. Conference attendees both learn from the experience of these workers and express

their solidarity with them.

With the American workers movement at a low ebb—only 11.3 percent of all workers belong to unions and only 6.7 in the private sector, and only 55,000 workers participating in a major strike last years—and with labor union leaders failing to provide much leadership in the fight against austerity and the attacks on workers' rights, the Labor Notes Conference plays an important role in providing inspiration, making connections between activists, and offering important strategic and tactical ideas to rebuild the labor movement.

Labor Notes publications, not only the monthly newsletter and the website, but also its book length publications, form part of its educational work. Labor Notes' most recent book, *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers*, analyzes the experience of the rank-and-file caucus in the Chicago Teachers Union, looks at how it took power, and how it organized and carried out its impressive strike in September 2012. Labor Notes also organizes regional "Troublemakers Schools" that bring together scores and sometimes hundreds of activists in cities around the country.

A new feature at this year's conference was a discussion of independent political action with a panel of speakers who talked about their campaigns: Jeff Crosby, New Lynn (Massachusetts), North Shore Central Labor Council; Mike Parker, Richmond Progressive Alliance and candidate for mayor of Richmond, California; Amisha Patel, Grassroots Collaborative in Illinois; and Kshama Sawant, the recently elected socialist on the Seattle City Council. While Sawant emphasized the importance of her Socialist Alternative in her campaign, Mike Parker talked about the importance of seeing political campaigns as the expression of social movements.

The Labor Notes conference always includes an action backing some on-going campaign. This year hundreds of Labor Notes supporters went demonstrated in support of postal workers by picketing a local Staples office supply store to protest its role in the privatization of postal services. The American Postal Workers Union has demanded that the retailer's "postal units" should be staffed by its union members who will otherwise lose their post office jobs. Hundreds of Labor Notes activists picketed the Staples store, waving their placards, and chanting their demand that postal workers be hired to do post office work.

Toward the end of the conference Labor Notes organized a panel called "Can Labor Change the World? An Intergenerational Exchange," featuring an impressive panel of organizers young and old, who discussed the question of how one can devote a life to working in the labor movement. A young activist told me he found it wonderful discussion, both educational and inspiring.

**Dan La Botz**

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*Videos of the Labor Notes Conference can be found at:*

<http://www.labornotes.org/blogs/2014/04/first-videos-2014-labor-notes-conference>

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