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Mobilizing for the '90s

Morton Bahr

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Mobilizing for the '90s

Abstract

[Excerpt] CWA's general strategy for the '90s can be summarized as increasing the involvement of our members at work, in their communities, and in building our Union. Building on our tradition of industrial unionism, we continue to organize and negotiate for higher pay, benefits and job security. Additionally, as we move into the 21st Century, we need to expand our vision to include worker involvement in building meaningful worklives and careers. This broader outlook helps increase the participation of our members in mobilizing around contract goals, organizing new members, and supporting other workers in their efforts to achieve Jobs with Justice. The greater the level of participation among the membership, the more active and stronger the union.

Keywords

CWA, union organizing, mobilization, management participation

Mobilizing For the '90s

■ *Morton Bahr*

CWA's general strategy for the '90s can be summarized as increasing the involvement of our members at work, in their communities, and in building our Union. Building on our tradition of industrial unionism, we continue to organize and negotiate for higher pay, benefits and job security. Additionally, as we move into the 21st Century, we need to expand our vision to include worker involvement in building meaningful worklives and careers. This broader outlook helps increase the participation of our members in mobilizing around contract goals, organizing new members, and supporting other workers in their efforts to achieve Jobs with Justice. The greater the level of participation among the membership, the more active and stronger the union.

In Chapter 4 of *Participating in Management*, Andy Banks and Jack Metzgar argue that unions should view participation as organizing. At CWA, our new mobilization program puts this theory into action.

Worker Participation at the Workplace

Our efforts in the workplace are directed at increasing the activism of our members. This approach contrasts sharply with the notion of workers being passive and simply accepting assignments at work in exchange for pay. The more active the worker

is, even in non-adversarial situations, the more active he or she will be in general and the more willing to fight for a fair share of what he or she produces both through collective bargaining and through political action in the community. The more self-confidence our members have, the more willing they are to act. The more who are active, the stronger the union and the better our chances of attaining our goals.

In building a strong workplace organization we must determine when, and whether, to cooperate with management and on what terms. In general, we believe that there are two basic dimensions in our relationship with management: 1) issues where there is an inherent conflict between workers and managers, such as wages, benefits and job security, and 2) issues where there is not *inevitable* conflict between the goals of workers and those of management, and cooperation is *possible*.

Conflict between labor and management is inevitable in collective bargaining. Collective bargaining determines our standard of living, and the union's role is clear. Our responsibility is to fight for a fair share of the profit we help create. To accomplish this we stress increased membership involvement through mobilization.

Where there isn't *inherent* conflict, cooperation is possible. Workers and managers both have an interest in a viable, successful company. We live in a competitive economy and ultimately job security does indeed depend on a well-run company. However, for cooperation to be possible, management must accept the institutional needs of the union. Cooperation must be seen as a two-way street. Employers must recognize the needs of the union and be willing to reach fair agreements which allow the union to grow along with the company. When our institutional needs are recognized, we can cooperate with employers to raise morale and productivity.

Take, for example, CWA's relationship with AT&T. Collective bargaining in 1989 took place against the backdrop of strikes in the two previous rounds of negotiations. The company insisted on reducing health benefits and shifting health care costs to employees up until the last hours of negotiations. Ultimately, an acceptable compromise (without cost shifting) was reached on health care and other issues. At the same time, we expanded the principle of corporate neutrality and card check recognition in organizing new units of AT&T. We also expanded a nationally recognized joint training program, the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development, to teach new skills and to bring access to upgrades and new job opportunities to workers facing layoffs.

Thirdly, during CWA strikes against regional Bell operating telephone companies, AT&T refused to handle struck companies' operator-assisted calls when the struck companies tried to transfer this work. These are each examples of company cooperation with the union in areas where other companies might refuse to cooperate. Yet both CWA and AT&T understand that we are adversaries in major areas of collective bargaining.

The Alliance for Employee Growth and Development is an example of what can be achieved through cooperation. With AT&T's cooperation and joint participation, we have created a program which allows telephone workers to develop their careers in a rapidly changing, technologically dynamic industry. Our members can retrain and learn new skills which allow them to continue their careers. Not only does the Alliance help reduce the pain of change by helping our members learn new skills, but it offers the opportunity to all workers to expand their career opportunities within the company. Free education is also available for employees to prepare for new careers outside of AT&T.

Contract Mobilization

On the eve of the expiration of their contract, 130,000 telephone workers at AT&T, members of the Communications Workers of America, stood up at their work stations to demand a fair contract with their employer. Across the nation, they rose as one, wearing



Morton Bahr is International President of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), which is one of the first unions to experiment on a broad scale in current circumstances with mobilization tactics and strategies.

red T-shirts proclaiming "TAKE A STAND" and "CWA DEMANDS JOBS WITH JUSTICE." In every office as people looked around them, they felt the power of their collective action. They saw their co-workers united and ready to fight for their fair share. This was the final activity of a year-long mobilization campaign at AT&T.

For three years, as we talked about alternatives to strikes, we educated our members to the need of recognizing that technology had made observance of the human picket line in a telephone strike meaningless. Picketing a telephone building could not stop the invisible telephone call from being made. Further, we saw that the very competition that so hurt our members could be turned to our advantage. Out of this came the new term "electronic picket line."

Working with the AFL-CIO well before collective bargaining began, a plan was formulated where one of our options, if no contract agreement was reached, would be a boycott of AT&T through the observance of the electronic picket line. Millions of stickers that would fit on the handle of a telephone carrying the simple directions as to how to bypass AT&T were prepared. A mailing list of 35,000 union activists was compiled; AFL-CIO affiliates and state and local bodies were advised; explanatory information was sent to all affiliates for reproduction in their newspapers and magazines; and a news conference was held by the AFL-CIO with President Lane Kirkland, myself and IBEW President John Barry.

The initial target to reach for the boycott was the "labor family" comprised of international unions, the local unions and branches, and the 15 million union families. It would spread out to vendors with whom unions do business, political entities and all segments of our society. We had a well-oiled plan that could divert millions of dollars of revenue from AT&T to a selected competitor.

The AT&T mobilization bore fruit: an acceptable contract without a strike which beat back company proposed health care cuts and which won new family care programs and an increase in the standard of living. This massive effort insured that mobilization would be a way of life at CWA.

Promoting activism is the cornerstone of the CWA mobilization program. This program grew from our belief that the trade union movement must be rebuilt worker by worker and based on their involvement in a three-part strategy which we symbolize as a triangle: representation at the worksite (which includes collective bargaining), bringing union representation to new workplaces (external organizing), and community/political action. All three are essential, and if the triangle is broken on any side, sooner or later

it will collapse.

Membership involvement on the job, day-to-day contract administration, and collective bargaining are the base of the triangle. The other two sides—organizing and community and political action—are just as critical to our strength. Unless we build the labor movement through effective organizing inside existing bargaining units, and by organizing unorganized workers and adding new units, union members will continue to be disappointed at the bargaining table. Similarly, unless we organize effective community and political action programs, we will not have the kind of popular and legislative support we need to bargain effectively.

This strategy and its implementation requires increased member involvement. Every union activity must increase participation or the vitality and viability of the union cannot be sustained. Unions cannot deliver "more" for their members. The union cannot be an organization with a life outside of its members. We have found that the key to success in each of the three sides of the triangle is reliance on our union's greatest asset: the participation of our rank-and-file members.

Mobilization and Participation

Mobilization means active participation of the membership. Our mobilization program has three phases—organization, education, and action. The first step is building an initial organizational infrastructure. With each action, the organization will strengthen, but an initial infrastructure is necessary to accomplish anything. Organization requires a tremendous amount of work: mapping worksites, identifying shifts and stewards or coordinators responsible for their worksites. Accountability is the key element of successful organization building.

The second phase of mobilization is education around key workplace issues. The education process utilizes, reinforces and builds the mobilization structure or organization. We reach out to every worker at the workplace about key issues which affect them. Within CWA during the last round of bargaining, for example, we held tens of thousands of small group and one-on-one meetings at AT&T worksites nationwide. At these meetings, our volunteer mobilization coordinators circulated pamphlets and facilitated discussions on key bargaining issues—employment security, health care, and a decent standard of living. This participatory education process also reemphasizes the union's approach to these programs and the need for action on all sides of the

“triangle” to achieve gains in our living standard.

The third phase of mobilization is action. Actions range from informational picket lines, presenting a mass grievance or petition, to passing out balloons and popping them at work, every worker tapping a pencil on his desk at the same time—to work stoppages and strikes. Actions can build solidarity or demonstrate workers’ power in controlling work. Actions also reinforce structure and educate workers.

Mobilization is used in all three union programs—collective bargaining, organizing and political action. It is a way of life at CWA and is based on the participation of our members. Its impact was dramatic on the 1989 round of bargaining. The union fought off health care cutbacks and cost shifting while winning agreement with the majority of companies to jointly pursue national and state health care reform. Where we were forced to strike, our strikes were stronger than ever. Our victories are directly attributable to our mobilization program.

Organizing New Workplaces

The mobilization model of participation is also the basis of CWA external organizing. Organizing new units is also built on the same principle of increasing worker involvement and participation. To expand our external organizing program, CWA established an Organizing Network of CWA locals pledging to organize 100 or more new workers annually. Local volunteer organizers, who live in the community, staff most campaigns. Similarly, in building organizing drives, the principle of participation leads us to train and rely on volunteer inside committees rather than outside organizers. In effect, staff organizers find, train and develop local volunteers who then work with the organizing staff to find, train and develop leaders inside the unorganized workplaces. These inside leaders make the difference in winning elections, negotiating contracts and building the union in the new workplaces.

In short, our organizing focus has two parts: 1) Develop more leaders in existing locals and unorganized workplaces. These leaders are volunteers who share our vision and work hard to achieve it. 2) Build our membership base thanks largely to the hard and skillful work of the volunteer organizers. Each year, at both the national and local levels, we need to set goals for involving more locals, developing more organizing leadership within those locals, and organizing more new workers to join our movement.

Community and Political Action

Jobs with Justice builds our base in the community in much the same way as organizing builds it in unorganized workplaces. Jobs with Justice is built person by person in communities around three issues: job security, the right to organize, and a decent standard of living. The key is the Jobs with Justice pledge card. Signers pledge to "be there" five times for someone else's fight as well as their own.

Built properly, Jobs with Justice is a mobilization program in the community. Just as "red T-shirt" days help build the solidarity necessary to win just contracts, a Jobs with Justice mobilization helps bring justice in the community. One great victory occurred in Nacogdoches, Texas, where 3,000 union members, civil rights activists and members of the women's movement marched behind the banner of Jobs with Justice in support of 100 Black cafeteria workers who had battled for over a decade against the plantation style management of Stephen F. Austin University. Ultimately, broad community pressure resulted in a first union contract and a million-dollar back pay settlement for these service industry workers. The essential point is that 3,000 men and women came from hundreds of miles away because they were organized, mobilized and fighting for themselves and others.

Mobilizing our members to fight for others as well as ourselves is critical if we are to revitalize our movement. Almost any employer today is more than a match for their own workers no matter how organized they may be.

The decline of the labor movement, and the recent fall in our standard of living, can only be reversed by greater worker participation and mobilization. Rebuilding and revitalizing the labor movement is a formidable task, yet our recent experience with mobilization leads me to be optimistic. Mobilization works, and as our song of solidarity says, "There is no power greater anywhere beneath the sun." ■