LRR Focus: Taking the Organizing Approach to Comprehensive Campaigns

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Abstract
[Excerpt] Must a local union always rely on its international to conduct and win a comprehensive, or corporate, campaign? Using an organizing model of unionism which relies on the knowledge, access to information, organizing skills, and community ties of its members, local unions can meet corporate challenges. The potential also exists for the local union to maintain and deepen this culture of organizing. Three examples from Northeast Ohio demonstrate the power of membership-driven comprehensive campaigns.

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Must a local union always rely on its international to conduct and win a comprehensive, or corporate, campaign? Using an organizing model of unionism which relies on the knowledge, access to information, organizing skills, and community ties of its members, local unions can meet corporate challenges. The potential also exists for the local union to maintain and deepen this culture of organizing. Three examples from Northeast Ohio demonstrate the power of membership-driven comprehensive campaigns.

From 1987 to 1990, UFCW Local 880 developed an extensive membership participation program that the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour described as one of the most innovative strategies generated by the labor movement in 75 years. The union stressed internal organizing and full membership participation in decision-making.

Faced with industry restructuring which destroyed pattern agreements and reduced UFCW membership 15% nationally, the 28,000 member Local 880 developed a pro-active strategy that decentralized decision-making and dramatically expanded direct membership participation in collective bargaining and organizing.

At the outset, Local 880 developed six primary committees (research, media, union outreach, community outreach, government, and membership) in Youngstown, Akron, and Cleveland. These committees were open to any member and the Local’s staff functioned as a resource and as a conduit of information to the leadership.

Of particular interest, the Local’s 50-member research committee gathered industry data store by store and developed a grocery industry database that ended the Local’s reliance on management negotiators in collective bargaining. Simultaneously, the committee was responsible for corporate research that was used to fight predatory corporations and nonunion competitors.

The media committee also exceeded expectations, especially in Youngstown. Each member was assigned to cover one broadcast or print reporter, and respond to the reporter’s stories on the local. Members also followed up on media which gave no coverage. This consistent monitoring of media exposure encouraged journalists to report more fully and accurately on the local’s activities.

Building on the committee structure and membership participation, Local 880 initiated a social justice campaign to organize nonunion stores. The campaign featured informational picketing,
telepicketing, and a high profile public relations effort. In a 24 month period, Local 880 preserved pattern bargaining in the region, organized 36 grocery stores and shut down others who failed to unionize and paid substandard wages.

So successful was the program that when other UFCW locals began to adopt Local 880’s strategies, local nonunion grocers, with the assistance of the National Grocers Association, filed an antitrust suit against Local 880. Burdened by legal costs and the threat of a multi-million dollar damage claim, Local 880 decided to all but abandon the program.

The success of Local 880’s program, however, led to its adoption by Teamsters Local 377 when beverage distributors in Youngstown hired the nation’s leading union-busters, West Coast Industrial Relations Association (WCIRA), to conduct labor negotiations in 1989. Since WCIRA had broken Teamster locals throughout the nation, the Local understood that the beverage distributors intended to force a strike and replace employees.

When faced with recognized provocateurs like WCIRA, business agent Mike Boano decided to adopt an in-plant strategy. Using the same organizing model philosophy and committee structure developed by Local 880, Local 377 began an internal organizing program for its 200 beverage members. Once again, the key element in all activities was to “empower members and decentralize the activities of the local union.”

For example, the government committee members analyzed State and Federal laws and developed a beverage employee survey to evaluate claims that union members were being asked to violate State Liquor Commission regulations or Federal Wage and Hour laws. At the same time, the research committee generated a master list of all customers and then developed a customer survey to evaluate the impact of the increasing economic concentration on the beverage distributors’ customers. In both instances, the purpose of the committee’s activities was to embarrass the employers and increase the potential costs of not reaching an agreement.

These two committees also developed a health and safety checklist for the trucks. They were prepared to ask each driver to inspect their trucks for any violations which would then be forwarded to the appropriate regulatory agencies.

Together, the membership mobilization, surveys, and series of concerted activities had a sobering effect on the beverage distributors.
When it was clear that Local 377 would not go on strike and was willing to wage a "guerilla war," the beverage distributors released WCIRA and within a matter of days reached a contract settlement.

A final example involves the organization of nursing homes by SEIU Local 627. Predominantly representing hospital workers in Youngstown, Local 627 began to expand nursing home organizing in 1991. Local 627 developed a community-wide organizing strategy that has attempted to bridge the Local's organizing, servicing and educational functions. In the last two years the Local has organized more nursing homes (14) than any other Local in the nation.

At Local 627, organizing director Debra Timko modified the Local 880 structure and philosophy by developing nursing home and bargaining councils. Each council was subdivided into committees: health and safety, community support, organizing, research, civil/human rights, and communications committees.

The nursing home council is composed of members involved in organizing drives and contract campaigns and has as its goal member empowerment, community support, and area-wide organizing. For example, the health and safety committee has developed a "Train the Trainers" program on AIDS and hepatitis awareness. The community support committee has developed a checklist and video for community members on choosing a nursing home.
The bargaining council is composed of the negotiating committees for each nursing home whose goal is pattern agreement for nursing homes in the area. Rather than depend on staff, the bargaining council members were trained in negotiating contracts and now participate as a group in each site's negotiations. The Local also plans to set up a workplace literacy program so that members can better understand their labor agreements.

Though all three examples can be considered successful use of the organizing model in comprehensive campaigns, it is important to note that Local 880 and Local 377 did not institutionalize the participatory programs. Local 627's program remains in the nursing home division, although the union is considering this strategy for the larger hospital division. There are various and complex reasons why these unions were not able to maintain a culture of organizing: local union politics, membership fatigue, potential litigation, staff resistance, and the inability to take the organizing approach deeper into the union's activities, including servicing.

The UFCW, Teamsters, and SEIU locals have proven, however, that local members and leaders can mount successful campaigns against formidable opponents. Local union members have a wealth of knowledge about their workplace, their employer, and their customers. Combined with the will and capacity to put that information to use in an all-out organizing effort, unions have a potent force right in their own backyards.

—John Russo

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