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Back to Basics for the Labor Movement

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Back to Basics for the Labor Movement

Abstract
[Excerpt] Today, however, most union leaders are hardly sanguine about the future. Companies are escalating their anti-union offensive. Technological change, growth in the service sectors and high tech sectors of the economy, overseas investment, plant shutdowns, and runaway shops dilute labor's strength. Without massive new organization, the labor movement will be pushed to the fringes of the economy and the government.

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STRATEGIES

BACK TO BASICS FOR THE LABOR MOVEMENT

by Lance Compa

The CIO Southern Organizing Committee is making splendid, if not altogether miraculous progress in the conduct of the campaign. We didn't go into the South to organize the South in a few months. Oh no! Oh no! No, we went in the South to stay in the South until the job of organizing is completed, and if it is not completed in the year 1946 we will carry on in 1947 and 1948 if need be.

—CIO President Philip Murray, 1946

Over thirty years ago, dramatic union organizing victories at two strongholds of southern anti-unionism, Cone Textile Mills in Greensboro and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, prompted Phillip Murray's burst of optimism. In the next few years, Murray predicted, labor would bring down the house of resistance and win the South, and he named labor's next target: Cannon Mills in Kannapolis.

Thirty-five years later, splendid progress is still being made. In 1980, union organizers have hailed the Steel Workers' contract for 15,000 workers at the big Newport News shipyard, and the settlement of the long dispute between 5,000 workers represented by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU) and J.P. Stevens as the newest breakthroughs. They represent, as one union official put it, a double-barrelled "shot in the arm for organizing in the South."

In this spirit of optimism ACTWU has announced its next target—Cannon Mills in Kannapolis.

Lance Compa has been a union staffer and organizer for eight years.

Rank and file militance is key. Does labor want it?

The resurrection of Cannon Mills illustrates just how frustrating and elusive union organizing victories can be. Despite occasional breakthroughs, southern organizing hasn't advanced much since 1946. The South and Southwest remain the least unionized regions of the country.

Elsewhere, union strength is plainly eroding. Union membership has taken a slow but steady dip from 36 percent in the mid-1950s to some 22 percent today. In 1977, union success in NLRB elections fell to an historic low and unions now maintain only a 45 percent victory rate. To make matters worse, "decertification" elections to vote out an incumbent, have risen from a relatively stable 200 per year in the 1950s and 1960s to a startling 800 per year in the late 1970s.

Observers have predicted the labor movement's demise before: "American trade unionism is slowly being limited by changes which destroy the basis on which it is erected. . . . I see no reason to believe that American trade unionism will so revolutionize itself within a short period of time as to become in the next decade a more potent social influence than it has been in the past decade."

George E. Barnet wrote that only one year before the San Francisco and Minneapolis general strikes of 1934. The next year, Toldeo electrical workers and Akron rubber workers staged sit-down strikes, and then in 1936–37 organizing drives swept the steel, electrical, auto, and rubber industries as well as other mass production industries, and 6 million workers joined the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations. Altogether, American union membership more than tripled in the 1935–45 decade and when the AFL and CIO merged in 1955, 14 million workers were in the federation.

Today, however, most union leaders are hardly sanguine about the future. Companies are escalating their anti-union offensive. Technological change, growth in the service sectors and high tech sectors of the economy, overseas investment, plant shutdowns, and runaway shops dilute labor's strength. Without massive new organization, the labor movement will be pushed to the fringes of the economy and the government.

Union leaders have long recognized that organizing is not merely a matter of acquiring more dues-paying members, but to increase public support and gain political power. Though employers, editors, professionals, politicians, preachers, and even conservative AFL union officials railed against CIO organizing drives, public sentiment nonetheless tilted toward workers who flocked into the new Auto Workers, Electrical Workers, Steel Workers, and Rubber Workers unions.

Those organizing years produced a reservoir of good will despite disruptive tactics like sit-

ins, general strikes, and mass picketing. In those days, unions stood for change, progress, social justice, fair play—an image still associated with parts of the union movement.

Despite labor's problems, opinion polls still show that most Americans favor trade unions and collective bargaining. *Norma Rae* owed much of its popularity to this reservoir of support for the underdog. So did the real-life J.P. Stevens campaign.

Failure to organize has the opposite effect. Unions then appear to be narrow groups whose only purpose is to hang on to their privileges. They thus lose potential allies as well as potential members.

Why are unions having such a hard time attracting new members? At a time of serious crisis, why aren't workers responding to the call for collective strength? The press constantly reports that union members earn more and get more ample wage increases than nonunion workers. Shouldn't the protection of a union contract bring in more union members?

In fact, many workers do seek union representation. But they face more sophisticated management opposition, and a changed economic environment. In the fifties and sixties, the rapidly expanding economy allowed employers to adopt a "we can live with them" attitude toward unions. As long as the unions joined in the Cold War and did not challenge the free enterprise system, companies praised the virtues of collective bargaining and the "constructive" role of union leadership.

As the economic crisis developed in the 1970s, employers have, however, reverted to their historic antipathy toward unions. Their newly sophisticated opposition killed the 1978 Labor Law Reform Bill, a mild measure that would have corrected some of the more blatant abuses permitted by current law. For example, deliberate delay of representation elections, and frivolous appeals of union election results were among the loopholes that allowed J.P. Stevens to stiff the Textile Workers for seventeen years.

Now companies routinely hire union busting firms and anti-union labor lawyers to quash organizing drives. These consultants virtually take over day-to-day management of their employers' firms. They spy on employees, blacklist activists, screen future employees for union sympathies, enlist the aid of strikebreakers, and try to bribe employees and otherwise dissuade them from participating in organizing campaigns. (See Ron Chernow, "Gray Flannel Goons," *Working Papers*, January/February 1981.)

What is worse, unions themselves have inadvertently provided grist for union busters. When the unions accept wage concessions and can't halt plant closings and runaway shops in such highly organized industries as auto, trucking, and steel, unorganized workers wonder how these mammoth unions will protect them.

Furthermore, reports of union corruption far removed from the immediate organizing drives, such as the Teamsters' misuse of the Central States Pension Fund, undercuts campaigns at hand. While employers have never hesitated to exploit reports of union misdeeds, unions have not been able to make corporate corruption an issue in organizing drives.

Another obstacle to reorganizing is internecine warfare. While millions of unorganized workers languish, unions spend an enormous amount of money and energy raiding one another's memberships. The Teamsters and the Machinists for example, are currently locked in bitter combat all across the country. Machinists' leaflets depict Teamster leaders as Mafia puppets, while Teamster fliers lampoon Machinists' President William Winpisinger.

The situation would appear very grim were it not for several new developments. Many unions have demonstrated a renewed commitment to organizing the unorganized by stepping up the pace of regional organizing conferences, and by production of organizer training materials. They have hired new organizers, from the

James Steinberg

ranks of union members, and hired young men and women trained in the community organizing and radical student movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

But what appears to be the really bright spot on the horizon is the labor movement's willingness to experiment with innovative techniques that promise more effective organizing campaigns. Some unions, particularly in the building trades, are planning to use pension fund investments as an organizing tool by channeling money away from companies hostile to unions and toward companies that are more friendly. Other unions, like the Communications Workers of America, are bringing in professional pollsters who promise to target critical issues and uncommitted voters. The best known of these tactics is the "corporate campaign," used by ACTWU to finally force J.P. Stevens to the bargaining table.

Developed by organizer Ray Rogers, who has since opened his own consulting firm, the campaign was a systematic exploitation of Stevens' links in business, banking, and insurance circles. Picket lines went up in front of New York banks, dissident stockholders rose at annual meetings to denounce Stevens, expensive proxy fights were mounted to ostracize Stevens-related directors of other corporations.

All this embarrassed Stevens in the corporate community. Then the threat of another directorship battle at Stevens' creditor Metropolitan Life, combined with federal court rulings upholding pro-union NLRB decisions, helped push the company over the brink to settlement.

Corporate campaigns, however, are double-edged. If labor is suffering from rank-and-file inertia, trying to cure it externally with consultants largely fails to address the disease. I do not scorn these developments because they don't conform to some idealized notion of "shop floor struggle." The forces lined up against workers trying to organize—employer power, weak labor laws, union busting consultants, anti-labor media, "right-to-work" groups, and so on—are so great that pure syndicalism alone can rarely succeed in building a union. The new organizing techniques using lawyers, pension experts, pollsters, and public relations specialists may indeed be useful in supplementing a campaign. However, by themselves or as a campaign's major feature, these techniques imply that workers are objects to be manipulated, rather than people shaping their own working lives.

The class consciousness and solidarity needed to build a union are based on relationships among the workers who are organizing—their faith in one another, confidence in the leaders among them, their communication with each other, the actions they take together. In a rush to embrace innovative techniques best handled by experts, many organizing campaigns have abandoned those "old-fashioned" methods—the very ones that give workers a taste of self-determination and self-confidence.

Only workers actively promoting their union can convince their workmates it's worth voting yes.

These methods include small-group home meetings, home visits with the union organizer, hand-to-hand distribution and face-to-face discussion of union leaflets in the workplace, arguments with a foreman, lunchroom speeches, plant gate rallies, putting out a shop paper, talking with already organized union members from other locals, holding a union picnic, organizing a union softball team, and so forth. A patient four-year program of home visits by in-plant organizers helped the Graphics Arts Union to organize the Krueger printing plant in Senatobia, Mississippi, in 1980. Women assembly line organizers who contradicted the supervisors' image of the company as "one big happy family" helped the IBEW win the Sharpe electronics plant in Memphis in early 1981. And even before the union won elections in the late 1970s, ACTWU had built a virtual shop steward system in the J.P. Stevens plants.

In examining campaign results, most organizing losses can be traced to a failure to develop and apply these traditional methods that are close to the workers' everyday experience. When union staff organizers do little more than pass out sign-up cards at plant gates, puff up showcase contracts and arbitration awards and sit back and wait, they often lose elections. That's what happened when the Steel Workers tried to organize at the non-union Appliance Park East, General Electric's facility in Colombia, Maryland. Organizers photostated paychecks of steelworkers working at the nearby Sparrows Point Bethlehem Steel plant and ran pre-packaged radio advertisements boasting of union victories and high earnings. In spite of all the pro-union propaganda, the 1,200 employees voted two to one to stay non-union.

Why? Because the in-plant organizing committee, though hard working, was just too small and isolated to reach the majority of workers in assembly departments. Anonymous union propaganda packaged by professionals was not able to counter the employer's face-to-face anti-union campaign. Only workers actively promoting their union—rather than passively waiting for an election that will determine if they have a union—can convince their workmates that it's worth voting yes.

Moreover, the "old-fashioned methods" are the very ones that put the conduct of a campaign into the hands of the workers themselves. They provide concrete tasks that allow workers to actively shape their campaign. They force workers to develop a network of relations

that cross the lines of race, sex, skill, age, and other divisions—divisions that employers impose in the workplace, in the form of departments, shifts, job classifications, and pay scales.

It takes years of work, and perhaps even a series of election defeats to convince a majority of workers to stick with the union. Instead of dedicating the necessary time, and applying rank-and-file methods across the board, many union officials would rather score an occasional NLRB election victory by dazzling the opposition with innovation than dig into the gritty, detailed work of a rank-and-file campaign.

But elections won with glossy PR often turn sour. Without a solid organizational base, unions are usually frustrated in negotiations on a first contract—the real test of whether workers have organized. For example, Vicki Saporta, a dynamic young Teamster organizer, swept the union to five rapid-fire organizing wins in Davidson County, North Carolina, in 1978, attracting national attention in the process. When the dust settled and the time came to negotiate and enforce contracts, Saporta had been sent on to campaigns in other parts of the country. Not surprisingly, local Teamster officials couldn't consolidate the victories. Without the months of patient committee-building, of the day-to-day confrontations with management that develop leaders and leadership skills, fragile union structures collapsed. This May, workers at Mallory Battery became the fourth of five plants to decertify the Teamsters, by a 481–228 vote. Only at PPG Industries is the union holding on (with the help of NLRB unfair labor practice proceedings).

Given this record, why are innovative tactics so popular? Their popularity comes from the estrangement of full-time union officials and organizers—themselves professionals—from the workers they want to organize. Although unions gain much more than they lose from organizational stability reflected in experienced full-time leadership and staff, and

most full-time trade unionists sincerely want to help working people, the increasing professionalization of trade union work attracts leaders and staff toward other like-minded professionals. They are simply more compatible in terms of outlook, style, discourse, and often standard of living.

Union professionals often work behind the scenes with company executives to reach a settlement, by-passing a rank-and-file bargaining committee. Top union officers and staffers develop personal relationships with political operators, trading union endorsements, support, and resources for political favors.

This whole network of labor professionals—national union officers and staffers and high regional officials, union lawyers and consultants, "labor" politicians and their aides—is also overwhelmingly white and male. They enjoy a fraternal culture that shuts out women and minority workers, who often make up a large part of the rank-and-file. Unless the rank-and-file are mobilized, this patronizing attitude becomes the dominant one and can undermine the union's chances of success.

When they exclude rank-and-file struggle, the innovations of the new organizing professionals, amount to nothing more than a jazzed-up version of the business unionism that has prevailed since the CIO expelled its left wing in the red-baiting purges of the late forties, and moved toward merger with the conservative AFL. Business unionists think members pay dues for services rendered. In the same way, they see workers in an organizing campaign not as protagonists in the struggle to organize, but as a chorus passing judgment on the marketing effectiveness of rival employer consultants and union professionals.

As long as the new methods are treated as a supplement to rank-and-file organizing, they can contribute to organizing success. Some of their practitioners, like Ray Rogers of the Stevens corporate campaign, are fully aware of this fact. The danger lies in a widespread loss of perspective by union officials and organizers so hungry for victories that they abandon rank-and-file methods in a rush to innovation.

The real question behind the problem of organizing in the 1980s is whether trade union leadership really *wants* rank-and-file participation and control as the cornerstone of an organizing movement. Of course, all unions want more members, but do they want a massive infusion of mobilized, aggressive workers who will carry their experience of solidarity and struggle into the life of the union as well? This is the question that must be answered in the affirmative if the new interest in organizing the unorganized is going to lead to a reversal of the membership decline. If, rather than addressing their own attitude toward unorganized workers, the unions get sidetracked into developing techniques to out-consult the consultants, the real opportunity will have been lost. ■