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Abstract
This article describes the COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training) program. Faced with declining membership and market share and an erosion of bargaining strength and political influence, building trades unions have undertaken a number of Initiatives to reverse their fortunes. COMET, an educational program that generates membership support and participation in organizing, has emerged as one of the most noteworthy of these new initiatives. Before COMET, organizing efforts were stymied by the reluctance of many union members and leaders to recruit into membership the large nonunion workforce. COMET appears to have transformed the political culture within those local unions that have utilized it by placing organizing on the top of their agendas. Although organizing activity and effectiveness are growing, it may be too soon to tell if construction unions can use COMET to successfully re-unionize the industry.

Keywords
: Construction Organizing Membership Education Training, COMET, construction, trade unions, organizing, worker rights, labor education, instruction, training

Comments
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Lighting the Spark: COMET Program Mobilizes the Ranks for Construction Organizing

Jeffery Grablesky[1]

This article describes the COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training) program. Faced with declining membership and market share and an erosion of bargaining strength and political influence, building trades unions have undertaken a number of Initiatives to reverse their fortunes. COMET, an educational program that generates membership support and participation in organizing, has emerged as one of the most noteworthy of these new initiatives. Before COMET, organizing efforts were stymied by the reluctance of many union members and leaders to recruit into membership the large nonunion workforce. COMET appears to have transformed the political culture within those local unions that have utilized it by placing organizing on the top of their agendas. Although organizing activity and effectiveness are growing, it may be too soon to tell if construction unions can use COMET to successfully re-unionize the industry.

Index terms: Construction industry; Labor education, instruction; Labor education, program report; Leadership, training; Organizing; Union commitment.

On March 8, 1994, organizing directors of the AFL-CIO affiliates gathered in the executive conference room of the Federation's Washington, D.C. headquarters to listen to a panel of building trades representatives describe the COMET, a membership education program that has become widely used throughout the construction industry in the last two years. The COMET, or Construction Organizing Membership Education Training program, is designed to generate rank and file support for, and participation in, organizing. It has already reached well over 75,000 construction unionists and begun to transform the building and construction trades, a sector of the labor movement many regarded as impervious to progressive change.

The panel was moderated by Robert Pleasure, executive director of the George Vleany Center, and featured Bob Ozinga, the Building and Construction Trades (B&CT) Department's full-time national COMET coordinator; Jim Sak,, of the Carpenters; Rick Root, of the Painters; and Mike Lucas, of the Electrical Workers and considered by many to be a pioneer of contemporary construction organizing. Pleasure suggested that it is rare that a labor education program provokes the kind of excitement and interest that the COMET has sparked. Endorsed by all of the general presidents of the fifteen unions affiliated with the B&CT Department, AFL-CIO, the COMET has been featured in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, is the target of the

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Associated Builders and Contractor's (ABC) "Coping with COMET" manual and national seminar, and is the topic of the Associated General Contrac.ors' (AGC) '"Preparing for COMET" video.[2]

Originally developed by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and shared with others, the COMET is being used by the state B&CT councils of Michigan, Indiana, Washington, West Virginia, Georgia and Massachusetts as well as the Electricians, Carpenters, Painters, Asbestos Workers, Ironworkers, Plumbers and Pipefitters, Sheet Metal Workers and Roofers. What is the COMET? Why was it developed? How is it delivered?
How does it work? This article seeks to answer these questions.

Rediscovering Unionism's Roots

"In the spirit of our traditions," explains B&CT Department President Robert Georgine., "we have begun a new, yet time proven initiative, to capture workers' interest in the foundations of their unions. This is [our] membership education program called COMET ... [N]ow a top priority for the entire building trades, we are building on COMET to organize nonunion workers on the job—the way it once was done."[3]

The COMET is a highly structured three-four hour educational program that is being delivered to rank and file members throughout the United States and Canada by specially trained instructors who use a detailed *Trainer's Manual* to conduct the class. These trainers are prepared for their COMET mission by participating in an intensive four-day Train-the-Trainer Course. COMET trainers report that rank and filers who are skeptical about recruiting new members generally emerge from the class with a renewed commitment to organizing.[4] The expected result is that they become more actively involved in their local's organizing efforts and that this will be reflected in intensified organizing throughout the industry.

At the 1994 Building Trades Legislative Conference, President Georgine defined the unions' mission in unambiguous terms: "Unless and until every construction worker belongs to a union, we can't rest. Universal membership is our goal."[5]

Why Organize?

Over the last five years, construction unions have focused increasing energy on organizing. Why? Having endured a dramatic decline in both membership and market share, the bargaining strength and political influence of most construction unions have been severely eroded. In a single generation unionized construction dropped precipitously from about 80% to 20% of the industry. Confronted by the cheaper costs of their open-shop competitors, signatory contractors lost their grasp of market segments that had traditionally been union strongholds. Thousands of unionized firms abandoned their collective bargaining agreements and many

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[2] Robert Tomsho, *Wall Street Journal* (November 18, 1994); ABC, "Coping with COMET" manual and AGC, "Preparing for COMET" video-tape in author's possession.
[3] Robert Georgine letter to editor, *Cockshaw's - Construction Labor News + Opinion* (March, 1994).
[4] Class evaluation forms received by the Electricians, Carpenters and Painters as well as anecdotal field reports affirm this view.
[5] Robert Georgine speech in author's possession.

more union members "put their tickets in their shoes" to work in burgeoning nonunion markets.[6]

In a frantic but ultimately futile attempt to recapture those markets and retain a hold on others, construction unions engaged in several cycles of concessionary bargaining during the 1970s and 1980s. But rather than leveling the playing field and sharpening the competitive edge of unionized contractors, these concessions merely contributed to a downward spiral in the industry. It was a classic "race to the bottom." As union costs declined, nonunion rivals became more ruthlessly competitive, cutting wages, undermining industry standards and, in many instances, cheating.[7]

An Industry in Crisis

Construction is the nation's second largest industry, employing about five million workers and supporting over one million employers. It is a chaotic and fiercely competitive sector of the economy. Unions have historically paved a stabilizing role in the industry: providing training for a work process with an inescapable reliance on craft skill; maintaining and referring a labor pool to meet the variable demands for skilled workers; and, establishing and enforcing uniform wage, benefit and jobsite standards that compel employers to compete on a level playing field, based on such factors as managerial efficiency, technical innovations, and constructive labor-management relations. The virtual de-unionization of many construction markets has unleashed on the industry intense and destructive competitive pressures that now batter every player in the construction community—including owners, users, builders, unions, and workers.

In a recent statement which promoted the COMET, B&CT Department President Robert Georgine said, "For some years, we have been warning government officials, builders, owners and developers that the policy of basing construction contract awards on the cheapest bid would have an eventual cost- It is now coming to pass . . . The effects of years of cut-throat, low-ball bidding, at the expense of construction workers, has come home to haunt the very people who espoused and perpetrated the policy." Georgine advocated unionization as the most viable way to tame the unbridled competition that now threatens the industry's vitality and its workers' livelihoods. "We are in for the long haul," he declared, "and are confident that, with time, all construction workers will enjoy the direct benefits of union representation and membership.[8]

Ironically, Georgine's diagnosis of the industry's problems is shared in part by some of his adversaries from the open shop. For example, Ted Kennedy, president of BE&K, a large open-shop contractor, and former president of the anti-union Associated Builders and Contractors, delivered a scathing attack on the destructive competitive forces that now

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[6] Steven G. Allen, "Declining Unionization in Construction: The Facts and The Reasons," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review,* vol. 41, no. 3 (April 1988), 349.

[7] One of (he most common forms of cheating is misclassifying employees as subcontractors to avoid paying taxes, social security, workers compensation, etc. The Coalition for Fair Worker Classification has analyzed Internal Revenue Service, Bureau of Labor Statistics and General Accounting Office data and estimated that almost one--fifth, of 19.8%, of the construction workforce is misclassified as independent subcontractors. This means that the problem of worker misclassification—which costs the IRS over S3 billion a year in lost revenue;—is more pervasive in construction than any other industry. *Construction Labor Report* . H)/12/94). 769-770.

[8] Georgine letter lo editor of *Cockshsw's,* cited above.

dominate the industry. In an astonishing speech to a group of construction users, Kennedy referred to nonunion contractors as "the biggest whores in the business . . . and you owners are the pimps and procurers." He continued:

> You've reveled in the competitive world of union and merit shop contractors fighting it out for market share . . . You owners are sitting there vouching us degrade what is supposed to be our most valuable commodity-—our people. And, as the wages fall, the benefits disappear and more and more leave the industry, you take refuge by saying, "it's the American Way—-the competitive market place at work—the free enterprise system in action." . . . [But t]he increased competition has provided a large portion of its cost savings at the expense of the individual employees' well-being.[9]

Kennedy did not, however, offer unionization as the cure.

Georgine's and Kennedy's perceptions are supported by hard evidence that reveals declining industry standards. In December 1993, Peter Cockshaw, a long-time industry observer, wrote: "The main reason construction fails to attract, or retain, qualified craftsmen is that wages now are no longer competitive with other industries." In fact, in 1993 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported average hourly wages and fringes of $ 16.43 for construction workers as compared to $18.30 for manufacturing workers. The Construction Labor Research Council calculated real wages-fringes in construction from 1987 to 1993 and found a $.77 an hour decrease. This decline is part of a longer—term trend in which construction wages have dropped over 25% in the last three decades.[10]

That de-unionization has contributed to the crisis in construction has been recognized by commentators outside the industry. For example, Robert Tomsho, of the *Wall Street Journal,* traced "long-festering industry problems" back to the 1970s and 1980s, when "major corporations and other customers, in a quest for lower building costs, awarded more jobs to nonunion contractors. As unions' market share dwindled, cutthroat competition among such firms drove down wages."[11]

Confronting the Limits of the 'Top Down' Approach

Within the unions, the industry crisis has induced a critical re-evaluation of policies and practices that seem to have contributed to the dilemma of declining membership and market share. In particular, over the last decade a number of union leaders came to believe that policies that excluded qualified workers from union membership were counterproductive. In years past, because the unions had organized a near monopoly of skilled workers, nonunion employers could be enticed to sign a collective bargaining agreement in order to gain access to the labor pool controlled by the unions. This approach came to be known as "top-down" organizing.[12] But during the last thirty years union membership has stagnated at the same time

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[9] Ted Kennedy speech to the American Society of Chemical Engineers (San Francisco, 1992), quoted in *Cockshaw's* (August 1993).
[10] *Cockshaw's* (December 1993).
[11] Robert Tomsho. *Wall Street Journal* (Januaiy 27, 1994).
[12] 1n 1959,the NLRA was amended to include Section 8f, which allowed construction unions, to sign collective bargaining agreements with employers without having to demonstrate their majority status. Given construction's transient workforce, mobile worksites and potentially

that the skilled workforce has expanded. As a result, the unions' working monopoly has evaporated. For example, in 1965, 66% of the 185,000 electricians in the United States were in the IBEW; by 1989, the skilled electrical workforce had expanded to 525,000, but only about 150,000, or 28.6%, were IBEW members.[13] In fact, the restrictive membership policies of the construction unions contributed to the unraveling of their labor market control. Consequently, the traditional top-down organizing approach that sought to persuade nonunion contractors to become signatory without directly appealing to their workers was no longer effective. Once progressive leaders recognized that "we can't do 80% of the work, without 80% of the workforce" as one unionist proclaimed, the unions began to focus their considerable resources and talents on organizing workers to recapture markets, rebuild bargaining strength, and retain membership.[14]

Several unions implemented ambitious organizing programs with this new "bottom up" orientation. In some areas these efforts were moderately successful. But in most jurisdictions, these organizing programs confronted a seemingly insuperable obstacle: union leaders observed that current rank and filers had no interest or desire to bring nonunion workers into membership. These members had been brought up on the exclusionary principles that had informed union affairs for decades. They believed that keeping union membership down would elevate their own worth. They feared increased membership meant union members would have to compete with these newly organized workers for a shrinking number of jobs.[15]

Overcoming Resistance to Change Through Education

Observers unfamiliar with the construction industry are sometimes baffled by this membership resistance to organizing. Because the construction unions maintain a labor supply from which unionized employers draw, newly organized workers join that common pool and "compete" with current members for union jobs. It would be the equivalent of an industrial union organizing a new unit and merging the workforce of both units into a single seniority list. Union members from the initial unit would feel threatened as their security was disrupted. While organizing new members in fact expands the employment opportunities and enhances the job security of current construction union members, rank and filers had been taught to regard organizing with suspicion, even outright hostility.

Given the local nature of the construction industry, the basic responsibility for organizing appropriately rests with the local union. But when internationals attempted to initiate organizing programs at the local level they were generally frustrated. Local union leaders depend upon constituent support for their own continued employment. Because organizing is a potentially volatile political issue, internationals discovered that few local leaders

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perishable bargaining units, the certification process established by the NLRA in 1935 was recognized to be an ill-fit for the construction industry The pre-hire agreements sanctioned by Section 8f were deemed necessary to preserve an industrial relations equilibrium in the construction industry and provided the legal foundation for "top-down" organizing.

[13] International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, *COMET Trainer's Manual,* Hand Out #1, and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[14] Mike Lucas, IBEW executive assistant to the international president, makes the "80% of the work, 80% of the workers" point in the IBEW's COMET video, "Construction Organizing.; Lessons of the Past, Challenges Ahead." It has become a familiar refrain among many construction unionists.

[15] These observations have been made repeatedly by hundreds of local and international leaders as well as rank and file members in training programs conducted by the author.

had the courage or will to tackle it. Mandating locals to organize produced meager results, so several international unions decided that membership resistance had to be faced directly.[16]

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers led the way. It brought together a development team of international representatives, who had been working closely with locals on this challenge, and Cornell University's Construction Industry Program, which had been working closely with the IBEW and several other international unions on a variety of innovative training programs.[17] The development team's mission was to design an educational program that would explain to members why it was in the test interests of the IBEW and its members to organize unrepresented electrical workers. COMET was thus conceived to reduce resistance to and generate support for organizing.

Creating a Climate for Organizing

At the outset, the development team identified two reasons why the union should organize: first, it was the only effective way to recapture market share and rebuild bargaining power; second, it was the right thing to do. The learning objectives of COMET were thus framed by these two reasons. In terms of knowledge, skills and attitude objectives, it was agreed that rank and file COMET participants should understand these two reasons, be able to articulate them to other members and be motivated to do so.

In order for COMET to significantly alter the political culture of the IBEW, it needed to reach a large number of the union's construction member. Therefore, the Train-the-Trainer model utilized to good effect by the IBEW in training 20,000 stewards was once again employed. That model necessitated the design of a *Trainer's Manual* with a detailed lesson plan and requisite materials so that relatively inexperienced instructors could successfully bring the IBEW's organizing gospel to the ranks. Several members of the development team had conducted membership education classes to promote organizing and that field experience was analyzed. Then, Cornell's Construction Industry Program drafted a lesson plan that was reviewed, revised and endorsed by the development team and, ultimately, approved by International President J.J. Barry.[18]

The lesson plan begins with introductions and an explanation of the purpose and spirit of the COMET course and then turns to a review of recent industry trends. Participants are asked to interpret a series of graphs, the first of which shows the approximate value of electrical construction from 1964 to 1989. The point is clear: unlike manufacturing sectors that have experienced a decline in the last twenty-five years, the demand for electrical construction has been steadily rising, climbing from $8 billion to over $40 billion. The second graph depicts

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[16] Contrary to the claims of some commentators, construction locals remain fundamentally democratic organizations. Local union business managers generally face re-election every three years and are understandably concerned about political challenges mounted by "anti-organizing" factions.

[17] Cornell's Construction Industry Program develops and delivers a wide range of training and education programs designed to help revitalize unionized construction. These include steward and leadership training, organizer training, membership education and internal organizing, and strategic planning.

[18] IBEW membership is about 750,000, of which almost 200,000 are construction electricians; see Jeffrey Grabelsky. "Steward Training in the Construction Industry: 'the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America Faces the Challenge." *Labor Studies Journal* (Winter 1993}; after six months of COMET' training, IBBW instructors met to review their experience and adjustments were made in the lesson plan to address problems encountered in the field'.

union-nonunion workforce trends over the same time period. The lesson is also apparent: in response to the growing demand, the number of electrical construction employees has nearly tripled while union membership has remained virtually static. The third graph reveals the IBEW's shrinking share of the total electrical construction wage pool. The fourth presents the estimated unionization rates and wage standards in ten American cities and shows in graphic terms how bargaining strength tends to rise in more densely organized labor markets. This initial exercise sets the stage for the COMET program.[19]

Because the development team anticipated that members would inevitably bring a litany of reasons why the union should not organize, it was decided that COMET should allow time for all those reasons to be aired. Thus, after participants have analyzed and discussed recent industry trends they engage in a free-wheeling brainstorming session, listing on a flip chart all the reasons members believe the IBEW should not organize new members: "Organizing will simply add more members to the out-of-work list." "they'll take my job," "they're not sufficiently skilled or qualified," "conditions of the job will deteriorate," "they have no commitment or loyalty to the union," "they haven't gone through the apprenticeship," These are some of the reasons members say the union should not organize. The flip chart is then taped to the wall and participants are promised that all of these objections will be answered through the COMBT course. This venting session is designed to clear the air.[20]

The rest of the course consists of a series of participatory exercises in which members reflect on the union's past, examine the unique dynamics of the construction industry, debate which of a list of factors most influence bargaining power, discuss how organizing unrepresented workers strengthens the union's ability to win better wages and conditions, and confront the differences and discover the similarities between union and nonunion workers.
This last exercise is especially important because one of the biggest barriers to organizing is a disparaging and sometimes arrogant attitude union members have had toward the unorganized. Participants discuss the meaning and careless abuse of terms like "rats'' and "scabs," commonly used by union members (and leaders) to describe any and all unrepresented construction workers. They ponder whether fictional workers in a series of biographical scenarios are union or nonunion—they could, in fact, be either—and conclude that the common bonds of craft and trade and the shared experience and aspirations of all construction workers are much more powerful than the differences that separate the organized and the unorganized. This is one of the profound moments of realization in the COMET program.

Close to the conclusion of COMET, participants return to the "Why Not Organize" flip chart that has hung on the wall throughout the course. In small groups, they discuss their own objections to organizing. Here, the COMET instructor discovers if the class has been a success. To the extent members can answer their own doubts in a thoughtful and compelling way, COMET can be judged effective.

The COMET lesson plan is designed to give members the knowledge they *need* to explain why the union must organize. "Organizing means we'll have to compete with new members for fewer jobs and we'll just add to our unemployment," an uneducated member may

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[19] IBHW COMET Hand Out #1 was developed using a number or sources. The fourth graph was constructed by estimating the unionization rate in thirty American cities and comparing the collective bargaining strength of each local using the published union wage as the measure. A trend revealed wages rising with union density.

[20] See IBEW *COMET Trainer's Manual*

complain at the start of the course COMET teaches members that within their local market they compete with unorganized workers who are generally more employable because they ate cheaper. The union can either cut its wages or raise the standards of non anion workers to level the playing field. Organizing inevitably raises the costs of nonunion construction, makes signatory contractors more competitive, and brings new contractors into the union fold. Thus, organizing makes union members more, not less, secure, by expanding their job opportunities and protecting and preserving union conditions against the threat of nonunion standards. COMET conveys these lessons.

Before a member participates in COMET, he or she may believe nonunion workers are not skilled enough to be union members. COMET shows how the skill levels of the unorganized workforce have risen steadily, in part because many former union members are now working open shop. In response to the objection that newly organized members will have no loyalty to the union, COMET participants learn that the process of organizing itself engenders a sense of commitment that matches that of the best long-term member. After the course, members recognize that newly organized workers who hive "seen the other side of the fence" often more fully appreciate union conditions than do many current members and have no intention or desire to "import" open shop standards to the union sector, as some unionists may fear.

The COMET program quickly proved itself to be so effective in winning over rank and file members and promoting an organizing culture within local unions that it was adapted for use by ten other international unions as well as six state building trades councils and eventually adopted by the national Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO.[21]

Train-the-Trainer: An Organizing Approach to Member Education

The key to COMET's success is not that it presents all the answers, but that it brings members through a systematic process of exploration that allows them to discover the "answers." In its conception it is a learner-based program. A liberation pedagogy underlays its design and an interactive process drives its execution. But however well-conceived it may be, its effectiveness is largely determined by the competence of the instructors who deliver it. That is why the IBEW, as well as the other unions and councils which have adopted COMET, have invested enormous human and material resources in the Train-the-Trainer courses that prepare COMET missionaries for their task.

The Train-the-Trainer Course is a four-day, intensive program to prepare union representatives to deliver COMET. These courses were initially run by union-based educators and Cornell University. As the demand for such programs grew, Cornell and the building trades unions invited labor educators from other university-based centers to help conduct the Train-the- Trainer Courses. Eventually, the Electrical Workers and Carpenters developed the internal capacity to run the Train-the-Trainer Courses without relying on any external support.[22]

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[21] Building on the success of COMET, the IBEW developed the Membership Education and Mobilization for Organizing (MEMO) program to generate rank and file support for and participation in the union's industrial organizing activities. The union hopes other organizations throughout the labor movement will adopt MEMO as all building and construction trades have adopted COMET.

[22] June McMahon, of UCLA, Mary Ruth Gross, of the University of California, Berkeley, Jeff Vincent, of Indiana University, and Fred Kotler, formerly of Northern Michigan University and now with Cornell University's Construction Industry Program, have been among the most active university-based COMET Train-the-Trainer Course instructors.

With sessions on such topics as "Adult Learners and the Need for Participation in Training," "Group Dynamics," "Effective Communication Skills,'' and "Motivation Techniques,'1 the course teaches prospective trainers about the philosophy and practice of participatory labor education. Several components deal with substantive organizing issues including "The Dynamics of Construction Organizing," "Salting,"'[23] "The Role of the Labor Movement in Modern Society," and, "An Introduction to Strategic Planning " A wide array of teaching techniques are demonstrated to the would be trainers and analyzed. A full day is spent practice teaching COMET. The participants are divided into smaller groups of about ten or twelve and each instructor is assigned a section of the COMET course to teach to his or her peers, who play the role of rank and file members. After each participant finishes, he or she is given constructive feedback to improve performance. All of the participants develop a more critical eye for effective training, and while the day is the most challenging of the entire Train-the-Trainer Course, it is invariably the most rewarding.[24]

As might be expected, there are discernible differences in confidence, comfort and competency among the instructors who complete the Train-the-Trainer Course. Only about one-third of the prospective trainers appear to be truly ready to bring COMET to rank and file members without considerable practice and support. In fact, data supplied by three international unions suggest a minority of trainers are conducting a significant majority of the training.[25]

Training as a Transformative Experience

However, the Train-the-Trainer Course serves another purpose beyond preparing instructors to teach COMET. It has emerged as one of the key instruments of organizational change within internationals and councils that have implemented COMET.[26] Rank and file members are not the only ones who need to be convinced that organizing workers is the best way to rebuild the contraction unions. In fact, often leaders at all levels of the union regard organizing with a skepticism that inhibits activity. The Train-the-Trainer Course tends to make disciples out of the key decision-makers in the locals and councils. Having leaders teach the union's organizing gospel, beginning with the practice teaching session, has proven to be an effective way for them to internalize the union's organizing mission. That is why influential local union leaders, some of whom may never teach COMET, are encouraged to participate in the Train-the-Trainer Course.[27] Two internationals—the painters and asbestos workers—included their entire top leadership in their first Train-the-Trainer Courses. One organizing director

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[23] "Salting" is a widely-used construction organizing tactic in which union members go to work for nonunion contractors for the explicit purpose of organizing the employees and employers.

[24] Train-the-Trainer Course evaluations consistently identify practice teaching as the most rewarding part of the program.

[25] The painters, carpenters and electricians have tracked all COMET training. The painters lave kept closest track of how many trainings each trainer has conducted.

[26] See Jeffrey Grabelsky and Rick Hurd, "Reinventing an Organizing Union: Strategies for Change." *Proceedings* of the Industrial Relations Research Association, January 1994, on the Train-t he-Trainer as a chief instrument of organizational change.

[27] At the January 1993 IBEW Construction Conference, International President J.J. Barry mandated every construction local union business manager to participate in a COMET Train-the-Trainer Course.

commented, "It takes four days to convince the leadership, but only four hours to convince the membership that we absolutely must organize unrepresented workers."[28]

COMET Train-the-Trainer Courses are truly transformative experiences for participants. At the emotional conclusion of the course, it is not uncommon for tearful construction unionists to express a sense of hope about the future that they have evidently missed for many years.[29]

The COMET program itself has been enthusiastically received in the field. "COMET has been an emotional experience for our members." Explains Tim Nichols, secretary treasurer of the Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council and the first leader to turn the IBEW's program into a trades-wide initiative. "[Our members] have been through some hard times," continues Nichols, "but [through COMET they] have gained a sense of enthusiasm that we can rebuild our unions." Capturing the attitude of most members who experience COMET, one rank-and-filer simply said: "After going through the class, I think organizing is the right thing to do!"

Changing the Face of (Construction) Markets

The COMET program's rather conspicuous flash has not escaped the attention of a range of industry observers. With its large-scale mobilization of rank and file members going directly to nonunion worksites to recruit unrepresented workers, union leaders claim that COMET has electrified construction organizing- For example, in an address to the annual convention of the National Electrical Contractors Association in Chicago, IBEW President Barry described his union's nearly 40,000 COMET "graduates" as an "army of organizers" that has caused hundreds of nonunion employers to sign IBEW contracts, "deciding they would rather switch than fight."[30] "Until COMET writes the *Wall Street Journal,* "most contractors hadn't had to worry about union infiltration for more than a generation mainly because . . . the construction unions hadn't done much organizing . . . But COMET is changing the face of a growing number of individual markets."[31] The authoritative *Engineering News Record* covered COMET in this way: "The AFL-CIO's B&CT Department has launched a major organizing drive and nonunion contractors are scrambling to find protection from what promises to be a very hot scrutiny . . . [T]he full impact of the COMET has yet to be felt. . . "[32]

Of course, the anti-union open shop did not wait for COMET's full impact before it reacted. In a letter of alarm from the current president of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), Toe Ivey wrote:

> Because of the critical nature of this issue, I am writing you and every ABC member to make you aware of a union organizing effort that could drastically change the way you do business. I cannot stress enough the gravity of this new union program. Called Construction Organizing Membership Education Training or COMET for short, it is a bottom-up approach to either force you to unionize or harass you enough . . . that you

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[28] "Four days to convince the leadership" quote from Marc Furman, Organizing Director, UBCJA.
[29] The IBEW survey results reveal how profoundly the Train-the-Trainer Course has transformed participants' attitudes about organizing.
[30] *Construction Labor Report* (11/2/94), 827.
[31] Robert Tomsho, *Wall Street Journal* (November 18, 1994).
[32] *Engineering News Record* (May 31, 1994).

> will simply walk away from your business. Don't think that COMET is another "flash-in-the-pan" effort trial will soon disappear. . . The success or failure of your business is directly related to ABC's ability to "shoot down COMET." Please understand the seriousness of this issue. COMET is a highly funded, major threat to your company, and it will only be overcome by a strong, united ABC.[33]

Ivey may have exaggerated the nature of the COMET "threat" to build his own organization. But the ABC has, in fact, sponsored a series of national training seminars for its members titled "Coping with COMET" in order to prepare nonunion employers for the impending "assault" by union organizers.[34]

The Associated General Contractors, an overwhelmingly nonunion employers association, has produced and distributed a video-tape called "Preparing for COMET" that warns its audience about the COMET threat and offers advice on how to blunt its impact.[35] And while some construction unionists have been flattered by the open shop's alarming rhetoric, Jim Sala, the Carpenters' COMET coordinator, cautioned: "If we start totally believing our adversaries' statements, we are in trouble." On the other hand, Jim Rudicil, the IBEW's Construction Organizing Director, has measured the value of the attention in this way: 'The ABC's and AGC's reaction as well as the coverage in the press have all legitimized our efforts in the eyes of some leaders and many members."[36]

A New Spirit of Hope

All of the internationals and councils that are using the COMET program witness a new spirit of hope that has taken hold throughout their organizations. "COMET is the spark that has regenerated our union fervor," IBEW President J.J. Barry declared to a recent construction conference. "If there is increased power and energy flowing through the ranks of the IBEW these days, it is because we tapped our greatest strength: our members. The introduction of COMET entailed nothing less than remaking our own culture within the IBEW."[37]

Reports from the field reaffirm this view. "COMET lifted us from despair to hope to success," says IBEW Local Union #611 organizer Tom Davis. "Our members are now fired up and hopeful for the future." Having recruited over 300 new members and organized 15 electrical contractors including a 200-person shop, local members have every reason to feel hopeful.[38]

But for the real measure of success we must go beyond subjective anecdotal reports and examine some hard performance indicators. Three unions have closely tracked the COMET program over the last couple of years. The Carpenters union, which intends to train over 100,000 members over the next year, has conducted 18 Train-the-Trainer Courses, prepared over 500 COMET instructors, delivered about 900 COMET trainings, and reached over 25,000 rank and file members. The Painters' numbers are 5 Train-the-Trainer Courses, 175 COMET

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[33] Joe Ivey letter to ABC members (May 10, 1993).
[34] *Coping with COMET* seminar manual in author's possession. In August 1993, the IBEV7 conducted a COMET Train.-the-Trainer Course in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Coincidentally the ABC conducted one of its "Coping with COMET" seminars at a nearby hotel at the same time.
[35] Associated General Contractors of America, "Preparing for COMET" video-tape (1993).
[36] Interview with Sala and Rudicil conducted by author, March M, 1994.
[37] President Barry's speech to IBEW Construction Conference (April 2, 1992).
[38] Quoted in *Cockshaw's* (April, 1994).

instructors, over 500 COMET trainings, and about 10,000 rank and file members trained. The Electrical Workers union has achieved the following; 30 Train-the-Trainer Courses, over 800 COMET instructors, nearly 2,000 COMET trainings, and about 38,000 rank and file members trained.[39]

Program Evaluation

Only the IBEW has surveyed its local unions to determine the impact of COMET on both organizing activity and attitudes of leaders and members toward organizing. A detailed, 8-page survey was distributed to each of the IBEWs 392 construction locals; 361 completed surveys were returned and processed.

Many union leaders and activists believed that the momentum of the IBEW's COMET-driven organizing was building. The surveys confirmed that belief. Five organizing performance indicators were included in the surveys: the number of new members taken into the local union, the number of salts (rank and file organizers) working for open shop contractors, the number of NLRB charges filed against nonunion contractors who interfere with the exercise of Section 7 rights, the number of contractors who have been targeted, and the number of contractors who have been organized. The local unions reported organizing 14,311 new members, placing 3,825 salts in the open shop, filing 1,527 NLRB charges, targeting over 2,000 employers for organizing and successfully signing about 100 new union contractors. In addition, the COMET "why organize" training generated a need for follow-up "how to organize" training, in which almost 4,000 members participated.

With the survey the IBEW hoped to demonstrate the connection between this impressive organizing activity and the 2,000 COMET training sessions that had been conducted. But when the survey results were analyzed, no statistically significant correlation between its five organizing variables and COMET training was found.[40]

Firm conclusions about the impact of the COMET training on organizing activity and effectiveness cannot be confidently drawn from the results of the survey for several reasons. The survey was not conceived as an experimental instrument. The IBEW sent the surveys to all construction locals; there was no control group of local unions who were not using the COMET. There was no pre-COMET training survey to assess the level of organizing activity before local unions initiated COMET training. The survey could not positively determine if elevated organizing activity was caused by the COMET training or if both organizing and COMET training might be explained by an independent variable such as visionary local leadership committed to organizing, COMET training and other innovative programs. Finally, the survey was conducted while both COMET training and organizing were taking place concurrently. Perhaps an additional survey should be conducted at some point in the future after the COMET training is completed so that its effects on organizing activity can be more reliably measured.

The IBEW's survey does, however, indicate that the COMET program has had a strong impact on attitudes toward organizing. The views of business managers have clearly been influenced by their participation in COMET Train-the-Trainers Courses. For example, while only

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[39] Data reported by UBCJA, IBPAT and IBEW, respectively.

[40] Copy of the survey may be obtained from the IBEW Education Department upon request. The IBEW sent the survey to all 392 construction local unions and 361 of those locals responded.

41% recognized the limitations of traditional top-down organizing before the Train-the-Trainer Course, after the course 72% believed that approach was largely ineffective. Before the Train-the-Trainer Course, 53.5% of the business managers believed that organizing workers bottom-up is the most effective strategy for the IBEW to re-establish itself as a vital force in the industry; after the course 83% embraced bottom-up organizing.

More impressive is how the COMET training has altered the political environment within the local unions. Of the 361 local union business managers who responded to the survey, the following results provide a measure of the COMET impact:

1. "Prior to the COMET it was difficult to promote organizing because my members opposed it." 72% either strongly agreed or agreed.
2. "Prior to the COMET it was a political liability to support organizing." 67% either strongly agreed or agreed.
3. "Because of the COMET our members have changed their attitudes toward organizing." 83% either strongly agreed or agreed.
4. "As a result of the COMET, promoting organizing is not a political liability in our local union." 69% either strongly agreed or agreed.
5. "Because of the COMET our members are more willing to help our organizing efforts." 82% either strongly agreed or agreed.
6. "The attitude of our members who have taken the COMET toward the International has improved significantly." 72% either strongly agreed or agreed.

COMET Programs

Many IBEW leaders found the statistical analysis of the surveys to be heartening. The results reaffirmed what these leaders knew from field repot is: the COMET has helped transform the political climate of locals by putting organizing back on top of the union's agenda.[41]

COMET-inspired organizing activity among all building trades unions continues to grow. The Carpenters are in the process of developing a series of follow-up training modules (COMET II) to provide rank and file COMET activists with additional skills to be more effective union organizers. The Bricklayers and Roofers intend to follow suit as well as the Massachusetts Building and Construction Trades Council. Moreover, the D.C. Campaign for Workers' Rights, the first multi-trade whole-market organizing effort in construction, is being driven by a mobilization of union and nonunion activists utilizing the COMET program.

It is hard to know if the Meany Center's Bob Pleasure was correct in asserting to the organizing directors assembled at the AFL-CIO's Washington offices on March 8, 1994, that COMET is truly a unique labor education program. But there is little doubt that the building and construction trades unions are stirring, that construction organizing is surging, and that COMET has contributed to these historic developments. While some in the unions and others in the universities may wonder aloud if labor education has much to offer a labor movement

[41] Information about survey results may be obtained from the IBEW. The full survey report remains an internal union document. Partial results have been reported in this article by permission of the union.

anxiously awaiting a rebirth, COMET demonstrates that the right program at the right time can make a real difference.