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Organizing Clerical Workers

Abstract

[Excerpt] There are two organizing models that are effective among clerical workers. One model is the media-oriented, high-tech type of organizing. AFSCME does this very well; some other unions have also used it effectively. It starts with polling and opinion research on the work force that might be organized. This is followed up by targeted direct mail, telephone banks, radio and TV ads, campaign-specific newspapers and so on. This type of campaign is most appropriate for large public-sector units, especially when the clericals work in multiple locations. It is an important and successful means of organizing, but it has limited private-sector potential.

The other successful model for organizing clerical workers is the grass-roots mass participation model, where the union staff representative builds the committee, and then the committee does the actual organizing. This approach was successful at Harvard University and at other high-visibility universities such as Columbia and Yale. It is also the approach that has been used in many less well publicized campaigns in the public and private sectors. This type of organizing is a very slow process because it is done one-on-one, worker-to-worker; but it builds strong commitment and involvement in the union.

Keywords

labor movement, organizing, unions, clerical workers

Disciplines

Labor Relations

Comments

Suggested Citation

Hurd, R. W. (1989). Organizing clerical workers [Electronic version]. In P. Wilson (Ed.), *Meeting the challenges of change: Unions and the white collar work force* (pp. 5-11). Washington, DC: AFL-CIO.

Required Publisher Statement

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ORGANIZING CLERICAL WORKERS

RICHARD WAYNE HURD*

I want to emphasize how important the changes that Vernon Briggs noted can be to the labor movement. With the growth in the service sector and the increasing participation of women in the labor force, it is now crucial that the labor movement become more effective at organizing these workers if the movement is to survive and thrive.

My interest in clerical unions dates back to 1973, when I walked a picket line at Michigan State University in support of the clerical-technical union that was striking for its first contract. My professional research interest began about five years ago at a New Hampshire AFL-CIO Convention, when I sat down and had a long conversation with Cheryl Schaffer, then an organizer for District 925 of the Service Employees Union. Since then I've talked with or interviewed approximately 100 clerical organizers or rank-and-file activists; and I feel that everything that I know about organizing clericals and other white collar workers, I learned from people in the labor movement. I've applied that knowledge to data available from the government and data I've been able to gather myself. I have used the knowledge I gained from organized labor to interpret trends in organization and unionization among clerical workers.

Let me point out a few things about the basic organizing environment. Clerical workers are skeptical of unions. They still perceive them basically in the old style, with sort of a macho, blue-collar image. Clerical workers are fearful of strikes -- at least non-union clericals are -- and they are very concerned about job security. All of these points make it difficult for them to consider unionization. On the other hand, like all workers, clericals desire fair treatment and respect. They have a particular problem here because they typically find themselves serving someone with a higher status, in a sense as a servant or as an addendum to that person's work. This raises even more concern for the issue of fair treatment. Many clerical workers want to be treated as professionals. This attitude leads them to unionization.

When clerical workers try to organize, management responds. Management tends to underestimate both the intensity of feeling that clerical workers have and their ability to unionize. Nevertheless, when an organizing drive starts, management responds nearly as viciously as it does to organizing campaigns among other types of workers. There is probably a little less of the overt anti-unionism -- such as firing union activists -- in clerical campaigns, but that's about all that is missing. If you want proof of this point, you can look in detail at some of the specific campaigns to organize Blue Cross/Blue Shield, because the company's response was unexpectedly negative.

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There are two organizing models that are effective among clerical workers. One model is the media-oriented, high-tech type of organizing. AFSCME does this very well; some other unions have also used it effectively. It starts with polling and opinion research on the work force that might be organized. This is followed up by targeted direct mail, telephone banks, radio and TV ads, campaign-specific newspapers and so on. This type of campaign is most appropriate for large public-sector units, especially when the clericals work in multiple locations. It is an important and successful means of organizing, but it has limited private-sector potential.

The other successful model for organizing clerical workers is the grass-roots mass participation model, where the union staff representative builds the committee, and then the committee does the actual organizing. This approach was successful at Harvard University and at other high-visibility universities such as Columbia and Yale. It is also the approach that has been used in many less well publicized campaigns in the public and private sectors. This type of organizing is a very slow process because it is done one-on-one, worker-to-worker; but it builds strong commitment and involvement in the union.

The key point is that clericals buy into the union in this situation because they can control the union themselves, because they own it. It is a form of pure democracy, and it is crucial to the success of most clerical organizing campaigns. There are very few "hot shops" among clerical workers; very few campaigns succeed overnight. They are mostly slow campaigns.

Table 2 shows that white collar workers -- including clerical workers -- tend to prefer unions that are more democratic in their structure, where there is local control of the bargaining process. One benefit of the slow organizing campaigns among clericals is illustrated in Table 1 under the heading "No Impact." Unlike organizing under the NLRB among any other group of workers in our society, delaying the election does not have a negative impact on clerical workers' support for unionization. For most workers, the delay is used by management to undermine support for the union. But it doesn't work that way among clerical workers. The reason is that the type of organizing that is usually pursued, the one-on-one grassroots organizing, builds a strong commitment.

Just to touch on a few other points... Both tables demonstrate that strikes tend to decrease clerical worker interest in unionization. Some of the variables under "Negative Impact" in Table 1 indicate that management opposition can reduce worker support for unionization among clerical workers, as among other workers. This is reflected in the stipulated and ordered election variables there, which are both forms of legal appeals of the NLRB process. Familiarity with unions tends to help. Clerical workers are less likely to misunderstand unions if they live in states where the labor movement is vibrant and vital.

Table 1 also indicates that job security is another important point. Employment growth in an industry has a positive impact on clerical votes regarding unionization; and conversely, shrinking employment in an industry has a negative impact on clerical worker votes for unionization.

Table 1
Environmental Factors Which Affect Votes in NLRB
Elections Among Clerical Workers*

<u>Negative Impact</u>	<u>Positive Impact</u>
Size of Unit	Union Membership in State
Strike Activity in State	Growth in Union Membership in State
Stipulated Election	Employment Growth in Industry
Ordered Election	
Clerical Employment Ratio for Industry	
<u>No Impact</u>	
Election Delay	
Voter Turnout	
Clerical Wage in State	

Table 2
Union Characteristics Which Affect Votes in NLRB
Elections Among White Collar Workers**

<u>Negative Impact</u>	<u>Positive Impact</u>
National Control of Bargaining	Union Democracy
Union Dues	Direct Benefits Provided by Union
Union Propensity for Lengthy Strikes	Union Rivalry
<u>No Impact</u>	
Union Wage Level	
<u>Mixed Impact</u>	
Union Jurisdiction	

* Source: Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Clerical Workers: Determinants of Success", Industrial and Labor Relations Review, April 1988, v. 41, pp. 360-73.

** Source: Cheryl Maranto and Jack Fiorito, "The Effect of Union Characteristics on the Outcome of NLRB Certification Elections", Industrial and Labor Relations Review, January 1987, v. 40, pp. 227-40.

Another interesting point about clerical unions is that jurisdiction doesn't seem to make much of a difference. This is less true for professional unions than for the clerical unions. Certainly for clericals, the jurisdiction of the union is not really an issue. Many different unions are involved. There are those that traditionally have been involved in clerical organizing, like District 65, District 925 of SEIU, OPEIU, and some of the others. There are also education unions like AFT and NEA that have organized clerical workers. Government employee unions clearly organize clerical workers. And just about any other union you can think of has organized some clerical workers. The ones that come to mind most readily are CWA, which has had quite a bit of success in certain areas of the country organizing clericals, particularly in those places where they have strong membership bases; the Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union, which has done much clerical organizing in Connecticut, including Yale University; the Teamsters, which has done a fair amount of clerical organizing in the Midwest, in Chicago and Indiana in particular; and some manufacturing unions which, faced with declining membership, have turned toward clerical organizing, like the Steelworkers' and the International Ladies' Garment Workers, and there are a lot of independent unions among clerical workers as well. A little aside on this... As I was doing some research on university clerical organizing, I was really surprised -- in fact delighted -- to find out that the first university clerical union in the country was established in 1946; and it was a local of the United Steelworkers at the Center for Degree Studies in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Clearly, this turn toward white collar workers isn't new; it is just expanding old activities.

The university clerical unions work very closely together across union lines; and I think that's very important, too. It's not only university clerical unions that do that; all clerical unions lend support to each other. This type of cooperation can be helpful to the labor movement.

The key to organizing clericals is local control and organizers who can understand, identify with and respect clerical workers. The particular parent union doesn't matter; what matters is the attitude toward the workers. You cannot go in and tell clerical workers what the issues are. You have to listen to them, and they will tell you. Unions that are used to servicing other types of workers must be very careful in servicing clerical units and must be sure that they are responsive to their needs.

Table 3 indicates that the presence of a faculty union has a major impact on the success of organizing campaigns on university campuses among clerical workers. This is because clericals who work with professionals, whether they are university professors or other professionals, gain a lot from that relationship in terms of their own identity. Thus they are more likely to consider unionization if the professionals with whom they work are supportive of their unionizing (or are at least understanding). The statistical results show that the strongest positive impact is the presence of AFT. The presence of an NEA faculty union has somewhat of an impact, but less strong; and the presence of an AAUP local has the weakest positive impact. The reason for this is that AFT is clearly integrated into the labor movement and much more likely to provide support to clerical organizing, NEA less so, and AAUP even less so.

Table 3
Environmental Factors Which Influence Organizing Success
Among Clericals in Higher Education*

Positive Impact

Public Sector Institution
State Unionization Level
Status of Institution
Presence of Faculty Union
AFT
NEA
AAUP

No Impact

Size of the University

Another important variable here is the status of an institution. Status has a very strong, positive impact on clerical workers' interest in unionization. Whether you're comparing one group of university clericals with another group of university clericals, or any group of clericals with any other group of clericals, those in higher status clerical positions are more likely to feel that they are not getting the respect that they deserve. It is more likely to be very noticeable to them, and they are more likely to turn toward unionization as a way to gain power and respect.

I would now like briefly to compare clericals to professionals. Professionals are most likely to unionize if they have not been able to get respect; if they are not treated as professionals. With clericals, the situation is very similar. The difference is that the higher the status of clericals, the more likely they are to be interested in unionization, because it is more likely that they will be aware that they should be treated like professionals. With professional workers, it tends to work the other way around. If they are treated with tremendous respect in their profession, it is less likely that they will seek unionization as a way to address their work-related problems.

There is some built-in conflict between professional and clerical workers in the union setting. It is similar to the conflict that the manufacturing unions have dealt with for years between their skilled and unskilled members. Professional and clerical workers in the same unit sometimes have serious difficulties. In one recent case in New Jersey, a group of public school secretaries voted to disaffiliate from NEA -- they were in the

* Source: Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Activity Among University Clerical Workers", Industrial Relations Research Association, Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Meeting, December 28-30, 1988, pp. 515-22.

same bargaining unit as the teachers, in the Matawan School District there -- and join PACE, which is an International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union division, because they were tired of being ignored. They said, "We don't even get to participate in negotiations; we want to be involved." So they split off from NEA. And NEA is not the only organization that can make that mistake. AFL-CIO unions that are primarily professional worker in their orientation also can make that mistake. It is very important to be aware that clericals have different problems; and they need respect, too, even if they are part of a union that includes professionals. Sometimes it is difficult because professionals may not want to be associated with clericals. There are many library units around the country, and in some of these there are splits between the professional and the clerical staff as to who should control the local. This is another issue that we have to keep in mind.

I will close by mentioning some different types of clerical workplaces and the kind of organizing potential that they have. I have divided them into four categories. One category, for mass production clerical work -- a sort of clerical sweatshop -- is the clerical workplace of the future. This kind of operation is very similar to blue collar work, with all its attendant problems. These workers are more likely to be attracted to traditional unionism, rather than clerical-professional style unionism, with a focus on wages, benefits and work rules. But there are real problems with organizing here, because this type of shop is the easiest to move. There is a real problem with job flight. Already there are booming clerical industries in Ireland and Barbados. U.S.-based financial and insurance firms are shipping out their clerical work to countries where wages are much lower and where the workers both speak English and have had a pretty good education. Workers in the mass production clerical sweatshops have serious problems, but organizing will be tough because job security is not very good there.

Another type of clerical situation involves those offices that are an adjunct to blue collar work, for example in factories, in the construction industry or in similar places. While there is much potential to organize here in stable or growth industries, there are real problems in trying to organize clerical workers in declining industries because of job security. However, there might be problems organizing these workers even in stable or growth industries because of the image of unions clericals hold and their desire to have their own union, rather than somehow being lost in a blue collar union. Separate units will probably be necessary. Government agencies at all levels still offer fertile organizing ground for clerical unions.

I think the area where there is the most short-run potential is among those clericals who work directly with professionals or management. Their jobs are more secure. They have higher prestige positions. They want to view themselves as professionals, but they are seldom treated that way. Here there is a really good opportunity to organize unions, and that is where we have seen a lot of success in recent years, including universities, law firms -- particularly law firms that work for unions -- libraries, the entertainment industry and its adjuncts, consulting and research firms and so on.

Ultimately, we must organize white collar workers. There are barriers, but there is also reason to be optimistic. On 70% of the campuses where there has been an organizing campaign in the past 20 years there is now a clerical union. This shows the

potential. The process will be slow, but we must be patient. We may have to change how we organize and how we defend workers. We will have to confront new barriers, but clerical and other white collar organizing offers great hope. We will continue to build on our successes in this area, and the labor movement will be stronger and more vibrant as a result.