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Kate Bronfenbrenner

Cornell University, klb23@cornell.edu

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Changing to Organize: Unions Know What Has To Be Done. Now They Have To Do It

Abstract

[Excerpt] Even leaving aside the unusual events of last year, it is clear that despite all the new initiatives and resources devoted to organizing and all the talk of “changing to organize,” American unions are at best standing still. They will need to organize millions, not hundreds of thousands, of workers each year if they are to reverse the tide and begin to regain their influence and power in American society.

Why is this so difficult? Why has it taken so long for new organizing initiatives to bear significant fruit? After spending the past fourteen years conducting a series of studies analyzing the factors contributing to union organizing success, I find the answers to these questions to be painfully obvious. Building capacity for organizing is one thing. Changing the structure, culture and strategy of the large, entrenched, democratic institutions that American unions have become is quite another.

Keywords

labor unions, organizing, elections, employer opposition

Disciplines

Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

Suggested Citation

Bronfenbrenner, K. (2001, September 3/10). Changing to organize: Unions know what has to be done. Now they have to do it [Electronic version]. *The Nation*, 17-19.

Required Publisher Statement

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'CHANGING TO ORGANIZE'

UNIONS KNOW WHAT HAS TO BE DONE. NOW THEY HAVE TO DO IT.

Kate Bronfenbrenner



On Labor Day 1995, for the first time in decades, the major media were filled with stories not about broken strikes and corrupt union leaders but about the promise and possibility of labor's revival. John Sweeney, Richard Trumka and Linda Chavez-Thompson had launched their campaign for leadership of the AFL-CIO pledging to organize on a massive scale, "to open up and reinvigorate the labor movement at every level." There was talk of building a national organizing fund, recruiting thousands of new young organizers and organizing millions of workers in new occupations and industries.

In the months following Sweeney's victory as the new AFL-CIO president, "changing to organize" became the mantra of a newly energized labor movement. For the first time, the federation had an organizing department, a director of organizing and an organizing fund to support large-scale, multi-union campaigns in key industries. The AFL-CIO also launched Union Summer, bringing in hundreds of college students to assist in a wave of new organizing campaigns.

These initiatives were not limited to the AFL-CIO. Across the country, local and national unions engaged in an aggressive effort to improve significantly their organizing capacity and success. This entailed shifting staff and financial resources into organizing, mobilizing leaders and members to support organizing campaigns, and developing and implementing more effective or-

ganizing strategies and tactics. By 1999 the combination of organizing victories and employment expansion in unionized industries resulted in a net gain of 265,000 union members, the first such gain in more than twenty years. The great American decline in union organizing seemed to have finally bottomed out.

But the good news was not to last. This past January, the government released union density figures for 2000 that once again told a story of decline. For last year was a presidential election year, and just as in the past, unions shifted enormous resources, including organizing staff, to the election campaign, leaving fewer staff and resources for organizing. Overall, organizing activity was down, and there were none of the massive victories that had dominated the 1999 organizing cycle. To make matters worse, in the last weeks of 2000 there was a series of plant closings and mass layoffs in unionized manufacturing and retail companies, raising the bar even higher if the number of newly organized workers was to offset those lost to the sudden downturn in the economy.

Even leaving aside the unusual events of last year, it is clear that despite all the new initiatives and resources devoted to organizing and all the talk of "changing to organize," American unions are at best standing still. They will need to organize millions, not hundreds of thousands, of workers each year if they are to reverse the tide and begin to regain their influence and power in American society.

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Kate Bronfenbrenner is the director of labor education research at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. She is the co-author and editor of several books on current labor issues, including Ravenswood: The Steelworkers' Victory and the Revival of American Labor and Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies (both Cornell).

tions that American unions have become is quite another.

Transforming the way unions operate is particularly hard at a time of escalating crisis and employer opposition. While labor has finally begun to regroup, the economic, political and legal climate has only grown more hostile. Each year, employer anti-union campaigns increase in intensity and effectiveness. Discharges for union activity, plant-closing threats, intimidation, harassment and surveillance have become routine elements of the organizing process, so much so that fewer than a third of those attempting to organize succeed in gaining representation under a collective bargaining agreement.



But it is too easy to blame employer opposition alone. American unions must shoulder a good portion of the responsibility for their organizing failures. The problem is not that the labor movement does not know what it takes to win. The problem is that the majority of unions organizing today still run weak, ineffectual campaigns that fail to build their strength for the long haul. They are not doing everything we know is necessary to succeed in the current climate of mobile capital, aggressive employer opposition and weak and poorly enforced labor laws.

There are no silver bullets, no simple formulas that guarantee union victory. Instead, as my research has shown, union success depends on using a multifaceted strategy including a broad range of union-building tactics: committing sufficient and appropriate staff and financial resources; using strategic research to select organizing targets and to increase bargaining leverage; emphasizing grassroots, person-to-person outreach and leadership development among the workers being organized; training and utilizing rank-and-file members as volunteer organizers; focusing on issues that resonate with the workers being organized and the broader community; building for the first contract during the organizing campaign; and engaging in escalating pressure tactics in the workplace and the community to foster commitment among the workers being organized and to deter employer opposition. The more comprehensive, aggressive and multifaceted the union strategy is during the organizing campaign, the more union-building strategies used, the more likely the union is to win.

There is no question that in the past five years more unions have begun to run aggressive campaigns. But for most, the shift toward a greater emphasis on organizing has been piecemeal. They have invested some money in organizing, recruited a few more organizers and added one or two new tactics to their arsenal. But they have not made the wholesale strategic, structural and cultural changes required to take on the diffuse, globally connected and extremely mobile corporate structures that dominate the American economic landscape today.

Nowhere are these deficiencies more evident than in the realm of choosing organizing targets. At a time when private-sector union density has dropped to 9 percent, unions can ill afford to waste precious time and resources on campaigns and targets that will not advance their long-term goals. Instead, they need to focus



their energies where they are most likely to win not just the election but also the first contract, and on the units that, once won, will have the greatest impact on strengthening their bargaining power in existing units. Unions that attempt to organize any type of worker in any industry with no regard to the union's bargaining leverage in the enterprise, community or industry risk seriously diluting their power, and the power of other unions, at a time when they most need to concentrate their power in any way they can.

This puts a special burden on unions in core sectors such as manufacturing, where win rates average as low as 30 percent and where employers are much more likely to engage in the most aggressive anti-union tactics such as discharging union supporters and making plant-closing threats. It is understandable that many industrial unions look longingly at the hotel and healthcare sectors, where win rates average as high as 60 percent and plant-closing threats and discharges for union activity are much less common. But as tempting as those service-sector targets may seem, it would be a grave mistake for industrial unions to give up on organizing in their primary industries—and for the AFL-CIO and service-sector affiliates to turn their backs on the struggle to organize in manufacturing. Sixty years ago, it was organizing in manufacturing that helped build the American labor movement and the American middle class. Today, manufacturing workers have felt the worst effects of globalization, both in declining job security and in deteriorating wages and working conditions. Absent intensive efforts to organize the nation's most mobile and global industries, working conditions will deteriorate even further. If manufacturing is not organized, there will be nothing to stop the race to the bottom in wages, benefits and working conditions for all organized and unorganized workers in all industries.



Even the country's more successful unions—including many operating in the service sector—cannot rest on their laurels. Despite their notable victories, they too have yet to organize on the scale necessary for labor's revival. Ironically, part of the problem may lie in their haste to expand their ranks. Too many of these unions, along with the AFL-CIO, have shifted resources into organizing, at the expense of funding for union education departments and programs. Thus, at the very time the labor movement most needs structural and cultural change, it is depleting the funds of the single most effective force for that change—membership and leadership education. Increasingly this has meant that the front-line work of organizing is being done by a flying squadron of new and inexperienced organizing hires, not by member volunteers or rank-and-file leaders within the unit being organized. Instead of building a union from the bottom up, these blitz campaigns often are little more than flash-in-the-pan mobilizations that fail to build the sense of ownership and commitment among the rank and file that is necessary to withstand the bosses' anti-union onslaught.

In addition, some organizing funds have been squandered on expensive public-opinion polling in a never-ending quest to deter-

mine which issues and which words receive the most positive response from unorganized workers. Not only has this been an enormous waste of resources that could be better directed toward actual organizing. It is also based on the false premise that the most effective efforts merely speak to workers where they are, rather than using education and action to move them to an understanding of what organizing a union is all about. The emphasis on polling also ignores the transformational process that triggers most organizing campaigns, when workers discover that there are some problems that can only be resolved through the independent collective voice and power that a union can bring.

Meanwhile, only a handful of unions are mounting the kind of comprehensive external pressure campaigns—targeting parent companies, investors, suppliers or customers in the United States and around the globe—that are required to win against the world’s largest and most powerful multinational employers. And where these external tactics are being used, they are too often carried out by staff from the international union or the AFL-CIO, completely divorced from the rank-and-file organizing campaign. This undermines the external pressure campaigns themselves as well as the rank-and-file ownership and empowerment essential to surviving daily assaults from anti-union employers.



THE MAJORITY OF UNIONS ORGANIZING TODAY STILL RUN WEAK, INEFFECTUAL CAMPAIGNS.

Exacerbating the situation is the persistent racial and gender gap separating union leaders and organizers from the workers being organized. It’s true that significant progress has recently been made in recruiting more women and people of color as organizers, but given the demographics of current and future union membership, the representation of women and people of color among union organizers, and especially among union leaders, remains woefully low. For more than ten years, the majority of newly organized workers have been women and people of color. But too many unions still see these new members simply as dues payers for the status quo, failing to grasp that they expect a seat at the table and a voice and power in the union.

The labor movement has made important gains in its effort at changing to organize. Unions are running and winning more campaigns, and winning them in larger units. But they still have a long way to go before they are organizing on the massive scale promised by the new leaders of the AFL-CIO six years ago. It won’t be easy. Not only do unions face ever more powerful external opposition from employers and government. There are serious internal obstacles as well—but these, at least, are within their control. The challenge is to move beyond a simple tactical effort to increase numbers, and to engage in the self-reflection and organizational change necessary to reverse the larger pattern of decline. Only then will labor be able to build a social movement powerful enough to take on global capital and win. ■