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New York State AFL-CIO Organizing Education Program

Abstract

New York State has long been hailed by the labor movement for its high union density and strong and active local labor unions. Yet, like their counterparts in other states, unions in New York State have watched their numbers and their power shrink precipitously in the last few decades under the onslaught of corporate "downsizing," plant closings, decertifications, broken strikes, and concession bargaining. At the same time, an increasingly hostile political climate, combined with rabidly anti-union employers and weak and poorly enforced labor laws, have made it more and more difficult for New York State unions to expand their membership through new organizing. In 1995, the New York State AFL-CIO began working with me, in my capacity as the Director of Labor Education Research at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, to design an education program for affiliated unions to turn around the membership trend.

Keywords

New York, AFL-CIO, labor movement, organizing, membership

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13

NEW YORK STATE AFL-CIO ORGANIZING EDUCATION PROGRAM

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New York State has long been hailed by the labor movement for its high union density and strong and active local labor unions. Yet, like their counterparts in other states, unions in New York State have watched their numbers and their power shrink precipitously in the last few decades under the onslaught of corporate "downsizing," plant closings, decertifications, broken strikes, and concession bargaining. At the same time, an increasingly hostile political climate, combined with rabidly anti-union employers and weak and poorly enforced labor laws, have made it more and more difficult for New York State unions to expand their membership through new organizing. In 1995, the New York State AFL-CIO began working with me, in my capacity as the Director of Labor Education Research at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, to design an education program for affiliated unions to turn around the membership trend.

The New York State AFL-CIO and Labor Education Research at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations

New York's extremely large and highly unionized state and local government workforce has bolstered the high union density for many years. Yet today, public sector unions too are faced with significant threats of job loss due to layoffs, privatization, and contracting out. They are also faced with a rapidly deteriorating bargaining climate as state and local government and public attitudes toward government workers have shifted dramatically to the right. From workfare to the school board association campaign for five-year tenure caps, these challenges are growing on every front. In addition, in the early 1990s, AFL-CIO public sector affiliates in the state were faced with one of the highest decertification rates in the country, primarily due to a combination of lackluster representation and poorly run incumbent union campaigns.

For the last few years, unions in New York State have been involved in, on average, fewer than 300 National Labor Relations Board certification elec-

tion campaigns and twenty-five public sector labor board certification and voluntary recognition campaigns each year. Most of the campaigns are concentrated in units with fewer than sixty eligible voters, and the private sector win rate is only approximately fifty percent. This means that fewer than 10,000 new workers in the state are organized each year in the public and private sector combined. Unions must organize at least five times that many workers to make up for the tens of thousands of unionized workers who lose their jobs each year, and they must organize at least ten times that many workers if the labor movement in the state of New York is to move forward and grow.

Ten years ago there were still many in the labor movement in this state who argued that without labor law reform, nothing could turn the tide on organizing. Instead, they suggested that unions should circle the wagons and focus increasingly scarce resources on servicing and bargaining for the steadily shrinking base of existing members. Today, however, few union leaders in the state would question that the very future of the labor movement depends on organizing on a massive scale, in New York State, and around the country.

In part this change in attitude has emerged from an increased understanding of political and economic forces threatening organized workers and attempts to expand their numbers. Cornell University's New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (NYSSILR) has produced some of the most important research on these issues for and about unions nationwide. This work is conducted in conjunction with both credit and non-credit labor courses offered by the school. In 1993, I was hired as director of Labor Education Research. Already well-recognized for my research and education programs on successful organizing and bargaining strategies, I was an accessible resource for the state federation's battle against union density decline.

Establishing the New York State Organizing Education Program

In the fall of 1995, on its own initiative, the New York State AFL-CIO offered a one-day organizing education program to their affiliates. Based on the interest and enthusiasm expressed by participants at the conference, Ed Cleary, president of the state AFL-CIO, and Denis Hughes, executive assistant to the president, asked me to work with them to set up an ongoing organizing education program for AFL-CIO affiliates in New York State. The stated purpose of the program was to facilitate and support organizing activity among AFL-CIO affiliates in the state with a primary target audience of local union officers, staff, and rank-and-file organizers.

The state federation agreed to underwrite the cost of program recruitment, curriculum design, materials development, instruction, and conference costs, while Cornell, under my direction, took responsibility for developing, promoting, coordinating, and implementing the program. Participant costs for attending the programs were limited solely to housing and meals. Not only

does this represent the first time the New York State AFL-CIO or, for that matter, any other state federation, has committed significant resources to organizing education, but in fact, it is the first time the New York State AFL-CIO has funded any kind of labor center-based statewide labor education program.

The program started in the summer of 1996 and in its first year included a one-day statewide conference on preventing and winning against decertification campaigns, three regional two-day introductory organizing trainings for local union staff and officers, a statewide two-day training on building an organizing local for local unions actively involved in organizing, a three-day rank-and-file volunteer organizer training, and a one-and-a-half-day statewide training for central labor council officers and staff focusing on facilitating organizing among their affiliates. I recruited a team of some of the most experienced and successful organizers in the state to assist with the training. For each of the regional programs, I worked closely with the Cornell labor extension faculty in that part of the state to facilitate recruitment and to put together a panel of rank-and-file organizing committee members.

More than 200 local leaders, staff, and rank-and-file activists from a broad range of public and private sector unions in the state attended these programs. Most of those participating had little, if any, organizing experience, and even among those local unions who had been actively involved in organizing, few had had any organizing success. Despite the lack of organizing experience, those attending the conference expressed a strong commitment to expanding or jump-starting organizing in their local unions.

In addition to organizing education conferences, the state federation also sponsored a survey of all affiliates of the state AFL-CIO to assess the organizing experience and organizing training needs of their local unions. The survey, which I developed and administered in the spring of 1996, assisted the state federation and Cornell ILR in designing an organizing education program that would best meet the needs of local unions in the state. Its results revealed that only a small percentage of unions in the state are actively involved in organizing. They typically allocate money and staff to (ultimately unsuccessful) "hot-shop" campaigns in very small units. Most are also running very traditional "top-down" campaigns without focusing on the rank-and-file leadership development and grass roots union-building strategies that are so critical to union success. Yet, nearly half of the respondents reported that lack of staff and officer training and experience had a negative impact on their organizing success. Most importantly, the majority expressed a clear interest in future organizing education programs.

The survey proved very useful both to document for the state federation the interest and need for further organizing education programs and to assess the most appropriate focus for the training curriculum. Although the original plan had included both beginning and advanced organizing training, the low level of organizing experience and skill found among program participants

and survey respondents convinced Cornell ILR to focus almost all of the programs on entry level organizers and "changing to organize" training.

Future Goals and Obstacles

Today, one year since its inception, the New York State Organizing Education Program can report considerable success. The evaluations from participants have been overwhelmingly positive with a significant amount of affirmation for the state AFL-CIO for their role in funding the program. There has also been great interest expressed in future programs in the areas of union first contract strategies, strategic targeting research, and more new organizer and rank-and-file volunteer organizer training.

Several elements contributed to these successes. The state federation responded to the labor center's argument that organizing education is critical to the revitalization of the labor movement in the state and that sponsoring and promoting organizing education is an appropriate role for a state federation. Second, together with the organizers and labor educators who assisted me, I have a proven track record in providing organizing education to union staff, officers, and rank-and-file activists. Third, local and regional unions, central labor bodies, and organizers across the state knew the parties involved in the training and trusted them to provide needed guidance and information. Finally, I and others expended the time and energy not just to coordinate the program but also recruit participants and involve local unions and labor councils in the process. None of this is easy. Fortunately, the New York State AFL-CIO officers have a strong commitment to promoting organizing in the state. Further, groups of organizers from the UAW, UNITE, SEIU and CWA readily agreed to volunteer their time to help teach in and promote the program.

The program still has a long way to go before it is a stable and permanent element of the state federation's commitments and initiatives. This was the first time they had ever spent significant funds on organizing education, and they have yet to make a long-term commitment to the program. Finally, a small program like this can only attain limited goals as many local union affiliates continue to resist investing the resources necessary to rebuild the labor movement in the state. For the over 200 union participants in the program to organize successfully, they need follow-up training, mentoring, and support from experienced organizers in their unions or other unions. They also need to gain both membership and leadership support for organizing, which is often a very difficult challenge.

It will take thousands, not hundreds, of trained rank-and-file and staff organizers for the labor movement in New York to reverse the decline in both their bargaining and political clout. The Organizing Education Program is an important first step in building those numbers in New York. Further, it presents a model which other university labor centers and state labor federations can

look to in their efforts to revitalize the labor movement in their states.

For more information on the New York State Organizing Education Program, contact:

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