Organizing High Tech: Unions & Their Future

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Abstract

[Excerpt] Statistics compiled by the American Electronics Association—a leading defender of high tech's "union-free environment"—indicate the difficulty unions have had organizing electronics workers. The AEA surveyed almost 1,200 firms about union activity in their plants between 1971 and 1982. They reported fewer than 100 NLRB representation elections during that period, with unions winning only 21.

These figures understate labor's problem. Through a sophisticated mixture of paternalism and repression, the high tech industry has prevented the vast majority of employee organizing efforts from reaching the stage of a Labor Board election. As a result, the AEA's 1900 member companies have only 90 union contracts.

In this article, we will examine the job problems facing high tech workers, the factors inhibiting union organizing in their industry, the experiences of some recent high tech campaigns, and strategies for overcoming the obstacles to worker self-organization in this crucial sector of the U.S. economy.

Keywords
union, labor movement, organizing, technical employees, professional employees

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On a cold, dark morning last winter, a union organizer we know was distributing leaflets outside a semi-conductor plant in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Like many non-union high technology manufacturing operations in the Merrimack Valley, this facility is located in an old textile mill. Seventy-five years ago, thousands of Lawrence mill workers waged one of the most militant strikes ever conducted by American workers. Now, when local high-tech workers call union organizers to complain about factory conditions, most are unwilling to identify themselves because they fear employer reprisals.

Our friend was at the plant gate that morning in response to this kind of anonymous call. He expected the usual looks of apprehension from the older workers, and an occasional glimmer of enthusiasm among the younger ones. But on this day, the organizer's presence elicited no response at all. As the workers trudged through the plant gate, they accepted his handbills without comment, not even looking at him or the material they received. An exception was one middle-aged woman who took a leaflet, walked on a few steps before looking at it, and then suddenly

* Steve Early and Rand Wilson are union organizers with experience in the high tech industry.
realized what it was. She turned and, with a genuine look of surprise on her face, asked, "You mean there are still unions?"

Some might find this a strange question. But, in the world of the high tech worker, it's not an unreasonable one. It reveals much about how organized labor is viewed today by the 2.5 million unorganized workers employed by electronics companies around the country. Working for any of these firms—Digital, Wang, Texas Instruments, National Semiconductor, or the grandfather of them all, IBM—one could easily get the idea that unions, like the dinosaurs, have disappeared.

Non-union high tech employers, from Boston's Route 128 to California's Silicon Valley, have been growing in size and importance while older manufacturing industries, with their heavily unionized blue-collar workforces, have declined. The country's major industrial unions have been unable to compensate for the resulting membership losses by organizing workers involved in the manufacture of micro-electronic components and finished products like word processors, computers, and other types of office and factory automation equipment. Even at unionized firms with long established bargaining units, unions have had little success expanding their membership to technical, computer and engineering personnel, sales and marketing employees, and other white-collar workers who represent an increasing percentage of the U.S. workforce.

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These figures underestimate labor's problem. Through a sophisticated mixture of paternalism and repression, the high tech industry has prevented the vast majority of employee organizing efforts from reaching the stage of a Labor Board election. As a result, the AEA's 1,900 member companies have only 90 union contracts.

In this article, we will examine the job problems facing high tech workers, the factors inhibiting union organizing in their industry, the experiences of some recent high tech campaigns, and strategies for overcoming the obstacles to worker self-organization in this crucial sector of the U.S. economy.
Why have organizing efforts fared so poorly? According to management, unionization is unpopular because high tech workers enjoy a dazzling array of fringe benefits, flexible work schedules, attractive workplaces, job security, opportunities for advancement, and competitive wages and salaries. The industry’s media hype has created the impression that everyone employed in high tech finds fulfillment in a Digital “Quality Circle,” spends lunch hours soaking in a hot tub at Rolm, or goes golfing after work at the Wang Country Club. The reality is usually quite different.

While salaries, benefits, and personnel practices are more favorable for many highly-skilled technical and professional employees, most production workers in high tech have the same problems as unorganized workers in any other industry. Average hourly wages are $2 to $5 less than those of workers in comparable unionized jobs.

All personnel practices are established unilaterally by management. Employees have no job rights or meaningful role in determining their wages, hours or conditions of work. Promotions, layoffs, and recalls do not have to be based on seniority or any other agreed upon formula.

Although many companies such as IBM, Digital, Control Data, and Texas Instruments have instituted grievance procedures, these almost never include provisions for worker representation or for resolution of problems, complaints, and discipline cases by a third party. Final authority rests with management. Experienced workers in non-union high tech plants often refer to these “open door” grievance mechanisms as an “out-the-door” procedure for workers who try to use them.

Electronics industry production workers rarely advance to more highly skilled jobs because job training and tuition-reimbursement programs are seldom available to them. These programs are generally administered with the proviso that training or outside course work must enhance and/or be relevant to the currently held position, ruling out most unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The lack of training opportunities and the absence of fair promotion systems based on seniority reinforces the segregation of women and minorities in dead-end jobs.

Many high tech companies claim to have “no layoff” policies. During their boom years, they gained a reputation for stable employment that made them attractive despite their relatively low wages. But now these firms have been unable to sustain their
promises. During the most recent sales slump, workforces have been reduced dramatically. Since January 1985, over 8,000 high tech workers in Massachusetts alone have been permanently laid off and another 22,000 have lost income because of temporary furloughs. Over 10,000 high tech workers also lost their jobs in Silicon Valley last year. Thousands of others there are working short weeks.4

Some companies like IBM utilize a substantial number of temporary production workers to avoid laying off their core workforce. Longtime Silicon Valley labor organizer Mike Eisenscher contends that the entire industry has been restructuring its workforce to create a pool of “temporary disposable workers.” While no data exist on the exact number of temporary employees utilized in high tech, Eisenscher notes that “Santa Clara County now has one of the largest concentrations of temporary work agencies in the nation, as more and more companies turn to the employment of temps rather than permanent workers.”5 It is standard practice for temps to be denied vacations, sick pay, health insurance and pension coverage. To become a permanent employee, they must survive two probation periods—one as a temp and another as a “new hire.” Their job insecurity (and the ever-present dangling carrot of promotion to permanent status if they behave) makes most temps reluctant to engage in organizing activity.

High tech has long claimed to provide safe jobs. But even this reputation has been tarnished as the industry’s hazards have become harder to conceal. Integrated circuit and electronic component manufacturing expose workers to highly toxic solvents and gases. In Massachusetts, two high tech employees have
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production is rapidly expanding.
In California, electronics workers
have an occupational illness rate
times that of the average
manufacturing worker. High
tech workers and the
unions assisting them have found
it hard to build successful
unionization campaigns based on
these health and safety hazards
because anti-unionism and
'union prevention' are built into
the structure of personnel
practices at most high tech firms. The industry employs an army
of 'personnel representatives' whose objective is to convince
employees that their job conditions are better than those of other
workers, and that solutions to any problems are best sought on
an individual basis. Companies promote themselves not just as
places to work, but as vehicles for personal growth and fulfillment.
Employee participation schemes are common. In small group
meetings attended by supervisors and representatives of top
management or the company's 'Human Resource' department,
employees are encouraged to discuss work-related problems, and personnel practices. However,
should anyone raise fundamental issues like determination of pay
levels or procedures for promotions, they run the risk of being
eliminated from future meetings or causing the group to be
disbanded. In some instances, team or circle leaders use these
discussions to identify pro-union members or other
'troublemakers' and isolate them from co-workers.
The organization of production itself also isolates and divides
workers from each other in high tech. As Mike Eisenscher notes,
'Unlike auto factories, steel mills, and other basic manufacturing
facilities, semiconductor and computer manufacturing plants
generally do not have large numbers of employees performing
functions on an integrated assembly line or manufacturing
process.' The work is done in small units, within departments
ranging in size from only 6 to 30 workers. Jobs are also
compartmentalized and closely supervised, with the ratio of
supervisors to workers often running 1 to 5 or 10. Within
individual plants, workers often have little contact with others
outside their own small group. Plant size is kept small, and
HIGH TECH

products are manufactured in a cluster of separate plants that may be miles apart. Many companies require some employees to work for the standard 8-hour day, five days a week, while others work four 10-hour days or three 12-hour shifts. Shifts are often staggered so that only a portion of the workforce comes and goes into the plant at any one time. Such arrangements and the use of temporary, part-time and “weekend-only” workers make it difficult for workers to maintain contact and to forge the unity necessary for a successful unionization campaign.11

The last and most pervasive high tech myth is that paternalism, not repression, is responsible for the industry’s union-free environment. However, even the most cursory examination of employer responses to union organizing in Silicon Valley confirms that high tech managers do not hesitate to harass, fire and blacklist large numbers of union supporters to disrupt organizing efforts. A chronological account of recruitment drives conducted by the United Electrical Workers (UE) between 1971 and 1984 involving workers at more than 10 Santa Clara County firms reveals that most UE activity never made it to the NLRB election stage because of intensive surveillance, threats, discriminatory discharges, and other illegal employer conduct.12 Other industrial unions in the Silicon Valley and on Massachusetts’ Route 128 have had similar experiences.

The Failure of Single-Plant Campaigns

Organizing drives involving production workers in large high tech plants have been few and far between. In the early to mid-1970s, most campaigns by the UE and other unions in Silicon Valley that did go all the way to representation elections were in shops with 200 workers or less. Firms such as National Semiconductor, with much larger manufacturing workforces, were targeted for shopfloor campaigns as part of the UE’s industry-wide Electronics Organizing Committee (which is described in the next section). But the UE’s Silicon Valley recruitment efforts had a multi-employer, rather than a single-employer, focus and did not ultimately succeed or fail based on the response in any one workplace.

The more traditional union approach of concentrating on only one potential bargaining unit has proven to be spectacularly unsuccessful in plants of 500 workers or more. The defeat of the Glaziers 1982-83 campaign at Atari in Silicon Valley and of CWA’s drive during the same period at Wavetek in Indianapolis, illustrates why. And a short-lived AFL-CIO effort to organize workers in high tech companies in Massachusetts’ Route 128 illustrates the limitations of “new approach objectives in the current climate.” The tragically muddled and disorganized “hot shop” fashion when so many workers operated video games division of lay-offs by visiting the new assembly line, the result of lay-offs by visiting the new United Press International wire. The outcome would probably not have been different had the short-lived AFL-CIO drive proceeded in the same fashion, with workers rather than the typically random choices of card-signing to secure a binding vote. The experience in the facilities might have to be in the united. To make matters worse, troubles and successive work stoppages in assembly operations over the years coupled with the random choices of workers and union organizers have contributed to the resulting failure of single-plant campaigns.
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Plant Campaigns

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why. And a short-lived AFL-CIO coordinated campaign directed
at high tech companies in Massachusetts likewise demonstrates
the limitations of “new approaches” to achieving traditional
objectives in the current climate.

The tragically muddled and ill-timed Atari campaign began in
“hot shop” fashion when some workers in the company’s coin-
operated video games division reacted to wage cuts and rumors
of lay-offs by visiting the nearest union they could find— Local
1621 of the Glaziers, Architectural Metal, and Glass Workers. The
outcome would probably not have been much different if a more
experienced industrial union had been involved, if the latter had
proceeded in the same fashion as the Glaziers did, but the Atari
workers’ rather random choice of a small craft union to assist them
contributed to the resulting fiasco.

Card-signing to secure a representation election began
immediately, despite the fact that Local 1621 had no broad-based
in-plant committee at Atari and little clarity about how many
workers in a number of separate-but-related manufacturing
facilities might have to be included in any proposed bargaining
unit. To make matters worse, Atari was soon rocked by financial
troubles and successive workforce reductions caused by its shifting
of assembly operations overseas. Up to 2,500 jobs were eliminated,
including many within the scope of the union’s organizing activity. The Glaziers’ two initial attempts to file for an NLRB election were rejected by the Board on the grounds that an appropriate Atari bargaining unit contained hundreds more workers than the union thought and that the union had not met the minimum legal requirement of signing up 30% of them.

By the time Local 1621 finally got an election, more than a year later, it involved fewer than 200 workers. This was only a small part of the workforce it had originally tried to organize. The survivors who voted—most of them company loyalists—were very hostile to the union. They rejected collective bargaining by 143 to 29. The campaign ended in confusion about whether the attempt at unionization was a valid response to the job insecurity of Atari workers or was, instead, the reason for the company’s decision to relocate its manufacturing operations to Asia! Embarrassed by the lopsided defeat, “a number of top AFL-CIO officials minimize[d] the significance of the Atari vote,” according to a Washington Post report. They condemned the organizing effort as “ill-conceived, too little, too soon, and as one put it ‘not typical of what we can achieve.’”

A far more carefully planned and well executed high tech campaign by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in Indianapolis during the same period employed atypical union organizing methods. But it still showed the limits of a single-plant approach against a determined, flexible and well-financed foe.

CWA’s campaign at Wavetek, a completely non-union company which manufactures electronic test and measurement equipment for other high tech firms, was jointly conducted by the union’s national organizing department and a large telephone workers’ local with a record of successful small shop organizing in the telecommunications industry. Wavetek’s 1,000-worker plant was targeted after the union did considerable research to evaluate the company’s financial situation, its investment plans, and whether or not it would be able to shift production elsewhere in response to union organizing and a strike for a first contract. At the same time, CWA organizers and local union members developed contacts inside the plant to find out more about conditions and assess whether there were sufficient job problems to fuel a successful campaign.

The union’s drive was based on the UE model of “strategic organizing,” rather than a traditional “hot-shop” campaign.13 The plan was not simply to get an NLRB election. It was to build a strong in-plant committee, recruit and train rank-and-file leadership for it, organize around shopfloor issues, and delay card-signing until majority support through mini-campaigns. It struggles, management would concede in response to won the efficacy of collective action demonstrate the need for col CWA succeeded in carrying months of escalating conflict management. But Wavetek’s a force and intensity usually re immediately preceding an NL installed around the plant messages, Big Brother style. A anti-union employees was given pro-union workers. [This grou union’s campaign office acr Supervisors distributed reams captive audience speeches, hc with workers, and assisted the anti-union newsletter to count publication.

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signing until majority support for unionization had been developed
through mini-campaigns. In these issue-oriented shopfloor
struggles, management would either be forced to make
concessions in response to worker activity (thereby demonstrating
the efficacy of collective action) or, by its refusal to act, would
demonstrate the need for collective bargaining.

CWA succeeded in carrying out its plan in the course of 18
months of escalating conflict between union supporters and
management. But Wavetek’s anti-union campaign was waged with
a force and intensity usually reserved by employers for the period
immediately preceding an NLRB vote. Huge video screens were
installed around the plant to broadcast regular anti-union
messages, Big Brother style. A management-backed committee
of anti-union employees was given free reign to intimidate and harass
pro-union workers. (This group also picketed and vandalized the
union’s campaign office across the street from the plant).
Supervisors distributed reams of anti-CWA propaganda, delivered
captive audience speeches, held extensive one-on-one meetings
with workers, and assisted the “No Committee” in publishing an
anti-union newsletter to counter the union’s own rank-and-file
publication.

In response to CWA-backed agitation, Wavetek instituted more
than 25 specific changes or improvements in its personnel
practices. What killed the union drive, however, was not kindness.
It was three successive layoffs of production workers which
permanently reduced the plant’s workforce by one-third,
decimated the ranks of the CWA organizing committee, and
reduced the number of card-signers from a near majority to less
than 30%. As a CWA organizer later recounted:

Each layoff resulted in mass transfers between departments,
causing widespread fear and uncertainty. Departments that
had a great deal of union support were eliminated. Anti-
union workers on the other hand, were promoted to new
classifications to avoid laying them off. Management
redesigned the plant, putting up dividers and moving aisles,
to limit contact between the remaining union supporters and
non-union workers. The best committee people left were put
totally by themselves so they couldn’t talk to anyone.

While these moves created great havoc for CWA, they did not
apparently have much impact on Wavetek’s business. Its overall
sales remained steady and the plant’s output was maintained
through rapid automation, subcontracting of work, and extensive
overtime. In addition, the layoffs resulted in a major change in
the composition of the workforce. At the start of the campaign, there was a 3 to 1 ratio of assemblers to technicians. (The latter tended to have two-year degrees, white-collar pretensions, and little interest in the union.) After the layoffs, the ratio was 1 1/2 to 1.

CWA's support was thus fatally eroded among assemblers and it could only count on a small minority of technicians. The union decided to close its campaign office, gradually withdrew its two organizers, and left it to the local union to maintain contact with the fragile rank-and-file network that remained. Unlike the Glaziers at Atari, CWA believed it was better to acknowledge a setback in this manner than press ahead to certain defeat in an NLRB election.

At both Atari and Wavetek, workers of a single employer were mobilized in isolation from any larger movement of high tech workers because no other such organizing activity was going on. As a result, they alone bore the full brunt of a concentrated management assault. The AFL-CIO's New England High Tech Organizing Campaign was an attempt to pool union resources, carefully select targets, coordinate organizing work and focus activity in the same geographical area so that several separate but simultaneous campaigns would mutually reinforce each other.

To this end, five unions—CWA, IAM, UAW, IUE, and ACTWU—established and jointly funded a committee of organizers chaired by AFL-CIO regional and national staff members.

An economist was hired to produce detailed research on the high tech industry in Massachusetts and on many individual firms as the basis for the group's targeting decisions. An area north of Boston was selected where the participating unions already have a substantial concentration of members and where there is a large number of non-union high tech plants with 500 to 1,000 workers.

After studying over 100 companies in the area, the organizers and staff targeted 13 firms. The committee then retained a professional pollster to determine employee attitudes towards unionization at these firms. A telephone survey of more than 300 workers was conducted. The survey explored attitudes towards management, views on unions, and specific job-related concerns. The results confirmed what some organizers already knew: organized labor was not well regarded. Among the production workers, 48% expressed a "low opinion" of labor unions, including 19% who had a "very low opinion." (Meanwhile, only 32% had a "high opinion" of unions and only 5% a "very high opinion.") An even larger number, 67%, did not believe they would be better off if they belonged to a union, compared to 28% who felt that they would be. Only 25% of those polled said they would vote to organize their firm.

Chastened by these results, the target firms in mid-1983, went about their work in trac to initiate its own individual campaigns, but there were programs aimed at workers: calls were made, some small union did further polling. But Unable to engage workers directed toward representatio were unwilling or unable developing in-plant contacts a workers fight for job improve the beginning of 1984, the con meeting.

Strategic and Industry

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polls said they would vote for a union if one attempted to organize their firm. Chastened by these results, the participating unions divided up the target firms in mid-1983. Thereafter, however, the organizers went about their work in traditional fashion. Each union was left to initiate its own individual in-plant contacts, committees and campaigns, but there were no area-wide or industry-wide programs aimed at workers in all the target firms. A few house calls were made, some small group meetings were held, and one union did further polling. But not a single campaign was launched. Unable to engage workers in traditional organizing activity directed toward representation elections, the participating unions were unwilling or unable to devise alternate strategies for developing in-plant contacts and leadership and helping high tech workers fight for job improvements short of a union contract. By the beginning of 1984, the committee of organizers was no longer meeting.

Strategic and Industry-Wide Organizing Initiatives

The odds against success in single-plant high tech campaigns conducted by unions individually or jointly have led some organizers to promote workplace activity and forms of organization which do not have a short-term election focus. The workers involved have been employed in Silicon Valley, the Boston area, and in the belly of “Big Blue” itself, IBM. This effort parallels the approach of clerical organizers in the “Working Women” or “9 to 5” movement around the country. The underlying assumption is that there are few workplaces where majority support for unionization can be developed at present. But there are many job problems that workers can be encouraged to organize around as part of a looser “pre-union” network. Collective struggles over such issues can be used to identify and train rank-and-file leaders and to develop the group consciousness necessary to move on to formal unionization campaigns.

The UE’s decision in 1974 to create a Silicon Valley Electronics Organizing Committee (EOC) reflected this longer-term strategy. For most of the ten years of its existence, the EOC was assisted by only one full-time union staffer (who frequently had other duties). The major part of its activity was conducted by a dedicated network of rank-and-file volunteers who worked at large semiconductor firms like National Semiconductor, Intel, Fairchild and Signetics. The EOC operated with a small budget but a structure that included elected leaders, formal membership and nominal
Mike Eisenscher spent a decade trying to organize high tech workers in Silicon Valley for the United Electrical Workers (UE). Mike has produced many valuable reports and proposals based on his experience. See the notes at the end of this article, particularly Note # 7.

dues. To protect its activists from management retaliation, the UE initially encouraged most workers involved to keep their membership secret. When thousands of copies of the EOC newsletter, The Union Voice, were distributed throughout the Valley, workers would hand them out at plants other than their own to avoid identification by their employers.

Within firms like National Semiconductor, committee supporters were eventually able to surface in sufficient numbers to lead sometimes successful campaigns for cost-of-living raises, job security protection, improved safety and health conditions, and an end to racial discrimination in job assignments and promotions. They responded to management-initiated "Quality Circles" just like "colonizers" for industrial unions did in the 1930's; they tried to take them over to expose their limitations as vehicles for genuine worker participation and representation. To recruit Filipino and other immigrant workers, the committee worked closely with community organizations concerned about harassment by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.14

The UE's ability to sustain this level of activity was limited by scarce resources. When Mike Eisenscher, the organizer responsible for assisting the EOC, took a leave of absence in 1984, he was not replaced. Meanwhile, management repression took a heavy toll.

According to Eisenscher: "mu fired between 1981 and 1983. any protection compelled some seek work elsewhere and the kept some from remaining in t had to seek jobs outside the in the Valley."

A joint effort by the UE and High Tech Workers Network (HTWN) had a shorter life-span and enc the union organizers involved in its period of peak activity, the model to the dead-end approac tech campaign described earlier tried to help workers win job-r whether there was enough su their workplace.

Network supporters noted a survey of Massachusetts high union sentiment, more than 55% can have enough clout with the as a group. The Network was for group activity that would with performance reviews, promotional opportunities, as programs. In practice, the Net group and newsletter producti workplace contacts and corres on personnel practices and pr The High Tech Workers Moni like Digital, Wang, Honeyw Network supporters remained their jobs to organize and lead: the act of handing out the dismissal as one Network sta companies. (The NLRB secure employers who fired her, but t had already been done, and rei While both the EOC and t workers together from a numb old workers committee origin manufac
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According to Eisenscher: "much of (the EOC's) leadership was fired between 1981 and 1983. The failure of the NLRB to provide any protection compelled some of the most committed leaders to seek work elsewhere and the operation of an industry 'blacklist' kept some from remaining in the industry at all. They ultimately had to seek jobs outside the industry and, in some cases, outside the Valley."12

A joint effort by the UE and CWA to foster an industry-wide High Tech Workers Network (HTWN) in Massachusetts in 1982-84 had a shorter life-span and encountered similar difficulties when the union organizers involved were laid off or reassigned. During its period of peak activity, the Network offered an alternative model to the dead-end approach of the multi-union AFL-CIO high tech campaign described earlier. Like the UE's EOC, the Network tried to help workers win job-related improvements regardless of whether there was enough support for collective bargaining in their workplace.

Network supporters noted that while the AFL-CIO's opinion survey of Massachusetts high tech workers showed much anti-union sentiment, more than 55% felt "that the only way employees can have enough clout with their company is by banding together as a group." The Network was projected as a personal support group and newsletter production and distribution committee. Its workplace contacts and correspondents contributed lively reports on personnel practices and problems throughout the industry to The High Tech Workers Monitor, which was circulated at firms like Digital, Wang, Honeywell, and smaller companies. But the Network supporters remained too isolated and insecure about their jobs to organize and lead significant workplace activity. Even the act of handing out the Monitor could lead to summary dismissal as one Network stalwart discovered at two different companies. (The NLRB secured a back-pay settlement from both employers who fired her, but the damage to Network organizing had already been done, and reinstatement was not a viable option.)

While both the EOC and the HTWN succeeded in bringing workers together from a number of high tech firms, no pre-union organization has been more persistent in networking within a single firm than the IBM Workers United (IBM WU), a nine-year-old workers committee originating at the computer giant's main manufacturing plant in Endicott, N.Y. IBM is the most aggressive
and successful anti-union high tech firm in the world. In the U.S., none of its 200,000-plus employees are represented by a union, and even in heavily unionized Western European countries it has been able to minimize union membership. Amazingly enough, IBM WU has operated without outside union assistance. On its own, it has made contacts with workers in other plants (including some who belong to an organization of dissident black employees at IBM) and has sent representatives to international conferences involving IBM employee organizations abroad.

In the 10,000-worker Endicott plant the group publishes an "underground" newsletter called The Resistor. Until recently, IBM WU leaders had to operate secretly, never revealing their identity in the plant or local community. Through The Resistor and with the help of community allies, they have waged on-going publicity campaigns against favoritism, unsafe job conditions, IBM’s dumping of toxic wastes, the company’s sale of computers to South Africa, and other timely issues. The survival of IBM WU is a testament to the patience, perseverance, courage and imagination of its leaders. But the group's small size and its understandable reluctance to be identified with any national union in the anti-union environment in which it operates makes it a slender reed on which to base large-scale unionization campaigns at IBM or the rest of the high tech industry.

The Community-Labor Alternative

To many observers, the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work's report, *The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions*, signaled a new commitment by the labor movement to develop alternative forms of union membership and new recruitment techniques that might be applicable to high tech. So far, however, there are few signs that either the traditional or non-traditional organizing described in this article will receive more institutional backing than it has in the past.

For understandable (but nevertheless shortsighted) reasons, America's industrial unions prefer to invest only in organizing campaigns that are quicker, easier to win, and able to produce dues-paying members in formal collective bargaining units. This, of course, usually requires forays into the public sector, competition with other AFL-CIO unions, and affiliation with or raids on independent employee organizations, instead of organizing the unorganized! No union—large or small, progressive or conservative, acting alone or in concert with others—has been willing or able to provide consistent support for efforts to organize high tech targets that do not membership gains.

As a result, organized labor has the field in high tech. And the high tech targets that do not. Membership gains. The community-labor alternative.

Trying to fill this enormous vacuum in the high tech industry are without even the committees and networks that and coordinate labor resistance. Organized at a national meeting the name Integrated Circuit, the Integrated Circuit is continuing the fight for protection, occupational safety, corporate social responsibility, trying to link labor and community groups, organizations, labor educators, trying to organize places around the country in the high tech development in California like North Carolina's "Research Corridor" and Colorado's "Silicon Mountain."
As a result, organized labor has—for the time being—abandoned the field in high tech. And the hundreds of thousands of workers who toil in the often oppressive "union-free environment" of the industry are without even the minimal union-backed workplace committees and networks that once existed to nurture, publicize and coordinate labor resistance from within.

Trying to fill this enormous vacuum, is a loose coalition drawn from community, peace, and environmental groups, local coalitions on occupational safety and health, independent research organizations, labor education programs, and union staffers. Organized at a national meeting in May 1985 and operating under the name Integrated Circuit, this alliance of high tech industry critics is continuing the fight for workers' rights, environmental protection, occupational safety and health, and increased corporate social responsibility. Integrated Circuit members are trying to link labor and community concerns in a growing number of places around the country—from the "older" centers of high tech development in California and Massachusetts to newer ones like North Carolina's "Research Triangle," Texas' "Silicon Prairie," Colorado's "Silicon Mountain," Oregon's "Silicon Forest," and high tech targets that do not offer the prospect of immediate membership gains.

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Michigan's "Automation Alley."  

- In California, Integrated Circuit affiliates such as the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition have mobilized public opposition to toxic waste dumping and environmental law violations by electronics firms.

- The COSH groups in Santa Clara County and Massachusetts are keeping the pressure on government agencies responsible for enforcing health standards and exposure limits in firms utilizing the wide range of hazardous chemicals found in the industry. MassCOSH is doing education and outreach among unorganized high tech workers to inform them about provisions of the state's new “right to know” law. Santa Clara COSH has helped form an organization of disabled electronics workers, called the Chemically Disabled Workers Group, which is fighting for workers' compensation reform and creation of a workers' clinic in Silicon Valley to deal with the epidemic of job-related illnesses now being reported there.

- Public interest research and advocacy groups like the Pacific Studies Center and the Massachusetts High Tech Research Group are challenging industry propaganda with reports on the negative impact of high tech lobbying against progressive taxation, protective labor legislation, and environmental regulation.

- High Tech Professionals for Peace and the Center for Economic Conversion—two Integrated Circuit affiliates opposed to the nuclear arms race—are conducting education campaigns against the increased “militarization of high tech” caused by President Reagan's military build-up.

- On the local level, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Lawrence Area Strategy For Employment Rights (LASER) is organizing union members, unorganized workers, community groups, churches and public officials to confront electronics companies over their minority hiring policies, plant closings and lay-offs, and abuse of government incentives for industrial development such as low-interest loans, industrial revenue bonds and property tax breaks.

The network of individuals and organizations in Integrated Circuit is also united in the effort to “increase the commitment of labor to providing the funds, resources, staff and publicity to organizing efforts in high tech, leading to a major commitment for the organization of the entire industry.”  

Integrated Circuit organizers argue that unions could begin providing this assistance on a low-cost basis in three crucial areas:

1) **Services to Non-Union High Tech Workers.** The experience of the EOC and the HTWN demonstrate the importance of labor-backed initiatives that can disseminate information, link workers

in different workgroup such as necessary for future development of high tech. Workers Organizing Committee is at the core of this effort.

2) **Developing Local High Tech Workers.** The organizations developing local workers are a critical part of organizing efforts in high tech. Unions can provide assistance to these programs in various ways. This includes financial assistance for organizing campaigns and providing support for local unions working with high tech firms.

3) **Confronting Opposition, and the Third World.** Unions can play a critical role in confronting opposition to organizing efforts from firms and industry representatives. Unions can also help to address other issues related to organizing efforts.

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in different workplaces, provide them with legal advice and organizing training, and develop the rank-and-file leadership necessary for future organizing campaigns. A detailed proposal, developed by Mike Eisenscher, outlines how these functions could be performed once again in Silicon Valley by a new “Electronics Workers Organizing and Service Center” launched with modest union funding.31 Elsewhere, expanded use of sympathetic labor education programs, COSH groups, legal service programs, community-based immigrant rights organizations, and existing local unions would enable the labor movement to reach out to high tech workers on a more systematic basis and provide them with the support they need for individual and group struggles against their employers. If the “associate member” benefit programs recommended by the AFL-CIO’s Evolution of Work Committee are actually implemented, high tech workers should be a primary market for them.

2) Development of Community-Labor Coalitions Dealing with Local High Tech Industry Problems. Even without a base of dues-paying members in high tech, individual unions and central labor bodies could play a more active role in opposing the industry’s political and economic dominance in many communities. Union members in other industries and the public sector, their families and fellow citizens are all adversely affected by industrial development strategies that favor high tech at the expense of state treasuries, local tax bases, the environment, and unorganized workers. The LASER model of a local watch-dog organization which stimulates discussion about such economic development and employment issues should be duplicated—with greater union involvement—in other communities.

3) Confronting the High Tech Industry in Politics, Public Opinion, and the Legislative Arena. At the state level, high tech firms are increasingly influential opponents of union-sponsored legislation dealing with plant closings, right-to-know, VDT protection, workers’ compensation, unemployment benefits, and other issues. In their very effective lobbying, industry representatives invariably purport to speak for everyone in high tech—owners, managers, and workers! The industry’s economic and political outlook is reflected in the “new ideas” of the growing “neo-liberal” wing of the Democratic Party, which has benefited greatly from high tech campaign contributions (many of which also go to more conservative Democrats and Republicans). This “neo-liberal” tendency is increasingly identified with criticism and repudiation of the labor movement as the voice of organized and unorganized workers. It enthusiastically promotes the “flexible,”
“competitive,” and supposedly “more productive” (i.e. union-free) environment of high tech. Organized labor’s viability as an effective champion of the interests of its own members and unrepresented workers in high tech and other industries requires it to take a more active role in challenging the industry’s political agenda. Labor’s ability to organize credible challenges to management control in high tech workplaces would be greatly enhanced by any resulting changes in public consciousness about the industry’s social role.

Conclusion

If the labor movement fails to undertake new initiatives of the sort outlined above, it does so at its own peril. Organizational in-roads in high tech will not be made spontaneously in the current environment. And waiting for further industry “shake-outs” or some larger economic crisis to create more favorable conditions does not facilitate the preparatory work that must be done now to enable unions to take advantage of new opportunities in the future. High tech’s future will most certainly be as “union-free” as its past if education, agitation and organization are not resumed on a far wider scale.

Whatever Happened to Job Security is available from the High Tech Research Group, P.O. Box 441001, West Somerville, MA 02144.

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Notes

1 Between 1980 and 1984, 1.5 million unionized manufacturing jobs were lost while more than 600,000 non-union jobs were created. See “Unionization in Industry,” Economic Notes, October 1985.


4 “Silicon Valley: A Digest of Electronics Data” by Mike Eisenscher, August 1984. The most detailed union research on wages in the high tech industry has been by economist James Parrott, now on the staff of the ILGWU, 1710 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.


7 “Prospectives for Organizing High Tech Industry,” an unpublished paper by former UE Organizer Mike Eisenscher, who now works as a union consultant in Silicon Valley. Available from Eisenscher at 138 South 20th St., San Jose, CA 95116


10 “Prospectives for Organizing,” Eisenscher, p. 6.


12 “Outline History of the U.E. Electronics Organizing Committee in Silicon Valley,” compiled by Mike Eisenscher in early 1985. [Available from Eisenscher at address in note #7].

13 See “Strategic Organizing” by former UE staff member Peter Brandon, an unpublished organizing guide based on the UE’s experiences in a successful long-term campaign at a GE plant in Charleston, SC.


15 “Prospectives for Organizing,” Eisenscher, p. 6.

16 “Sounds of Worker Resistance Are Heard From IBM’s Anti-Union Empire,” by “Maguire,” Labor Notes, March 22, 1984. “Maguire” was the pseudonym of IBM Workers United founder and organizer Lee Conrad. The group can be contacted at PO Box 634, Johnson City, NY 13790.

17 Another legitimate consideration is a union’s ability to obtain a first contract after winning an NLRB election. See Union Organizing and Public Policy: Failure to Secure First Contracts, by William N. Cooke (Upjohn Institute, 1985).

18 For a detailed discussion of the growth of the high tech industry nationwide, see The High Cost of High Tech: The Dark Side of the Chip, by Lenny Siegel and John Markoff (Harper & Row/Bessie Books, 1985).

19 See description of LASER, and related materials, prepared by the CWA and ACTWU organizers who helped start the group. Available from Rand Wilson, 44 Foskett St. Somerville, MA 02144.

20 For more information contact Integrated Circuit. West Coast Committee, 138 South 20th St., San Jose, CA 95116; or East Coast Committee, P.O. Box 1342, Brookline, MA 02146.

21 See “Silicon Valley High Tech Industry: Ready For Organizing,” a July 1985 “discussion paper for unions” prepared by Mike Eisenscher. [Available from him at the address in note #7]