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ACTWU at Cannon Mills: It's Not Over

Paul Filson
ACTWU at Cannon Mills: It's Not Over

Abstract

[Excerpt] October 10, 1985, was a day of reckoning for a remarkable organizing campaign. On that day nearly 10,000 North Carolina textile workers cast their ballots on whether they wanted to be represented by the Amalgamated Clothing Textile & Workers Union (ACTWU). 10:30 that night, inside the gates of Plant 1, the heart of the Cannon Mills Company, the 150 union supporters who had been permitted to witness the vote count heard the results. For five solid minutes there was a deafening cheer and chants of "union, union, union." The huge press contingent outside the gates was convinced the union had won. The numbers, however, gave the union 37% and the company 63% of the vote.

Looking at the Cannon organizing drive analytically, it is easier to see why there was reason to cheer when the vote tally was announced. Over 3,500 workers in one of the most viciously anti-union states in the country voted union. In spite of what has to be one of the most expensive and intense anti-union campaigns ever, in the midst of hundreds of plant closings and a textile import crisis, 3,500 workers were not scared away from voting for the union and voting their convictions. There is no doubt in my mind that these workers represent a solid core for future organizing in the South.

Looking to the future, the campaign brought to light techniques and strategies which can be used again and may help unions win organizing campaigns in the 1980s. Though times may look bleak for industrial union organizing, there is reason for optimism. The Cannon campaign touched the lives of many more thousands of people than actually voted. Now, when workers in the Charlotte, N.C., area have problems on the job, they will look to organizing unions as an alternative and ACTWU as a union that can help.

Keywords

North Carolina, ACTWU, Cannon Mills Company, union organizing

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October 10, 1985, was a day of reckoning for a remarkable organizing campaign. On that day nearly 10,000 North Carolina textile workers cast their ballots on whether they wanted to be represented by the Amalgamated Clothing Textile & Workers Union (ACTWU). 10:30 that night, inside the gates of Plant 1, the heart of the Cannon Mills Company, the 150 union supporters who had been permitted to witness the vote count heard the results. For five solid minutes there was a deafening cheer and chants of "union, union, union." The huge press contingent outside the gates was convinced the union had won. The numbers, however, gave the union 37% and the company 63% of the vote.

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The Cannon Mills

Cannon Mills, the world's largest producer of towels, takes raw cotton and synthetic fibers and turns them into finished and packaged towels and sheets. The mills were founded by Charles Cannon Sr. nearly 100 years ago in Cabarrus County, North Carolina. As the mills grew, a company town formed around the factory—Kannapolis, population now about 37,000. By the 1970s there were more than 16,000 workers at Cannon. The centerpiece of the Cannon empire is Plant 1, with more than 7,500 workers today, down from over 10,000 in the 1970s. The union campaign encompassed 9 plants, all within 25 miles of Kannapolis.

Until recently the company was a publicly held corporation controlled by the Cannon family. Most workers who worked in the mills were born, educated, employed and died in Kannapolis, the company town. The police and fire departments, the schools, the YMCA, the churches, the water and electricity were all controlled by the Cannons. People in Cabarrus County are taught to respect authority and hate unions. People in Kannapolis now look back in fondness to the days, 10 years ago, when the mills and the town were still owned by Charlie Cannon.

In 1982 Cannon Mills was bought and taken private in a leveraged buyout by David Murdock. Murdock, a real estate mogul from California, bought not only a manufacturing operation, but the whole town that came with it. The purchase price was about $400 million. If Charlie Cannon was the benevolent dictator, Murdock soon came to represent the odious despot. His first moves at Cannon involved speeding up the pace of work, cutting rates of pay, and laying off hundreds of workers at a time.

By 1984 the heads of Cannon workers were spinning from the changes. Murdock had promised in 1982 that there would be no major changes. Yet he was now selling off the mill houses, perpetually laying down fac closing down fac Wages at Cann per hour. The pa workers were wh their daily produ under David M dissatisfied with anger was focus union for help. I mailback authori signed cards floo Before underta made a committ Murdock and his l their communiti issue, and rese By understandi he would make a
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Cannon Mills company house for sale.

permanently laying off thousands of workers and supervisors, closing down facilities and talking tough. Wages at Cannon are fairly low, often averaging only $5 or $6 per hour. The pace of work was getting to the point that many workers were working through their lunch breaks just to make their daily production quotas. After three years of management under David Murdock, the vast majority of workers were dissatisfied with conditions on the job. Much of the blame and anger was focused on Murdock, and workers began to call the union for help. In response the union put out a leaflet with a mailback authorization card attached. Literally thousands of signed cards flooded the office within a few days.

Know Your Enemy

Before undertaking a serious organizing campaign, ACTWU made a commitment to thoroughly research Cannon Mills, David Murdock and his business empire, and Cannon Mills workers and their communities. Early on it was clear Murdock was a major issue, and research exposed many of his liabilities and weaknesses. By understanding Murdock, ACTWU was able to anticipate moves he would make and to exploit his mistakes. At all times it was
important to keep the research on a level that could translate to the shopfloor. The research task was so immense that it sometimes went off on tangents and got bogged down in details. There was a constant struggle during the campaign to rein in the research and keep it from getting too esoteric. Much of the information that was compiled, however, will continue to be useful.

Research was divided into two main components, local and national. The national research looked at Murdock's empire—his other businesses and real estate holdings, his history and his business linkages. The local research looked at the towns, Kannapolis and Concord, where workers lived. Searching public records, the objective of the research was to find out who and what made these towns tick. It was found that Murdock had mortgaged much of the town of Kannapolis, including the land under the U.S. Post Office, to buy imports. Research laid the groundwork for development of issues and for organizing itself.

Research also supplied some of the ammunition that was needed to fight the union-busting consultants. Able to anticipate each step of the anti-union campaign, the research team was able to pull together both defensive and offensive materials designed to combat it. As it turned out, the only argument that really made a difference was the implied threat by Murdock of closing the plant down. For months before the election, ACTWU used a variety of strategies to try and head off that theme.

**Reaching the People**

The sheer immensity of organizing 10,000 workers who feared unionism necessitated a different kind of thinking. Because the workers were mostly concentrated in a small area and because it was such a large unit, the drive was able to take on some of the characteristics of a grass-roots political campaign. Nearly everyone in the Kannapolis-Concord area worked at Cannon or had close relatives working there. It was felt that in addition to reaching the workers inside the plant, work needed to be done in the community. The union also anticipated that many of the local community powers, like the daily newspapers, the Chamber of Commerce and the churches would be forced by Cannon to take anti-union positions.

Much of ACTWU's community campaign concentrated on defusing the plant closing issue. The union realized that the company would try to shift blame for imports and plant closings. So ACTWU stepped up its statewide campaign to explain the real reason why imports are flooding the U.S. market. A series of large [for North Carolina] and ver- around the state. These de- coverage. Rather than being 1 in an anti-union state, the un desperate for hard news to c was attention to details—ma informed about events. By th a regular on the 6 O'clock coverage varied, the publicity w in North Carolina. The impo to distort in North Carolina, have lost their jobs and doze At ACTWU events blame fi was placed squarely on the governement policies. Throu Murdock scrambled to prove A lot of Cannon resources an the end the union was confic imports. Workers seemed les the government could do an To stage this very high vis conscious decision to open up Dozens of press conferences entered the homes of thousan with reporters, and as the vote in newspapers. Through the North Carolina. Many union media in organizing campai union eventually loses, a go Like a political campaign, n pavement. Organizers conce developing the in-shop co recruited, concentrated on th foreign to Kannapolis and Co helped break down some barr 50 volunteers were mobilized The volunteers were memb other local unions, and stud hours to work with the un 20 students from the Unive donated time and energy. Volunteers were given br experie people. Differe US
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[for North Carolina] and very public demonstrations took place
around the state. These demonstrations got statewide media
coverage. Rather than being frozen out of coverage by television
in an anti-union state, the union found that television was fairly
desperate for hard news to cover. All it took on the union’s part
was attention to details—making sure the media was properly
informed about events. By the end of the campaign ACTWU was
a regular on the 6 O’clock News. Though the fairness of the
coverage varied, the publicity was making ACTWU a household name
in North Carolina. The import story was difficult for the media
to distort in North Carolina, where tens of thousands of workers
have lost their jobs and dozens of plants have closed their doors.
At ACTWU events blame for unfair imports and plant closings
was placed squarely on the shoulders of large corporations and
government policies. Throughout the campaign, Cannon and
Murdock scrambled to prove that they were fighting imports too.
A lot of Cannon resources and time were spent on this effort. By
the end the union was confident that it would not be blamed for
imports. Workers seemed less convinced that anyone other than
the government could do anything about imports.

To stage this very high visibility campaign, the union made a
conscious decision to open up much of its campaign to local media.
Dozens of press conferences were held and the union’s campaign
entered the homes of thousands of people. The union cooperated
with reporters, and as the vote approached, articles appeared daily
in newspapers. Through the media, the union grew in stature in
North Carolina. Many unions have been shy about their use of
media in organizing campaigns. With a careful plan, even if the
union eventually loses, a good campaign can open a lot of eyes.

Like a political campaign, reaching the people means hitting the
pavement. Organizers concentrated on talking with workers and
developing the in-shop committee. Volunteers, who were
recruited, concentrated on the community. Because unions were
foreign to Kannapolis and Concord residents, face-to-face contact
helped break down some barriers. On several weekends more than
50 volunteers worked to go door to door in the community.
The volunteers were members of ACTWU locals, members of
other local unions, and students. Some volunteers travelled two
hours to work with the union. Over the course of the campaign,
20 students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
donated time and energy.

Volunteers were given brief training and then paired up with
experienced people. Different written material was prepared for
distribution. Most of the material was designed to dispel myths
about unions and to reassure people that the factory would not close because the union was voted in. In just a few hours hundreds of community residents were visited. When volunteers came across enthusiastic people, they asked if it would be alright for an organizer to get in touch. A few contacts were made this way.

In a place like Kannapolis you could be nearly 100% sure that if the person did not work at Cannon, they were related to someone who did. Many of the residents were retirees who had children or grandchildren working in the factories. Surprisingly, the volunteers were received warmly and in some cases enthusiastically when they identified themselves as union members or supporters. A large percentage of people who said they favored the union or were neutral admitted they thought the plants would close if the union “got in.”

The reaction of the volunteers to the canvassing was extremely positive. The volunteers enjoyed talking with people in the community and answering their questions about trade unionism.

Volunteers and Cannon workers themselves did the bulk of calling in the telephone bank that was set up during the campaign. The Excelsior List (names of Cannon workers which the NLRB requires be given to the union before an election) was matched up with computerized phone lists, generating thousands of phone numbers. The callers identified Cannon workers or supporters just a few minutes, but in end of the campaign near the end of the campaign near was reached. Volunteers from workers and ACTWU texted the phone. As a rule people most cases answered question.

Community institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce, Through the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, in addition to the workers and ACTWU, through the efforts of community leaders and workers, community leaders and workers formed a group called the Community Action Team, which organized community events and meetings to support the union.

It’s hard to imagine the difficulties and challenges faced by the union in organizing the workers. The union’s efforts on the community level were crucial in overcoming the challenges posed by the company’s campaign. The company’s campaign against the union was relentless, and the union had to fight hard to gain the support of the workers. Despite the company’s efforts, the union was able to gain a majority of the votes in the election.

The entire thrust of its efforts was to demonstrate that the union was a force for change and progress, and that it was committed to improving the working conditions of the workers. The union’s success in the election was a testament to its hard work and dedication to its cause.
factory would not be alright for them to make this way. Surprisingly, it's hard to imagine the extent of the bias the union was confronted with in the local press. The Kannapolis and Concord newspapers routinely printed verbatim Cannon press releases which attacked, criticized and distorted facts about the union. Articles about union events or accomplishments, however, were usually turned around by the papers to reflect the company's point-of-view. As bad as this systematic distortion of truth was, it could have been worse. ACTWU's continual pressure—regularly visiting the editors and writing rebuttals—tempered the effects of the bias.

The union's efforts on the churches had a small payoff. Most churches thankfully decided to stay out of the fight and did not choose sides publicly. A few black ministers and churches stood up to the pressures of Cannon and publicly campaigned for the union. Of course, several churches from both the black and white communities preached against the union also, but by and large the effect could not have been too great.

The activity outside the workplace, by volunteers and in the media, played a role inside the factory too. Workers could see that the union was bigger than just Cannon Mills. Workers saw the union on TV and saw that the union could mobilize hundreds of volunteers. Every worker received a phone call or a visit. The quality of the contact was important. Most effective were the worker-to-worker discussions which took place; Cannon workers met union workers who also made towels. In spite of limited resources, the union's campaign generated more excitement and momentum than the company's campaign. David Murdock was forced to go inside the factory and shake every worker's hand at least once.

The company's campaign was its most effective inside the plant. The entire thrust of its campaign was to generate fear. Every numbers. The callers identified themselves as union members, Cannon workers or supporters. Each call was supposed to take just a few minutes, but in some cases went much longer. By the end of the campaign nearly everyone who had a listed number was reached. Volunteers found this work very rewarding. Cannon workers and ACTWU textile workers were extremely effective on the phone. As a rule people listened politely to the callers and in most cases answered questions or asked them, as requested.

Community institutions like the church, the newspapers and the Chamber of Commerce represented a challenge to the union. Through the efforts of organizers, the union's campaign was explained to ministers and merchants. The small-town newspapers were visited regularly and the union's point-of-view made clear.

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worker was pulled off the job and required to see slick movies, videos and slide shows. Every supervisor was instructed to spread rumors of the imminence of a plant closing. Murdock spent $10 million to fight the union. With that kind of money dedicated to fight a union campaign, the odds of winning the first battle are slim. But by organizing with a view to the future, by thawing the ice of in-bred southern anti-union feelings, a broad public campaign was good preparation for future efforts.

The Cannon campaign should be looked at as preparation for future organizing campaigns in the Charlotte, N.C., area. Already as a result of the Cannon campaign, many workers have shown they are more open to organizing than in the past. The potential for organizing in that area right now looks brighter than it has in many years.

Some Lessons

The campaign points out several very interesting lessons. By running a very public, almost grass-roots, political campaign, many more people than the 10,000 Cannon workers were exposed to the union. The image of a vigorous, creative, progressive and underdog organization of workers battling a powerful multi-

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millionaire stood up throughout the campaign.
The Cannon drive, I believe, points to the strategy of taking on
the big targets. Much of the direct impetus for organizing Cannon
came from the massive changes that Murdock made to squeeze
more profits from the company. His need for cash flow came as
a result of leveraging his buyout of Cannon. By using the assets
of the company itself, he was able to buy Cannon with very little
of his own money. To pay back over $350 million in bank loans,
he cut the workforce by at least 30% and drastically increased
production requirements and workloads. By looking at Cannon
as numbers on paper rather than as the heart of a town and the
lifeblood of thousands of people, Murdock forced the workers to
take their first serious look at organizing.
The final chapter has not been written about the organization
of Cannon workers. The enormity of organizing 10,000 workers
looms as large a challenge as ever. But I believe that more than
a first step was taken. The mood of the 3,500 workers who voted
for the union was one of disappointment not defeat. In fact, union
supporters started talking about the future almost as soon as the
vote count was over. A solid foundation for organizing in the future
has been built in an area where there was nothing before. That
is an accomplishment ACTWU can build on.

Postscript
Towards the end of the campaign rumors began to fly that
Cannon Mills would be sold by Murdock. Murdock responded
by admitting he had engaged in talks about "merger," but that was
all. He told the workers that by voting against the union they
would be showing loyalty to him, and he would never sell after
such a mandate. Several weeks after the vote, Murdock repaid
workers' "loyalty" by selling 80% of Cannon Mills to Fieldcrest.
Fieldcrest manufactures towels and sheets just like Cannon, but
nearly 60% of Fieldcrest is organized by ACTWU.