Contract Servicing From An Organizing Model: Don't Bureaucratize, Organize!

Teresa Conrow
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Abstract
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I looked at the walls for relief. There was a picket sign from the 1987 Red Cross nurses strike, a photo of a hundred women from the AFL-CIO Summer Institute, and a poster of a young woman, fist in the air, tearing the boards off a vacant house where our community group had moved in a homeless family. Just yesterday I had taped up a snapshot of health care workers from Los Angeles area unions jointly picketing a hospital.

These are some of the pictures I value from my work as a labor representative and organizer. Yet here I sat, feeling like the worst of bureaucrats, trying to figure out how to avoid some of the very people I represent.

Keywords
contract servicing, union organizing, negotiation

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"Let me guess. Is this another one of your group grievances?"
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The intercom buzzed, "A member is on line one for you." I recognized the name of a newly involved steward, probably calling with yet another problem.

"Teresa, I wanted to let you know that they tried to call me off today and replace me with a temporary worker."

Oh, this was the worst. A major issue we needed to be fighting.

Teresa Conrow, a Labor Research Review Consulting Editor, has represented health care workers for the last six years in the Los Angeles area.
Temporary workers are, in theory, supposed to be hired to assist regular staff only when the workload is unexpectedly increased; they work for another company and are paid a higher wage with no benefits. During the current shortage, many hospitals are relying on temporary workers to permanently staff whole units. Now, management was giving preference to temps over our members!

"So, tell me what happened."

"Well, I was really tired and angry, and I didn’t want to argue with them, so I told them I would go home, but that they would end up having to pay me for the day because I was going to fight this."

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least I wouldn’t have to go over to the hospital for a meeting with the supervisor.

"So I drove home. You know I don’t live too far from the hospital. Well you won’t believe what happened. When I opened the door, the phone was ringing. They must have been calling me from the moment I left. I answered it and it was my supervisor."

My heart skipped a beat. I remembered this manager. She was a real problem. Though membership had been low in the past, this new steward I was speaking to had recently been instrumental in getting more people to join.

"Well, she asked me what I wanted to do. She said that I could either take comp time or come back to work. She said that she was very sorry, that she wanted to do what the contract said. She even offered to meet me in front of the hospital with her parking pass so I wouldn’t have to pay for parking again!"

My heart was skipping happily now. "This is incredible," I exclaimed. "This has never happened before. How did you ever get her straightened out? You know, since we have a statewide contract, what you did is going to help all the other employees in the state system."

I got off the phone and did a little victory dance. I really do try to let myself jump up and down when things go well. I looked at the pictures on the wall again, and then settled down to return as many of my phone calls as possible.

"Contract servicing from an organizing model" simply means that as labor representatives we continually examine how every action we take can increase participation in the union in order to win more of our issues and strengthen our organizations. In the incident described above, it was because of the increased involvement of the members that the union won an important issue. We didn’t win because the supervisor had gone through a personality change. It was the employees on the unit who had changed,
and the supervisor was merely reflecting their increased power.

Without our steward's involvement and understanding of the contract, I would have had a grievance to file on that busy afternoon, with months spent on an arbitration rather than a few minutes on the phone.

There is a push within the labor movement to move from a "servicing model of unionism" to an "organizing model." Unions are beginning to use more of an organizing model during relatively brief periods of contract campaigns, elections, or crises such as decertification attempts. This article will attempt to show how the organizing model can be used throughout the ongoing contract administration and the running of the union.

There is often a false separation between servicing and organizing. We are frequently led to believe that we must either service our membership or organize them, because we cannot do both. It is an odd distinction. One cannot be done without the other.

Contract servicing has to be an organizing activity. Every action we take needs to be viewed from an organizing perspective: How can we involve more people? What lessons will be learned? Will more people be empowered to do more for themselves?

Traditional contract servicing seems to be defined as the job of representing our membership by utilizing certain methods already developed and agreed upon by both management and the union—usually grievance and arbitration procedures. Those who support the servicing model of unionism do so with the hope that if we defend both the contract and individuals covered by the contract, then people will see their self-interest in supporting organized labor. However, the traditional model for servicing limits and narrows the union's activities and creates very business-like relationships both between the union and its members and between the union and management.

In fact, it is important to remember that contract servicing was created by the organizing efforts of the early labor movement. Contracts are simply one of the tools labor has used to reach our goals. If we use this traditional tool, but with the perspective of including as many people as possible in our servicing, then we are servicing on an organizing model.

In this article, I reflect on the experience of servicing and organizing health care workers in order to try and draw some lessons about servicing as organizing. I'll explain what I think are four critical areas for servicing from an organizing perspective—communication, knowledge of work and worksite, choosing your issues, and leadership development—and then I'll look at some of the obstacles to this approach within the labor movement.
Communication

The fundamental truth about unions and communication is that more complete and direct communication from the union always benefits labor and always disadvantages management. The reason for this, believe it or not, is that unions really do fight for truth and justice. While management’s purpose is to fight to save itself money and to get more work done with less cost, the union is continually challenging the fairness of management’s actions. There is not a grievance filed that does not have fairness as an issue. Even when unions are defending the most guilty of employees, we are defending everybody’s right to a fair process. We need to communicate our goals of justice, truth and fairness to our members.

Simply resolving a grievance does little to improve the level of participation in the union when it is done between management and a lone union representative. Even though the issue at hand is won, it is not until this information is communicated that the union is strengthened. If we are interested in winning grievances, we need to publicize them, both internally and in the public news media whenever possible. Whether we win or lose them, we need to communicate the outcome as well as our structures, who we are, our goals and dreams, and our constant analysis of what is occurring in the workplace.

We have different ways to communicate. One of the lessons we have learned is that the best form of communication is face-to-face, the second best is telephone, and third is written. The ideal is to combine all three forms whenever possible to increase the impact of each. Written flyers, for example, are best when hand delivered rather than mailed. Personal contact from stewards must always be the highest priority.

Phone trees, group meetings, written flyers, petitions and walk-throughs can all be utilized not only to communicate internally with our union membership, but also to communicate with management. For example, the phone tree can be implemented to let all employees know that they should each individually, during the next three days, let their manager know that they are unwilling to accept management’s argument that it has the right to float employees to units without a full orientation. Again, personal contact is preferable to written. A meeting of employees with management will be more effective than a written petition. But a petition involving a large number of people is better than the chief steward or staff rep alone stating their objections.

Often we hear the argument that the membership will not come
to a picket when in fact they have not been asked or have not been
given enough information about what may be an uncomfortable
new activity for them. Having a fellow worker ask them will
ensure a better turnout than a posted flyer alone. To ensure turn­
out at a picket of county social workers one year, one union handed
out a sign-up card that simply said, “Yes, I am concerned about
decreasing caseload levels, and I will attend the picket at the
County Board of Supervisors on [date and time]:” Stewards col­
lected the signed commitments and made reminder calls two days
before the picket.

During recent negotiations, we xeroxed self-adhesive mailing
labels to get our information around. Quicker to print and more
personalized than buttons, they were worn on peoples’ uniforms
or stuck on bulletin boards or correspondence where management
could see them. They were extremely effective in fighting back
a management proposal for “flexible scheduling.” The stickers
showed up everywhere, proving to management that the workers
were united and could not be divided and bullied into accepting
a proposal that was not in the long-term best interests of all the
workers. The stickers helped educate those members who were
not sure what “flexible scheduling” was. This early information
and show of unity blocked management’s later attempts to divide
the employees with misinformation.
Knowledge of the Work & Worksite

In order to communicate, we need to know where everyone is—physically, mentally and ideologically. The easiest way is to "map" the worksite, so that as a labor representative or leader you are aware of where all represented employees are.

At one hospital we represent about 1,400 workers, some of whom work at the main medical center and some of whom work in small clinics up to 20 miles away. One rank-and-file leader put the entire membership list on a computer program along with work location, home address, telephone numbers, membership status, and any role they played within the union. Now, when an employee calls we can refer to the alphabetical list and see whether she/he is a member and who their steward is. In addition, the computer program has been used to send personalized letters to non-members in certain targeted units, providing information about why they should join the union and signed by their unit steward. You can imagine the potential for being able to communicate with workers affected by certain grievances, actions taken by management, or decisions to be made by the union.

Once people can be tracked by worksite, and they are receiving steady information critical to their jobs, contract grievances can be filed by local or work unit rather than by contract article. This way the labor rep has an overall view of what is going on in each unit. As soon as a phone call comes into the union office, it should be referred to the relevant steward.

In addition to knowing where everyone is, we will do better representing our membership if we understand the work they do and how they see themselves as a profession. One of the advantages that professional associations have is that they often take these issues seriously. The labor movement has too much of a reputation for limiting ourselves to so-called "bread-and-butter" issues and overlooking the professional concerns of workers. Once we understand the work, we are able to envision how we, and they, want the profession or industry to develop, and what we need to do to best protect and promote the interest of our membership.

In order to win our issues, we need to fully analyze the power structures and decision-making processes of each workplace and industry. The easiest way to begin is to develop a list of all the management players, and the relationships between them. The standard organizational charts will tell us a lot, but often the most powerful decision-makers will not be on the chart. Shareholders, government agencies, other unions, employer organizations, competing companies, insurance companies, banks, even community...
An Organizing Model of Unionism

and religious leaders may all be making crucial decisions that affect the union, the profession or the industry.

A thorough discussion and brainstorming session involving the union leadership will usually result in a much clearer understanding of where and how decisions get made. The discussion can include a listing of all possible decision-makers and union allies, an analysis of their self-interest, and an analysis of where the union can bring both pressure and support to bear. During this discussion, additional areas that need research will become apparent; research tasks should be delegated and any training on how to obtain information, provided.

During the grievance process, it is essential that the grievant and other workers in the area provide information identifying decision-makers and their self-interests. These may change as the grievance progresses. One recent grievance grew from an individual employee's performance issue to a question of the supervisor's fairness and competence simply because more employees in the area have joined the union and people are becoming more supportive of each other and willing to speak up. Additionally, every personality requires a different strategy. The grievant along with their co-workers will often know how to work each individual most effectively.

A critical analysis and discussion of power, self-interest and decision-making must happen within our own organizations as well. This is essential for all of us—staff, leaders and members. When organizational structures and procedures are hidden or not discussed, people are disempowered. When our own organizational structures are not easily understood, people learn that they have to be "in with the in crowd" to be involved with the union. This is one of the common ways that sexism, racism and stagnation prevail in many organizations.

Choosing Issues

When we use the traditional method of contract servicing, our issues are chosen for us—whatever issue we have clear contract language on. We usually have to respond to a negative action that management has taken, rather than take positive action to prevent problems.

When servicing from an organizing model we get to choose our issues. Grievances then become only one tool—although a very important tool—to use with some issues. Servicing on an organizing model means not just asking the five Ws when filing a grievance. It means assessing who the issue affects, how many
people will be motivated to involve themselves, and the potential for the union to organize around the issue. (See the “Organizing Grievance Form” on page 53.)

Issues need to be chosen carefully. We cannot work on everything at the same time. The first step is to choose [and assist others to choose] the one or two issues that people most want to work on. Make sure people [including yourself] pick their favorites. The second step is to make sure to choose something the union can handle and hopefully win. The third is to choose the issue that will best build the organization.

Above all, be decisive and honest about what issues are being chosen. There is nothing more frustrating than leaders or staff exaggerating what is possible and then having to come along and explain reality. Newly involved worksite leaders are sometimes encouraged to believe an exaggeration of the union's present strength in an effort to get an immediate return on increased membership. The end result is that the respect for and trust in the new leader is undermined in the workplace.

We are less able to win when management is not clear about what our priorities are. Management needs to know what the results will be if they do not take the desired action. We need to be honest about this. If the most we can do is provide a signed letter by all the employees in a unit, and no one is interested in doing “work to rule,” let’s not threaten it.

People do not usually come to a union meeting just to come to a union meeting. Unless they have been there before or already feel part of the organization, they usually come because they want to get something done about a particular issue. It is our job to find out what people’s issues are and which issues will move them. We then help define the issue and mobilize around it.

**Leadership Development**

Good people are always present in every workplace, but often they are very busy, or don’t want to become involved either through fear or because of past experience with the union. We need to have personal contact with people in order to find leaders. The initial time spent in developing leadership is always worthwhile.

At one worksite we have gradually built up a steward structure, first by asking people to distribute union literature in the work area. Only when we had a small communication structure in place did we then ask people to commit to distributing membership forms to nonmembers. From this core, we have completed elec-
SUGGESTIONS FOR

An Organizing Grievance Form

In order to encourage organizing at all times, a checklist could be printed on the back of a standard grievance form and used in steward trainings. Here’s what it might look like:

# of Members in Work Area ______

ISSUE ________

To Whom Is This Issue Important? __________

How Many People Are Affected by This Issue? ______

Can People Be Mobilized Around This Issue? Yes [ ] No [ ]

Can This Issue:
  Increase the Visibility of the Union? Yes [ ] No [ ]
  Improve the Representation of Underrepresented Groups in the Union? Yes [ ] No [ ]

Leadership already involved with this issue:

Leadership who would need to become involved:

How can PRESSURE be exerted on:
  Decision-Makers in Management:
  Outside Decision-Makers: (e.g., government agencies, employer associations):

REMEDY or GOAL to be Achieved:

Is This Issue Winnable or Partly Winnable? Yes [ ] No [ ]

Possible Actions Who Will Do Date to be Done

Grievance

Group Meeting with Decision-Maker

One-Minute Stand-up on the Job

Buttons, same Color Shirts

Newsletter Article

Phone Tree

Involving Allies

Petition
tions for union representatives and stewards.

I was once told by another union staff person that I asked members to do too much. It was meant as a criticism. I took it as a compliment. Passing tasks on to other people is a skill we must consciously teach ourselves—and our leaders. The iron law of organizing is: NEVER do for others what they can do for themselves. In order to accomplish this, we must constantly be breaking down tasks, training others and planning ahead so that we do not slip into doing what sometimes seems easier or quicker—doing it ourselves. The skill of enabling others to do what you were previously doing also has to be passed on to the new leaders we recruit. They, in turn, can be looking to find others to take over their tasks.

When filing grievances, it is best to ask grievants to write down everything that has happened in their own words. This saves time for the steward and often gives more and different information than what the steward may have requested. In addition, there is no reason why a labor rep or steward should ever need to go to management with only the grievant. They should always bring another person to listen, take notes, learn, lend advice—and provide support. It is even more powerful if the whole group affected by the grievance attends the grievance meeting. More people becoming involved can lead to more opinions, so decision-making procedures and lines of authority need to be clear. But if you always take at least one other employee into a grievance meeting, you will eventually train more stewards.

Recognition is essential to leadership. We all need it, either in the form of praise (both private and public), compensation for our time and work, or decision-making power commensurate with the work and knowledge we are contributing. Daily verbal recognition of each other's work can assist all of us in continuing with difficult work and responsibilities. Monetary compensation, either through release time paid by the employer or wages paid by the union, shows that we truly value the work being done. Often we do not spend enough time in contract negotiations demanding paid release time, and our organizations are consequently not solidified and remain based on "extra" and "donated" time spent by the leadership.

We have a tremendous problem with burnout in the labor movement—both for ourselves and any new leaders we bring in. The answer is to involve more people and expand leadership roles. We need to continually ensure that new leaders do more, and at the same time make sure they are looking for others to do more of what they used to do.
All unions have different structures. It is important to know and understand each union's particular structure, and to pass on this information to others. But structures need to fit the reality of an organization, not the other way around. If the union contract allows for only 15 stewards and you have 50, keep 50. Let management know you have 50, but that if necessary the union will designate 15 contract-designated stewards. At one hospital we call the contract-designated stewards 'Article 29-F Stewards' to distinguish them from other stewards who are not eligible for release time. Our structures should accurately reflect our organizations, and give them room to grow rather than inhibiting growth.

We also need to consider the makeup of union staff and leadership and whether they are reflective of the constituency we are trying to organize. Membership participation and new leaders will often reflect the races and sexes of present leadership. If there are few women or men of color involved in an organization, fewer will come forward to become involved. Everyone's participation needs to be encouraged, but as leaders and organizers we need to be especially concerned with finding new leadership that accurately reflects the membership we seek to represent. People who have been accustomed to power in society come forward as leaders in unions disproportionately to their numbers. In my experience representing nurses and social workers, both female-dominated professions, there are always more men on the negotiating team than their proportionate numbers in the bargaining unit. When there are only white men in leadership, we miss whole cultures of knowledge and ways of approaching issues and events.

**What Prevents Us From Organizing as We Service?**

Ideally, we want to organize and we want to grow and be more powerful and representative. What stops us? This final section will examine why it is difficult for us to escape the ruts and patterned responses that prevent us from wanting to organize.

**Time and Planning**

We all are busy people. We negotiate contracts, file grievances, listen and help. We fight back. We want to do more, be stronger. And in the middle of all this, in between those squeezed-in phone calls, using every moment to complete the immediate tasks before us, we need to organize and to grow. Even just talking about doing organizing along with our servicing will give most of us that all-too-familiar overwhelmed feeling. The next step after being over-
whelmed can be inaction.

However, when we are utilizing an organizing model, issues and concerns that previously would be too overwhelming for a single labor representative or steward can be dealt with successfully and promptly. In one of our hospitals, we found that the opportunities for nurses to advance on the career ladder vary greatly according to the nurse manager and work area. With a steward in each work area, we are able to compare practices and win grievances. For one person to research the different career opportunities would take days. Instead, we had a lively half-hour discussion at our monthly stewards’ meeting, which we followed up by filing more grievances and implementing our phone tree to obtain still more information.

A crisis mentality will stunt and kill organizing. Time needs to be allocated for planning long before every event and project. There is nothing worse than getting outdated information about negotiations when it is already old, or involving a lot of new people and not immediately providing them with training or information about the next meeting. When we plan, we can prioritize and make thoughtful decisions about how we want to spend our time. When crises are constantly occurring, and staffing and resources are too limited, it is impossible to be growth oriented.

Organizing takes more time initially, but saves time in the long run. When an issue or grievance comes up, calls have to be made to involve as many of the employees, stewards and union leadership as possible. As the issue progresses, however, more people are involved and as long as tasks are delegated, time is saved.

The Structure of the Labor Movement
The existence of a organizing vs. servicing debate is reflective of the labor movement’s structure. Our unions now divide both staff and rank-and-file leadership along servicing and organizing lines. We hire staff either as labor representatives or as organizers. Labor reps and stewards work with grievances (servicing). Organizers work to increase or activate the membership (organizing).

In fact, not only have we falsely divided ourselves, we have traditionally rewarded and promoted “servicing” more than “organizing.” Labor representatives often receive more pay and more status, both from their manager and from their members. They are supposed to be more “lawyer like.” Labor representatives have been stereotyped as less committed to the labor movement than organizers. There are subtle pressures to imitate management. In return for their higher status and pay, labor representatives are often expected to accept more distance between them-
selves and the membership they are servicing.

In contrast, organizers are often expected to be more intricately involved with the membership and to work long hours for low pay. Burnout can be an expectation of the job. These long hours are promoted by the very same labor movement that fought long and hard for the 8-hour day. When we insist that organizing be part of servicing we are sometimes, without realizing it, also pushing for lower status and longer hours for labor representatives.

Many unions are beginning the process of promoting organizing to a higher level. We are finally beginning to hire more organizers and teach more organizing values and skills. However, since the labor movement has created a structure where servicing is different and apart from organizing, we have then begun to ignore servicing in our efforts to expand and organize. The division between organizing and servicing is seldom questioned. Not only is it expected that labor representatives will not care to learn organizing, it is also taken for granted that they know nothing about organizing and do not have a valued contribution to make to the growth and expansion of the labor movement. In fact, labor representatives and stewards are already organizing; every time a grievance is filed, some organizing is done.

When organizing is separated from servicing, we lose the depth of organizing. Organizing becomes signing the membership card, or attending a meeting or rally when asked to do so, rather than a true process of empowerment and advancement. Instead of sharing knowledge and training so that more of us are able to represent ourselves and our interests, we want to tell our newly involved members what they should do, where they should show up and when. We become so busy trying to get them to something that we do not have time to assist with the actual training and grievance handling. Sometimes we even come to believe that we can get by without real servicing. If we just organize around the “important” issues, we won’t have to defend the disciplined employee or be readily available for those small, individual requests for information or assistance. In fact, quality service can never be separated from organizing.

Allocation of Resources and Quality of Service

The reality of our present labor organizations is that we are extremely short staffed. Simply answering the phone calls is no small feat. We often do not begin implementing what we know will work because we are afraid of the increased workload. This is short-sighted and self-destructive, but if we are facing a work-
load full of deadlines and crises, it will be difficult to implement and plan for organizing.

Once the organization has grown, there will, of course, be benefits from increased dues and time saved from effective self-representation. Most of these resources need to be plowed right back into organizing, thus rewarding the staff and leaders who brought the increased activity and funds into the organization. Too often we want to hire temporary organizers or plan temporary organizing campaigns with resources that are withdrawn after a specific period of time. We can end up discouraging rather than rewarding organizing. Leaders and staff who have worked to organize will care very much about continuing on the path of growth, and will not wish to stagnate once they have reached certain "organizational goals." The purpose of promoting organizing needs to be to encourage ongoing growth, not to save money that can be used for something else, and not to stop growing and improving once we reach a certain fixed "acceptable" point.

Naturally, a crisis exists in the labor movement. Staff and leadership are unbelievably overworked. We provide a service, but when we barely have time to return phone calls and meet deadlines, we are not able to provide quality service. Union stewards and staff could learn something from the nursing profession about taking responsibility for being able to provide a level of quality service. Nurses have long fought for standardized patient-nurse ratios and acuity systems that allow for the allocation of nursing staff based on the requirements of the patients. Similarly, labor representatives and stewards need to be covering smaller geographic areas and fewer members. The labor movement’s standards for acceptable levels of service have become very low.

**Conclusion**

Contract servicing from an organizing perspective is not easy. Our very own self-interests as labor leaders, staff and activists can often be in opposition to real organizing. An empowered membership can threaten the existence of established leadership. Growth is a vulnerable state. The desire to accumulate more power for our membership and for the labor movement must override the fear of risking our own individual power.

In order to overcome these fears, we must first of all be aware of them. We too often want to cover up the fact that having more people to deal with and more people involved in making decisions will lead to a lack of control and instability for each of us. However, once we take the risk to involve and empower people, the
common result is that everyone gains more power.

The involvement of more men of color and women can force some of the needed changes. Men of color and women have been isolated from the culture in power, and thus usually maintain community and cultural relationships outside of the dominant white male culture. These relationships can bring the labor movement much more in concert with other movements. In order for this to happen, all people must be integral to the power of the labor movement, and not forced to choose activism in either their "own" communities or the community of the labor movement.

Women and the women's movement, for example, bring a particular set of skills to the labor movement that fundamentally encourages organizing. Men tend to learn to accumulate power, and women have learned to distribute it. Organizing is about the distribution of power. Women have learned to include everyone in the room in a conversation, striving for consensus, while men can tend to dominate the conversation. Consensus-seeking invites participation of everyone—the fundamental goal of organizing.

We as a labor movement need to change to reflect who we are. Workers relying on the truths of our own lives, and not the information provided by management, is what organizing is all about. Servicing from an organizing model simply means that we continually examine how every action we take can increase participation in the union. Once we reflect who we are, we will be strong.