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Abstract
As increasing numbers of employers and governments in industrialized nations hasten to “Americanize” their economic policies, labor laws, and union-avoidance strategies, it has become critical for unions in other countries to learn what they can from the organizing experience of the US labor movement. Most research on factors contributing to US organizing decline has focused on the role played by factors external to the labor movement such as global competition, de-industrialization, changes in workforce demographics, new work systems, deregulation, aggressive employer opposition, and weak and poorly enforced labor laws. US unions, however, have greatly contributed to their own decline by having failed to aggressively organize when they had the power and opportunity in the 1950s and 1960s, and then continuing to fail to commit the resources and strategic initiatives necessary to win in the more hostile organizing climate of the 1970s and 1980s. The author’s research over the last 10 years has shown that unions can significantly improve their organizing success, even in the most hostile organizing climate, when they rely on a comprehensive union building strategy. These findings have important implications, not just for the US labor movement, but for unions in other nations as well, as they struggle to regain lost membership and power.

Keywords
labor unions, organizing, elections, employer opposition, labor movement

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Reversing the Tide of Organizing Decline: Lessons from the US Experience

Kate Bronfenbrenner*

As increasing numbers of employers and governments in industrialized nations hasten to "Americanize" their economic policies, labor laws, and union-avoidance strategies, it has become critical for unions in other countries to learn what they can from the organizing experience of the US labor movement. Most research on factors contributing to US organizing decline has focused on the role played by factors external to the labor movement such as global competition, de-industrialization, changes in workforce demographics, new work systems, deregulation, aggressive employer opposition, and weak and poorly enforced labor laws. US unions, however, have greatly contributed to their own decline by having failed to aggressively organize when they had the power and opportunity in the 1950s and 1960s, and then continuing to fail to commit the resources and strategic initiatives necessary to win in the more hostile organizing climate of the 1970s and 1980s. The author's research over the last 10 years has shown that unions can significantly improve their organizing success, even in the most hostile organizing climate, when they rely on a comprehensive union building strategy. These findings have important implications, not just for the US labor movement, but for unions in other nations as well, as they struggle to regain lost membership and power.

Introduction

For years, it has been commonly understood that the US labor movement is in a greater state of decline and vulnerability than labor movements in other industrialized nations. In the global economy of the 1990s, however, as employers and employer strategies become more global in scope and more similar in practice, and as governments in other nations hasten to adapt the most union-unfriendly aspects of US labor law, much can be learned from the US organizing experience. For, despite a rapidly deteriorating economic, political, and legal climate for organizing, in the last few years there has been a resurgence in union organizing activity and strategic organizing initiatives in the US, and these have begun to show results.

Unlike New Zealand, where free market economic policies and the recent dismantling of collective bargaining legislation have, in just a few short years, devastated unions, the decline in US union density and organizing success began decades ago. (Harbridge and Crawford, 1998). As long as US companies and their employees were reaping the benefits

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of an expanding world economy in the 1950s and 1960s, union leaders were able to ignore the devastating long term implications of a deteriorating legal, economic, and political climate. The full force of these environmental changes was not felt until the 1980s, too late to easily institute the serious strategic and structural changes within their organizations necessary to reverse the decline.

Today, as US union density rates drop below 15 percent for the first time in more than 60 years, the pressures on US unions have only intensified. Employer opposition to organizing is rapidly escalating in scale, sophistication, and effectiveness. Instead of the union-friendly labor law reform that unions hoped to achieve under a Democratic administration, they now watch as conservatives at all levels of government pursue an aggressive campaign to severely undercut all protective labor legislation. Liberalized trade policies are being used to threaten the security of workers throughout the economy (Bronfenbrenner, 1997b).

Nowhere are these negative pressures more apparent than in organizing. With a private sector organizing win rate of less than 50 percent and a first contract rate of less than 70 percent, US unions have been able to gain collective bargaining representation for fewer than 60,000 additional private sector workers each year and 100,000 workers in the private and public sector combined. This falls far short of making up for the more than 300,000 union jobs that are lost each year through corporate mergers and restructuring, plant closings, contracting out, layoffs, and decertifications. Either US unions must quickly and effectively organize millions of new workers or face becoming irrevocably marginalized in both the political and economic arenas (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998).

Yet, despite these numbers and despite an increasingly hostile organizing climate, there are signs that the US labor movement is making significant progress in reversing its organizing fortunes. Recent victories such as the 11,000 US AIRWAYS ticket agents organized by the Communication Workers of America (CWA), the thousands of hotel workers organized by the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) in Las Vegas, the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) dramatic organizing gains among nursing home and hospital workers, the Teamster organizing wins at Overnight Trucking, or the string of victories by Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) in southern manufacturing plants, prove that some unions are winning, and winning big, even when faced with extremely aggressive employer opposition. More than that, we now see a national commitment at the highest levels of the AFL-CIO and many of their largest affiliates to commit more resources to organizing and to “organize at an unprecedented pace and scale” (Sweeney, Trumka, and Chavez-Thompson, 1995).

Within just the last few years, these changes and initiatives have begun to show results. NLRB election data from the first six months of 1997 reveal that unions are running more campaigns, winning more elections, and winning them in larger units. In the first six months of 1997, unions won 728 representation elections involving 42,501 eligible voters. This is an 11.6 percent increase from the 652 certification elections held in the first six months of 1996, and a 15 percent increase in the number of eligible voters involved in
elections won by unions during the same time period in 1996 (BNA Plus, 1997). At the same time, tens of thousands of US workers are now seeking to organize outside of the traditional government-supervised and regulated election process through community-based and industry-based direct pressure campaigns and by demanding voluntary recognition from employers. These campaigns have been particularly effective among leased and contract employees such as janitors and home health aides, construction workers, and low wage workers in the hospitality and retail industries.¹

Unfortunately it has taken the US labor movement more than 40 years to critically evaluate its own responsibility for its declining fortunes and to take major aggressive action to reverse the decline. Other countries need not wait so long. They can learn from both our mistakes and our belated attempts at revitalization, so that they can stem their own decline before it reaches the same depths as in the US.

Roots of US organizing decline

In the late 1930s and early 1940s US unions greatly increased their membership and power through aggressive organizing in the context of an expanding economy and a favorable political and social climate. In the decades that followed, actual union membership remained fairly stable, but overall density declined because unions failed to keep up with a rapidly expanding workforce. As Bronfenbrenner et al. explain in their recent volume Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies, some of this decline can be attributed to a series of structural changes in the US economy:

The rise of global competition, capital flight to low wage countries and the nonunion Sun Belt, and the transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy all are interrelated and have resulted in significant job loss in unionized industries. These broader economic changes have been coupled with equally dramatic technological changes and changes in work organization which have resulted in both significant losses of union jobs and in an increasing reliance on a more flexible and more transitory contingent workforce of part-time, temporary, and contract employees. These pressures have been reinforced by government economic policies, especially trade liberalization and deregulation. (Bronfenbrenner, et al., 1998: 3)

The changing labor law climate has also contributed to decline. Union density peaked in the late 1940s, just before the enactment of the Taft-Hartley amendments to the National Labor Relations Act, which enacted into law some of the more probusiness decisions of a much more conservative, post New Deal judiciary (Tomlins, 1985). Taft-Hartley expanded

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¹ There is no accurate data available on the number of US workers who organize each year through voluntary recognition campaigns and non-NLRB supervised elections. Based on numbers provided by unions most active in non-NLRB campaigns, including SEIU, HERE, UNITE, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and unions in the building trades, we would estimate that since 1990 between 50,000 to 75,000 US workers have gained union representation through non-NLRB campaigns, but these are extremely rough estimates. Still, this is a dramatic increase over the 1980s when only a handful of unions were attempting, largely unsuccessfully, to use a non-NLRB strategy.
employer rights to oppose unions, at the same time removing one of labor's most effective organizing tools, the secondary boycott. Reflecting the cold-war hysteria of the time, Taft-Hartley also included a clause requiring unions to sign "noncommunist" affidavits if they wanted to be covered under the Act. In the years that followed, a whole generation of the labor movement's best organizers were purged for being communists, socialists, or "fellow travelers." With them went a wealth of strategic knowledge and organizing experience that is only now being regained, more than two generations later (Green, 1980: 195-205).

Although the decline in union density started in the years after Taft-Hartley, the true impact of these labor law changes was masked by the expanding economy. During these years unions focused their efforts on servicing their existing members rather than organizing industries and sectors that had been untouched by the wave of industrial organizing in the 1930s. It was not until the US postwar economic boom first faltered in the 1970s, and unions first began to lose significant numbers through layoffs, plant closings, and capital flight, that unions felt the full force of their weakened labor rights. For now, when they tried to organize, they found employers committed to containing unionization to already organized industries and aggressively opposing all efforts to organize the unorganized.

Unions were ill prepared for the employers'onslaught. Earlier in the century in the textile mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts or in the auto-plants in Flint, Michigan, organizers understood that their success depended on running slow, underground, community-based campaigns. Faced with employers who readily spied on, beat up, fired, blacklisted, and evicted workers for the slightest evidence of union sympathy, these organizers went house to house, neighborhood to neighborhood, building leaders, capitalizing on community networks and allies, and steadily preparing for more aggressive action (Kraus, 1947: 1-87; Cameron 1993: 117-169). But for most industrial unions in the 1950s and 1960s, organizing involved no more than handing out authorization cards outside the plant gate, followed by a few large meetings and some mass mailings. For other unions, particularly the building trades and the Teamsters, most organizing was accomplished top down, through visits by union officers to non-union employers. These strategies worked as long as unions controlled the market share of the industry and employer opposition was minimal. But once employers became more aggressive in their opposition to unions in the 1960s and 1970s, both union organizing activity and union organizing success plummeted. (Chaison and Rose, 1991: 26).

As unions grew weaker, employers became more emboldened and sophisticated in their union-avoidance strategies. An entire industry of management consultants sprang-up, feeding off employers eager to spare no expense to keep their workplaces "union-free." By the mid-1980s employers used anti-union consultants in 71 percent of private sector union organizing campaigns (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995b). By 1995 the number had increased to 90 percent (Bronfenbrenner, 1997b).

Illegal anti-union activity also increased. According to Richard Freeman: "From 1960 to 1980 the number of all employer unfair labor practice charges [violations of worker rights to organize under the National Labor Relations Act] rose fourfold; the number of charges..."
involving a firing for union activity rose threefold; and the number of workers awarded back pay or reinstated into their jobs rose fivefold" (Freeman, 1985: 53).

By 1980, the overwhelming majority of employers aggressively opposed union organizing efforts through a combination of delays, harassment, discharges, misinformation, interrogation, threats, promises, bribes, and surveillance (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Emboldened by President Reagan's unequivocal support for their anti-union agenda, as demonstrated by his discharge and replacement of striking air-traffic controllers, many openly flaunted labor law, secure in the knowledge that the penalties for even the most egregious violations were little more than a slap on the wrist. Today, more than one-third of US employers discharge workers for union activity during organizing campaigns, more than half threaten a full or partial shutdown of their company if the union succeeds in organizing the facility, and between 15 and 40 percent make illegal changes in wages, benefits and working conditions, give bribes to those who oppose the union, or use electronic surveillance of union activists during the organizing campaign (Bronfenbrenner 1997b). In short, US employers, facing organizing campaigns, stop at nothing to create a climate so fraught with fear, conflict, suspicion, and intimidation, that workers long for the time before the union drive began. And, employers engage in these actions with little fear of any significant legal penalties from the NLRB or the courts.

Not surprisingly, the intensity of these employer campaigns has had a devastating impact on union organizing success. In my 10 years of research on employer behavior in NLRB election campaigns I have consistently found that most individual anti-union employer tactics are associated with union win rates 10 to 20 percent lower than in units where they are not utilized. In addition, when included in a regression equation controlling for the influence of election background, bargaining-unit demographics, and union tactic variables, these individual employer actions were shown to decrease the probability that the union would win the election by between three and 22 percent, while each additional aggressive anti-union tactic the employer uses reduces the probability of the union's winning the election by seven percent (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; 1997b; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998).

This aggressive anti-union behavior does not stop when the union wins the certification election campaign. In fact, the majority of private sector employers in the US continue to resist union efforts to bargain a first contract by using a broad range of legal and illegal tactics. These include captive audience meetings, discharges for union activity, threats of plant closing, surveillance, and, in some cases, an absolute refusal to bargain. In one quarter of the units, employers threaten a full or partial shutdown directly in response to the union's winning the election. In 15 percent of the units where the union won the election, employers shut down the plant or division in response. Once again, the penalties for these violations typically consist of little more than a posted notice to employees and an order requiring the company to refrain from such activities in the future (Bronfenbrenner, 1997b).

It is therefore not surprising that many researchers have concluded that employer opposition and weak and poorly enforced labor laws, particularly in the context of a
deteriorating economic and political environment, are the primary causes of the declining organizing success of US unions. Yet, unions in the US cannot simply blame external factors for their failure to organize. They themselves must take a significant share of the blame. In the 1950s and 1960s when they had the resources and power to launch massive organizing campaigns, taking on entire industries, they failed to do so. Equally damaging, they entirely ignored, and in many cases consciously neglected, whole sectors of the economy because they were dominated by low-wage workers, women and people of color (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998). In part this was due to prejudice. But it was also due to the mistaken belief that these workers were less interested in unions and these industries were more difficult to organize. Many unions have held onto this belief into the 1990s, despite the fact that research has consistently shown that women workers, low-wage service workers, and people of color are just as likely, if not more likely, to organize (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

For decades US unions also neglected to organize professional, technical, and clerical workers in white-collar occupations, once again convinced that these workers were less interested in unions than their blue collar counterparts. This changed somewhat in the 1960s and 1970s, when, with the advent of public sector collective bargaining, public sector teachers, office workers, and administrators began to flock to unions in droves. Although by the 1990s, only 16 percent of the total US workforce was employed by state, local, and federal government entities, a third of the workers represented by AFL-CIO affiliates were employed in the public sector and public sector union density has stabilized above 35 percent. These public sector workers were able to organize into unions and bargain first agreements largely free of the aggressive employer opposition that is so prevalent in the private sector. This explains why public sector white collar workers have been so much more likely to organize than their private sector counterparts (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995a).

In the 1970s, with the elimination of the healthcare worker exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act, there was also a burst of organizing activity among private sector hospital and nursing home employees. Similarly in the 1980s, unions such as District 65 of the United Auto Workers (UAW) won several major campaigns among university clerical workers. Coupled with victories in the public sector, these efforts have brought thousands of women and people of color into the labor movement. Yet even these gains were not enough to stop the hemorrhaging of union membership in labor's former strongholds in auto, steel, construction, electronics, and textiles (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1988).

Even by the 1980s, when it was difficult for any union leader in the US to ignore the hard numbers demonstrating labor's decline, few unions were willing or able to rise to the organizing challenge. Instead, most concentrated their resources on servicing and bargaining for a shrinking membership. The majority of those who did organize ran very weak top-down organizing campaigns, which were no match for most employers. But amidst this malaise and drift, some unions were organizing and winning despite employer opposition and despite the deteriorating organizing climate. The challenge for the US
labor movement today is to determine why these unions have been more successful and which tactics and strategies contributed most to their success.

Factors contributing to union organizing success

Although there has been extensive research on factors contributing to the decline in union organizing in the US, very few studies have examined the role played by union tactics in the organizing process. In part this is because many industrial relations researchers are not convinced that union tactics play a significant role in determining election outcomes. Some, like Dickens, believe that union tactics are entirely reactive, determined solely by management tactics, and therefore should not and do not need to be included in organizing research models (1983). Others may believe that union tactics matter, but are unable to include them in their research models, both because they have limited understanding of what tactics unions have available to them in organizing drives and because they lack access to union campaign data. Thus most industrial relations research on private sector organizing in the US continues to focus primarily on the election, unit and employer variables easily accessible in NLRB databases.

In 1988, in cooperation with the Organizing Department of the AFL-CIO, I launched the first of a series of studies specifically designed to expand the body of knowledge available to the labor movement and scholars of the labor movement regarding factors contributing to union success or failure in certification election campaigns. Through surveys of lead organizers in private and public sector organizing campaigns, we have been able to determine which union tactics have the most positive impact on union organizing success while controlling for the impact of election environment, organizer background, bargaining unit demographics, and employer characteristics and tactics.\(^2\)

The findings from these studies have been consistent and clear. Unions that win elections in the context of aggressive employer opposition, tend to run very different campaigns from those that lose. In fact, union strategies and tactics were found as a group to matter just as much, if not more, in determining election outcomes than other variables, including bargaining unit demographics, employer characteristics and tactics, and the broader organizing climate. This is one of the most striking findings of the research because this means that the one element of the election process which US unions control, namely their own organizing strategy and tactics, can make a significant difference in determining whether they win or lose elections, even in a hostile organizing climate.

What we found is that unions are most likely to win certification election campaigns when they run aggressive and creative campaigns utilizing a grassroots, rank-and-file intensive

For more information on my research on the private sector union organizing campaigns see Bronfenbrenner 1993; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c and Bronfenbrenner and (uravich 1998. For research on public sector campaigns (which was conducted jointly with my co-principal investigator Tom Juravich, Director of the Labor Relations and Research Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst) see Bronfenbrenner and (uravich, 1995a; 1995b; and )uravich and Bronfenbrenner, 1998).
strategy, building a union and acting like a union from the very beginning of the campaign. Small group meetings to develop leadership and union consciousness and inoculate workers against the employer's anti-union strategy were associated with significantly higher win rates than traditional campaigns which primarily utilized gate leafleting, mass meetings, and glossy mailings to contact unorganized workers.

This is not to say that there is something inherently wrong with leaflets and mailings during organizing campaigns. Rather, what our research shows is that these leaflets and mailings act as a proxy for traditional campaigns where the union's energy is focused on indirect means of communication rather than on the personal contact and leadership development necessary to build the union and counteract the employer campaign. Unlike leaflets and mailings, person-to-person contact through house calls and small group meetings is an essential and effective means for organizers to listen to workers' concerns, allay their fears, and mobilize them around the justice and dignity issues that matter enough to them to challenge the employer and win, regardless of the brutality and intensity of the employer campaign.

Unions were also more successful when they encouraged rank-and-file participation in and responsibility for the organizing campaign. More than any other single variable, having a large, active, rank-and-file committee representative of all the different interest groups in the bargaining unit was found to be critical to union organizing success, increasing the probability of the union's winning the election by as much as 20 percent. With employers aggressively campaigning against the union eight hours a day in the workplace, these committees are the most effective vehicles for generating the worker participation and commitment necessary to counteract the fears and misinformation created by the employer campaign. Representative rank-and-file committees are also essential in order for the union to keep in touch with the issues and concerns of the workers they are attempting to organize. But perhaps most important of all, these committees give workers a sense of ownership of the union and the organizing campaign and a sense that they are part of a democratic and inclusive organization. Rank-and-file leadership and ownership of the union campaign make it difficult for the employer to paint the union as an outside third party.

Escalating pressure tactics in the workplace and the community such as petitions, mass grievances, T-shirt or button days, rallies, public forums, or leveraging the employer through suppliers, investors, stockholders or customers, were also found to have a significant positive impact on union organizing success. These actions are important because they build worker solidarity, develop leadership, reinforce commitment among pro-union workers and help convince undecided voters that they can safely support the union. These tactics also actively demonstrate support for the union among the workers and the broader community and can, therefore, compel the employer to scale back its anti-union campaign.

According to our findings, union success also depends on developing a long range campaign strategy that incorporates building for the first contract into the original
organizing process. Union win rates were significantly higher in campaigns where the union started preparing for the first contract before the election by conducting bargaining surveys, selecting the bargaining committee, and involving the workers in researching and preparing proposals. These tactics are important because they build worker confidence that the union is going to win the election and successfully bargain a first agreement and because they demonstrate to the workers that they are going to play an active role in the collective bargaining process.

Unions are also more successful in organizing when there is an emphasis on developing a culture of organizing that permeates everything the union does. This includes a serious commitment of staff and financial resources to organizing at both the local and international levels. Organizing costs money - for staff, training, cars, petrol, hotels, literature, computers, and phones. In a time of declining members and dues, most unions are struggling with how to best allocate increasingly scarce resources. Thus, unions will only be successful in transferring sufficient resources into organizing if they are able to convince union leaders and their members that the future of their union depends on organizing and that organizing depends on transferring resources from servicing to organizing.

One of the most effective ways to mobilize membership support for organizing is through the recruitment, training, and utilization of member organizers from already organized units. These volunteers are important, in part, because they can inexpensively supplement scarce organizing staff resources. However, their most important contribution is their ability to speak sincerely and powerfully from their own experiences of organizing and winning a first contract. They can credibly tell unorganized workers that not only is it possible to organize and win, but it is worth the risks, fear, and conflict that it takes to get there, and they can do this much more successfully than a paid professional organizer.

Lastly, union organizing success depends on strategic research and targeting that carefully assesses whether the workers are really ready to organize, whether the union has the expertise, experience, and resources to organize workers in this industry, and, perhaps most important of all, whether the union has the leverage to gain a first contract for the workers once the election is won.

In the late 1980s, when the first of these organizing studies was conducted, we found many of the individual components of the comprehensive strategy described above to be associated with win rates 10 to 30 percent higher than win rates in campaigns which did not use those tactics (Bronfenbrenner 1997a). The tactics associated with the highest win rates included having a representative committee, house calling the majority of the unit, using escalating pressure tactics such as solidarity days, establishing a rank-and-file bargaining committee before the election, using member volunteer organizers, and focusing on issues of dignity and justice rather than just bread and butter issues. We also found that when union building tactics were included in a regression equation controlling for the influence of other election campaign variables, most were associated with as much as a three percent increase in the percentage of votes received by the union and as much.
as a 10 percent increase in the probability of the union's winning the elections. The probability of the union's winning the election also increased by 10 percent for each additional union building tactic used by the union during the organizing campaign (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998).

Unfortunately, the study also found that, in the late 1980s, only a very small number of unions were using a comprehensive union building strategy in their certification election campaigns. Fewer than a third of the unions surveyed had representative committees, house called the majority of the members of the unit, held ten or more small-group meetings, or focused on dignity and fairness as the primary issues. Even fewer started preparing for the first contract before the election or used escalating pressure tactics such as solidarity days, community coalitions, rallies, job actions or media campaigns.

Unions were able to win every election in the extremely small number of campaigns (three percent) where the union ran a comprehensive campaign using five or more of the union building tactics described above. However the win rate was only 41 percent in campaigns where they used fewer than five union building tactics.

Since that time, we have conducted two follow-up studies of NLRB election campaigns, one of elections which took place in 1994 and a broader one of elections which took place between 1993 and 1995 (Bronfenbrenner, 1997b; 1997c; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998). Although, overall, the results from these studies are very consistent with the findings from the 1980s study, there are two important differences. First, while employer campaigns have dramatically escalated in intensity and effectiveness, the nature and intensity of union campaigns have increased to a much smaller extent. True more unions are committing more staff and financial resources to organizing, and more are also using representative committees, person-to person contact, and escalating pressure tactics, and preparing for the first contract during the organizing campaign. However, while the percentage of employers who run very aggressive campaigns has increased from 21 to 64 percent, the percentage of unions that run aggressive campaigns has increased from three to only 30 percent.

Second, in the 1990s, individual union tactics variables were found to be associated with win rates only two to 16 percent higher than campaigns in which the tactics were not used. A few tactics, when measured individually, such as house calling the majority of the unit, were now associated with lower win rates than campaigns where they were not used. In the 30 percent of the campaigns where the union did use five or more union building tactics the win rate was 50 percent, compared to 36 percent where they used fewer than five tactics and 27 percent where no union building tactics were used. More important, for the six percent of the campaigns where the union ran a true multifaceted comprehensive campaign, using 10 or more union building tactics, the win rate increased to 72 percent (Bronfenbrenner, 1997c). When a variable measuring the number of union tactics used was included in a regression equation controlling for the influence of other election campaign variables, including employer tactics, the probability of the union's winning the election increased by nine percent for each additional union building tactic.
used. At the same time the probability of the union’s winning the election declined by seven percent for each additional anti-union tactic the employer used (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998).

What the 1990s data show is that in the US today, when employer campaigns are dramatically increasing in their intensity and the broader economic, social and political climate is becoming more and more hostile to organizing, the strategies and tactics that unions use matter now, more than ever. However, there is no silver bullet, no single tactic which guarantees union victory. Instead union success depends on utilizing a multifaceted comprehensive strategy incorporating as many rank-and-file intensive union building strategies as possible, including person-to-person contact, rank-and-file leadership development, escalating pressure tactics, and building for the first contract during the organizing campaign. The more comprehensive and multifaceted the union strategy is during organizing campaigns, the more union building strategies they use, the more likely they are to win the election.

The data also show that in the last ten years more and more union organizers are trying to run more aggressive organizing campaigns. However, their approach to organizing has often been piecemeal. They have been adding on one or two new tactics to their traditional organizing practices without incorporating them into a more cohesive and comprehensive strategy. Thus, more unions may be house calling the majority of the unit, but if they are using only professional staff to conduct the house calls, without building an effective rank-and-file committee and without using volunteer organizers from other units, those house calls are much less effective. More unions are also using representative committees, but, because they are not always actively involving them in an aggressive and creative campaign, their positive impact is greatly muted.

Our data do show that in the 1990s there are more unions in the US that are consistently adopting the more comprehensive approach that is required to win in the current organizing climate. Not surprising, it is these unions that have won the lion’s share of union victories in the last five years. These are also the unions that have committed the most resources to organizing, are running the most election campaigns, are winning the largest units, and have contributed the most to the 1997 upturn in union organizing numbers. Unfortunately they still represent the minority, which is why the US labor movement is still so far from organizing the millions of new workers it needs to regain its bargaining and political power.

Conclusion

The data on union organizing in the 1990s demonstrate both the great challenges and opportunities facing unions in the US and around the world. There is no question that free market economic policies, liberalized trade practices, and the elimination or weakening of protective labor legislation have greatly increased the costs and risks to workers and unions attempting to organize in every nation. But these findings also hold out the promise
and possibility that unions can organize and win, even in the most hostile organizing climate, if they are willing to commit to a much more costly and comprehensive organizing strategy.

But they cannot delay. For too many decades unions in the US failed to accept responsibility for their declining numbers and power. Not only did they continue to blame external forces for their organizing difficulties, but they also continued to seek to be rescued by their political allies, blinded by the belief that any organizing renewal was entirely dependent on first achieving significant labor law reform. In doing so they failed to understand that the deteriorating legal climate for organizing has always been a direct result of their declining numbers and political power. In fact, only through organizing massive numbers of new members, will US unions once again have the political leverage to ensure more progressive and more effective labor legislation.

For many years labor’s declining political power in the US was cushioned by the post-World War II economic boom. By the time most of the US labor movement woke up and recognized that they were in a crisis, they faced a hostile President and a global market economy. For other industrial nations the crisis has developed much later and much more quickly. But today, whether in Great Britain, France, Australia, or New Zealand, it is no less acute.

Nowhere is this more obvious than labor’s recent experience in New Zealand. In 1991, a newly elected conservative government in New Zealand literally wiped away nearly a century of supportive collective bargaining legislation and bargaining practices and structures through the enactment of the Employment Contracts Act. In the five years that followed, union density plummeted from 41.5 percent to 19.9 percent and union organizing activity came to a virtual halt (Harbridge, 1998).

Unions in New Zealand are naturally focusing a great deal of their energy on trying to regain some protective labor legislation. Yet as the US experience of the last two decades has taught us, their resources and energy might be better spent on aggressive and strategic organizing, before their union density and union organizing success plummet any further. Labor law reform will come, but only once unions have regained the membership and political clout to make it happen.

Unions in the US are learning that, even in the most hostile organizing climate, workers do organize and unions can win, if they are willing to commit to a more aggressive and comprehensive organizing strategy which slowly but surely builds the union from the bottom up. This is how unions everywhere have always had to organize in the absence of strong enforceable protective labor legislation and this is how more and more unions around the world will have to organize in an era of free markets, free trade, deregulation, and multinational corporate restructuring. It is a great challenge, but it is also a great opportunity to build a stronger and more united labor movement around the globe.
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