This World Called Miami: ACTWU Approaches Union-Building in a Multi-Cultural Framework

Monica Russo
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Abstract

[Excerpt] In Miami, ACTWU has a local union which runs fine. We enjoy close to 100% membership in our shops—despite the fact that Florida is a "Right to Work" state—and we have a dedicated executive board. So, if it ain't broke then don't fix it, right? Wrong. While we might be running smoothly in terms of servicing our members, we are in no position to move into the future and organize any significant number of apparel workers.

Keywords

Miami, ACTWU, diversity, union organizing
LA DECISIÓN DE UNIONARSE ES DE LOS TRABAJADORES NO DEL PATRON
Sometimes we just get caught up in business as usual and we continue to do the same old same old. There’s nothing malicious in our actions. We’re just stuck in time.

In Miami, ACTWU has a local union which runs fine. We enjoy close to 100% membership in our shops—despite the fact that Florida is a “Right to Work” state—and we have a dedicated executive board. So, if it ain’t broke then don’t fix it, right? Wrong. While we might be running smoothly in terms of servicing our members, we are in no position to move into the future and organize any significant number of apparel workers.

Miami is the third largest garment production center in the United States employing over 22,000 people, but under 1,000 of these workers are unionized. Working conditions in the apparel industry in South Florida make it fertile ground for union organizing. The standard of living for industrial workers is abominable, many work without health insurance, and race and sex discrimination run rampant. And yet, union organizing is terribly difficult. Fear is pervasive, negative imagery of unions is commonplace, and ethnic divisions are acute.

ACTWU in Miami is moving beyond the same old same old to

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Monica Russo is the Florida District Manager of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU).
meet the challenges of Miami. More than only transforming our well functioning "service model" of unionism, we are building a multicultural organizing model of unionism. Our goal is to build an organization where workers exercise power on their jobs, in their union and in their communities; an organization which fights for the rights of the working class, union or not. Toward that end, ACTWU is putting some basic principles into practice:

First, we strengthen the base we already have—however small—in order to position ourselves to organize more workers into our organization. We are internally organizing—creating a culture of organizing—by involving the rank and file membership in every aspect of the union from activities to decision-making.

Second, our leadership reflects the ethnic diversity in our shops. The vast majority of workers in the clothing industry in South Florida are immigrants from countries all over Latin America and the Caribbean who have varied experience and traditions in labor and political organizing. While Cubans account for the majority of the more established employees, more and more people working in our shops are from Haiti, Colombia, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, and other countries in the region.

Not only are we electing representative leaders, but we are also striving to confront every day problems and tensions that stem from ethnic diversity. Let's face it—we are different. On the other hand, we have a lot in common, namely, we are all workers, the majority of us are immigrants, and most of us are women. We must learn to find points of unity in our diversity and strength in our differences.

Third, the union is getting involved in the struggles in our communities. We are becoming a leading voice for the issues that are important to the working class—not just to our members. By building a reputation as a defender of poor people, we broaden and deepen our organizing contacts and possibilities.

Lastly, we experiment with creative organizing strategies and tactics. While we have amassed a considerable amount of expertise in NLRB election-style organizing, this process is harrowing and excrutiatingly difficult especially in the face of expensive union-busting consultants. Though we do not intend to abandon the NLRB route, we are willing to take some risks and explore new ideas. We are tough and can take a lot of knocks, but we need to set up some small victories that we can celebrate—that will give us the inspiration and the motivation to continue on to the harder battles.

The transformation of ACTWU in Miami, as guided by these
four principles, takes place in the everyday struggles of our members. From internal organizing to external organizing to political action to hurricane relief, we are building upon our differences and creating an organization that fights for the rights of all of our sisters and brothers in the working class Miami.

**GETTING OUT OF THE SAME OLD SAME OLD**

In order to build our multicultural union, we had to reorganize it. The very structure of ACTWU Local 694 in Miami impeded our goals. Until our restructuring, Local 694 had been an amalgamated local, covering five plants which range in size from 320 to 8 employees. Local 694’s Executive Board was composed of 12 people either elected or appointed from each of the five shops: 10 Cuban women, one white woman, and one Haitian man. Though the 12 E-Board members who controlled the local were fine trade union leaders, this structure led to a completely inactive membership. The board met once a month; membership meetings were not held at all.

We decided that only by restructuring the local would we create an organizing culture, develop new leaders who represent the diversity of our membership, and organize new members. By disamalgamating, each plant would elect its own officers and stewards, hold monthly meetings, and resolve to elect representative leadership for each plant.

The danger of disamalgamating a local is losing the connection between the shops when each local meets and deliberates separately. In order to counter such a possibility, we decided to form the ACTWU South Florida Council, a citywide organization which would unite all of the locals. While each local will resolve its own grievances and shop floor problems, the Council will address the bigger questions that affect our entire membership such as organizing, politics, and community issues.

It all sounded good on paper—but would it work? How would members respond to the proposed restructuring? We held meetings to vote on the new structure as well as to nominate and elect new leadership. Though our members have lots of responsibilities outside the factory such as cooking, cleaning, attending church, and raising children, we generated enough momentum around the proposal that the participation far exceeded what we had hoped for. Veteran union officers as well as young immigrant women rose to the challenge of leading their organization. There was cheering and shouting and behind-the-scenes organizing. The workers finally had a forum to express their creative energies.
WE'RE DIFFERENT PEOPLE, IN THE SAME BOAT

With a union structure in place which encouraged the energy and participation of our members, we could get on to the hard work of building a vibrant, organizing union. In a local as diverse as ours, we have to deal with cultural and language differences or we will get nowhere. In many ways, the factory or union is a microcosm of the society we live in, so if conflicts exist in Miami, they will exist on the shop floor too. In our local, the greatest challenge is to create bridges between the diverse nationalities in our shops: particularly between the Haitians and Latinos. We've had both setbacks and successes, and each new day brings a new challenge to our work.

"Fok ou" or, Cross Cultural Conflicts

Over the last 30 years, the Cuban middle class has managed to achieve a tremendous amount of social, economic and political clout in Miami, but only after years of struggle. Our Cuban members recall when they arrived in this country in the 1950's, signs in the windows of many apartment buildings read "NO PETS, NO CHILDREN, NO CUBANS." Factories were the only employers who would hire Cubans, even those who were fluent in English and held university degrees. The conditions in the factories were horrible; women were told that if they got sick or if they didn't make production they would be fired. "It doesn't matter, a new plane full of you Cubans will arrive tomorrow and I'll replace you" was the typical threat. Because the Anglo community reacted viciously to the arrival of the Cubans, today many of our Cuban members can relate to the pain that the Haitians are experiencing as new immigrants in Miami.

The Haitian community is extremely impoverished and suffers from racist and negative imagery which depicts Haitians as AIDS-carrying drains on the economy. Haitian refugees flee the persecution of the military in their country to find themselves locked up in Krome Detention center, denied access to legal counsel and medical aid, and without basic necessities. Though the Haitian community takes to the streets to express themselves politically, they have almost no electoral power, as the Cubans do, because many Haitians are not U.S. citizens. Even though the United States does not recognize the current government of Haiti, 98% of the Haitians seeking political asylum are denied this refugee status although Cubans are welcomed with open arms.

If our union acquiesces to these community conflicts, we are doomed. ACTWU is an immigrant union with members from a
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whole gamut of nations. We must fight for just and equitable immigration policies that treat everyone by the same standards. While the Cuban middle class has made considerable gains, it is not uncommon to find Cuban workers making $4.25 an hour with no health insurance in nonunion factories. We must point out that Cuban workers and Haitian workers—as well as other immigrant workers—may not have arrived on the same boat, but they certainly are in the same boat economically in Miami. And that boat is going to sink unless we stick together as workers.

But people just can't be told to not be racist or to love such-and-such—that's mere polemics. We gotta get out there and DO. Overcoming racial and ethnic divisions starts by asking each other questions, housecalling together, going to events together—the practical experiences of building a union.

Of course, this is easier said than done when our members don't speak the same language. The Cuban and Latino communities speak Spanish and the Haitians speak Creole; a few of our members speak broken English. So how do we communicate when we don't speak one another's language? And what kinds of problems do we face because of the language barrier?

A recent incident at one of our plants illustrates what we're up against. We happened to be holding a training at the union office for 10 Haitian members, talking about how to build the union, when a Haitian worker entered, announcing she had just been
fired for using obscene language and gestures. The worker, Yolanda, claimed she was fired unjustly, and that this was a blatant instance of discrimination against Haitians.

The whole class returned to the factory with Yolanda, pledging to stick by one another. Yolanda, her shop steward and I went to the plant manager's office to find out what was going on. He said Yolanda was fired for saying "fuck you" to one of her co-workers and supervisors and for flipping off a couple of clericals in the office. Yolanda denied the story. She speaks a little bit of English—she does not curse period—and she maintained that she certainly did not curse in English.

We interviewed all of the people involved. There was tension between a Cuban employee and Yolanda around how work was distributed. According to Yolanda, the Cuban woman had thrown a jacket on Yolanda's sewing machine and Yolanda didn't like how it was thrown over there. She felt it was disrespectful and so she said something loudly in Creole "fok ou" which sounds like "fuck you" but it means "you have to do". Yolanda was also very emphatic with her gestures, waving her hands in the air, so it looked like she was giving people the finger. Naturally if she was flipping someone off in the factory, that would be justifiably offensive to her co-workers. As shop chairperson, Aleyda, who happens to be Cuban, felt compelled to represent and defend her co-worker and sister union member, Yolanda. Aleyda helped explain to the other employee involved that Yolanda's actions were the result of her frustration and it was simply a miscommunication. She argued with the plant manager that Yolanda was a good employee who had simply lost her cool. We ended up working it out and we won Yolanda's job back.

These incidents happen because there is animosity to begin with and people look and wait for something to go wrong. We just have to recognize that we're not going to change these things over night; it's something that's going to happen little by little and we have to celebrate our victories however small.

"No Somos Enemigos" or, Finding Common Ground

As we recognize our differences, we constantly have to challenge ourselves to find points of unity so we can act in solidarity. In our trainings and organizing campaigns we involve Haitian, Latino, and African-American rank and file volunteers. Our regular meetings are conducted in Creole, Spanish, and English. Translating can be very trying, tedious, and stressful so in particularly important meetings we hold a "collective" meeting then split into groups by language to get more intensive exchanges going, then
reconvene for the finale.

Collectivity gives us a chance to share each other’s languages and culture. Little by little we start to say a phrase or two in someone else’s language. Sometimes we just hug one another to communicate where words don’t suffice. Just being in the same room together forces us to learn something about each other and sometimes we are surprised to see how much we have common. On the other hand, separation gives each language group a chance to express themselves in a deeper and more intense dialogue. Many times, the majority language group will dominate the group discussion and the minority group will feel uncomfortable participating. The separation therefore is an important stage in building the self-confidence of all of the members and it gives us an opportunity to break down our inhibitions and air our complaints.

Greater understanding and appreciation for each other is emerging in the local. We recently held a tri-lingual union meeting at one of our plants right after work and a comment was made that during an employee’s probationary period she has no job security. This issue was of particular importance because it was a new factory and almost everyone was still on probation. Well, job security might not be provided for in the contract during that period, but as Nubya, a Latina woman put it, our job security depends on us sticking together. She said:

No somos enemigos, we are not enemies.
We can’t compete against each other.
We can’t see each other as black or white or Haitian or Spanish. We are all workers. We all need jobs. When we see a co-worker is struggling to make it—we need to reach out.

At which point Bernadette, a young Haitian woman yelled out, “We Haitians love all Spanish,” and she and her Haitian co-workers broke into a popular Creole political chant:

Yon sel nou feb, ensam nou fo,
Ensam, ensam, nou se lavalas!

Alone we are weak, together we are strong,
Together, together, we are ‘lavalas’* (the power)!

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*‘Lavalas’ is the name of the popular movement in Haiti which resulted in the democratic election of President Jean Bertrand Aristide with 67% of the vote. ‘Lavalas’ literally means the gushing water that washes away the debris after the storm.
The following week, Nubya and some of her Haitian co-workers were discussing the work schedule at the factory which was inconvenient for many of the Haitians who have to rely on public transportation. Nubya then spoke to her Latina co-workers and explained the plight of the Haitians; she also wrote a letter to management requesting that the hours of work be changed by 15 minutes to accommodate all of the employees. The company agreed to change the hours if it was the will of the majority. Nubya proceeded to mobilize the people to vote for the change in hours—even if it did not affect them specifically—to be in solidarity with their sisters. "We all have to feed our families," she maintained. Nubya was showered with kisses and hugs from her Haitian co-workers, "Mamita, you’re a buena persona!"

"Boom Boomin’ for the Union"
Until we began the transformation into an organizing union, most of our Florida members only thought of the union as a means for free insurance, low cost insurance for their spouses, a retirement plan, and the place to get their claim forms. Restructuring the local and our internal organizing represented only part of the process of changing the culture of our union. Last spring, we started pulling people out of the plant on lost time to do some external organizing. At this point, organizing was still a concept in our union, not yet a reality. We started off with a brief training
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where we discussed what the union meant to us and why organizing was crucial to our survival. We then proceeded to some practical activity where we housecalled some workers at a couple of factories locally to see if there was any interest in unionizing. No campaigns actually came out of these initial runs, but it was really exciting for people because they got out in the street and started articulating what the union meant for them. People started developing a real pride in their union and a real sense of their own potential.

Several of our Miami members then travelled to Tampa as volunteer organizers for a NLRB election campaign going on at a huge garment factory. We brought five members full-time out of our plants and an additional 15-20 workers volunteered a weekend here or a few days there. This major campaign brought our members into contact with organizers and staff and members from all over the region, many of whom have a very progressive concept of unionism and who have years of organizing experience. Most folks who comprise ACTWU’s Southern organization are Black or white American; by working with our Miami members, they too were exposed to new cultures and new experiences.

Take this white guy, Art, from the Cone Mills textile plant in North Carolina. On his first day in Florida, Art met Consuelo from Columbia who now lives in Miami and works at an ACTWU Fashion 500 apparel factory. Neither one spoke the other’s language, yet Art was struggling to explain to Consuelo how the hurricane up in South Carolina blew the hair right off the horse’s back and Consuelo was nodding her head in earnest. I don’t know if she understood what Art was saying, but they had certainly made a connection.

A couple weeks later, I got in Art’s car and he had a Spanish tape playing because he wanted to learn how to communicate.

Or take Arcine, an African American woman out of North Carolina and Julia and Consuelo who both are sewing operators in Miami. Arcine doesn’t speak any Spanish and Consuelo and Julia don’t speak any English. They’d come to the morning staff meetings giggling and laughing after a night of salsa and soul; Julia would be saying something in Spanish and Arcine would be emphatically nodding her head in agreement—they knew exactly what one another were talking about. They had developed this body language, this chemistry where they could communicate with one another.

Or take Marlene, who’s from Columbia and works at Kuppenheimer in Miami as a machine operator and Eugene, a young African American out of the Organizing Institute who is from
Buffalo, New York. They went to the factory together to pass out leaflets. The first day Eugene came back singing a little Spanish song about ‘pescado’ which Marlene had taught him. The next day when they returned from leafletting, Marlene was shaking her thing and singing a reggae song that Eugene had taught her. She was “boom, boom, boomin.” Marlene learned some interesting and useful phrases like “chill baby” and “what’s up” and our gringo staff learned how to drink cafe con leche, eat arroz con frijoles, and give out kisses on the cheek.

Though we didn't win the election, it was nonetheless an incredible experience for everyone involved. All of us were introduced to a new experience of communicating cross-culturally. Sure there were times when people would get frustrated about the translations, not understanding, not able to express themselves. But we really learned respect for each other’s cultures. Such simple acts of sharing food, sharing songs—organizing together—are transformative experiences.

**POLITICS IN MIAMI**

We often become so focused on grievances and leafletting that we forget that there is another world out there. In fact, last summer, some of us were so busy housecalling that we didn't even know that a hurricane was about to hit Miami in a matter of hours. Political activity offers us the chance to take our organizing model beyond the confines of the factory. When we put our shop-floor experience to work in the realm of politics we find that we have more power than we ever imagined.

We are developing a reputation in Miami as being multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, aggressive, and determined to win. In late 1992, ACTWU spearheaded an effort to expose the Bush Administration's trade scandal whereby U.S. taxpayer dollars were being used to finance the closing and relocation of U.S. factories to Central America and the Caribbean. The issue received broad national coverage, but we decided to take some action in Miami. We got together a crew of Nicaraguans, Haitians, Cubans, and others and demonstrated in front the office of FUSADES, the Salvadoran recruitment agency funded by USAID. Then 35 of us went inside the building to try to meet with FUSADES officials: they refused to speak and yelled out to the crowd: “Why don’t you take your problems to Fidel to help you?” That’s when our members got really upset; they held the line, demanding answers: “Why are you trying to send our jobs away? What are you going to do when we lose our jobs? We want answers from You, not from Fidel!”
This demonstration sparked our members' involvement in the Clinton/Gore campaign. Historically, the Cuban community has been right wing and Republican, but our members started to get bold: to work for Clinton and an end to the anti-worker administration. Anita Cofino, our Service Representative and daughter of a legendary Cuban trade union leader—Angel Cofino—became one of the principal spokespersons for the organization of Cuban-American women for Clinton. Representing Labor, Anita spoke out on workers' issues at debates on the Spanish radio and television stations as well as in the Miami Herald and other print media.

Our Latin, Haitian, and African-American members got out in the street and did whatever it took to mobilize the vote for Clinton and other important local candidates, such as Carrie Meek, who became the first African American to be elected to U.S. congress from Florida since Reconstruction. We went in to public housing, business sections, parks, senior citizens homes. We leafletted non-union workers in industrial parks heightening our visibility as defenders of workers' interests. Although some other organizations were a little timid about going in certain areas or doing certain things (like putting up or uprooting signs), we weren't afraid of anything. In one situation, one of our members knocked on someone's door and a man answered with not one stitch of clothing on and without missing a beat, she told him he better go put some clothes on and carry his butt to go vote.

ACTWU members—of all nationalities—commemorated the inauguration of Aristide and protested the U.S.'s inhumane treatment of Haitian refugees in a march from Little Haiti to INS offices.
TRANSFORMING FEAR INTO CONFIDENCE

While ACTWU is developing a presence in Miami, we are still up against the wall. Union organizing has become increasingly difficult in the past decade due to a crumbling economy, sophisticated terrorist tactics on the part of union-busting consultants, an unsympathetic media, and 12 years of openly anti-worker administrations. Nonetheless, we union organizers go out there and we housecall secretly and we sign people up clandestinely on union cards and then as soon as the boss gets his first whiff of the union he calls a meeting and threatens to fire anyone who signed a card and to close the plant if the union comes in. Despite our steadfast determination, organizing is quite a difficult proposition these days. Innovative approaches have become a survival tactic.

First, we are experimenting with playing a significant role in the Miami economy by being the source for skilled operators and new jobs in the garment industry. We see this as fundamentally helping economic development in the city and building our presence in the community at the same time. A recent situation indicates the promise of this approach. [See also LRR 19, "I Never Lost Hope that We'd Come Out Ahead"]. The owner of a newly set-up factory for expensive men's shirts needed experienced sewing operators. He agreed to recognize the union if ACTWU found skilled workers for him. So we began approaching workers whom we knew from nonunion factories. We asked, "Do you want to work in a union factory with better wages and benefits?" Of course, the workers jumped at the opportunity. We now have close to 100% membership at this new factory. We had approached some of these workers several months earlier to see if they were interested in unionizing their own factories and received a very different response: "Yes, we would theoretically like to have a union here, but no, we are not willing to sign a card or to risk losing our jobs." This one example shows that in the absence of the threat factor employees are much more eager to unionize.

Another way to grapple with employer intimidation and to develop workers' confidence in organizing is to get out in the community and be there to respond to the needs of all workers. We plan to set up a worker's rights center—not a charitable association—to root ourselves firmly in the community and become an organization which defends workers rights in general. If someone works at a nonunion apparel factory and gets hurt on the job, chances are their company won't help them get workers' compensation. We plan to set up an educational program whereby workers are trained about their rights on the job: the right to
unionize, the right to a safe and healthy workplace, the right to workers' compensation, the right to fair wages, the right to work free from race and sex discrimination. More importantly, we will train workers how to exercise these fundamental rights. We can fight for the community's needs, not just the interests of our members. In doing so, we create a culture of organizing that extends beyond the walls of the factory or union hall.

CONCLUSION

The key to ACTWU's success and our greatest challenge lie in our diversity. Our multicultural union-building means fighting racism and discrimination, celebrating our differences, and constantly striving to find points of unity. Our task as organizers is to create as many opportunities for us all to change through action.

Human beings have an incredible capacity to develop ways to relate to one another when in need. In transforming one's attitudes—in transforming our unions—we don't do it by sitting around and talking about it. We have to get out there and roll up our sleeves. We have to live with each other, be with each other, and our human potential and our rich experiences start coming out. That's how we're building a multicultural organizing union in this world called Miami.
