

A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (2)

By Harry Kelber

This is the second of eight articles on union organizing.

CORRECTING THE MESSAGE

It has become an annual ritual that every June, for an entire week, central labor councils and local unions around the country, mostly the same ones, stage a variety of events to “shine a spotlight” on employers who deny their workers the right to join a union.

Sponsored by the AFL-CIO’s Voice@Work, “7 Days in June” is designed to inform the public about the harsh, often illegal methods that employers use to maintain a “union-free environment.” Through rallies, parades, picket lines, candlelight vigils and tons of flyers, the unions describe, with facts and figures, the obstacles workers face when they try to organize:

- Employers spend \$300 million a year on consultants trained to stop workers from forming unions.
- 10,000 workers are fired each year for attempting to join a union.
- 91% of employers force their employees to attend “captive audience” meetings where they have to listen to anti-union propaganda.
- 75% of employers use supervisors to pressure workers in one-on-one meetings to disown the union when they try to organize.

* In one-third of the cases where workers vote for a union, employers never agree to a first contract.

At rallies and teach-ins, unions invite workers who have been fired or intimidated to tell their stories of what happened to them when they tried to join the union. The laudable purpose of the “7 Days in June” is to stir public condemnation of anti-labor employers, and sympathy and support for pro-union workers.

But what is a sympathetic public to do? Since no follow-up

actions are proposed, what help will unions get from these demonstrations? Will people have to wait until next June to hear the same story?

Consider the reaction of unorganized workers to union admissions of the relentless power of employers. They don't have to be told about the intimidation they must endure, because most of them know all about this from personal experience. What these workers want to hear is what is the union going to do about it.

Listening to the incessant talk about mean-spirited employers, why would workers want to risk their job by professing pro-union sympathy?

To appeal to unorganized workers, the message of the June demonstrations should have been: "It pays to belong to a union," with speeches and placards at picket lines telling why. Let the public know about the 16 million Americans who have joined unions and why they're a lot better off than those in non-union workplaces.

Instead of featuring mostly victims of employer hostility at Voice@Work rallies, why not invite workers who successfully defied their employers and gained a union contract? Those stories would be better received by non-union workers than tales of intimidation and defeat.

USEFUL YEAR-'ROUND ACTIVITY

if unions are to create a favorable climate for organizing, they must find ways to promote their public image and agenda throughout the year. It would be very helpful if they had an abundance of well-informed speakers with attractive personalities and a dash of wit and humor, who could effectively communicate organized labor's position on a range of issues.

Sad to say, such labor speakers are in short supply. Of the 54 members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, maybe four or five, if that many, have appeared on national radio or TV or prominent talk shows--and rarely more than once.

There are two things the AFL-CIO can do about labor's lack of exposure on the electronic media. It can establish a program that will provide intensive training in public speaking to labor leaders at all levels. Those who aspire to union leadership should be required to become effective public speakers.

The AFL-CIO should also insist that its speakers be invited to press interviews and as panelists on radio and TV talk shows, especially when the subject is the economy, where workers and their unions have a vital stake. Unions should exert whatever leverage they have to get their views on the air.

Unions must find at least a few speakers who can so please a national television audience that they will be called back again and again to perform. What better way to reach millions of Americans with labor's message--and at no cost.

Speakers Bureaus and 'Truth Teams'

One of the best ways to acquaint residents of a community with the advantages that unions offer is through well-trained speakers that can command their attention. Each central labor council should not find it too difficult to establish a Speakers Bureau, where qualified members of affiliated local unions can be trained as public speakers to argue the case for unionism.

The Speakers Bureau can press for invitations from high schools and colleges, churches, political gatherings and organizations of minorities and women. Its members can challenge right-wing and anti-union groups to debates. They can pressure their way onto local radio and TV talk shows. They can serve as a support group in the community where workers are on strike or face difficult negotiations.

"Truth teams" are an important adjunct of a functioning Speakers Bureau, especially during the political season. They can fluster anti-labor politicians, editors and commentators by exposing any lies, distortions and omissions in what they try to pass off as truth.

In our fast-moving society, the labor movement can't limit itself to a major action once in a while. Employer opposition to unions is fiercer than ever, and so the battle for union rights must be fought constantly and consistently if labor is to regain its former strength.

Focus on 'Right to Work' States

Unions face major roadblocks when they try to organize in 22 states (nearly all in the South and Midwest.) that forbid union shop and job security agreements. In these so-called "right to work" (RTW) states, workers are not required to join a union, but when

a labor-management contract is signed, they can enjoy all of its benefits. It's hard to win an organizing campaign with "free loaders" sitting on the sidelines, waiting to cash in on the benefits.

The ban on union shop agreements by states is permitted under Section 14(b) of the National Labor Relations Act, as amended by the Taft Hartley Act of 1947.

Although unions are severely handicapped in their organizing efforts because of repressive legislation, the AFL-CIO, in the past 50 years has been unable--and has not even seriously tried--to eliminate the union-busting "right to work" legislation in any of the 22 states that enforce its anti-labor provisions.

The AFL-CIO must stop being defensive and begin to challenge "right to work" laws in every state where they exist. Its affiliated state federations must be given the resources to launch a major campaign to get rid of them.

The South continues to be a haven for profit-hungry corporations, attracted by its lower wages and anti-union laws. Many unions have suffered substantial membership losses as a result of these relocations.

In a full-scale southern organizing campaign, unions have some appealing talking points: Workers in states where free collective bargaining is protected are significantly better off than their counterparts in RTW states. They earn more money, get higher cash benefits when they are unemployed, enjoy better pensions, suffer fewer fatalities and their children have better schools and public facilities.

As difficult as it is, the AFL-CIO and its affiliated international unions must take on the task of organizing private and public sector workplaces throughout the South. It can't possibly make significant gains in membership, unless it organizes the millions of workers below the Mason-Dixon line.

Article 3 of the series will be posted on Monday, Nov. 24.