

A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (5)

By Harry Kelber

This is the fifth of eight articles on union organizing.

THE EMPLOYER OFFENSIVE

Organizers should be aware that employers have access to U.S. Labor Dept. reports which unions are required to file annually. These reports inform them about the union's structure, membership, dues and assessments, salaries and expenses of officers and staff, constitution and bylaws.

Employers can also get copies of union contracts and data on the number, length and outcome of strikes, and the union's successes and failures in previous organizing campaigns. Through government documents, newspapers and anti-labor publications, they can collect dossiers on alleged union violence and corruption.

Employers will inform their workers about whatever evidence they believe is damaging to the union. Organizers must be prepared with quick, convincing answers.

Most employer attacks against unions are predictable, because they have used them again and again to defeat unions. Organizers should have a thorough advanced knowledge of those tactics and devise ways to counter them, depending on the circumstances of a particular campaign.

Employers, through their lawyers and high-priced "management consultants," will vigorously oppose the manner and content of the authorization cards that unions will be collecting from workers at the start of their campaigns. They will tell employees that by signing the cards, they will be surrendering their rights to the union and may risk losing their jobs when the employer finds out about their disloyalty.

If the management can prevent 30% of their employees from signing the cards, the union can't petition for a National Labor Relations Board election. The organizing campaign is dead in its tracks.

Organizers shouldn't have difficulty persuading workers that their signatures on the cards refer only to union representation and will not be available to their employer. Furthermore, the union will not be using the NLRB election process, so it can continue collecting cards until it has a majority.

A favorite tactic of the consultants is to spread a rumor that if "outsiders" (the union) are allowed into the workplace to dictate policies, the enterprise will cease being competitive; there'll be layoffs and a possible plant shutdown or a relocation elsewhere.

Actually, it's the "insiders" (employees), not "outsiders," who make bosses and managers lose sleep for fear they might decide to join a union. It's sheer nonsense to say that the union wants to take over management's job of running the company. What most workers want is a voice in determining their conditions of employment, and that's what the union provides.

Management consultants often make a big deal of the dues and assessments that employees would have to pay if they became union members. They may circulate a leaflet containing photos of various home appliances that workers could possess for the cost of the union dues they would have to pay.

You may wonder why employers are suddenly so interested in saving their employees' money. What really bothers them is that the dues money will be used to strengthen the union, so it can be more effective at the bargaining table.

Employers try to frighten their workers by warning them that a union can force them out on strike for months or even years. The truth is that no strike can be called without the approval of the employees. Unions call strikes only as a last resort, when every possible effort to compromise has been exhausted.

It's worth noting that more than 97% of the thousands of collective bargaining contracts that are negotiated annually are settled without a strike. There would be even fewer strikes if employers would negotiate with unions in good faith.

Organizers also have to contend with persistent criticism about the high salaries and perks of union officers, many of whom justify their pay because they work endless hours in a high pressure job that requires them to deal with a constant flow of problems in behalf of hundreds of thousands of union members.

The pay of officers has to be approved by the membership, in accordance with the provision in the union constitution. Salaries of officers depend on their responsibilities, the size of the organization, the wage standards of the members and the size of the union treasury.

Admittedly, there are labor leaders whose salaries are excessive, but there are also those who work for below-par pay because they believe in unionism.

The company CEO or his top manager, at some point, will send “love letters” to the homes of employees, advising the spouse and other family members about the dangers that unions represent for the company and its work force. Union organizers should be able to offer a quick response to employer arguments in a mailing to the same audience

”Captive audience meetings” are probably the surest way a management consultant has to jolt employees into deserting a union. Workers are forced to listen to speeches and watch videotapes that depict union leaders as greedy, strike-happy, sinister, violent and despotic.

With a union, they’re told, they’ll have to pay whatever dues and assessments are demanded of them. They could be ordered out on strike by union “bosses” and be subjected to violent situations where they could be seriously hurt.

Many “captives” leave the meeting in a state of shock, even though union organizers have told them beforehand what to expect. Some may ask organizers to tear up their signed authorization cards.

Organizers must react swiftly to counter the damage that these meetings can cause the campaign. It is essential that they talk to all pro-union workers, either in groups or as individuals, to refute the employer propaganda. They can demand equal time to address the employees. They can publicize the company’s improper behavior in the local media. They can produce a video giving the union’s side of the story.

One of the employer’s favorite arguments is that all that the union can offer is promises, but he’s the one who sets the pay for his workers. To respond, organizers can produce scores of examples of workers who cashed in on those promises, winning higher pay and better benefits in a union-negotiated contract.

At some point, the employer may play his most potent trump card: he fires one or more pro-union workers, sending a clear, unmistakable message to the rest of his work force to forget about the union if they want to hold onto their jobs. The way that organizers respond to these illegal firings may determine whether the union organizing campaign succeeds or fails.

How organizers use their two major assets — union volunteer teams and community advocates — to develop winning campaigns will be the subject of the next article.

Article 6 will be posted on Monday, December 15.