

New Game Plan For Union Organizing (8)

By Harry Kelber

This is the last of eight articles on union organizing.

REACHING THE UNORGANIZED

More than 40 million unorganized workers would like to join a union, we're told, but apparently they feel it's too risky. Wouldn't it be great if we could unionize even five million?

But where are they? What industries and occupations do they represent? How do we reach them to talk over their problems and convince them to join?

Fortunately, we have a golden opportunity to build a huge data base of unorganized workers. In this election year, we'll have tens of thousands of union volunteers holding one-on-one conversations with workers on their jobs and in their homes. They should be able to find out how unorganized workers feel about unions and come up with a list that can be used in organizing campaigns.

And why not ask each of the AFL-CIO's 13 million members if they know of any unorganized workers among their friends, relatives, neighbors and shopmates?

The hard part will be knowing how to use those lists to win organizing campaigns.

Five Changes for Successful Organizing

First. If unions expect to grow, they'll have to multiply the number of their organizing campaigns. They'll need hundreds of new, well-trained organizers. The three-day training that wannabe organizers get from the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute is clearly inadequate.

The AFL-CIO should establish four regional training centers, where organizers would be carefully selected, given rigorous classroom and field training and then certified, after having met professional standards.

Second: Major organizing campaigns need a large supporting cast of union volunteers, organized in teams, each with special responsibilities. With strong encouragement from union leaders, a sufficient number of volunteer teams can be assembled for each organizing campaign.

Rank-and-file volunteers are better at dealing with the hesitations of unorganized workers about joining a union, because they've been in that predicament and had to make the same decisions.

Thousands of retired union members who have knowledge and experience about organizing should be invited to join the campaigns.

Third: Unions should disentangle from the National Labor Relations Board, which is heavily weighted in favor of the employer. For tactical reasons, they should organize workers where they live and are more readily accessible, than where they work, under the watchful eye of their employer.

They should strive to win recognition by card check, rather than through the frustrating NLRB election process that favors employers. When a union has gained a substantial majority of signed authorization cards in a workplace, it can ask some accredited agency or respected citizens committee to certify it as bargaining representative for the workers. When that happens, the employer will be under heavy public pressure to negotiate a first contract with the union.

Fourth: It is of utmost importance that unions establish cordial working relations with communities in the area where the employer has his workplace. Communities can provide a valuable home base of operations for the organizing campaign.

There are many ways in which a community can help the campaign, once its residents are convinced that the cause is just and they are kept fully informed. To earn their cooperation, unions must also find opportunities to be helpful to communities.

Fifth: The AFL-CIO must do a better job of promoting labor's message to the public. It needs to reach a national audience with weekly radio and television programs that can match those of the media networks. It must make those programs so interesting and informative that millions of workers, union and non-union, will become better informed and rally behind labor's agenda.

Will Labor Leaders Respond to the Challenge?

AFL-CIO leaders have been unable to arrest the decline of union membership, no matter what strategies they have tried. The one thing they have failed to do is involve union members--their most precious asset--in the pressing task of rebuilding the labor movement.

Some union leaders are afraid--and some don't know how--to discuss organizing problems with their members or pay any attention to their criticisms and suggestions. Yet they ought to know that without massive support from the rank-and-file, the smartest strategies won't significantly add members or strength to unions.

Since there is an urgent need for new organizing strategies, I decided to publish "A New Game Plan for Union Organizing," based on years of study and personal observation.

It would be nice to get some comments, even critical ones, from union leaders, but I will not be surprised if they respond in their habitual fashion--with silence.

Whether any or all of the "game plan" makes sense, I am glad to let readers judge.

End of Series