



A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (1)

By Harry Kelber

This is the first of a series of eight articles on union organizing.

The Missing Ingredient

Since 1995, when John Sweeney became its president, the AFL-CIO has given organizing its highest priority. Its search for a magic formula to increase labor's organizing power has been a major topic at virtually every AFL-CIO convention and at meetings of its 54-member Executive Council for years.

Unions have spent tens of millions of dollars on organizing, hired and trained hundreds of young, eager organizers, held countless sessions where the most experienced organizers devised supposedly winning strategies, conducted scores of conferences and seminars and produced tons of literature with detailed explanations of how to organize.

Our labor leaders have tried just about everything that promises to improve labor's organizing record, and the best minds within the labor movement are still wrestling with the problem.

Yet, despite the best efforts of the Sweeney leadership, unions today represent only 13.2% of the nation's work force, a considerable drop from the 13.9% at the time Sweeney took office. (In 1980, the figure was 23%.) The situation is worse in the private sector, where less than 9% of the total work force belongs to unions, the lowest in six decades.

There are 40 million workers out there who say they want to join a union. We've got some good "selling points" to convince them to join: Union members earn a lot more than non-union workers, and that goes for women and minorities. Their benefits are greater, and they have better protection on the job.

By any measure, belonging to a union is a good deal, particularly for workers who are hard-pressed to pay their bills. So why aren't those millions of workers rushing to union halls to join?

The short answer is that there's a lot that's wrong with the way most AFL-CIO unions conduct their organizing campaigns. In this series, we'll deal with them, one at a time.

First, unions are not using their most precious asset for organizing: their own members. They need an enormous pool of volunteer organizers from their own ranks if they're ever going to take on the nation's major non-union corporations.

Employed union members, not paid staff, are the ones who can best tell unorganized workers in their industry, in specific, bread-and-butter terms, why it pays to belong to a union. They can also deal with the anxieties and fears that non-union workers have about joining, because union members — 16 million of them — once had to face the same problems and overcame them. Volunteer organizers are best equipped to turn the fear and suspicion of non-union workers into trust.

Today, AFL-CIO leaders feel that the big problem is that unions are not spending enough money on organizing. They believe that if unions spent 30% or more of their budget on organizing, they'd regain labor's former strength. Sure, money is important, but the real problem is how the money allocated for organizing is spent.

Unions hire organizers, many with little more than a weekend of training at the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute, and tell them to go out and organize a non-union workplace, where they face seasoned union-busters. They may spend a year or more on a campaign that, as often as not, ends in a stalemate or defeat. Organizing activities are not integrated into the life of the union, and the average member is rarely involved. If organizers had a corps of volunteers they could assign to the numerous tasks required of any effective campaign, there's no question their chances of success would be improved.

So why don't union leaders make a strong effort to inspire their members to become volunteer organizers? The answer is that many of them don't want to. They're scared that once the rank-and-file is activated, they won't be able to control them. They might be nurturing candidates who will try to take away their jobs.

There are other labor leaders who, even if they wanted to, do not have the leadership skills to persuade members to become involved in organizing. Indeed, it's no easy task, even for the most competent union leaders. Unfortunately, most members see no need to spend their free time at boring meetings or becoming involved in union causes. They have so many better things to do that require their attention. They pay their union dues and expect their officers to deliver better pay and benefits in every new contract. Many even resent spending money on organizing, because they're worried about new members competing with them for available jobs, especially in an economic slowdown.

The challenge for union leaders is to convince their members about the stark alternatives they face: either they help raise the wages and benefits of unorganized workers to union standards or they compete with them in a "race to the bottom." In short, unless the union grows and acquires a dominant role in the industry, there is the ever-present danger that union jobs will disappear.

Teams of Volunteer Organizers

For local union leaders, recruiting teams of volunteer organizers should be a top priority. They should use their publications, mailings, shop meetings and the union Web site to seek out volunteers. They should realize that the union's future may largely depend on these volunteers, whom they must assure that the work they'll be doing will be interesting and rewarding, as well as in their self-interest.

Many members will be flattered to be asked to help the union- probably for the first time — and if the appeal is properly presented, quite a few can be expected to respond favorably.

Union leaders will find many ways to highlight the importance of volunteer organizers. They can be given pins, caps, T-shirts, jackets and other paraphernalia in recognition of their services

to the union. Their activities can be featured in the union's official publication and reported at union meetings. They might be invited to a monthly luncheon with the officers to discuss organizing progress.

Organizers will need to set up several teams of from five to ten volunteers to carry out specific assignments. All volunteers should get at least a weekend of intensive training on how organizing campaigns are conducted and the responsibilities of each team.

Care must be taken, especially at first, to keep assignments simple and understandable and to clearly define achievable objectives. Records should be kept of each team's performance and periodically reviewed by organizers to correct weaknesses and praise accomplishments.

What Volunteers Can Do

If unions are to grow, they must organize many more non-union workplaces than they now do. They need accurate information about all of the non-union employers in the area that falls within their jurisdiction. A team of volunteers should be assigned to scour the territory and compile and update a list of non-union workplaces.

To get a campaign off the ground, organizers can assemble another team of volunteers whose prime task is to canvass communities and build a roster of employees in the targeted workplaces. They can get help from members of other unions and sympathetic residents.

Volunteers can strike up conversations in fast-food restaurants, bowling alleys, bars, shopping malls and other places that workers frequent. The union can buy radio spots and newspaper ads to reinforce its organizing message, and invite non-union workers to respond with telephone calls, letters and e-mails. Organizing news would have a prominent place on the union's Web site.

Organizers shape their strategies based on what they know or can find out about the employer, his workers and the community where the workplace is located. They need competent volunteer researchers who will feed them every scrap of information that can strengthen the campaign.

The "house-call" volunteers are an especially important asset for organizers. This team is in charge of arranging meetings between experienced union members and unorganized workers. House calls are one of the best ways of getting the union message across to the unorganized. In these one-to-one meetings, non-union workers can get a frank and acceptable answer to their questions from someone who obviously knows what he or she is talking about, based on their personal experience. These dialogues often result in unorganized workers signing union authorization cards.

Organizers will benefit from a "community affairs" team that will promote a cooperative relationship between the community and the union. This team can play a critical role by involving the community at various stages of the campaign.

Finally, there ought to be a public affairs and publicity team that may be called upon to prepare radio and TV spots, as well as press releases and flyers for general distribution.

Coordinating the activities of the volunteers, organizers are in a stronger position to win a campaign than if they and their staff had to perform these time-consuming tasks on their own.

Article 2 of the series will be posted on Monday, Nov. 17.