

A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (3)

By Harry Kelber

This is the third of eight articles on union organizing.

A NEW ORGANIZING STRATEGY

The standard organizing method that unions use has built-in disadvantages. It calls for playing by the rules that are blatantly stacked in the employer's favor.

The workplace that the union is trying to organize is the employer's fortress, a terrain where he wields total control. He exercises his "free speech" rights to denounce the union, hinting that he'd sooner shut down and relocate than recognize an "outside party." His supervisors are on the lookout for any signs of pro-union activity and hold frequent one-on-one meetings with his workers, pressuring them to have nothing to do with the union.

At "captive audience" meetings, called whenever he wants to, the employer subjects his entire work force to a barrage of anti-union speeches and videos. And if these efforts fail, he relies on his ultimate weapon: firing pro-union workers, just so everyone else on the job gets the message.

While this is going on, what are union organizers doing? They are trying to meet, often in secret, with as many individuals or groups as they can find to tell them about the advantages of being in a union. It's time-consuming, frustrating work, because many workers fear they'll be harassed or fired if the boss finds out they've been talking to a union organizer.

A preliminary goal of the organizers is to obtain authorization cards from at least 30% of the work force so they can petition for an election under the National Labor Relations Act. That's not easy. Employers go to great lengths to prevent their workers from signing those cards and if they succeed, the organizing campaign is dead in the water.

But let's say that organizers, after a year or more, collect signed cards from as many as 70% or 80% of the workers in a particular workplace. Does that mean that the union is recognized

as their bargaining representative? Not at all. They have to go through a Labor Board election, where employers can use high-pressure tactics and legal maneuvers to whittle down the union's majority. By the time of the election, workers have been so indoctrinated by the employer that a majority of them cast their votes against the union.

There is rarely any support for the organizing campaign from the local media, politicians, the community or even the union members. Organizers are left to fight pretty much on their own against employers who hold powerful trump cards. It's a wonder that organizers win any campaigns against such heavy odds.

A New 'Playing Field' That Favors Unions

Instead of struggling to organize non-union workers where they work, the new strategy calls for reaching those same workers *where they live*. The advantages are obvious.

It is considerably easier to contact unorganized workers where they live and get them to speak freely to organizers, far from the prying, hostile eyes of their employer.

With the community as their home base, organizers can solicit support from friendly local organizations and influential residents, as well as other unions, that can supply them with additional contacts and other assistance.

Through the local media, unions can tell the community why they are trying to organize a particular workplace where many local residents are employed at wages and working conditions that are clearly substandard.

With press releases, leaflets, e-mails and participation in public forums and talk shows, unions can keep the community informed of the campaign's progress. To counter the employer's "captive audience" meetings, the union can call a "town hall" meeting, inviting the public to hear the workers tell their side of the story. The employer or his representatives can be invited to debate the issue.

Here is where the volunteer organizers become very important to the campaign. One of their top assignments is to promote friendly relations between the union and the community. They must encourage union members to behave like good citizens, participating in worthwhile community activities. The

union, for example, could establish a scholarship fund for high school students or support some of the community's leading charities.

Union leaders and organizers should make it their business to know the influential people in their area: elected public officials, editors and reporters, prominent civic leaders and the officers of progressive local organizations. The payoff for this investment in time and effort can be enormous, especially at critical moments in the organizing campaign.

Developing an Aggressive Campaign

As the organizing campaign moves forward, the workers will be watching to see who is stronger--the employer or the union. That is why the union must move aggressively to put the employer on the defensive.

Working with a dossier supplied by volunteer researchers, the union can publicize whatever evidence there is of the employer's misconduct, especially where it affects the community. Every point of employer vulnerability, from safety violations to employee discrimination, should be utilized as ammunition in the campaign.

A media campaign is one obvious way to highlight the need for a union at the targeted workplace and to expose the employer's efforts to deny his workers their legal right to join a union. The union can take out advertisements in the local newspaper, featuring several workers, with their photos, describing conditions on their jobs.

The ad can be duplicated in leaflets and distributed widely in the community and posted on the union's Web site, with as many links as possible. It can also be made into a videotape and mailed to the unorganized workers.

.A committee of interested civic leaders might call on the employer, requesting to know why he is so adamantly against letting his workers join, the union and inviting him to appear with union representatives in a public debate on the issue.

Meanwhile, a corps of union volunteers, men and women who know the industry and occupation, will be making house calls to unorganized workers, answering their questions and building pro-union interest..

The employer may decide to counter the union tactic by running his own ads, featuring loyal employees. It won't enhance his image if he copycats the union's initiative. If he responds with a public statement opposing unions, that's fine; it means that the debate over whether these workers need a union is now out in the open.

Organizers don't have to meet secretly with small groups of nervous workers to explain the advantages of belonging to a union. They can now convey the union message to *all* workers, who can read it in the privacy of their homes. The union should see to it that the entire community is kept informed of every important development in the campaign.

After the union succeeds in obtaining authorization cards from a significant majority of the work force, the final stages of the battle for certification and the ultimate goal, winning a decent contract, begins. But unions won't have to endure the hazards of an NLRB election.

Article 4 of the series will be posted on Monday, December 1.