

A New Game Plan For Union Organizing (4)

By Harry Kelber

This is the fourth of eight articles on union organizing.

THE IDEAL UNION ORGANIZER

If unions are to grow, they'll need bigger, better and more successful organizing campaigns. That means they'll also need a larger pool of well-trained organizers.

The job of union organizer is the toughest in the labor movement. Yet many unions don't pay much attention to selecting and training their organizers. They may pick seasoned workers from their own ranks or hire smart college kids, sending them to a weekend course at the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute and perhaps a short, follow-up apprenticeship with an organizing campaign.

These fledgling organizers are then sent out on a campaign, where they are no match for experienced, union-busting "consultants," with their arsenal of dirty tricks and crafty maneuvers. If they have natural talent and work hard at it, they may become good organizers. But far too many can't take the long hours and frustrating setbacks, and quit or get fired. Burn-out is an occupational disease for organizers.

So what, ideally, are the essential qualities of good organizers? First and foremost, they must be able to win the trust and confidence of the workers they are hoping to unionize.. First impressions, while not necessarily accurate, are important, especially for workers who feel they are risking their livelihood by talking to an organizer about joining a union..

Organizers must radiate competence. They must be able to give clear, frank and convincing answers to workers, many of them skeptical about unions. They must be tough-minded and be able to handle all sorts of difficult situations, including threats of physical harm. Whatever the challenges, they must not lose their composure and become panicky, worst of all in the presence of non-union workers.

Even before starting a campaign, organizers must fully understand all the standard arguments employers use to

intimidate their workers and defeat the union, and they must devise effective tactics to respond to any attack. They must also have a thorough grasp of federal and state labor laws as they affect union organizing.

One of the most important objectives of the organizers is to involve as many of the workers as possible in the actual organizing activities. They must make the workers feel that it is their union and they will play a major role in all decisions, up to and including the signing of a contract and its ratification.

Organizers must learn how to utilize the community as a base of operations and get the most out of their teams of volunteer organizers. It will be helpful if they study the successes and failures of past organizing campaigns.

Organizers must be patient listeners and also make good judgments about what they hear. They must rely on their contacts in the workplace, who are their eyes and ears, about what's happening on the job. But they also double-check the information they receive. And they must move quickly to scotch any harmful rumors that the employer may float. They are also on the lookout for workers who act as spies for the employer, and they must find ways to expose them.

Organizers keep accurate records of everything they consider essential to the organizing drive. Their computer data base contains updated information about every aspect of the campaign, including a daily progress report.

High-powered organizers are those who are masters at organizing their time, strength and resources with maximum efficiency. They make every minute count, without appearing stressed or frantic. They establish the proper priorities for the countless tasks that press upon them for attention.

They make quick decisions about what is a "must" on their calendar, what is less important and what they can eliminate. They know how to delegate tasks to subordinates, utilizing their special capabilities.

And despite a grueling daily schedule, organizers must find time to keep themselves healthy, eat properly, get enough sleep and find moments of relaxation. Unless they are well-disciplined, organizers can easily burn out and end their careers.

A School for Organizers

Ideal organizers are hard to come by, but a program of rigorous training can upgrade many of them who now are stumbling along for months in losing campaigns. The bar for hiring organizers needs to be raised.

A “West Point” for organizers should be created that would provide a professional-level of training for would-be organizers. Instructors would use video and interviews to check the personality and character traits of students, testing their ability to deal with difficult problems that often occur in any organizing campaign. There would be time spent in field exercises to study campaigns that are in actual progress.

Organizers should know how to write an appropriate answer in response to an employer’s letter to the workers’ families. They should be able to make a convincing speech about the value of unions to a group of non-union workers or a public audience. A report of student performance, including videos and written exercises, would be sent to the appropriate unions. Upon completion of the course, students would receive a professional degree.

Considering the huge sums that unions spend on losing campaigns, wouldn’t an investment in an elite school for organizers make sense?

Article 5 of this series will be posted on Monday, December 8.