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## Silicon Valley: Labor's High-Tech Stumping

### Abstract

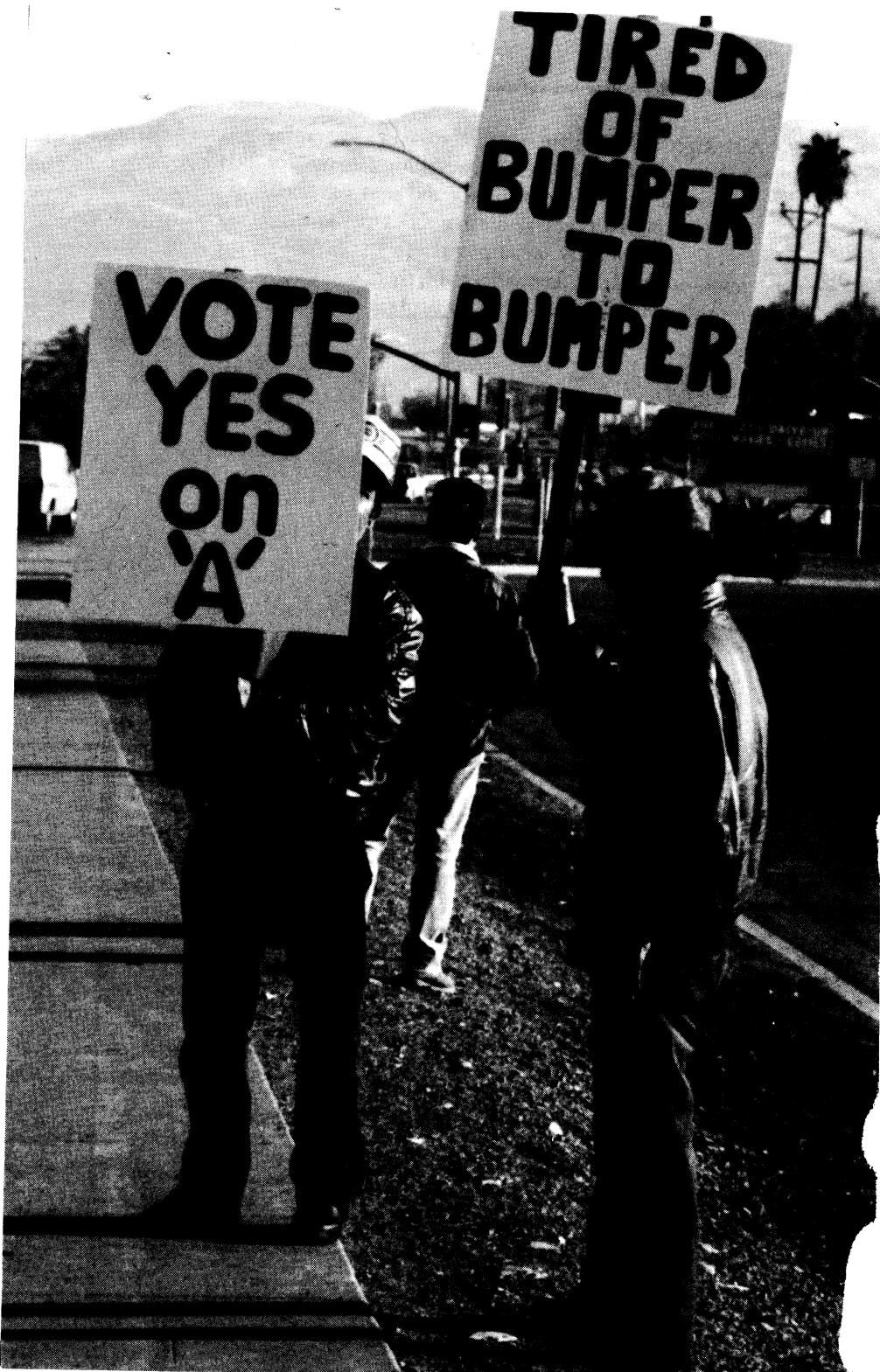
[Excerpt] Nestled 50 miles south of San Francisco, Silicon Valley has been touted as the model for the future of industrial and corporate America. More important, it could serve as a blueprint for deploying the power of labor's political action – and doing it right.

### Keywords

Silicon Valley, South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council, Committee on Political Education, COPE, Democratic Party

**VOTE  
YES  
on  
'A'**

**TIRE'D  
OF  
BUMPER  
TO  
BUMPER**



# Silicon Valley Labor's High-Tech Stumping

■ *Amy Dean*

Nestled 50 miles south of San Francisco, Silicon Valley has been touted as the model for the future of industrial and corporate America. More important, it could serve as a blueprint for deploying the power of labor's political action—and doing it right.

Over the last few years, the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council, which covers both Santa Clara and San Benito Counties, has been building a political action program combining a defined local agenda for labor with an activist base of volunteers, using the most sophisticated tools available to political action groups. At the core of the Council's Committee on Political Education (COPE) program is an endorsement process that works to build coordination and coalition among the various sectors of the labor movement.

Building this program through the local Democratic Party has meant that we are able to play a central role in uniting labor and other progressive organizations into a strong political coalition responsive to working-class issues and concerns. Indeed, the Santa Clara County Democratic Party may be as close as it gets these days to a labor party. Since the South Bay AFL-CIO is the 15th largest in the country, its expe-

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riences in unifying and coordinating its 110 affiliated local unions serve as a good model toward building political power within a local labor movement.

### **THE LINK: USING TECHNOLOGY TO WIN**

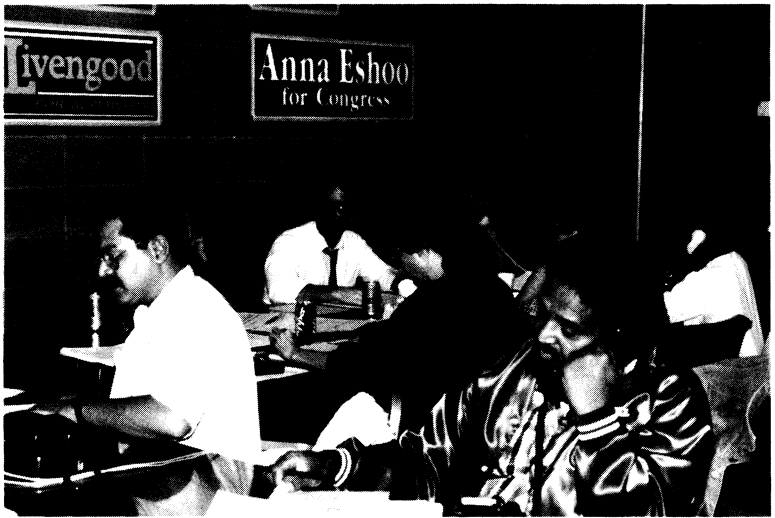
To understand South Bay COPE's approach, it's useful to make some general observations about most COPE programs. Too often, whether or not there is coordination and definition associated with a labor endorsement, traditional COPE programs gear up to get their candidate elected in political isolation, using primitive tools for educating and getting union members out to vote. They employ cumbersome manual and outdated systems for contacting and tracking union members. Poor coordination among local unions means poor use of resources; duplication, waste, and ineffectiveness are the inevitable results.

Overall, national AFL-CIO efforts to support the political action efforts of Labor Councils throughout the country are not only severely understaffed, but also grossly ineffective. Traditional programs start off the election cycle by ordering lists and mailing labels of union members through the national AFL-CIO. The turnaround time on orders through the AFL-CIO can be more than two weeks. Information is limited, making it impossible to target voters; there is no way of knowing anything about other registered voters living within a union household.

That means that most COPE programs start from scratch each election cycle.

Moreover, by the time information reaches a local council, it has gone from an individual local union to its International, then from there, over to the AFL-CIO, and finally, back down to local central labor councils. Maintaining accuracy is difficult at best, and is made even worse when the lag time between collection and dissemination of the data can be as long as several years! In the end, a lot of money is spent, a lot of hard work and volunteer efforts expended for murky results. It seems that traditional COPE programs offer little opportunity to evaluate what works and what doesn't.

In 1991, the Labor Council and 22 locals came together to create a tangible value to candidates for winning the local COPE endorsement. The Labor Council built the Link—the first locally based union membership voter file, which now contains tens of thousands of records. It is a computerized list of almost every registered and non-registered union member living in Santa Clara and San Benito Counties. Beginning with membership lists collected from each local union, the data is enhanced with additional information to yield a wealth of knowl-



edge. We know the full name and address of each union member and registered voter within a union household. The database contains a wide variety of information including political district lines, party affiliation, age, gender, voter history, registration status, party makeup of household, telephone number, voter frequency codes, and phone-response data.

The Link arms labor's political action program and local COPE-endorsed candidates with the necessary and most modern technology available. It better targets those members most likely to volunteer and vote and those occasional voters, reaching out to whom can mean the margin of victory. Better targeting brings better use of resources and volunteer time. This means reaching out to those who most need to hear from us, engaging those most likely to be supporters, and writing off those least likely to listen to our message. Better data means knowing a lot more about the people COPE is trying to communicate with. It lets COPE personalize the political message, rather than randomly contacting all union members on a list. We estimate that our methodology has increased threefold the number of voters potentially influenced.

At the outset of each election cycle (both primary and general elections), the most up-to-date membership information from our "linked locals" is forwarded to the South Bay Labor Council. By using a uniform file format to gather this information, the individual local files are then easily merged. These files are then matched up against the local county registrar of voters lists and enhanced with other demographic data, which is purchased. The completed file is then returned to and maintained at the Labor Council.



By rebuilding the file once before a primary election and once before the general election, we gain substantial list accuracy. We can also compare our data with that from the national AFL-CIO. During the 1992 primary and general elections, the Link's lists had an error rate of 14% compared to a 28% error rate on the AFL-CIO lists. Even though we had a 100% increase in accuracy compared to the AFL-CIO data, there is still room for improvement.

The Link's key feature was the addition of all registered voters living in a union household. This increased the raw file size by 25%, but the value we gained was much greater. By knowing how many additional registered voters lived in a union household, we were able to convey our message to family members of the targeted voters, thereby reducing our "callbacks." This becomes particularly valuable in local city council races and in hotly contested races where the margin of victory is within three to five percentage points.

The Link also gives us a way to easily target groups of voters. For example, we identified voters who lived in precincts strategically important to campaigns that needed specialized outreach. So we "linked" particular precincts where neighborhood meetings ("coffees") needed to be held or where the candidate required a special push for lawn signs and neighborhood headquarters. We could also separate loyal Democratic households from households with mixed registration status so that we could tailor our campaign message depending on the audience.

All of these targeting features not only improve the success of our overall operations, but also increase the value of labor's program to COPE-endorsed candidates by making sure money is spent well and vol-

unteer efforts sharply focused. Since the Link allows us to measure results, we can attest to its effectiveness: in 1992, labor voters comprised at least 30% of the total margin of victory of each COPE-endorsed candidate.

### **VALUE ADDED TO A COPE ENDORSEMENT**

Once a candidate or ballot measure has won a sole endorsement from South Bay COPE, a tailor-made program to meet the campaign's specific needs is put together. Traditional, immediate needs like lawn signs and other advertising mechanisms for increasing name recognition are quickly accomplished. But labor's contribution to targeted races during an election cycle do not start or stop here. COPE doesn't just advertise, we educate.

Rather than the traditional shotgun approach to reaching out to union households, South Bay COPE outreach efforts are staged. Phone banking in the early part of a campaign generates volunteerism and activism within a particular district, as opposed to simply getting the candidate's name out to our members.

Not only will this activity benefit the immediate campaign, but over time, as we build more information into our database about the volunteer efforts of otherwise unidentified union-household members, the COPE program can draw directly on those people at the outset of an election cycle in any particular district, jump-starting the campaign and building local momentum. The exciting part about making these contacts is that most are with members not already part of our core activist base.

Further in the election cycle, our efforts tend to be more traditional COPE activities, such as phone banking, increasing candidates' name identification, and getting out the vote (GOTV). We focus on occasional voters and swing voters as the targeted universe for these outreach efforts.

Normally, COPE programs simply tell members who their union is supporting and expect that this information will yield their support. The Link's voter files gives the council an accurate reading on the key issues on voters' minds, improves our ability to tailor messages, and increases the timeliness between phone and mail contacts. Informal polling in a district defines a set of priority issues. A list of the top three to five are used in the solicitation of undecided voters. Each evening, after volunteers have phoned union members and asked which issues are most important to them in a local race, the responses are scanned back into the voter file. Direct mail can then be sent that not only talks about a particular candidate, but also describes the candidate's posi-



tion on the issues the member identified as most important.

From a modest start, the Link is now a key resource for local candidates. During the 1992 San Jose City Council races, the volume of activity, voter contact, and technical expertise in COPE-endorsed campaigns greatly increased. On a nightly basis, the results from labor's voter-contact efforts were shared with each local campaign. Often this was the only regular polling information the campaign had at its disposal. This type of information is invaluable to many campaigns as they make decisions about directing or redirecting their own resources.

These processes have greatly changed labor's political role. In the past, labor was cut off from the campaign and the candidate who, in the end, has only a vague idea of labor's contribution to his/her election. To increase the visibility of labor's political efforts, we ask candidates to observe the local operation and spend time with union volunteers.

Beyond simple visibility, the effectiveness of our process allows members of South Bay COPE to participate directly in a candidate's campaign by serving on a candidate's "kitchen cabinet." During the 1992 election cycle, there was not a single campaign where labor did not serve in this capacity. In addition to the highest strategic level of a campaign, COPE designates local representatives as the official COPE liaison to a campaign's neighborhood headquarters or operations. In 1992, COPE designated local liaisons to three assembly races and three San Jose City Council races. This unprecedented level of involvement gave COPE a critical role within the various campaigns that did not go unnoticed by the candidates.



## **BUILDING POWER THROUGH ELECTORAL COALITIONS**

Santa Clara County is an important county in California; it is a swing county. It is common knowledge among political pundits that you need to win Santa Clara County to win a statewide campaign. To this end, the South Bay Labor Council and the Santa Clara County Democratic Party have had more than just a close working relationship throughout the years. Many local unions initially defined part of their independent political action programs by participating in building the grassroots infrastructure of the local Democratic Party. Unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers, SEIU, and building-trades locals have had years of involvement in providing not just the financing, but the troops for our local party.

It was the drive to focus the full weight of labor's political potential that led to our involvement in building the United Democratic Campaign (UDC). The UDC, a three-tiered coalition of labor, elected officials, and the Democratic Party, creates a structure through which labor can activate its political machinery. It means that in Santa Clara County, progressive forces are already organized to create a campaign capable of educating and mobilizing voters countywide. Pooling resources means minimizing the duplication of voter-contact efforts, so political activists can reach a larger percentage of the electorate during a given election cycle.

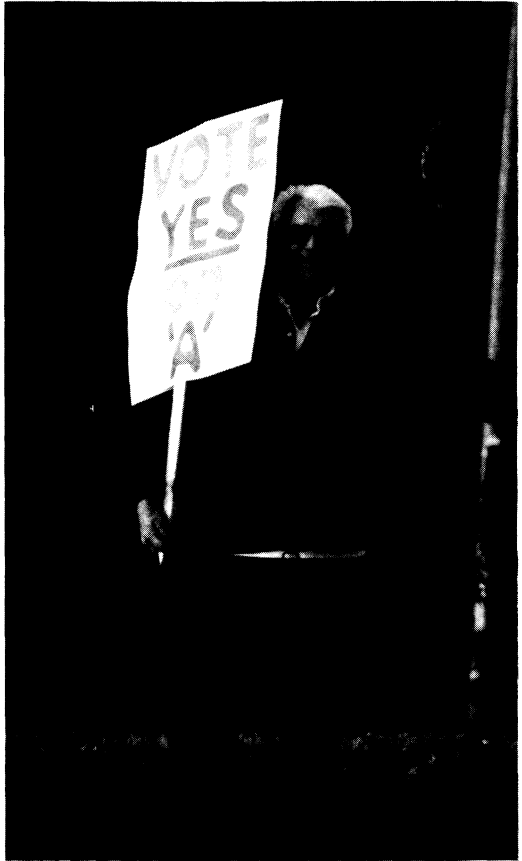
The experience of organized labor in Santa Clara County has been one of building political power in coalition with other progressive organizations and interests countywide. We see ourselves not as party hacks or political loyalists, but as co-owners of a vehicle through which progressive groups can come together to elect candidates committed to a broadly defined political agenda. Forming an electoral coalition is a good beginning, but we also have a long way to go: we must begin to think about different ways in which we participate in the political process. For example, during political primaries, where the choices among candidates are fairly lackluster, labor should begin reserving PAC dollars for independent issues-based campaigns. In place of traditional political action efforts, labor should organize town hall meetings, televised debates, and broadly sponsored forums on issues such as jobs, education, and the environment. Not allowing elections to become the politics of personality depends on our ability to generate authentic debate and discussion.

Further, holding labor-backed candidates accountable after they get elected depends, in large part, on the endorsement process. At the national and state levels, it has become too easy for candidates to proffer

the proper platitudes during a COPE endorsement interview and win labor's PAC dollars and infrastructure support. Labor must create a new set of expectations from candidates. We should think about linking our support for a candidate to the candidate's support of our coalition partners. We need to beef up our endorsement process by not limiting our issues to specific legislation and particular bills. We need to have candidates understand that we seek real support for our organizations.

Although the Santa Bay Labor Council began altering traditional habits a long time ago, we have not gone far enough. Our next step is to refine, and in many ways redefine, what it means to be a labor-endorsed candidate. Creation of a labor platform is the logical progression in our political evolution.

A labor platform will ask candidates to commit to, and to sign onto, a broadly defined agenda that acknowledges working people and their unions as an important and valuable community resource not just during the campaign season but throughout the year. This platform will call for elected officials to use their public stature during organizing drives to encourage employees seeking workplace representation. Seeing unions as the voice of all workers, organized and unorganized, would be an additional expectation. It is not enough for candidates to take this position during an endorsement interview; they must be willing to state their support publicly.



Achieving a labor platform does not necessarily mean the creation of a labor party. Rather, it is about redirecting and rededicating our political resources to affect the changes we seek in the political process. Whether or not progressive forces coalesce within or outside of the Democratic Party is not the central question. Rather, we must strive for the creation of an agenda appealing to a broad base of people. Political action that works relies on the basics—invigorating our memberships and constituencies to do battle on behalf of their own interests. ■



**THE CONSERVATIVE AGENDA**