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## Come Join Us! Volunteer Organizing From a Local-Union Base

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Four months later, May 3, 1991, Delta workers elected to join the UAW by a vote of 68 to 58. The small numbers belie the real significance of this achievement, for Delta is the largest Japanese-owned supplier yet organized by the UAW. Equally important, this victory highlights the potency of two overlapping strategies: the use of volunteer organizers, and the reliance on a local-union base for launching and sustaining a drive.

### Keywords

Delta, Japan, UAW, volunteer organizers, corporate campaigns

WE'RE VOTING UNION YES ON MAY 3rd



**A CONTRACT IS WORTH  
1000 PROMISES.**

FOR YOURSELF  
FOR YOUR FAMILY  
FOR YOUR CO-WORKERS  
FOR YOUR FUTURE

VOTE  
UNION  
YES

# "Come Join Us"

## Volunteer Organizing From a Local-Union Base

■ *Steve Babson*

Two groups clustered in the meeting hall. Their contrasting uniforms gave the appearance of two army units warily eyeing each other: one group dressed in short-sleeve blue shirts, the other in long-sleeve khaki. But these were not rival armies; these people were gathering for a union organizing meeting.

The blue uniform shirts identified plant workers from Delta U.S.A., a Japanese owned manufacturer of automobile seats located in Monroe, Michigan, thirty miles south of Detroit. Some 65 of them had come to their first meeting to ask questions about the UAW. The 20 workers in khaki had come to answer them. They were UAW activists from the nearby Mazda assembly plant where Delta shipped its seats.

"I know what you face, because that's what we faced," said one of several Local 3000 speakers who described their work experience at Mazda. His litany brought nods of recognition from the Delta workers: favoritism, speed up, carpal tunnel syndrome, arbitrary work-rule changes. "We still face these things," he added, "but I know we can do something about it now because we're together, we're a union."

Only a few hours earlier, company supervisors had warned

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Delta workers to expect dues-hungry "professionals" from the UAW. Instead, they met workers who were the same age, lived in the same industrial suburbs, and had the same workplace problems. They met volunteers who would, in the ensuing weeks, leaflet their plant on winter mornings, come to organizing meetings after shift, and make evening house calls.

Four months later, May 3, 1991, Delta workers elected to join the UAW by a vote of 68 to 58. The small numbers belie the real significance of this achievement, for Delta is the largest Japanese-owned supplier yet organized by the UAW. Equally important, this victory highlights the potency of two overlapping strategies: the use of volunteer organizers, and the reliance on a local-union base for launching and sustaining a drive.

### **FIRST CONTACT**

A previous effort to organize Delta failed in 1988, for all the familiar reasons. Delta-Kogyo of Hiroshima had just started operations in Michigan to supply Mazda, its principal customer in both Japan and the United States. The company located its new plant in the city of Monroe and drew two-thirds of its new hires from the town, many of them laid-off autoworkers grateful for a job. A few former UAW members began passing out cards, but there was no organizing committee and only intermittent contact with a full-time organizer. Delta management called a series of captive audience meetings, announced a Christmas bonus of \$200, and asked for another chance to address employee concerns. The drive collapsed.

In the meantime, however, the UAW's fledgling Mazda local, itself only a year old, was making its first efforts to organize among the 40 Michigan-based firms that supply Mazda. Most of these companies are nonunion and many are Japanese transplants. Local 3000's leaders recognized that efforts to raise wages and working conditions at their plant, if not matched by similar improvements at these suppliers, would ultimately induce more outsourcing of work.

To kick off its organizing drive, the local targeted two companies that were small and close at hand: MANA, a Mazda-owned packaging and shipping subsidiary located next to the main plant in Flat Rock, and Pentson, a Japanese-owned supplier of window assemblies located in the neighboring town of Rockwood.

When both were organized in 1988 they added only 50 members to the union's roster, but these victories established Local 3000 as an amalgamated union with an ambitious organizing agenda.

Unfortunately, deteriorating relations with Mazda management and hotly contested, back-to-back elections for union leadership absorbed Local 3000's energies in 1989-1990. New initiatives in organizing suffered.

By the fall of 1990, the local was ready to take another crack at organizing. Delta was the obvious target, both because of its location in neighboring Monroe and because a nucleus of union supporters was already in touch with Local 3000's leaders. They didn't have any trouble finding them. "Jim Emerick, one of the Delta leaders, is my brother-in-law," explains Greg Drudi, the Bargaining Chair at Mazda. "We talked all the time, and other people from Mazda knew Delta workers as neighbors, friends, and family. When it came time to get things moving, we started with a couple of small meetings in the basement of my house."

### **"HAVE NO FEAR"**

When the Delta organizing drive went public in January 1991, Local 3000 took the lead. Delta's union supporters reported that a sizable number of their co-workers were "red hot" for the UAW, but many were also convinced that if they went public, management would retaliate. Traditional practice might have called for a full-time union organizer to step into the breach and make the initial public contacts. Instead, Mazda workers stepped in.

"We had 30-40 people down there leafleting in the snow or rain at 6 in the morning," recalls Local 3000 President Phil Keeling. "The commitment from all levels of local leadership was fantastic." The first leaflet prominently featured the role of the Mazda local. "HAVE NO FEAR," it trumpeted in bold-face letters, "DELTA CANNOT RETALIATE AGAINST YOU. If they even try, they will have to answer to the National Labor Relations Board, and more importantly, to us at Mazda, their most important customer. WE ARE THREE THOUSAND MEMBERS STRONG! . . .COME JOIN US."

In short order, about two-thirds of the Delta workforce did just that, attending a series of open meetings and signing authorization cards for an NLRB election. Delta management countered with a textbook campaign of intimidation and cooptation: hiring security guards to "protect" Delta workers from the UAW; retaining a consulting firm, Sterner, Wilson, Clifton, and Wolf, to train supervisors in one-on-one communications; holding captive audience meetings featuring films of union violence; producing a special slide show on the "Delta Family"; and encouraging a "Vote No" committee of Delta workers. In addition, the company intro-

duced a more lenient attendance policy and a "Peer Review Board" to counter union demands for a grievance procedure and generally blanketed the workplace with a blizzard of memos on the UAW Constitution, the salaries of UAW officials, and the good intentions of Delta management.

That Delta's UAW supporters retained their majority and won the election is a testimony to the hard work of their 22-member in-plant committee, assisted by the full-time UAW organizer assigned to the drive, Frank White. House calls, rallies, and a weekly newsletter, "You/nion News," sustained the UAW presence and countered management claims that the union was a third-party outsider. "We had a big committee that could communicate one-on-one with every Delta worker," White observed. "They could see it was their union."

Once Delta's in-plant committee got off the ground, the Mazda local provided it with crucial support. "Mazda members were very active," says White, "willing to do anything you asked them to do. They'd pull people out of the plant on lost time, their secretaries typed for me, I had free access to their copier, their printer, their phones. Without all those resources, I'm not sure we could have held things together." Local 3000's Education Committee invited Delta's entire in-plant committee to attend its Saturday "Union Awareness" classes. The local's first Vice President, Mary Olson-Carter, also remained active throughout, helping White organize meetings and produce the newsletter during the hectic closing weeks of the campaign.

Above all, the visible presence of Mazda's UAW members helped sustain the drive. "Delta's people could see these union members were workers like themselves," says White, "and they could relate to them more than to a full-time union official."

### **CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS**

A growing number of unions are echoing White's positive appraisal of volunteer organizers. "They know the work, they know the drill," says Linda Cromer, Director of Organizing for RWDSU. "Nobody understands the frustrations of the job like someone who's been there." RWDSU uses volunteers from unionized poultry plants in a major campaign to organize nonunion poultry workers. (See LRR 16.) ACTWU uses volunteers to help organize clothing and textile mills in the South; SEIU uses them to organize healthcare workers; and the UFCW also relies extensively on volunteers.

Volunteers gain as much as they give in these campaigns. In



Volunteers from Delta's in-plant organizing committee discuss strategy with UAW Local 3000 President Phil Keeling.

in addition to the satisfaction of helping others help themselves, they develop a wider sense of labor as a social movement and a deeper commitment to their own union. Still, there are compelling reasons why many union members do not volunteer their time.

They have little enough time to give, for one thing. Recent trends (single-parent families, both parents working, multiple job holding) make it hard to juggle the demands of work and family, much less union organizing. Many members also lack confidence in their own ability to motivate others and in their union's ability to make a difference.

Some of these obstacles can be overcome by leadership action. The RWDSU, for example, allocated \$1 million at its last convention to finance the cost of lost-time wages for volunteer organizers, allowing them to leave their jobs in the North and participate full time in the union's southern organizing campaigns. The UAW has made a similar commitment by earmarking a portion of the interest from its strike fund to cover the lost-time wages of



volunteer organizers.

But in the vast majority of cases where lost-time funds are not available, leadership must motivate the unpaid work of volunteers. UAW Region 1A Director Bob King has made such efforts a top priority in his west Detroit and suburban district by urging local activists to enlist in the several organizing drives currently underway. An especially ambitious campaign to organize the Dayton-Hudson Department stores in the Detroit area has drawn hundreds of volunteers to public rallies, "UAW Shop Days," and in-store demonstrations. (To date the union has won at two of the three stores that have gone to elections.)

Specialized training can give volunteers the needed confidence and skills to participate in a drive. "The worst thing you can do is send someone out who has not been properly trained," warns Ben Perkins, Director of the UAW Organizing Department. "You're speaking to an unorganized group, so you can't count on them understanding your message the way unionized workers do. It's not only that they don't know the lingo of collective bargaining, many also aren't yet comfortable with the idea of standing up to the boss. You have to learn to walk and talk delicately."

Over half of the UAW's regions train volunteer organizers in these communications techniques, and many other unions have initiated similar training efforts. The Steelworkers, Chemical Workers, and Hotel and Restaurant Employees, among others, supplement their in-house programs by turning to the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. (See article in this issue.)

## INSIDE OUT

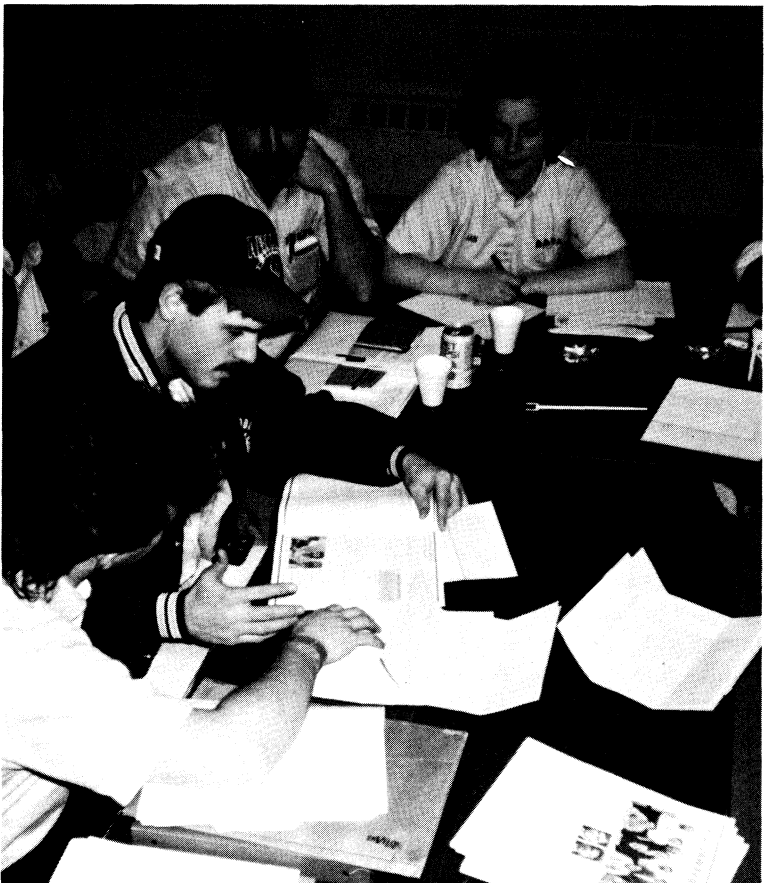
Training can prepare union activists for organizing, but it can only enable volunteers who have already stepped forward. What motivates people to volunteer in the first place?

The answer varies according to the type of local a potential activist comes from. If it is a top-down "service-oriented" local in which a few officers monopolize leadership and the members remain passive "customers," then volunteer organizing outside the local may appeal to activists who see no outlet for their energies within the organization. But such locals will generate far fewer volunteers than ones in which internal organizing has already mobilized a wider activist base. "For union workers to volunteer their efforts in an (external) organizing drive," as ACTWU Education Director Jose LaLuz puts it, they must already have developed "the sense that the union belongs to them." (See *LRR 17*.) There has to be a "culture of organizing" that gives activists ownership

in their union and a commitment to its growth.

In Mazda Local 3000, this culture grew out of the union's protracted campaign to renegotiate its "team-concept" agreement with the Japanese automaker. The Delta organizing drive not only developed in the context of that effort, but became a part of it.

Indeed, the two campaigns started at roughly the same time. In the fall of 1990, as initial contacts with Delta workers prepared the ground for the organizing drive, Local 3000's leadership also began to plan for a "contract campaign" focusing on upcoming negotiations with Mazda. The union could not rely on the traditional approach that put the entire burden on the Bargaining Committee, leaving a passive membership to ratify or reject the proposed contract. The issues confronting the local were too fundamental and the mettle of its membership was too untested



for such routine practice. In just three years of operation, Mazda had effectively contradicted its own promises of "participative management" by giving front-line supervision near-unilateral powers: the result had been a sharp intensification of work, an injury rate three times higher than the Big 3 average, and a widespread perception that the flexibility granted management in the initial contract had become a license for favoritism. Local leaders wanted to bargain for tougher contract language and anticipated the possibility of a strike. Would Mazda's inexperienced workforce follow their lead?

**ONE-ON-ONE**

The answer depended on the same organizing techniques that proved so successful at Delta: a one-on-one campaign of communication and mobilization that gave Mazda's members ownership of their union.

To implement the campaign, the local turned to its corps of elected union "coordinators," roughly one for every 40 members, who work on the line and act as stewards. After a day-long training session in contract issues and communications techniques, the coordinators began talking one-on-one with every worker in the plant. The bargaining survey that kicked off the campaign not only generated 2,400 responses in a plant population of 2,900, but also provided extensive documentation of speed up, favoritism, inadequate training, and unilateral action by supervision. Flyers distributed inside the plant or at the gates highlighted the survey results and focused attention on the membership's shared grievances.

In the meantime, coordinators circulated a group grievance focused on the abuse of temporary workers, collecting signatures from

FEBRUARY 27th, 1991

# YOU UNION News

WELCOME TO THE 3RD EDITION OF YOU UNION NEWS

**Open Door Policy**

The Company is committed to full and open communication among all employees. Your suggestions, comments, questions and concerns are welcome at all times by any member of the management team.

How often has management sat down with YOU? Can YOU imagine sitting down with management and telling them YOU concern? How many times have YOU told management that quality was slipping? (Just to be told to "run it anyway" for "it is good enough"?)


On February 25th, 1991 a group of employees asked to meet with Gary Sivest. We suggested that Gary Sivest meet with US on our break. WE were told that he "would never meet with US."

WE have another suggestion for Mr. Sivest:

Mr. Sivest YOU should follow the company philosophy on page 1 of the employee handbook which reads as follows:

**Company Philosophy**

Our Company creed is:  
 To maintain an atmosphere of respect and cooperation,  
 To keep business in our ideas and activities,  
 To remember our responsibility for preserving Company image,  
 To continue to serve in the bestment of society.




STAND  
CONTRACT

Dear Delta CO-WORKERS,

I have worked at Delta U.S.A. for 21 years. I am a single parent and self supporting. I have worked at many different jobs, Delta is one of the cleanest places I have worked in. My co-workers are exceptional and hard working.

While there are good things about Delta, I feel there is much room for improvement on these issues:

- "Hiring procedure for other jobs"
- "Fair and equal treatment is not a consistent policy of Delta"
- "Delta does not listen to the employees when they resolve issues"
- "Vacation, medical care, layoff/promotions and attendance policy". It feel it to unfair for Delta Management to give incentives for taking time off for being a responsible parent or taking care of family matters."
- "This is why I feel we need to be united at Delta, to deal with these problems. I feel having a union will give us the voice we need to improve conditions here at Delta."



TEAM MEMBER

Your friend and co-worker,  
**Nancy Book**  
 Nancy Book

over 90% of the members. Finally, just two weeks before the start of negotiations, the local conducted a strike authorization vote—not in the union hall, but inside the plant, with ballots distributed one-on-one to every member. The results surprised even the leadership: with an enthusiasm that built during the day as workers attached to their uniforms stickers that read "Fighting for A Better Contract," 94% voted "yes" for strike authorization.

These events did not go unnoticed at Delta, where management issued several memorandums highlighting the "ongoing uncertainty" of a strike at Mazda. But matters took an unexpected turn for Delta management when the Mazda negotiations produced an eleventh-hour agreement that not only raised wages and benefits to levels that matched or exceeded Big 3 standards, but also replaced management's previous control over selection of Team Leaders with a new system of election and recall by Team Members. Delta's in-plant organizing committee quickly capitalized on this turn of events, distributing a detailed summary of the Mazda contract to all Delta workers, accompanied by a leaflet emphasizing the membership vote 83% that ratified its contents. "These many gains were made without the necessity of a strike, slowdown, or any other scary thing that management says will happen when we form our union."

The Mazda contract had an even more direct bearing on the Delta drive. During negotiations, Local 3000's Bargaining Committee repeatedly raised the issue of Delta management's anti-union campaign, urging Mazda to publicly disavow such union-bashing in its supplier firms. Mazda management refused to condemn these practices, arguing that it could not intervene in another company's internal affairs—a claim that conveniently ignored the financial and business ties that link these two firms in Japan. Ultimately, the contract did contain a compromise letter in which the company promised to tell suppliers "of the positive aspects and the advantages of its relationship to the UAW."

UAW bargainers had little confidence this letter would cause Delta managers to mend their ways. Management was not the intended audience in any case. The real audience was Delta's workers, and the intended message was one of solidarity.

### **PROS AND CONS OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS**

Local 3000's role in the organization of Delta illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of volunteer organizing from a local-union base.

When the "parent" local widens its corps of activists through

internal organizing, it generates an enthusiasm about the union and a commitment to its growth that translates into volunteers. In the case of Local 3000, a total of 35-40 people participated in some aspect of the Delta drive, with a half dozen leaders playing an especially prominent role. In an era when the NLRB offers scant protection for workers seeking unionization, this organized and visible presence bolsters the morale of nonunion workers as they launch their campaign.

The parent local can also help sustain that morale after the election, when the difficult task of winning a contract still lies ahead. At Delta, this may be a particularly arduous job. The company immediately appealed the NLRB election results, charging union supporters with "intimidation," and fired one member of the in-plant organizing committee on the spurious charge of "sabotage." Local 3000 has collected over 1500 signatures on a petition that labels Delta's actions "an insult to all of us" and calls on Mazda to intervene against this "anti-worker, anti-union, anti-UAW campaign." Many Local 3000 members have expressed concern that if Mazda management ignores the petition and does nothing to discourage Delta's union bashing, then the quality of Delta's product will be so undermined by harsh conditions and deteriorating morale that it will no longer meet the high standards Mazda applies to suppliers.

This kind of sustained support from a parent local is lacking when a "regional" organizing strategy draws activists out of many locals and concentrates their efforts on targeted organizing drives, some of them quite distant from the volunteers' home locals. On the other hand, when the targeted workplace is in a nonunion area with few nearby locals or is a multi-site employer beyond the reach of a single local, regional deployment of volunteers is the only alternative to organizing from a local-union base. By extending the range and therefore the number of potential organizing drives, a regional approach also enhances the training and development of volunteers: their training will more often have a real-world urgency and focus on the particular drive they're about to join, and they will have more opportunities to discover which tasks—making house calls, leafleting, writing, giving testimonials, planning, researching—they are most comfortable with.

The wider reach of regional organizing has its downside in the narrower range of experiences shared by volunteers and nonunion workers. When volunteers are "out of their element," they are less effective in addressing the doubts and fears of unorganized workers. Training can bridge some of this gap, but only with difficulty when occupational or regional sub-cultures separate workers.

No such gap divided Delta workers from their union counterparts at Mazda. As the drive started, Delta workers not only met union members they could relate to, they also grew familiar with the internal workings of a vibrant, democratic local. At times, this too had its downside—Local 3000's tumultuous internal politics distracted many volunteers from their organizing tasks and depleted the number who could make house calls. It could also be argued that the Mazda local was too close to the Delta drive: if a Mazda strike had occurred, it would only have confirmed Delta management's dire predictions. Even so, it's probably better that Delta workers learned about the sometimes messy process of collective action from people they could trust, rather than relying solely on management and media accounts.

Ultimately, however, the supportive role of Local 3000 could only go so far; beyond that point, the volunteer organizers from Mazda had to step back. "We had to reign them in sometimes," as one staff organizer observed. "The Mazda people wanted to do too much, come to every meeting, hand out every leaflet, and confront the cops when they tried to remove us from Delta property. We had to let the Delta people build their union. They had to own it."

And that's the name of the game for all union members, organized or soon-to-be. ■



Delta worker's solid victory resulted from a strong in-plant committee and enthusiastic volunteer member organizers from the workers at Mazda.