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## Let's Get Moving: Labor's survival depends on organizing industry-wide for justice and power

Stephen Lerner

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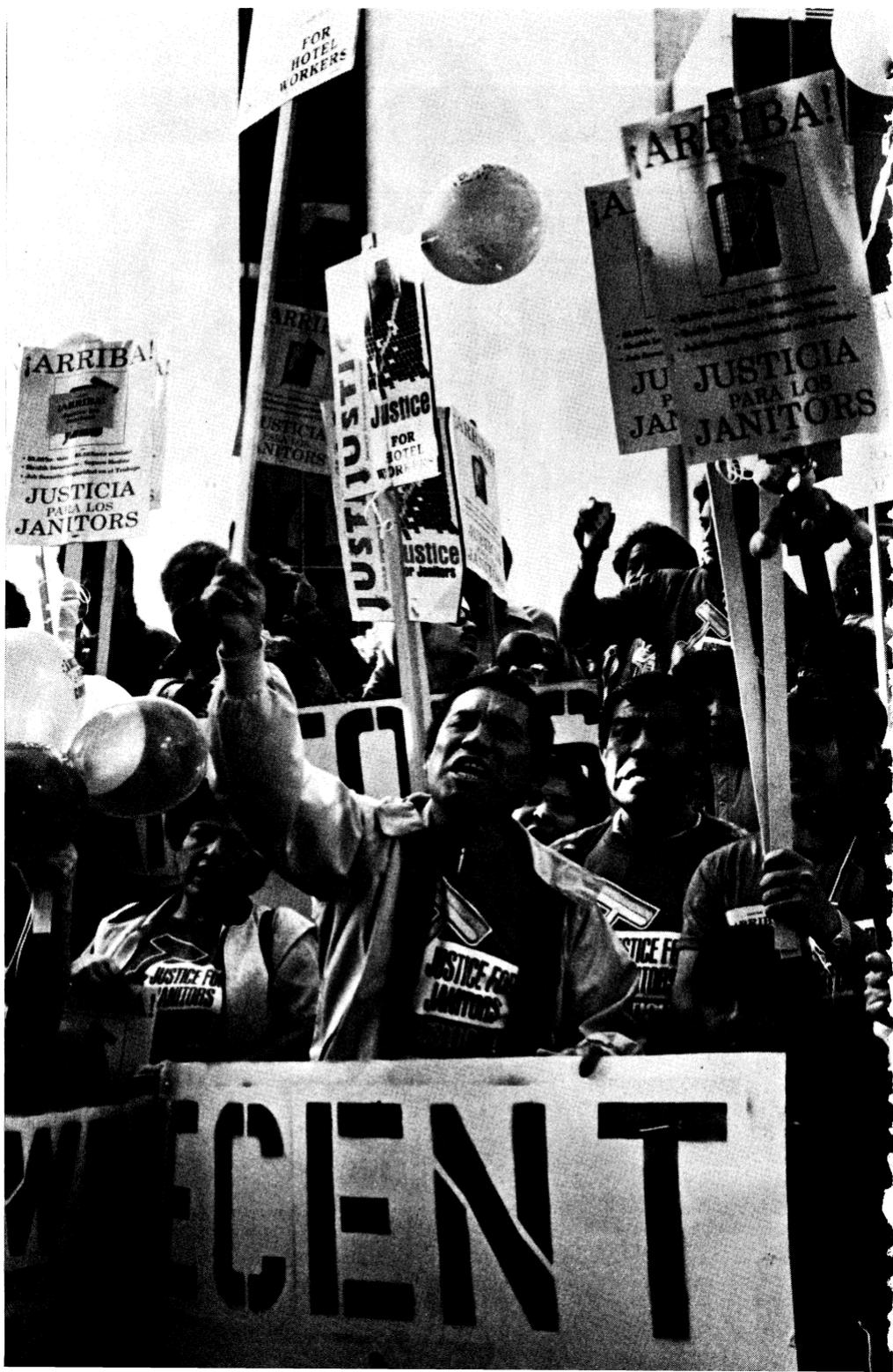
## Let's Get Moving: Labor's survival depends on organizing industry-wide for justice and power

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Despite our almost universal lack of significant organizing victories, we continue to organize in basically the same way we have for the last 37 years. Labor's model for organizing remains a site-by-site NLRB approach. We continue to fine-tune a model that most organizers know hasn't worked in years. Depending on how you define success, it can be argued that our current method of organizing hasn't worked in 37 years.

### Keywords

union organizing, unionization, strategy



# Let's Get Moving

**Labor's survival depends on organizing industry-wide for justice and power**

■ *Stephen Lerner*

By the year 2000 unions may represent only 5% of the private sector workforce. Despite increased emphasis by some unions on organizing, no union is consistently organizing large private sector units. This is true throughout the country, including regions and industries of traditional labor strength. Even if labor's hemorrhaging among currently organized workers is stopped, there is no reason to believe our current level of activity and success in organizing will stop labor's slide into irrelevance.

Our continued inability to organize doesn't just mean we won't gain new members. It threatens every aspect of the labor movement:

- We are increasingly unable to improve wages and benefits for our members because we've lost majority control of industries and markets.
- We are becoming less able to move labor's larger social and legislative agenda.
- Our decline in the private sector will ultimately undermine our ability to organize and protect public sector workers.

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■ *Stephen Lerner is director of Building Service Division Organizing for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).*

- The combination of increasingly inferior contracts and an anti-labor environment makes organizing even more difficult.

Despite our almost universal lack of significant organizing victories, we continue to organize in basically the same way we have for the last 37 years. Labor's model for organizing remains a site-by-site NLRB approach. We continue to fine-tune a model that most organizers know hasn't worked in years. Depending on how you define success, it can be argued that our current method of organizing hasn't worked in 37 years.

### **FALLING BEHIND FOR 37 YEARS?**

There is a myth that drives much of the thinking about both the cause of labor's current decline and the resulting ideas on how we can reverse this decline. The myth is that prior to the Reagan era and before the growth of union-busting management consultants, unions had been slowly growing in numbers and power.

If true, then the source of our weakness in organizing and bargaining is the increased combativeness of employers, sanctioned and enhanced by anti-union, anti-worker Reagan and Bush administrations.

But it's not true. In 1954 union membership as a percentage of the workforce peaked at nearly 35%. With a little more than 17 million union workers then, the number of union members did increase by more than 3 million from 1954 to 1980. But in 1980 these 20 million union workers represented just 23% of the workforce. *Though our numbers were growing, union power had been declining for 26 years before Reagan took office.* Whereas unions once represented one of every 3 workers, by 1980 we represented only one of every 4 1/2. Today we represent less than one of 5. This is an enormous loss in power.

Successful organizing needs to be defined as organizing enough workers to *increase* the percentage of workers represented by unions in their industries and nationally. That is, *we must organize more workers than jobs created every year.* If growth in the union percentage of the workforce, both in any given industry and in the nation as a whole, is not accepted as our definition for success, then we accept a prescription for continued decline.

By this definition, despite temporary increases in total workers represented, labor has been unsuccessful in its organizing for nearly four decades.

Since 1954, under Democrats and Republicans, in times of recession and prosperity, labor has been unable to organize more

workers than jobs created. In the 20-year period from 1934 to 1954, the percentage of the workforce organized grew from 12% to nearly 35%. In the years since, the percentage has dropped to just barely 16%. For organizers it is clear that labor's failure to organize started long ago—before Reagan, before PATCO, before union-busters and "modern management," and before the prosperity that some claim has made U.S. workers uninterested in organizing.

It is true that our decline has been faster since Reagan, and organizing is more difficult now than in the mid-1960s. But if we didn't organize at the peak of our strength, what makes us think that by fine tuning a failed model of organizing we can be successful in more difficult times?

Rather than simply blaming others for our problems, we need to confront difficult questions on why we didn't successfully organize in friendly economic and political times. We need to meet the challenges posed by the demographics of the new workforce—immigrants, people of color, and women. We need to understand the shift to a service economy built on low-wage jobs and how this affects organizing and bargaining. We need to figure out how we use our remaining power to organize now. We need to relearn how to capture imaginations, generate excitement and articulate a vision that can mobilize union and nonunion workers.

### **HOW DO WE CURRENTLY ORGANIZE?**

In the private sector, the model for organizing over the past 30 years has essentially remained the same. In simplest terms, it involves:

- targeting a specific site.
- building an organizing committee and getting workers to sign cards, and then petitioning for an NLRB election.
- conducting the election.
- if successful, attempting to bargain a contract.

We don't attempt to cost the employer money until we've won an election and begin to bargain. We spend years on election campaigns without gaining the power over employers to sign good contracts.

The organizing is done in a vacuum. Workers do not perceive the campaign as part of a larger movement. Many campaigns are based on the target being "hot" and are not part of a company, industry, market or regional strategy. The campaign is conducted and won or lost on the narrow issue of which is more credible—

the union's promises or the company's threats. The union is defined by our ability to win one more than 50% of the vote on a given day. In recent years union promises have become less credible while companies have become increasingly more sophisticated—and often accurate—in convincing workers of the futility of organizing.



**Successful organizing needs to be defined as organizing enough workers to *increase* the percentage of workers represented by unions in their industries and nationally. That is, we must organize more workers than jobs created every year.**

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More than Board delays, unfair labor practices and union-busting consultants, the fact that management arguments make sense is devastating to our ability to organize large numbers of workers. Unions can overcome threats, job loss and lies, but how do we overcome an employer argument that is more persuasive than ours? Not only is it more persuasive, but the whole process of organizing reinforces the boss's message: "We are strong. The union is weak."

If we look at a typical organizing campaign, we see that it is far from empowering—it alienates people from organizing. The boss' message of futility is backed up everyday not just by the anti-union campaign, but by who large employers are. A major hospital, manufacturing plant or university exudes power. From its physical size to its power in the community, to management's day-to-day control over people's lives, it is clear they have power.

What do we offer to fight this power? When workers see the union, they see a few organizers and co-workers who want the union. They hear a lot of rhetoric about unity and standing together, but how do we demonstrate that we have more power than the boss? How do we demonstrate that we can win changes that warrant the risks workers must take to get the union? What do we have beyond rhetoric to show how we will get a good contract?

We know how long it takes and how difficult it can be to get contracts. We know how marginal many first agreements are. We know we often don't get contracts at all. We rarely have a plan for how we will win a contract when we start a campaign. Why should workers believe we know how to win a good first agreement if we, in fact, often don't know how to? If we can't clearly

articulate a rational plan and demonstrate that we have more power than the boss, why in the world would workers risk their livelihood to support the union?

We try to build a sense of power through workplace activity, actions and "acting like a union." That's what good organizing is about. But even where this works in overcoming the boss' campaign and we win an election, it is so time-consuming and expensive that it rules out large-scale organizing. Ironically, the employers who we have the power to beat, most of whom have treated people so badly that they do organize ("hot shops"), often do not have the resources, market conditions or capacity to afford a good contract. We end up reinforcing the idea that the union can't bargain good contracts because we end up organizing small firms who can't afford wage rates that are above the industry average.

The issue isn't that employers oppose the union. That's to be expected. Workers in this country and throughout the world have faced worse opposition than we do now and yet risked their jobs and even their lives to organize. Workers won't organize, on a large scale, if we don't offer a program that has a reasonable chance for success and a vision worth fighting for. We can't organize non-union workers through the Board model because they don't believe we can win.

There are some large NLRB victories, but they are the exception, not the rule. Overall, a site-based NLRB model of organizing has not organized one new industry or region or been able to keep up with the increase in new jobs. In fact, most major gains in the last 30 years have not been through NLRB organizing.

Despite our lack of success in NLRB organizing, there have been a few attempts to organize outside the Board. Everyone is critical of the Board, but few unions move beyond that model. We invest time in trying to reform the Board instead of exploring ways for unions to organize around it.

### **HOW DID WE ORGANIZE DURING TIMES OF LABOR'S GROWTH?**

It is simplistic to say we should organize the way we did in the CIO days. We live in dramatically different times. There is always a danger when looking to CIO organizing that nostalgia rather than analysis will guide us.

Despite the danger, there are some fundamental differences between how organizing was approached during those times of labor's sustained growth and now. Most significantly, organizing

was industry-based and/or region-wide, not site-based. The goal was to organize everybody in an industry or industry segment.

Based on an analysis of an industry, the organizing drive sought to create a movement among all workers in that industry, while reaching out to every kind and manner of ally related to the industry's workforce. Though a specific employer or site might be the focus of a militant confrontation, union organizers made it clear that this was part of a larger organizing plan—a plan that sought justice and power for all the industry's workers.

Garment workers organized whole segments of their industry (cloakmakers, undergarment workers) and established an improved standard for the entire industry. Steel, auto and rubber workers organized company-wide and industry-wide drives. Coal miners organized whole regions. More recently, the big growth of New York's Local 1199 was prior to Board coverage and was part of a citywide movement.

In not one of these cases was the approach to solely organize individual sites. In these major victories, workers were part of large movements involving thousands of workers.

From both an organizing and bargaining perspective, these campaigns were based in industry realities. Industry-wide campaigns paved the way for power at the table and appealed to workers' sense they they were building real power.

Historically, labor's major gains have come through industry and region-wide organizing based on creating a movement with a clearly articulated plan for winning justice and power. Few, if any, significant sustained gains have come through site organizing based on winning Board elections.

For labor to succeed, we need to organize millions of workers. We need to organize and dominate industries and markets so we can negotiate good contracts. We need to give workers a reason to take risks to organize unions. We need to rebuild a movement of workers, organized and unorganized, that makes organizing its highest priority.

## **BUILDING A MOVEMENT**

Workers won't organize in large numbers in isolation. Workers will organize and take risks when they see themselves as part of a movement that has a chance to succeed. Only when unions begin to capture on a large scale the emotion, anger and excitement of workers as part of a larger movement will we be able to organize large numbers of workers.



The Daily News strike created a mini-movement in New York City.  
(Courtesy 1199 News)

This sets up a potential Catch 22: You can't organize without a movement and there is no movement, so we can't organize. For many this means either continuing the status quo or waiting for the magical day when "the movement" appears. Both options ignore the possibility that by approaching organizing in a fundamentally different way, exercising the power labor currently has, and taking risks on new ways to exercise power, we can create mini-movements that ultimately become the building blocks for large-scale organizing nationally.

A good example of where unions effectively create mini-movements is in major negotiations in the public and private sectors. There are dozens of examples of major contract campaigns that mobilize thousands of workers, dominate the media and become the issue in a community. We need only think of the Machinists at Eastern or the Mine Workers at Pittston, but there are dozens of others. (See Labor Research Review #17, "An Organizing Model of Unionism.")

It's not just that we technically know how to build and escalate such a campaign. Nor is it just the outcome that is important to workers. When we combine large numbers of workers, militant action, emotion, concrete deadlines and we force people to take sides, we can build an intensity of excitement and involvement

that moves workers to do things they wouldn't normally do, and this sets the stage for dramatic change. The *Daily News* strike, New York's 1199 contract campaign in 1989, the Oregon Public Employees Union in 1987 and again in 1989—all operated on a scale and a level of importance that mini-movements were created in a way rarely seen in organizing campaigns. We need to figure out how to capture this in organizing new members.

To succeed, we need to approach organizing in a fundamentally different fashion. Currently our organizing is driven by the question: "How do we win a majority of votes?"

Instead, we need to ask two questions:

- How do we develop power to force employers to recognize the union and sign good contracts?
- How do we demonstrate power so nonunion workers want to join the union?

By asking these questions, we set the stage to free ourselves from a failed model of organizing and to fight employers on *our terms*, not theirs.

By asking how we build power rather than how we win a majority in an unfair election, we lay the groundwork to move beyond one-dimensional NLRB campaigns to multi-layered comprehensive campaigns that target large groups of workers in whole industries and/or markets. We position ourselves to concentrate the power of organized workers, labor's political clout and our coalition partners to build a movement to demand justice for workers. We go to war armed with dozens of weapons instead of being reduced to fighting through the Board. We say to workers, the community and employers: The issue is not what percentage of workers will vote for the union. The issue is the conditions workers work and live under and how we can gain the power to win the union and improve conditions.

## **USING POWER TO BUILD MINI-MOVEMENTS**

How might it work? There are several concrete examples of such mini-movements being built by various unions right now. SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles is a good example (see Andy Banks' article in this issue for more details). But in order to flesh out the basic set of ideas outlined above, let's take some hypothetical examples and see how a movement-oriented organizing approach might work in different situations.

**■ ORGANIZING CASE 1:****A Citywide Healthcare Campaign****SITUATION:**

Local X represents 10,000 hospital workers in a citywide master contract. This represents about 50% of hospital workers in the city, but membership growth is stagnant. The union's ability to organize and negotiate is continually declining as the union share of the industry drops in relation to the increase in total hospital workers. Nonunion hospitals have consistently defeated organizing drives by matching close to whatever the union negotiates in the master contract. Financial distress and reorganization have resulted in union hospitals operating a growing number of nonunion facilities and residual units, which the union has also been unsuccessful in organizing.

Though Local X is gradually getting weaker, it still has substantial power it can build upon. It has a history of being able to mobilize thousands of members during contract struggles. It also is politically powerful as part of a local labor movement that retains a great deal of power in the city and the state. The hospital industry is deeply intertwined. Doctors and corporate leaders serve on the boards of both union and nonunion hospitals, and all hospitals are dependent upon a complicated state-financed reimbursement system.

**STRATEGY:**

A traditional site-by-site approach already failed. But there is potential here for Local X to create a mini-movement by simultaneously running contract and organizing campaigns, and making card check recognition of the union in the residual units and nonunion hospitals the number one priority in bargaining.

Using the excitement and membership involvement of a citywide bargaining campaign to involve nonunion workers, Local X would build toward a citywide strike—a healthcare crisis—that could only be settled through hospitals' agreeing to card-check recognition.

Union members would need to be educated and activated around the impact of nonunion hospitals on their ability to bargain a good contract. And then these union members would need to work on building a broad coalition in support of their bargaining and organizing campaigns. Under a general theme that a quality healthcare system for workers and patients can only exist with

fairly paid and treated unionized workers, a coalition of union members and other groups would become the nucleus of a movement. Through demonstrations, sit-ins, media events, etc., the coalition would focus the city's attention on the importance of solving the healthcare crisis for workers and patients.

Union activists and their allies would be directly involved in organizing nonunion workers into the citywide campaign, demonstrating to nonunion workers that they were part of a larger movement. Nonunion workers would be plugged into mass meetings and other activities. The union bargaining demands would be what they were organizing to gain. Instead of confronting a huge powerful hospital with a few co-workers, nonunion activists would participate in events that demonstrated the power of the union.

The healthcare industry and healthcare reimbursement systems are highly political and are intertwined with massive regulatory bureaucracies. Local X would constantly use the regulatory process and its links with hospital financing and the business and political ties of hospital directors to demonstrate the long-term costs of hospitals' insisting on trying to operate nonunion.

Escalating job actions and street activity would build toward a mass strike. The union's threat, which it would need to be prepared to act on, would be to use strikers from union hospitals to pull out workers from the nonunion hospitals and residual units.



Even if the strike at nonunion units could only pull 20% of the workers, it would dramatically magnify the healthcare crisis, especially if key occupations struck. A citywide strike of 10,000 union hospital workers combined with thousands of nonunion workers would cripple the industry and allow the union to disrupt the whole city.

Such a strategy involves taking some risks. It is based on the idea that if the union is willing and able to create a big enough crisis, it can force highly political institutions to accept unionization. It is also built on the idea that union members can understand and get excited about organizing nonunion competition. Finally, it is based on the idea that we can mobilize at least a militant minority of nonunion workers into a citywide campaign to force hospitals to recognize the union through a card-check. Such a strategy can work only if the union is willing to make organizing its highest priority.

## ■ ORGANIZING CASE 2:

### **Organizing MFG's Suppliers**

#### **SITUATION:**

Union Y represents almost 100% of MFG Corp.'s factory workers nationally, but MFG has outsourced much of its parts production to nonunion suppliers. The union has lost the fight to bring this work back in-house, and in addition there is a lot of work that has never been done in-house. Economic reality dictates that there will always be a large number of outside suppliers. The union has been unable to organize the suppliers in the past because suppliers can credibly argue that a union contract would make it impossible for them to compete for parts contracts against nonunion suppliers. Besides being almost 100% organized at MFG, Union Y has one other lever of power: Its contract with MFG allows it to honor authorized picket lines.

#### **STRATEGY:**

An industry-wide approach here would require Union Y to identify a specific product, like the proverbial "widgets," that are produced by a manageable number of companies who are dependent on MFG Corp. for most of their work. The union would form a National Organizing Committee (NOC) of workers from these companies. The NOC would develop standard national demands (the basis for an industry contract), and the union would approach

each widget company and demand that each agree to a card-check recognition procedure. The union would agree that it would not attempt to bargain a contract until a majority of widget manufacturers had recognized the union. Companies could avoid a fight with the union by agreeing to a recognition procedure that would not put them at a competitive disadvantage. Among companies that refused the card-check recognition procedure, the union would select strike targets.

MFG's union workers would be organized around the importance of organizing companies that threaten their jobs and standards, and they would be educated on their right to honor a picket line against struck work. Where possible, they would be active participants in organizing nonunion workers to understand the power the union had. Nonunion workers would be organized around the concept that only through an industry master contract could they win improvements and job security. They would see the union's power in two ways: through unionized workers' willingness to honor their picket lines and through simultaneous organizing activity at all widget companies around the country.

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The effectiveness of a strike would not be based on stopping production, but instead on the ability to stop a major customer from buying the product. In this context, an Unfair Labor Practice strike of a small percentage of a supplier plant could be devastating. While the union is threatening to strike a nonunion supplier, union workers would be agitating MFG about not using the struck supplier. Union workers would demonstrate concrete power by their refusal to handle struck goods. Nonunion workers would have real power and would respond to an ability to cripple their employer with relatively little risk (since scabs would be ineffective because the real target is the customer).

Employers won't fight the union as hard if being union doesn't threaten their market position. Targeting the entire industry and linking bargaining to the competition also being union allows us

to play different companies against each other.

Nonunion workers will be willing to take greater risks if there is a clear plan and a demonstration of union power. Targeting a whole industry sector gives the union large numbers, a rational target, and the potential to capture the imagination of nonunion workers.

### ■ **ORGANIZING CASE 3:**

#### **Publicly Funded Private Sector Jobs**

##### **SITUATION:**

The city of Unionburg, with a population of 1 million, is a former union stronghold. The private sector is still heavily organized, but union membership has declined with the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs. There are 30,000 unionized public employees, but jobs are being lost to privatization as the city and other public entities increasingly rely on private contractors. Union researchers have gone through city contracts and have identified thousands of jobs being done nonunion—jobs ranging from laundries to microfiche filming, to law firms and consultants that employ large numbers of clerical workers. It is clear that a huge number of nonunion private sector jobs are dependent on city money, jobs in both traditionally organized industries and in sectors labor has little base in.

##### **STRATEGY:**

Unionburg could be a good place to develop a mini-movement around what kinds of jobs public money is supporting. A multi-union citywide campaign to organize companies funded by city money could regain membership lost to privatization. This would increase total citywide union membership, thereby strengthening labor's political clout. Unions would gain footholds and leverage in new industries and would eventually build a citywide movement to support organizing and bargaining demands.

Such a strategy would involve five distinct parts:

- 1) Citywide mobilization of public and private sector unions.
- 2) Research of city-funded work to identify targets for multi-union organizing campaigns.
- 3) A bargaining campaign by city workers to oppose further privatization and to win contract language allowing public workers to honor picket lines and refuse to work with law-breaking contractors.

4) A legislative program to pass laws that assist organizing—e.g., Davis-Bacon type laws that establish minimum wages and benefits for all workers whose employers are recipients of city or state funds, or procedures that quickly disbar contractors who violate laws.

5) A citywide coalition of labor, community, religious and political leaders to support the idea that jobs created by public money need to pay and treat workers decently. This coalition would fight low-wage contracting policies that create poverty-level jobs and increase social service costs.

The campaign would build a citywide movement calling for justice for thousands of contracted workers. The strategy is to coordinate campaigns for legislation and new contract language and combine them with organizing drives to win leverage over contractors to force them to go union. Each piece feeds off each other.



Oregon Public Employees Union/SEIU Local 503 campaigns are conducted in coalition with other groups representing workers in the private sector, client groups, and nonprofits dependent on similar sources of funding. The rally pictured above, centered around the Union's state employee contract campaign of 1989. (Photo by Bentley Gilbert, SEIU Local 503)

The ultimate power is the ability to cost contractors their city funding. Once labor has this power, workers and contractors will see the advantages of being union.

Nonunion workers provide the motivation and ammunition for the campaign. These workers would be approached as part of a mass campaign for contracted workers. Meetings would be for multiple contractors and would be part of the citywide campaign.

Nonunion worker activists, telling stories of low wages and mistreatment, would be the core of many campaign events.

Private sector unions would activate their members to organize industry counterparts among targeted contractors.

Public sector workers would be activated around stopping privatization, while at the same time fighting for contract language that would benefit the organizing campaign among contracted workers. Nonlabor groups would be mobilized to fight to protect and improve city services and to win justice for contracted workers. The aim would be to build outrage that the city is the ultimate source of gross exploitation.

Thirty thousand public employees, thousands of unionized private sector workers, thousands of nonunion contracted workers, and dozens of community groups and leaders would be affected by and involved in the campaign. The multiple goals of protecting current jobs, wages, and benefits *and* organizing new workers offer the opportunity to mobilize activity for thousands of union members while using labor's power to organize thousands of non-union workers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Understanding where labor's current strength is allows us to plan large-scale campaigns that offer the potential for protecting our base and organizing large numbers of workers.

Only by targeting on a grand scale and by taking big risks can we succeed in organizing. By moving beyond NLRB site-by-site organizing, we open the door to mass campaigns that involve current members, the community and nonunion workers in building a movement for justice.

There is a window of opportunity now for this kind of organizing. There is an increasing recognition of the depth of labor's crisis, combined with a willingness to hear new ideas.

We still have enough power to directly impact our ability to organize. But if we do not use these opportunities now, it may soon be too late. ■