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Creating a Culture of Organizing: ACTWU's Education for Empowerment

Abstract

[Excerpt] Providing rank-and-file members opportunities to participate and learn from their own experiences in organizing other workers is not only a very powerful educational tool. It also goes a long way in creating a culture of organizing when it is part of an overall education program, driven by the union's strategic goals.

Keywords

ACTWU, education, union organizing, strategy



Creating a Culture of Organizing

ACTWU's Education for Empowerment

■ *Jose La Luz*

"U.S. unions have it tough," said John Eagles, an organizer for the South African Clothing and Textile Workers who spent five weeks last year working on an ACTWU organizing drive in Martinsville, Virginia. Eagles concluded that ACTWU organizers have a tougher job than their South African counterparts, but that rank-and-file volunteers make a big difference in the union's organizing efforts.

Dozens of volunteer organizers and staff, including John Eagles, attempted to persuade some 3,000 workers at Tultex Corporation that they could make history in the growing fleecewear industry by choosing the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union as their bargaining representative. Although the union lost the election by a very close margin, Eagles insists that union members who volunteered their efforts in the organizing campaign obtained an invaluable education.

According to Eagles, SACTWU has tried unsuccessfully for years to negotiate union leaves with South African employers that would allow members to get involved in organizing campaigns and other union business. Many ACTWU contracts allow members to take

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leaves of up to six months to do union work. Such provisions are not uncommon in U.S. labor contracts, but only recently have unions begun to use them to develop rank-and-file organizers.

"Your members, especially those who have been on a number of campaigns are really extraordinary," Eagles observed. "Whether a campaign is won or lost, the education it provides for the members is invaluable."

Eagles' assertion that membership involvement in organizing is in fact an educational activity is consistent with the mission of ACTWU's Education Department. An important part of this mission is to foster a learning environment out of every challenge before the union in order to increase the members' understanding of the role they can play in *building their own union*.

Providing rank-and-file members opportunities to participate and learn from their own experiences in organizing other workers is not only a very powerful educational tool. It also goes a long way in creating a culture of organizing when it is part of an overall education program, driven by the union's strategic goals.

When the union placed organizing as its most important strategic goal at its 1987 convention, its newly elected President Jack Sheinkman also proposed a bold new program calling for restructuring the union's affiliated bodies in order to maximize resources for organizing. Sheinkman's vision also required the adoption of a dynamic, change-oriented educational program that would contribute to the development of a culture of organizing.

Since then, organizing activities have increased dramatically throughout the union. Its affiliates have conducted 135 campaigns covering approximately 27,000 workers and have won the right to bargain for 13,000. More than 5,500 of these have been organized in Right-to-Work states in the South and Southwest, where obtaining recognition for new units is often a long and arduous process that requires ongoing internal organizing before and after a first contract is negotiated.

Ownership: The Foundation for An Organizing Culture

Organizing is intrinsically an educational activity. Although it is still conceived in some quarters of the labor movement as a selling and marketing activity—thus, the emphasis on the adoption of technology and manipulation techniques—the fact is that most workers won't "commit" unless they develop a *sense of ownership*. This simply means that during the campaign most workers realize that their risks are worth it because they are *meeting their own needs* by developing *their own vehicle* to meet those needs.

In the midst of the anti-worker, anti-union climate that prevails in this country, particularly in Right-to-Work states, the fear of losing one's livelihood conditions the behavior and views many workers have about this "outsider" called the union. We have learned from experience that workers overcome their legitimate fears only by developing an understanding that the union is not an outside third party but that they themselves are the union. Ownership becomes the fundamental notion necessary to change behavior and generate action.

In ACTWU we are convinced that worker-to-worker organizing is a lot more powerful and effective than hiring an army of paid staff to organize.

It also stands to reason that for union workers to volunteer their efforts in an organizing drive, they have to develop the sense that the union belongs to them. And this sense can only be developed through an education process. Why "education" and not simply "training"? Because this process not only entails providing the potential volunteer organizers with whatever *skills* are necessary in organizing. Far more important is developing the *values, attitudes and conviction* among members that "sharing their union" with other workers is going to give them, as well as the unorganized workers, more power to improve everybody's lives.

That kind of education does not happen in an isolated skill-oriented training session for potential volunteer organizers whenever the perceived need arises. It only takes place as part of an ongoing, developmental process of education that combines all kinds and levels of learning activities, both within and outside classroom settings. It has more to do with creating an environment or a culture that promotes those values than with demonstrating how to do a house call.

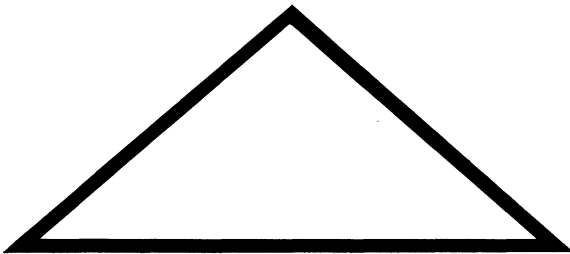
Though the Education Department's role varies greatly from region to region, our best practice in recruiting volunteer organizers usually begins with a weekend institute on internal organizing. In Right-to-Work states, like Texas, we prepare rank-and-file volunteers to recruit new members where they work. In workplaces that have union shops, as in Missouri, we provide educational support for developing an expanded leadership for contract campaigns, as was the case at the Brown Shoe Corp.

After our members have gained experience in internal organizing, we encourage them to reflect on that experience and to think about taking short leaves to help organize nonunion plants. Through workshops and seminars, reflection on their experience as internal organizers prepares and motivates them for organizing new members. In Texas, for example, volunteers experienced

in internal organizing at union plants in San Antonio and Dallas have taken leaves to help organize nonunion plants along the border with Mexico.

Usually, a rank-and-file volunteer's first experience with external organizing is in making house calls during a week-long Blitz at a nonunion plant. The Blitz is a technique developed by former ACTWU organizer Richard Bensinger, who is now Director of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. In a Blitz, the union seeks to flood a workforce with organizers in a very concentrated period of time, accumulating a majority of signed cards before the employer has time to develop his full array of stalling tactics and union-busting techniques. After their experience Blitzing, we again ask our volunteers to reflect on their experience, on what they have learned both about themselves and about their union. Many return for other Blitz campaigns. Others take longer leaves to participate in more sustained and more traditional organizing drives—a few have even been hired by the union as full-time organizers. Still others return to their local union to run for office or to otherwise participate more fully in strengthening their union. When we're successful, all the volunteers return to their regular jobs with a deepened (and deepening) commitment to their union and to organizing as a daily part of the union's life.

**Reflection
&
Analysis**



**Information
Sharing**

**Action
(& Appropriate
Strategy)**

In their classes, ACTWU teachers often use the pyramid above to illustrate the nature of our pedagogy. Beginning at the lower left base with information sharing, the process moves to reflection upon and analysis of that information, and then to strategizing about what action should be taken. After the action has been taken, the process begins again with sharing information about the action.



Danny Forsyth

Education for Change

Our pedagogical process discards the use of lectures and speeches, encouraging instead more active methods that lead to critical analysis and examination of the reality the union operates in, without making any previous assumptions. If anything, the only assumption or premise is that ACTWU is a union fighting for its life in a rapidly declining industry.

That usually sparks lively discussion in which organizing begins to emerge as the most vital activity and one that can't be left only to those who are employed by the union. Participants also discover that a union with a shrinking membership certainly cannot rely exclusively on hiring more staff in order to organize. Thus, the participants are confronted with a reality that gives them several choices from doing nothing at all to becoming a protagonist in building their own union.

What makes for a lively discussion where participants can get a sense of what ownership and change mean in relation to union building? Based on our own experience, the consistent use of open-ended questions is critical, especially those that allow them to examine why and how people become involved, beginning with an analysis of how they themselves became "committed."

It's interesting to note how many union members resist reflecting on their own experience to learn how they themselves became activists, preferring instead to cite reasons why others don't participate by attending meetings. This reaction to other workers who don't attend those traditionally boring union business meetings is always intriguing. It assumes that attending meetings is the

only way or the most important way for members to participate in their union. It also deflects the activists from looking at their own experience and needs, and from critically reflecting on how well the union is doing to encourage its members to participate.

Creating an environment where union members can reflect on their own experiences of participation in the life of the union in order to understand how their own needs have or have not been met is one of the primary goals in most of our education sessions. In trying to meet their own needs, many of them had to change both their environment and themselves. Often that meant confronting unfair supervisory practices on the shopfloor, challenging an incumbent shop steward or union officer who was perceived to be ineffective, or fighting for a better contract than the one proposed for ratification. This involves dealing with the stress of personal change while at the same time working collectively for institutional change. Through the process of sharing information about their experiences, union members discover that their motivations for becoming activists are as varied as their needs. Reflecting on and analyzing those experiences together as a group makes them aware of how both personal and institutional change are essential to meeting those needs, and how these two types of change reinforce and nurture each other.

Once a better understanding of ownership and change is developed, the training in whatever skills are necessary for organizing (one-on-one communications, public speaking, house calls, etc.) acquire a new meaning.

In summary, our pedagogical process can be seen as a cycle where members, officers and staff can *share information* about their experiences and practices in organizing and union building, *reflect* on these through *discussion and analysis* and arrive at conclusions that generate *more action*. It is far more successful in those sections of the union where organizing and union building are not the subject of an occasional education workshop or conference but rather part of every activity in the life of the union.

The Celebration of Organizing: Developing a Shared Vision

ACTWU's affiliates in the South and Southwest have been far more successful in organizing precisely because their leadership and staff share a vision of a rank-and-file membership that must be empowered and mobilized to build their own union. And they have been working hard to translate that vision into a program of action.

For instance, organizing, both internal and external, is always a subject of discussion and reflection at their regional joint board meetings. Summer schools and weekend education conferences invariably include organizing and union building in the curriculum. Organizing victories are celebrated collectively in all these gatherings. Furthermore, rank-and-file members who volunteer their efforts in internal and external organizing campaigns are rewarded with public recognition and tribute by their peers. The pages of the international union's newspaper *Labor Unity* are constantly filled with stories depicting the contributions of workers organizing other workers in these and other regions.

In the Southwest Region, officers, staff and experienced volunteer organizers are trained in the methodology of adult worker education so that they can facilitate and lead discussions with potential volunteers. In these sessions participants explore together the meaning of ownership and change in the context of building the union. Also, collaboration and teamwork between servicing and organizing staff and between shop stewards and members is emphasized as a critical learning objective. The discussions that take place are not to contemplate reality, but to change it together. ■

Victoria Williams



... rank-and-file
organizers at
Tultex Corp.