



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 8
Labor's Crucible in the 1980's...Organize!

Article 10

1986

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Ben Green

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One on One: The On-the-Job Canvass in Florida

Abstract

[Excerpt] If you went looking for the "new frontier" of the American labor movement, Alachua, Florida, would hardly be your first stop. To Yankee snowbirds whizzing by on Interstate 75, heading south to Walt Disney World or the Gold Coast's beaches, Alachua is an exit in the middle of nowhere. A true hole-in-the-road.

It's located 8 miles northwest of Gainesville, on the southern edge of Florida's panhandle. This is the Bible Belt. Farm country. It's also "Gator Country," as the billboards along U.S. 441 scream out, referring in this case to University of Florida football, although the four-legged kind also inhabit the swamps and marshes.

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Today, GE must be wondering what went wrong. IBEW Local 2156 has 780 members out of 959 hourly employees at the plant—a remarkable 81% in a Right-To-Work state. Wages are comparable to unionized GE plants in other parts of the country. Alachua produced one thing that GE never expected: one hell of a local union.

IBEW 2156 has accomplished this feat by pioneering a new and innovative technique — the On-The-Job Canvass (OTJC) — that proponents hope will help revitalize the American labor movement. The combination of new techniques, old-fashioned dedication, and leaders who are not afraid of either one has put this local on the cutting edge of the labor movement in the 1980s.

Keywords

union, labor movement, organizing, General Electric, GE, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, IBEW, On-The-Job Canvass, OTJC, labor movement



Building the Ranks:

One on One:

The On-the-Job Canvass in Florida

■ *Ben Green*

If you went looking for the "new frontier" of the American labor movement, Alachua, Florida, would hardly be your first stop. To Yankee snowbirds whizzing by on Interstate 75, heading south to Walt Disney World or the Gold Coast's beaches, Alachua is an exit in the middle of nowhere. A true hole-in-the-road.

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• Ben Green is a former communications director and director of humanities programs for the Florida AFL-CIO. He is the author of *Finest Kind: A Celebration of a Florida Fishing Village* (Mercer, 1985).

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Background of the Struggle

None of it came easy for Local 2156. When GE opened the plant in 1962, it was the only major industry in the area. It's the largest private sector employer in Alachua County. The 959 hourly workers are drawn from 11 small surrounding counties. Two-thirds of the workers are women, one-third are black. Men hold most of the highly skilled positions (maintenance workers, electricians, machinists, mechanics, and welders), while most women are assembly operators.

The nickel-cadmium cells made in Alachua are used in thousands of applications. Black and Decker, the plant's biggest customer, uses the batteries in its Dustbusters, electric drills, and rechargeable lights. Several years ago, GE started promoting a consumer line of rechargeable batteries, with excellent results. Sales remain promising despite a recent drop-off.

Although there are a number of other GE assembly plants in Florida, Alachua is the only one that is organized.

It took a five-year struggle to get a union contract in Alachua. In 1963, several workers in the maintenance department started shopping around for a union. They read the constitutions of several internationals and eventually settled on the IBEW, one of 13 internationals representing GE workers.

Local 2156 was chartered in 1964 and soon afterwards filed for union recognition. When GE refused to bargain, the union filed suit. But it wasn't until 1969 that the union finally won its case.

Local 2156 got its first contract in 1970, when GE workers staged a 101-day nationwide strike. Ironically, the local was so weak that the international refused to allow it to participate in the strike for fear the local would collapse.

Union members were harassed throughout the five years it took to win that contract. The company fired almost every woman who

joined the union. When the union called meetings at night, members would park their cars several blocks from the meeting site and walk the rest of the way to avoid attention. The harassment was so intense that by the time the first contract was signed in 1970, only two of the charter members were still working in the plant (one of them, Jim Hope, is still a member of the negotiating committee and served as union president from 1981-84). All of the others had been fired or had quit under pressure.

The 1980s: New Challenges and New Techniques

Throughout the 1970s, IBEW 2156 maintained a membership of about 60-65% of the workforce. The union had a good record of contract gains for its members, but couldn't increase its membership significantly, despite regular attempts. It also suffered from poor attendance at union meetings, too few people doing the work, apparent apathy on the part of rank-and-file members.

When Susan Wilson was appointed Business Manager in 1980, after the previous Business Manager had resigned, she had no grand design for overcoming those problems. Wilson had been a machine adjuster-operator and an assembly operator in the plant since 1973, and a union steward and member of the Executive Board prior to her appointment.

What she had going for her was the ability to win the trust and support of people in her local—which was reflected in her election to a full 3-year term in 1981—and a willingness to try new ideas and programs.

At the Florida AFL-CIO Labor School in June 1982, Wilson and three other members of the local, Jackie Ward, Ann Tomlinson and Joan Sweat, heard a presentation by a representative of the International Association of Machinists on a new program called the On-The-Job Canvass. They liked what they heard.

"We were very excited because we thought it was a tool we could use," said Ward. "We knew one-to-one contact could work because there are churches in our area that are very successful at getting people to church that way. And the United Way does the same thing."

Jackie Ward reported on the On-The-Job Canvass at the next meeting of the local's Executive Board. "The Executive Board got excited, too," said Ward, "because we needed some way to get people more active and build our membership. We just didn't know how to implement it."

They would soon have the chance to find out.

The On-The-Job Canvass: How It Works

The On-The-Job Canvass (OTJC) has been hailed by some proponents as an important element in the salvation of the labor movement. It was first developed by the Canadian Labor Congress and then brought to the U.S. in 1981 by the International Association of Machinists. Jerry Thompson, director of the IAM's Placid Harbour Education Center, has directed the Machinists' OTJC projects and is its leading advocate.

The On-The-Job Canvass attempts to solve one of labor's most pressing problems: lack of communication between union leaders and rank-and-file members. Critics point to labor's failure to deliver its members' votes in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections as evidence of the problem. The low percentage of union members who attend union meetings or read union newsletters are other examples.

The On-The-Job Canvass goes to the heart of this problem by establishing one-on-one communication between union leaders and members. The communication is also two-way—coming from the members to the leaders, rather than from the top down.

The key steps in the process include: making the members aware of an issue, making them concerned about the issue, and then convincing them to take action on the issue.

Here's how it works:

1. Local union officers agree to do a canvass. They name a Canvass Coordinator to head up the project.

2. Attitude Survey. The IAM added an attitude survey to the original Canadian program. They feel this is a critical element to insure the canvass incorporates the views of the members and is not perceived as another top-down program. The attitude survey is developed by local leaders, and may focus on the job the union is doing, political or workplace issues, or all of the above. Surveys are distributed to all union members. They are asked to complete them during lunch or coffee breaks and return them the same day. Surveys are collected and tallied.

3. Planning Session for Canvass. Local leaders pick one of the top three issues from the attitude survey as the subject for a canvass. It should be an issue that action can be taken on (for example, contacting legislators on a critical vote) and that affects other members of the community. A timetable is established for training sessions and for the canvass.

4. Leaflet. A leaflet is developed to educate members on the issue and to ask them for specific actions (sign letter or tear-off sheet).

5. Training Sessions for Canvass Organizers and Canvassers. One



Jackie Ward

... IBEW 2156 canvassers at lunch meeting.

canvasser is recruited for every 20 union members, and one canvass organizer for every 10 canvassers. Separate training sessions are held for organizers and canvassers to familiarize them with the canvass issue and the leaflet, and to teach them how to respond to criticisms.

6. Canvass. The actual canvass lasts no more than two weeks. Each Canvasser is responsible for contacting 20 co-workers at work, during breaks and lunch. They hand out leaflets, discuss the issue and ask the member to take the hoped-for action.

7. Evaluation. The results of the canvass are discussed.

Putting It Into Action

By 1982, the IAM's Jerry Thompson had had little success at selling the program to other unions. His luck changed when Don Resha, then the Executive Vice-President of the Florida AFL-CIO, attended a training session that Thompson held for IAM Local 702 in Miami.

Resha was so impressed that he asked the IAM to send an OTJC instructor to the Florida AFL-CIO Labor School that summer. That was where Susan Wilson and the other IBEW 2156 members first heard about the program.

In February 1983, the Florida AFL-CIO invited Thompson back to Florida to lead a week-long training for representatives from the central labor councils in the state. Marty Letsinger, field representative for the state federation, was one of the participants. During the next two years, the On-The-Job Canvass would be one of her primary job assignments.

"We hoped that the participants would go back to their labor councils and start canvasses," said Letsinger. "But it didn't happen because there wasn't a hot issue for them to go to their local unions and say, 'Hey, let's do something about this.'"

In September 1983, the hot issue appeared: "Clean-Up '84," a statewide petition drive to pass a constitutional amendment on toxic substances. At the Florida AFL-CIO Convention that month, Resha and Letsinger met with 9 local union leaders and asked them to set up pilot canvasses for "Clean-Up '84."

Susan Wilson volunteered. "They told us how the program worked and asked us to take a chance on it," she recalled. "We had been interested in the program ever since we heard about it, so I agreed."

The goal of that first canvass was to inform union members about "Clean Up '84" and get them to sign a petition to place the issue on the state ballot in November 1984.

Wilson scheduled the first training for Canvass Organizers on Saturday, October 29, 1983. The five-hour session was led by Marty Letsinger and Gary Hardacre (then president of the local central labor council and a participant at Thompson's week-long training). All of Local 2156's officers and executive board attended.

At the end of the training, canvass organizers were asked to recruit canvassers to come to the Canvasser Training on the following Saturday. Forty-five people showed up, including most of the executive board and officers.

The Canvass lasted from November 7-18. Out of 875 workers canvassed, 683 signed the "Clean Up '84" petition.

Susan Wilson and the other leaders of Local 2156 were ecstatic. "Everybody was enthusiastic because it proved that the On-The-Job Canvass really worked," she said.

"My enthusiasm just bubbled over, I couldn't help it," said Alice Kinzer, currently a Secretary of the union. "As soon as we started the canvass, everybody in the plant started talking about it. People came up to me and asked, 'Are you going to canvass me, too, or are you just being selective?' They were upset that they hadn't been canvassed."

"The Clean Up '84 canvass was the first time that people in our plant could see that the union was actually doing something,"

added Jackie Ward. "It gave us insight into what people's concerns were, and also opened the door to talk union issues with them."

In fact, many of the most enthusiastic workers weren't even members of Local 2156. The union's leaders were so excited about the results that they decided to use the On-The-Job Canvass for a membership drive. They had attempted to increase membership before, but this time would be different.

The 1984 Membership Drive

The leaders of Local 2156 scheduled the start of the membership drive for February 27, 1984. There was a lot of work to do before then. First, they developed a brochure entitled "Power Through Unity." It outlined some of the local's accomplishments and the advantages of belonging to the union.

Using the On-The-Job Canvass for a membership drive meant adapting its usual format. Susan Wilson explains: "The On-The-Job Canvass is designed to talk to union members about political issues, one at a time. But we decided to reverse it and talk to non-members about joining the union."

The Canvass Organizer training was held on February 11th, with the Canvasser training two weeks later on February 25th. Again, nearly 50 people volunteered to be canvassers, including three people who had never been to a union meeting. "We did some role-playing exercises to give the canvassers practice at responding to the most common excuses for not joining: I can't afford it; unions are crooked; why should I join when I get all the benefits anyway; my religion forbids it; or I don't like that dizzy broad that's running the union," said Wilson.

The union kicked off the membership canvass by handing out "Proud To Be Union" buttons to all union members and asking them to wear them every day during the canvass. The buttons had an immediate impact. "The buttons created a bandwagon effect," said Wilson. "Non-members started coming up and saying, 'Hurry up and sign me up so I can wear one of those buttons; I don't want people to know I'm not a member.' One woman said, 'Give me one of those buttons. I can't walk around bare-chested.'"

The membership canvass was a tremendous success. A total of 160 new members were signed up during the two-week drive—a 23% increase in the union's membership.

"It was almost like a game," said Jackie Ward. "People were saying, 'Hey, how many did you get today?' As a result of the canvass I think our members have much more faith in what the union can accomplish. They feel now like there's not anything the

union can't do if we get behind it."

The membership drive also strengthened the union's position with plant management. "I went to the personnel director before we started the drive and told him that our goal was to sign up every non-union person in the plant," said Wilson. "He laughed and said, 'Yeah, sure.' About four days later he called me back and said, 'What in the hell are y'all doing?' He realized how many people we were signing up and got real concerned. So did all the supervisors in the plant. That's my favorite part about canvass: you make the company notice that the union is out there talking to the workers. We put them on the defensive, which is really out of character since GE has a management philosophy of always being on the offensive. The personnel director still can't figure out what we did. He still asks, 'How did y'all do that?' He thinks there was some secret to it."

Jim Hope, the only original member of the local still working in the plant, credits the success of the membership canvass to a psychological "domino theory:" "Everybody in the plant was talking about the same thing at the same time. It created a domino effect. Even if the first reaction you got from a person was negative, when they walked off, the next group of people they saw were talking about the union. Everybody wants to associate with a winner, and the canvass gave the union the image of a winner. We had a good product—the union—and a good marketing program—the canvass. Signing up 160 new members in two weeks was something I'd dreamed about over the years."

The Canvass As a Permanent Fixture

Local 2156 didn't rest on its laurels after the remarkable success of the membership drive. They did a third On-the-Job Canvass in May 1985, prior to the start of local negotiations on a new three-year contract. The local had already conducted a survey in April 1985 to identify what members wanted in the new contract, so the goal of the negotiations canvass was to educate the members about the union's bargaining proposals.

Thirteen different internationals bargain jointly with GE on economic issues, but IBEW unions negotiate local agreements on non-economic issues. "The company had people scared to death that if the union asked for anything we would lose our jobs," said Wilson. "But the canvass showed people that our demands were reasonable, and our members stuck by us throughout negotiations. We ended up getting a non-concession national agreement and most of what we wanted on the local level."



Jackie Ward

... canvass organizers prepare for canvass.

What has the local learned from its success with the On-the-Job Canvass? To keep using it, that's what. And also to keep developing other new programs to improve communication with its members.

Prior to negotiations, the union invited a union consultant to lead a one-day workshop to increase solidarity and unity among members of the negotiating committee. Committee members credit some of their success at the table to that workshop. "We were so united during negotiations that management couldn't figure out what was going on," said Wilson. "They finally just came in and said, 'Tell us what it will take to settle this contract.'"

In September 1985, Susan Wilson resigned as Business Manager of Local 2156 after being elected Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida AFL-CIO—making her the first woman to hold a statewide executive office in Florida. Jackie Ward took her place as Business Manager. She sees the On-the-Job Canvass as a permanent fixture of the union: "I see parts of the canvass being used every day in the plant. More than ever before, people sit around and ask, 'Well, what do you think about that issue.' One-to-one contact is definitely going to be an ongoing thing for this local."

Canvass Spreads to Other Florida Unions

Other unions in Florida have been inspired by Local 2156's success with the OTJC and have begun implementing it.

Florida AFL-CIO field rep Marty Letsinger has been a one-woman barnstorming troupe, holding canvass trainings all over the state. She has personally trained 371 canvass organizers and 637 canvassers in the past two years. Most of those have been in Florida, although she has also held trainings for the North Carolina AFL-CIO, IBEW's EM-5 Systems Council, the Bakery and Confectionary Workers' southern region, and for union officers and staff in New Hampshire.

In November 1983, the Broward County AFL-CIO used the canvass in its successful campaign to enact a county-wide prevailing wage law—the only one in the state. Eighty canvassers from different building trades locals were trained, and they canvassed workers on every union construction site in Broward County. They collected letters of support and signatures on petitions urging the county commission to pass the prevailing wage bill.

"What happened in Broward County was very significant," said Letsinger, "because many people have said, 'Yeah, the On-the-Job Canvass is fine for industrial and public employee unions, but it won't work in the building trades.' Well, it did work in the building trades!"

In the fall of 1985, Florida AFL-CIO President Dan Miller launched a major drive to use the canvass to fight the Reagan administration's proposed taxation of employee benefits. Electric utility workers in Cocoa, postal workers in Tampa, telephone workers in Gainesville, and textile workers in Ocala were canvassed.

Letsinger is most excited about a canvass on taxation of benefits in IBEW 824, a huge 6,500 member telephone company local covering 6 counties on the west coast of Florida. She has trained 40 canvass organizers and 300 canvassers for the union. "This is the premiere local to watch," she said, "because if a union this big and this spread out can make the canvass work, then nobody else will have any excuses for not using it."

Nationwide Success of the Canvass

The success of the On-The-Job Canvass in Florida has been duplicated by the IAM in other parts of the country. According to Jerry Thompson, a IAM local in San Jose, California, increased

its political action fund pledges from \$2,000 to \$36,000 during a two-week canvass. In Ohio, the IAM registered 10,300 of its members to vote (out of 30,000 IAM members statewide).

In Kansas, the union collected 34,000 tear-off cards supporting its position on decontrol of natural gas. The cards were mailed to the state's Congressional delegation and were credited with turning around the position of two members of Congress.

The On-The-Job Canvass has also been used successfully to win non-concessionary contracts and defeat union decertification drives.

Recently, the national AFL-CIO has recognized the benefits of the IAM and Florida AFL-CIO's OTJC. In May 1985, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland announced a "new" One-on-One program, incorporating the On-The-Job Canvass completely. Pilot projects are underway in three states: Georgia, Missouri and Idaho. Goals of the program include: "systematic training of several thousand local officers, stewards and activists to reach out to the membership in face-to-face conversations."

Conclusion: A New Tool In An Old Box

In essence, the On-the-Job Canvass is a structured attempt to recapture the one-to-one communication that was an essential part of CIO organizing success in the 1930s. The union steward was a shop-floor organizer, a dues-collector (prior to dues check-off) and a sounding board for members' concerns. As the role of the steward has been whittled down to a mere grievance-handler and distributor of union newsletters, that two-way communication has been lost.

The On-The-Job Canvass may well prove to be the shot in the arm the labor movement needs. The results so far are certainly promising. The canvass is resurrecting the best of what the labor movement has always been by putting new training methods and a new face on one of labor's oldest institutions: the steward system. ■