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Fear, Conflict, and Union Organizing

Abstract

[Excerpt] Workers' fears—of job loss, of strikes, of management retaliation—are well-documented obstacles to successful union organizing. Exploiting these fears is at the heart of employers' union-avoidance strategies. Unorganized workers are well aware that management opposition creates real and potential risks in organizing. Not so well documented is the effect of conflict generated during the organizing process. Conflict is distinct from fear because the adversarial relationship itself has an impact on undecided workers. Management and their consultants can take actions that polarize the workplace and then transfer blame to "outside" union organizers and inside "troublemakers."

We believe that conflict is at least as important as fear in arousing anti-union sentiments, especially in organizing campaigns among professional, technical, and office workers. Our research indicates that understanding and addressing the issue of conflict is essential for success among these workers. Without more attention to its influence, by default, private-sector organizing may well appeal to only those workers with little to lose.

The role of fear and conflict in employers' union-avoidance campaigns will first be explored with the aid of several cases; we will distinguish between fear and conflict while demonstrating their entanglement. Next, we will explore in detail the campaign by the Communications Workers of America to organize computer technicians employed by AT&T's NCR subsidiary. We will present survey data based on interviews with 320 of these technicians, which enable us to evaluate their attitudes toward unionization. The data along with field experience indicate that aversion to conflict provides a significant explanation for hesitancy to organize among workers who are otherwise favorably disposed toward unions. Finally, we will discuss strategies to overcome fear and conflict and argue that the extent to which workers build their own organizations is directly related to the workers' likely success.

Keywords

unions, labor movement, organizing, worker rights, United States, anti-unionism

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Chapter 11

Fear, Conflict, and Union Organizing

Larry Cohen and Richard W. Hurd

Workers' fears—of job loss, of strikes, of management retaliation—are well-documented obstacles to successful union organizing. Exploiting these fears is at the heart of employers' union-avoidance strategies (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Freeman 1985; Hurd 1994, Weiler 1983). Unorganized workers are well aware that management opposition creates real and potential risks in organizing. Not so well documented is the effect of conflict generated during the organizing process. Conflict is distinct from fear because the adversarial relationship itself has an impact on undecided workers. Management and their consultants can take actions that polarize the workplace and then transfer blame to "outside" union organizers and inside "trouble-makers."

We believe that conflict is at least as important as fear in arousing anti-union sentiments, especially in organizing campaigns among professional, technical, and office workers. Our research indicates that understanding and addressing the issue of conflict is essential for success among these workers. Without more attention to its influence, by default, private-sector organizing may well appeal to only those workers with little to lose.

The role of fear and conflict in employers' union-avoidance campaigns will first be explored with the aid of several cases; we will distinguish between fear and conflict while demonstrating their entanglement. Next, we will explore in detail the campaign by the Communications Workers of America to organize computer technicians employed by AT&T's NCR subsidiary. We will present survey data based on interviews with 320 of these technicians, which enable us to evaluate their attitudes toward unionization. The data along with field experience indicate that aversion to conflict provides a significant explanation for hesitancy to organize among workers who are otherwise favorably disposed toward unions. Finally, we

will discuss strategies to overcome fear and conflict and argue that the extent to which workers build their own organizations is directly related to the workers' likely success.

The Specter of Conflict

Employers use a variety of tactics to wage their campaigns of fear and intimidation. Firing union activists, harassing and discriminating against union supporters, threatening plant closings or layoffs, and suggesting the inevitability of strikes are all tactics designed to exploit workers' fears. The intent is to increase dramatically the expected cost of unionization and to convince undecided voters and reserved union supporters that organizing is not worth the risks.

Intertwined with these appeals to fear are efforts to create anxiety about workplace life in a unionized future. In particular, employers attempt to portray union adherents as malcontents committed to a confrontational approach that will translate into a state of perpetual conflict if the organizing campaign succeeds. Typically, this unsavory picture is counterposed with a peaceful and cooperative nonunion future based on promises of improved communication and an increased voice for workers.

For example, when workers at Teksid Aluminum's Dickson, Tennessee, plant attempted to organize with the assistance of the Aluminum, Brick and Glass Workers (ABGW), Teksid's director of human resources referred to ABGW adherents as "union slime." One worker who refused to wear an antiunion button being distributed by the company was ordered to sweep the basement. Another was cursed by his supervisor for wearing a pro-union button at work. A third was fired for theft when he placed an inexpensive file in his back pocket while cleaning his work area. These and a series of similar incidents created an intimidating atmosphere that scared away potential union supporters. After setting this negative tone with its anti-union campaign, Teksid's management complained to its employees that production was suffering because of the "high tension" caused by the organizing campaign. On the eve of the NLRB election, the company's president asked employees to choose cooperation over adversarialism: "You can vote for this union and make me negotiate against you, or you can vote against this union and help me shape Teksid into a team" (Hurd 1994:15-16).

When ACTWU attempted to assist a group of workers interested in forming a union at BMP America in Medina, New York, the company condemned the "name callers" and suggested in a memo that "employees [who] are sick and tired of being hounded and harassed to sign cards . . . [should] tell the union organizer to get lost." Meanwhile, an informal work environ-

ment gave way to a crackdown on conversations, especially those involving union supporters. An "Employee-Management Committee" was presented as a peaceful alternative to the union. As described by the ACTWU organizer, "The critical group needed for a majority . . . latched on to the Employee-Management Committee as a way to avoid the need to confront the boss" (Hurd and Uehlein 1994:134-38).

Lundy Packing in Clinton, North Carolina, was more aggressive in its reaction to an organizing campaign initiated by workers with the help of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Several captive-audience meetings were supplemented by a series of small-group meetings. Workers were warned of strikes and the likely futility of collective bargaining. Four union supporters were fired, one for wearing a wristwatch on the job (against a seldom enforced policy), even though the watch had been a gift from the company for thirty years of service. The centerpiece of the employer's message was job loss, as summarized by the operations manager in a captive-audience meeting: "The best way to protect your job, your paycheck, is to vote 'no' in this election." Against the backdrop of this intense campaign, a final speech by Lundy's owner undoubtedly rang true: "If we defeat this union, then we can get on with it. If the union wins, well, then as far as I'm concerned, the battle has probably just begun" (Hurd and Uehlein 1994:96-98).

Some employers lay the foundation for union resistance in advance, based on the conflict hyperbole. After facing organizing campaigns in other parts of the country, K-Mart hired a well-known antiunion law firm to help reorganize its human resource management system (e.g., workers were referred to as "associates") and otherwise prepare its Newnan, Georgia, distribution center to retain its union-free status. A year later, the IBT began an organizing campaign, and on cue the company created two committees—the Associate Relations Committee and the Employee Involvement Committee. While these committees went to work addressing employees' concerns (union activists were barred from the meetings), K-Mart implemented a broad-ranging campaign complete with antiunion videos, T-shirts, threats of plant closing, harassment of union supporters, and an attack on "fast-talking home visitors." One flyer directly addressed the issue of perpetual conflict: "The union has already caused a lot of dissension and loss of friendships between our associates so far, how much more are we willing to lose because of the union? AS A TEAM NOT A TEAMSTER, WE CAN RALLY TOGETHER TO PROTECT OUR JOBS, OUR RIGHTS AND OUR FUTURE" (Hurd 1994:50-51).

Our point in reviewing these cases is to show how employers use the specter of conflict to magnify other concerns. Workers are encouraged to think like this: "Even if the union wins the organizing campaign, even if the

company stays open and I keep my job, even if the union lets us vote whether or not to strike, the future will be filled with conflict which could flare into war at any time. Who wants to work in an environment like that? Why take the risk?"

HarperCollins and the CWA

Fear and conflict were major components of the management campaign at HarperCollins Publishing in San Francisco.¹ In late 1992, eighty office, marketing, and professional employees attempted to organize a union with help from CWA Local 9410. An experienced organizer met with leaders of the group and conducted inoculation training, portraying a typical employer campaign to fight unionization. Gina Hyams, a rank-and-file leader, described the group's reaction to the training: "Naively we thought, almost all our bosses are liberal Democrats. The company's profits come from publishing tons of progressive self-help books. If we decide to form a union, our management will just recognize that we're trying to help ourselves and they'll be civil and sit down and fairly negotiate a reasonable contract. We were wrong" (Herrera and Marklin 1993:4).

Of the eighty-three mostly college-educated women in the unit, sixty-two signed a CWA election petition. The company responded with a standard antiunion campaign. Top HarperCollins management personnel were involved, in addition to corporate counsel. Four of the most active union leaders were "laid off." Two others were "promoted" out of the unit. CEO George Craig flew in from New York to tell the staff in a captive-audience meeting that he considered organizing "war" and all employees involved in the campaign "disloyal."

Local managers were enlisted to sign a joint letter to employees arguing that unionization "would not serve to promote cooperation and solidarity." These same managers had encouraged the formation of a "nonmanagement group" two years earlier to discuss problems in a collegial manner. In fact, it was the failure to accomplish substantive change after two years of working through informal task forces that had created sufficient frustration to spawn the CWA organizing drive. Although management continued to proclaim its willingness to confer an occasional consulting role on its employees through the nonmanagement group, it would not tolerate an independent organization that could bargain and receive its own support from the CWA. As summarized in a letter sent to every worker at home from Senior Vice President Clayton Carlson: "The current feisty, free and open involvement of the entire staff as part of our working life is ironically what would be

1. For a more detailed account of this case, see Herrera and Marklin 1993:3-8.

most endangered by the success of the CWA petition. . . . To unsettle that dynamic mixture by drawing an artificial line down the middle of our organization is a step backward . . . and endangers most directly those values which we all hold dear (Herrera and Marklin 1993:4).

The CWA lost the election thirty-one to thirty-six, of which four ballots were challenged. Subsequently, the National Labor Relations Board overturned the results, certified the union based on unfair labor practices committed by HarperCollins, and ordered the parties to bargain. Three years later, in March 1996, the U.S. Court of Appeals upheld the NLRB's judgment but reversed the remedy, vacating the certification and bargaining order.

While the use of fear in this campaign was quite obvious, management's use of conflict was more subtle. Its argument was simply that harmony could never be restored, with the proper focus on the editorial function of the office, as long as union activity continued. In other words, management contended that the presence of a union created tension that would only increase with certification. Several swing voters who originally favored the CWA switched to "no" votes when they were convinced that the price for supporting a union would be continuing disruption.

NCR Customer Engineers and the CWA

NCR customer engineers install and repair computer equipment, mostly manufactured by the company. Their average service is twenty years. They are highly educated and receive several months of continuing education each year. Average annual income for the group exceeds \$40,000.

Before AT&T's 1991 purchase of the company, NCR had pursued an aggressive union-elimination strategy. As of the mid-1960s, about 60 percent of NCR employees (most in manufacturing) had been represented by unions. According to NCR company documents, management then implemented a containment program to resist further organization, followed by a "Union Free Organization" (UFO) campaign to eliminate collective bargaining in previously organized locations. A management training program conducted in 1987 specified four "losses" from unionization that supervisors were expected to convey to workers: plant closings, strikes, the end of open relationships with supervisors, and discord. The first two appealed directly to fear; the latter two conveyed the specter of conflict. The UFO campaign was successful, and by 1996 less than 2 percent of NCR employees were unionized.

The CWA's support for organizing among NCR's customer engineers began soon after the purchase announcement by AT&T. More than eighty thousand AT&T employees were represented by the CWA, including about

twenty-five thousand technicians. Many CWA locals with AT&T technicians as members were willing to "adopt" the NCR technicians in their areas. The unionized workers at AT&T had much better health-care benefits and substantially higher pensions, providing additional encouragement to the customer engineers that union representation could provide material gain as well as a real voice in decision making.

Consistent with its "union-free" strategy, NCR ran an aggressive campaign against the CWA with the assistance of the well-known antiunion law firm of Jackson, Lewis, Schnitzler and Krupman. Shortly after the CWA lost two close elections among NCR's customer engineers in Dayton and Indianapolis in 1992, NCR implemented a union-replacement strategy through company-sponsored organizations known as "Satisfaction Councils." The councils included management personnel, discussed "terms and conditions of employment," and were dominated by the employer, including control of the agenda for the meetings. In several separate decisions, these employee-management committees were ruled violations of section 8(a)2 of the National Labor Relations Act and were ordered "disestablished" by the NLRB.

After the two narrow NLRB election losses in Dayton and Indianapolis, the CWA organizing strategy focused on building a national organization of customer engineers while pressuring for organizing rights through national AT&T bargaining. Of four thousand customer engineers in the United States, about four hundred joined the National Association of NCR Employees (NANE) in twenty different NCR districts. In 1995, the customer engineers renamed their organization the Voice of Informed Customer Engineers (VOICE).

VOICE had been designed by customer engineers, with support from the CWA, to promote their own self-organization. The engineers emphasized that this was their organization; they were not simply joining a union, they were building one of their own with CWA support. Unlike the Satisfaction Councils, they could set their own agendas and launch campaigns on key issues. If majority support was achieved, they could seek recognition through the NLRB and bargain collectively.

During the 1995 round of bargaining at AT&T, organizing rights at NCR were a significant union issue. Union goals included workplace access, neutrality, and card-check recognition. Although agreement was not reached in these areas, the company did agree to a payroll deduction for VOICE membership dues. Payroll deduction without recognition has long been used to sustain employee organizations in the public sector. At least for the CWA, this had never before been attempted in the private sector. Could such an organization be built after thirty years of management anti-union campaigning? Was fear an issue among customer engineers faced

with continuing restructuring and cutbacks as well as constantly changing technologies?

Given these concerns, a research project was designed to survey the attitudes of NCR's customer engineers about workplace issues and organizing. Particular attention was paid to barriers to organizing and to what kind of organization the customer engineers would join. The following section reviews the results of the research project, with an emphasis on the effect of fear and conflict on the workers' attitudes.

The NCR Customer Engineer Survey

To evaluate the NANE experience, gather information to help direct the activities of the newly renamed VOICE, and investigate the issues of fear and conflict, a telephone survey was conducted during October 1995. Interviews were limited to nine regions of NCR with active NANE chapters. Of the approximately 1,500 customer engineers in those regions, a representative sample of 500 was contacted and 320 were interviewed. All interviewees were asked twelve questions, which covered job satisfaction, attitudes toward management, the type of workers' organization they preferred (if any), and why customer engineers had not joined NANE.

Answers to the question on the type of organization they preferred are summarized in table 11.1. When those who indicated a preference for a union are combined with those who voiced support for NANE (which was explicitly linked to the CWA in the interview questions), just under 30 percent of the respondents could be considered pro-union. Only a slightly higher share were opposed to any organization, leaving a large group of engineers who were neither enthusiastically pro-union nor decidedly against organization. A large portion of these "organizable" workers would have

TABLE 11.1. Type of Organization Preferred by NCR Computer Technicians

| Type of Organization | Number | Percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| 1. Union that negotiates contracts | 51 | 15.9 |
| a. willing to campaign | (24) | (7.5) |
| b. not willing to support publicly | (27) | (8.4) |
| 2. Voluntary association like NANE | 40 | 12.5 |
| 3. Professional association for entire industry | 40 | 12.5 |
| 4. Employee-management committee like Satisfaction Councils | 48 | 15.0 |
| 5. Unsure | 25 | 7.8 |
| 6. Not interested in any organization | 111 | 34.7 |
| 7. Refused to answer | 5 | 1.6 |
| Total | 320 | 100.0 |

to be attracted, however, to attain majority status. In the two formal organizing campaigns conducted in 1992 in Dayton and Indianapolis, the CWA received a combined 45 percent of the vote—close enough to a majority to demonstrate that unionization was a viable possibility for these professional/technical workers if there was an appropriate organizing strategy and the right type of independent organization.

To explore more carefully the concerns of the marginal voters, a second set of twelve questions was posed to workers who showed some interest in an organization but were hesitant to support a union. We defined this “*uncommitted middle*” broadly to include the 180 workers (about 55 percent of the entire sample) who would have liked a union but would not support it publicly, or who chose some type of association short of a union, or who were unsure what type of organization they wanted (categories 1b, 2, 3, 4 and 5 on table 11.1). The additional questions posed to them probed in more detail their attitudes toward unions, their reasons for joining or not joining an employee association, and the types of services that would be of interest.

To put this into the context of a union organizing campaign in which CWA rates workers on a 1 to 3 scale, where 1 represents strong union supporters and 3 represents confirmed opponents, this uncommitted middle represented the 2s.² Of course, they were being surveyed after four years of CWA/NANE presence, an antiunion campaign by management, the imposition of Satisfaction Councils, and a successful legal challenge to the Satisfaction Councils. In short, these 2s had been influenced by both labor and management during the organizing campaign.³

The most interesting data gleaned from the survey responses relate to the issues of fear and conflict. We asked two questions that were designed to address these issues. By comparing answers to these questions with responses to the rest of the survey, we have been able to develop profiles that help to unravel the influences of fear and conflict. One question specifically asked *all* of those interviewed, “What do you feel is the main reason that some Customer Engineers have not yet chosen to join NANE/CWA?” We offered ten options, including five directly related to fear, three concerned with the activities of NANE/CWA, one on unfamiliarity with the organization, and one concerning antiunion attitudes.

2. Some unions use a five-point scale in which 1 is assigned to organizing committee members, 2 to other union supporters, 3 to fence sitters, 4 to those leaning against, and 5 to opponents. Using this rating system, the uncommitted middle would include all 3s plus some 2s and 4s.

3. The workers in Dayton and Indianapolis experienced the influences of the organizing campaign more directly. Workers from these regions accounted for just under 20 percent of the sample. Their responses were not substantially different from those of other respondents.

TABLE 11.2. Reasons Coworkers Do Not Join NANE, by Type of Organization Preferred (in percent)

| Reasons | Union | Voluntary Association (NANE) | Professional Association | Employee-Management (Satisfaction Council) | No Organization | Total |
|----------------------|-------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|-----------------|-------|
| Unfamiliar with NANE | 21.6 | 15.0 | 20.0 | 16.7 | 6.0 | 14.4 |
| Antiunion | 13.7 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 41.7 | 45.7 | 30.6 |
| NANE mistakes | 15.7 | 20.0 | 25.0 | 16.7 | 22.4 | 20.4 |
| Fear | 41.1 | 42.5 | 30.0 | 18.8 | 12.1 | 25.3 |
| Unsure | 2.0 | 2.5 | 5.0 | 6.3 | 13.8 | 9.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Note: To simplify the table, the answers of those who are unsure what type of organization they would prefer are omitted; however, they are included in the totals.

The responses are summarized in the right-hand column of table 11.2. The relatively even distribution of answers among the four options is less interesting than the breakdown by "type of organization preferred" included in the other columns. The four highlighted cells represent the highest response levels. Those who prefer no organization or those who prefer joint employee-management committees (the two most antiunion categories) disproportionately believe that their coworkers have not joined NANE/CWA because they too are antiunion. Similarly, those in the most pro-union categories (those who prefer a union or a voluntary association) offer assessments that fit *their* biases: they disproportionately believe that fear has kept their coworkers from joining. Looking specifically at the responses of the most pro-union workers, those willing to work on an organizing campaign, 58.3 percent blame fear,⁴ three times the share among other workers. In other words, the perceptions of the most activist union supporters about why their coworkers do not join unions are not representative and may be misleading. In the CWA campaign at NCR, the union relied on the organizing committee's strong perception that fear was the key explanation for the reluctance of coworkers to openly support collective action by joining NANE. The survey results indicate that this conclusion needs to be reevaluated and the organizing approach adjusted accordingly.

The second question related to fear and conflict was posed only to those in the uncommitted middle; it asked for "the best reasons not to join any employee organization." Responses are summarized in table 11.3. Given

4. This percentage is not reported in the table, which combines the responses of all those who supported a union whether or not they were willing to work on a campaign.

TABLE 11.3. Best Reason Not to Join Any Employee Organization

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Dues too high | 9 | 5.0 |
| Make conditions worse | 16 | 8.9 |
| Decrease job security | 22 | 12.2 |
| Decrease possibility of raise | 20 | 11.1 |
| Hurt NCR | 36 | 20.0 |
| Create conflict at work | 71 | 39.4 |
| Loss of individual freedom | 50 | 27.8 |
| Total responding | 180 ^a | |

^a Only those in the "uncommitted middle" as defined in the text of the chapter were asked this question; thus, the total responding was 180. More than one answer was accepted, however, so the number of responses totals more than 180. Percentages are based on 180.

the centrality of the threat of job loss in the employer's antiunion communications with workers, we expected "decrease job security" to capture fear most directly. The fact that of those interviewed only 12.2 percent selected this option reinforces our conclusion that we overestimated the role of fear. The related option, "hurt NCR," was included to separate out those feeling strong identification with the company; in other words, we used it as an ideological screen. The 20.0 percent of the uncommitted middle who selected this option are also concerned about job loss but are likely to be ideological opponents of unions at any rate.

The most frequently cited "best reason not to join" any employee organization was that such organizations "create conflict at work." Although we understood the role of conflict in employers' antiunion campaigns, we had not anticipated that it would be of such great concern to those in the uncommitted middle. The second most frequent response was "loss of individual freedom," another option we introduced as an ideological screen since those who are concerned about this issue are less likely than others to be attracted to collective action.

Most important for our purposes, 39.4 percent of those in the uncommitted middle selected "create conflict at work"—more than any other option. We will refer to those who selected this option as "*conflict avoiders*." In terms of the type of organization they prefer, these workers are similar to others in the middle. They are a little less likely to be unsure about the type of organization they prefer, a little more likely to support a voluntary association like NANE, and a little less likely to prefer a union. None of these differences is statistically significant, however, so it is safe to say that the conflict avoiders are a reasonably representative group within the uncommitted middle.

Turning to table 11.4, comparisons of the responses of conflict avoiders

TABLE 11.4. Attitudes Associated with Best Reasons for Not Joining Employee Organizations (in percent)

| Attitudes | Create Conflict at Work | Hurt NCR | Loss of Individual Freedom | Total Uncommitted Middle |
|--|-------------------------|------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Likely to join NANE | 52.1 | 27.8***(-) | 36.0**(-) | 49.4 |
| Better off with union | 50.7 | 22.2***(-) | 32.0***(-) | 48.9 |
| Work-related activities you would support: | | | | |
| Petitions regarding management policies | 23.9 | 22.2 | 20.0 | 23.9 |
| Meet with human resource personnel | 46.5 | 55.6 | 52.0 | 46.7 |
| Union organizing | 26.8 | 13.9***(-) | 30.0 | 28.3 |
| None | 22.5 | 27.8 | 22.0 | 23.3 |
| What if you joined NANE? | | | | |
| Better off | 16.9 | 5.6***(-) | 12.0 | 17.2 |
| Worse off | 25.4 | 19.4 | 20.0 | 18.9 |
| No difference | 42.3***(-) | 66.7*(+) | 66.0*(+) | 55.0 |
| Unsure | 15.5**(+) | 8.3 | 2.0***(-) | 8.9 |
| More likely to join if management neutral | 52.1**(+) | 30.6*(-) | 38.0 | 42.8 |
| Reason coworkers don't join: | | | | |
| Unfamiliar with NANE | 16.9 | 16.7 | 24.0 | 18.9 |
| Antiunion | 23.9 | 38.9**(+) | 24.0 | 24.4 |
| NANE mistakes | 12.7**(-) | 25.0 | 16.0 | 20.0 |
| Fear of management retaliation | 42.3***(+) | 13.9***(+) | 26.0 | 29.4 |
| Positive view of management | 45.0 | 58.3**(+) | 34.0 | 41.7 |
| Considerations determining job satisfaction: | | | | |
| Wages and benefits | 16.9 | 22.2 | 12.0 | 16.7 |
| Job security | 31.0 | 27.8 | 40.0 | 37.2 |
| Working conditions | 40.8**(+) | 30.6 | 36.0 | 30.6 |
| Unsure | 11.3 | 19.4 | 12.0 | 15.6 |

Note: Statistically significant differences from all others in the uncommitted middle are denoted by *** 99% confidence, ** 95% confidence, * 90% confidence; the direction of difference is denoted by (+) or (-); significance levels are based on the Z statistic.

with all others in the uncommitted middle reveal some interesting patterns. For most questions, the answers of the conflict avoiders mirror those of others in the middle. Conflict avoiders are just as likely to join NANE (52.1 percent), to believe they would be better off with a union (50.7 percent), and to have a positive view of management (45.0 percent). They also would support various workplace activities in the same proportion as others in the uncommitted middle.

Given the overall similarity to the norm, the differences are all the more striking:

- The conflict avoiders are significantly less likely to believe that joining NANE would make no difference, significantly more likely to be unsure of the impact, and also more likely to believe that joining would cause problems (25.4 percent compared with 14.7 percent).
- Given this cautiously pessimistic assessment, it is not surprising that the conflict avoiders would be affected significantly more by management neutrality than would others in the middle and would be more likely to join NANE under this scenario.
- When asked why coworkers had not joined NANE, the conflict avoiders were twice as likely as others in the uncommitted middle to select a response related to fear (42.3 percent compared with 21.2 percent). For each "type of organization preferred," the conflict avoiders were more likely to select a response related to fear than were the others preferring that type of organization. This is consistent with the idea that fear and conflict are entangled as influences on potential support for collective action.
- Although job satisfaction for this subgroup (74.6 percent) is essentially the same as for others in the uncommitted middle (75.9 percent), the reasons cited are quite different. For both satisfied and dissatisfied conflict avoiders, the "main reason [they] feel that way" is significantly more likely to relate to noneconomic job conditions and less likely to relate to job security.

The overall picture that emerges, then, is that those concerned about conflict are more pessimistic about the potential benefits of joining NANE, more likely to believe that coworkers do not join out of fear, and more concerned about working conditions/environment than their counterparts. Because they represent about 40 percent of the uncommitted middle, these concerns should be taken seriously. This important and large subgroup of cautious supporters of collective action would be particularly susceptible to management attempts to raise the specter of perpetual conflict during an organizing campaign. At NCR, winning majority status would be virtually impossible without appealing to most of those concerned about potential conflict.

Table 11.4 also reports responses to a range of questions for those who believe that unionization would "hurt NCR" or would lead to "loss of individual freedom." Consistent with the types of organizations they prefer, respondents who answered that unionization would "hurt NCR" are decidedly antiunion. The "individual freedom" respondents are less so. Of particular interest, those who selected "loss of individual freedom" as the "best reason not to join any employee organization" nonetheless are as supportive of union organizing as others in the uncommitted middle and are less likely

to have a positive view of management. Perhaps the discontent of these workers could be tapped in an organizing campaign.

Implications

Union organizers have always contended with management-engendered fear. Inoculating workers during organizing by anticipating management's tactics has been standard practice for decades. Mainly the attention has been on fears of firing or management retaliation. This follows a framework established by the NLRB that focuses on illegal discriminatory actions against workers or threats concerning shutdown or conditions of employment. The NCR survey indicates that although fear is an important concern, the closely related issue of conflict may be even more essential in convincing some groups of workers to vote "no" in a representation election.

If concern that unionization will result in conflict is as widespread in other workplaces as it is among NCR customer engineers, it may be appropriate to reevaluate and/or redesign the organizing tactics aimed at dissipating or circumventing appeals to fear. For example, warning workers about management's likely aggressive antiunion campaign may inoculate them against fear, but it may raise their concerns about conflict. Similarly, deploying a team of organizers to sign up workers before management can react may produce short-term gains, but does it also open the union to employer attempts to pin the blame for conflict on outside union agitators? If they are not carefully planned, even efforts to build worker solidarity through demonstrations and actions during the organizing campaign may backfire with the essential group of cautious but organizable workers.

Traditionally, employers have raised the specter of conflict by focusing on the union's use of strikes and job actions. Under this scenario, the union response would include data on the relative infrequency of strikes and violence. But in this era of widespread uncertainty, disruption itself has become a tool for management. The NCR survey data indicate that workers in the uncommitted middle in organizing campaigns are more likely to be affected by the conflict generated during the campaign than they are to be intimidated by perceived management threats of retaliation. For these NCR technicians, disruption and increased tension at work were identified as by-products of any type of union presence.

Obviously, management can create a sense of conflict simply by fighting the union, which it will do in virtually every private-sector organizing campaign. It is almost as if the union is being pressured to assume responsibility for ensuring that worker organization will proceed without continual struggle. Can management, just by being angry or unhappy with the organizing effort, convince employees that the conflict will only grow worse if they

support a union? Can union supporters in particular situations such as those at NCR convince their undecided coworkers that they can participate in the organizing effort without signing on to perpetual class warfare? Can unions help workers understand that organization offers them a powerful voice, and *this* is why management intentionally incites conflict as part of the effort to fight the union?

Some lessons from industrial relations and case study research are relevant here. White-collar workers generally and clerical workers specifically are less likely to vote for union representation if they associate unionization with strikes (Maranto and Fiorito 1987; Hurd and McElwain 1988). Clericals also are concerned that they may be ostracized by their coworkers and their supervisors if they support unionization. Because of this reticence, organizing tends to be a very slow process (Hurd 1990). Yet there have been notable successes organizing clerical workers at private-sector universities and professional workers in health care. Furthermore, once they have made the decision to unionize, these workers have displayed incredible tenacity and have moved beyond their initial cautions to use strikes and other militant tactics when necessary.

The key to overcoming reluctance among white-collar workers seems to be organizing around issues of voice using a grassroots approach with a large inside committee. White-collar workers often are confident that they can make a major contribution to their employer and are frustrated when management limits their role in decision making. Once these workers see unions as a vehicle to gain an effective voice, their enthusiasm grows. Both clerical and professional workers react against campaigns that fit the "third-party" image and respond best to a democratic structure that allows them to take control of their own organization and use it to gain influence and respect and to enhance their professionalism (Hurd 1990).

The CWA experience lends further credence to these observations. Recent organizing success among eighteen hundred telephone service representatives in New England can largely be attributed to the voice provided by a local union led by customer service staff. Similarly, CWA Local 9119 has won two representation elections at the University of California for eight thousand technical and professional staff. There has been significant management opposition to the union, featuring "information" designed to increase fear and engender the likelihood of perpetual conflict. But CWA local leadership rests primarily on elected officers with long-term careers at the university, and this committed leadership at each campus has made the difference.

Organizing, then, needs to demonstrate the potential for the union to coexist as an equal with management not only in negotiations and grievance handling but also in solving a wide variety of workplace problems. To

demonstrate during the organizing campaign that the potential exists to bargain on a par with the employer, unions must respond to the conflict introduced by management without assuming responsibility for that conflict. Organizers need to be able to assist workers in developing an effective strategy of resisting management when it inevitably becomes necessary, without alienating conflict avoiders and others in the uncommitted middle.

In a successful campaign, workers will realize that genuine voice requires independent organization *and* the ability to resist. Seemingly contradictory, voice and resistance both speak to the concerns not only of union supporters but also of the crucial uncommitted middle. It is this ability to resist that enables workers to have a powerful voice and to challenge management when necessary. Organizers need to be aware of the tension between voice and resistance and make clear that by participating effectively in collective bargaining, labor-management committees, and other forums the union can assure that perpetual conflict is *not* inevitable.

In the CWA's experience, increasing worker ownership and leadership during the organizing campaign makes this dual-track unionism more credible. To win, the union must appeal to those in the uncommitted middle. They are more approachable if they can be convinced that the workers will own and control the future organization. And this ownership is more believable if the organizing committee has the deepest possible reach into the work group. Workers like the NCR customer engineers have tremendous confidence in their ability to understand the technical details of their jobs. They have more faith in their coworkers than they could possibly have in organizers from outside the firm.

The role of the union's organizers is to help build unity but *not* to lead the group. Based on the concerns expressed at NCR by the conflict avoiders, one key to success is for the organizer to convince activist committee members to select tactics with careful attention to the potential effect on uncommitted voters. In particular, when resistance is necessary, it is essential to plan carefully and to maximize the potential for victory. Although the survey does not speak directly to this question, we are convinced that technical workers like the NCR customer engineers are not afraid to fight; they just do not want to be involved in conflict if they are going to lose.

The relevance of our findings to other settings can be assessed fully only by analyzing a wide variety of organizing cases. The NCR customer engineers are, after all, highly skilled and middle income, and they have much to protect. Based on comparisons such as those summarized briefly above, we believe that their situation is representative of professional, technical, and other white-collar workers in the private sector. Similarities and differences in attitudes toward conflict among white-collar workers need to be explored, however, with careful attention to influences of gender, age, and

race. We are less confident that our conclusions on conflict apply to manufacturing, although we suspect that the proliferation of team-based production systems also may make medium- to high-skilled blue-collar workers susceptible to employer efforts to portray unions as inevitably disruptive. The issue of conflict probably plays a role in most private-sector organizing campaigns, although in some settings (such as low-wage service work), conditions may be so bad that aversion to conflict dissolves. With a representative committee that is sensitive to the doubts and fears of coworkers, the appropriate emphasis on resistance and voice can be determined. Our ultimate point is that although workers everywhere calculate the risk/reward ratio in organizing, different circumstances lead to different solutions.