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## Overcoming Obstacles to Transformation: Challenges on the Way to a New Unionism

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# Overcoming Obstacles to Transformation: Challenges on the Way to a New Unionism

## Abstract

[Excerpt] The change to organizing requires more than a shift in resources. It is difficult to imagine a sustained commitment to organizing at the grass roots unless locals have the tools, skills, and strategic perspective necessary to mount successful organizing campaigns. Ultimately the commitment to building the labor movement inherent in the organizing priority challenges unions to alter organizational cultures that are often deeply imbued with traditional and conservative approaches to trade unionism. The struggle to succeed at organizing, to maintain representation, and to alter union culture is forcing national unions to define their role in this process and to reassess their relationships with locals. A key objective of the research reported here is to help clarify the issues at stake in the process of the change to organizing at the local level. Although there are few definitive answers, the experiences of locals struggling with the realities of juggling organizing and representational responsibilities should guide the search for sustainable conversion.

## Keywords

labor movement, unions, organization, labor rights, revitalization, AFL-CIO, organizational change

## Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Labor and Employment Law | Unions

## Comments

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## Overcoming Obstacles to Transformation

### *Challenges on the Way to a New Unionism*

**Bill Fletcher, Jr., and Richard W. Hurd**

**T**he U.S. labor movement has been grappling for more than a decade with the complex question of how to generate revitalization. If nothing else, the internal debate has produced consensus that organizing must be at the forefront. The organizing priority was confirmed with the election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, and it has been reinforced by the Federation's unceasing efforts to induce, support, and applaud organizing efforts by affiliated national unions.

The clarion call of "Changing to Organize, Organizing for Change" has been spread to all levels and corners of the labor movement. Given the critical importance of this effort, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates have been working diligently to resolve dilemmas related to implementation. Much of the attention has been devoted to shifting greater resources toward organizing. With a major share of labor's financial resources controlled at the local level, any shift in priorities must be accepted by local union leaders to have full effect. Thus, the AFL-CIO and the national unions have campaigned to persuade locals to embrace the change to organizing and to manifest support by reallocating funds.

Many of the unions most committed to the organizing priority have determined that a top-down process is the most effective mechanism of ensuring change at the local level. Some national unions have mandated a shift of local union resources and staff to support organizing, while others have restructured, forcing locals to merge or otherwise

consolidating control over resources in order to facilitate the change. In some unions with decentralized structures, this revolution from above is authorized by the leader of a region, a statewide organization, or a large local with a geographic jurisdiction.

If member approval of the shift of resources is required, leaders pull out all stops to push through the decision. There seems to be a consensus that member support can be secured by appealing to self-interest, in short by arguing that organizing will increase bargaining power and allow the union to take wages out of competition. Little attention is paid to issues of representation in advance of the shift, and indeed, potential problems are ignored, masked, or downplayed. It is the organizing itself that takes priority. There is an understanding among many proponents of the change to organizing that the abrupt reallocation of resources and staff will inevitably lead to crises in representation and other local union functions. The consensus, however, is that it is best to avoid raising red flags on the assumption that organizing locals will adapt and figure out how to handle these challenges as they arise.

Of course, not all unions are as committed to the organizing priority, and not all union leaders are in a position to mandate this type of radical reorientation. At the national level beneath a rhetorical commitment to organizing, many leaders and staff assume that in their unions the shift will be deliberate rather than abrupt. Because gradual change is less threatening, many unionists see it as the most realistic way to establish the organizing priority. In spite of our conviction that the labor movement cannot afford the luxury of a slow and comfortable transition to an organizing priority, it is essential to recognize that for many locals the commitment to organizing is marginal rather than comprehensive. In those unions in which national leaders equivocate, it is difficult and risky for local leaders to embark on their own organizing crusades. Even in unions in which the national leaders are vociferous proponents of organizing, it is our impression that many local leaders are reluctant to abandon traditional approaches and embrace the new priority wholeheartedly.

As experienced by local unions, then, "Changing to Organize, Organizing for Change" presents two options. We call the first, with its predisposition to organizing at all costs, *organizational combustion*. We

call the second, with its merely rhetorical acceptance that organizing is a legitimate function, *organizational evolution*. Given the choice, it is no surprise that local union leaders often prefer the latter.

The fieldwork reported in this paper provides evidence that both approaches are fraught with difficulties. Proponents of organizational evolution conveniently underestimate the potential that resistance to organizing from members, staff, and elected leaders will halt any progress, especially when the push is modest from the start. For their part, those who argue that organizational combustion will generate its own solutions deny the political base of local leaders and the possibility of counterrevolution. Creating a series of crises and picking up the pieces is akin to shoving in nitroglycerin until there is an explosion. The results will not be pretty.

We propose that attention be devoted to building a third alternative that looks strategically at the entire organization and recognizes the complexity of balancing organizing needs with representational realities. Lasting change at the local level will take place only as the result of a multilayered process. Yes, the enthusiasm of local leaders is essential, but there also must be a mass base within the membership that understands and advances the organizing priority. This will not occur spontaneously but must be cultivated by leaders with vision and supported by an educational initiative that goes beyond an appeal to self-interest. Furthermore, the reticence of staff must be respected and steps must be taken to engage them as productive contributors to the change process. We think of this uncharted alternative as *organizational transformation*.

The change to organizing requires more than a shift in resources. It is difficult to imagine a sustained commitment to organizing at the grass roots unless locals have the tools, skills, and strategic perspective necessary to mount successful organizing campaigns. Ultimately the commitment to building the labor movement inherent in the organizing priority challenges unions to alter organizational cultures that are often deeply imbued with traditional and conservative approaches to trade unionism. The struggle to succeed at organizing, to maintain representation, and to alter union culture is forcing national unions to define their role in this process and to reassess their relationships with locals. A key objective of the research reported here is to help clarify

the issues at stake in the process of the change to organizing at the local level. Although there are few definitive answers, the experiences of locals struggling with the realities of juggling organizing and representational responsibilities should guide the search for sustainable conversion.

## **Research Methodology**

Because far too little is known about the impact of the change to organizing on the life of the union at the grass roots, in 1996 the AFL-CIO Education and Organizing Departments invited national unions to send representatives to a meeting devoted to the topic. The initial discussion centered on the impact of organizing on local unions' representational functions, especially collective bargaining and contract enforcement. The group decided to meet periodically to exchange information and to sponsor field research on the topic. Over time the emphasis of the discussions and the research gradually expanded to the whole range of experiences of locals with an organizing priority, and the title "Organizational Change Working Group" was adopted. Members of the group were especially interested in lessons that could help national unions promote successful change at the local level. Sixteen national unions from diverse jurisdictions participated in the project. The authors of this paper were involved from the start, Fletcher as convener of the discussions and Hurd as research coordinator.

The field research extended prior work of the authors in cooperation with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) during 1995-96 (see Fletcher and Hurd 1998, 1999). The common focus was on the representational practices of local unions with a commitment to external organizing. The shared methodology was site visits to the locals to gather information and conduct interviews with elected leaders, staff, and activist members. The survey instrument designed for the SEIU interviews was modified and extended based on input from the participating unions.

Members of the Organizational Change Working Group nominated thirty possible cases of which fourteen were chosen for site visits. The selected cases came from a broad range of industries and included some

locals with established organizing programs and others that only recently committed to external organizing. Included were ten local unions and four multiunit collections (district, council, joint board). Membership in these fourteen "locals" ranged from one thousand to sixty thousand. Most site visits included two full days of interviews. Additional interviews with regional staff or elected leaders were conducted in four of the cases. The field research was conducted in 1997–98, with follow-up telephone interviews in 1998–99.

Analysis of the cases was informed by the SEIU project, by the authors' respective experiences working with other unions on changing to organize, and especially by feedback and discussion with the participants in the Organizational Change Working Group. Thus, the conclusions and observations we offer are based on more than the fourteen cases alone. The research we report is clearly qualitative, interpretive, and inductive. With a diversity of views represented on the working group, we started with no consensus regarding a priori hypotheses.

## **Social Movements and Organizational Change**

Voss and Sherman (1998) have contributed a very interesting analysis of local union organizing strategy based on fieldwork conducted at about the same time as the research reported here. Their conclusions are consistent with and sympathetic to the approach we have labeled organizational combustion. They explain how local unions that have adopted innovative organizing tactics differ from other locals with less innovative programs, and explore implications for organizational change.

Voss and Sherman first review the work of social movement scholars and identify consensus on two broad conclusions: (1) tactically innovative movement organizations are almost always informally organized and (2) such movements are likely to try new disruptive tactics only when political opportunity structures are favorable (Voss and Sherman 1998, 3).

Contrary to these expectations, Voss and Sherman find that local unions with the most innovative organizing programs are formally struc-

tured and operate in environments with declining political opportunities. Unions they call “full innovators” are locals operating aggressive organizing programs that rely on a tactical repertoire, including “intensive worker organizing, corporate campaigns, strategic targeting, and obtaining union recognition without the NLRB election” (Voss and Sherman 1998, 8). Adoption of the full repertoire of innovative organizing tactics is associated with changes in the organizational structure to support organizing, including (1) creation of an organizing department, (2) recruitment of members to serve as volunteer organizers, (3) a substantial resource shift to support organizing, and (4) a reduction in services for current members (Voss and Sherman 1998, 15).

These full innovators exemplify top-down change to organizing. In each case there is a strong presence from the national union, either in the form of a trusteeship or direct support to a progressive new leader who has embraced organizing and is intent on setting a new direction for the local (Voss and Sherman, 1998, 30, 35). The overriding commonality is that organizing takes priority over all other concerns. The message is that innovation on the organizing front seeps backward into the local, and fires are put out as they arise. The problem of recalcitrant staff is dealt with by importing more militant staff from outside the local and often from outside the labor movement (Voss and Sherman, 1998, 20, 35).

Although we find their inquiry extraordinarily useful because it sets forth the rationale for organizational combustion, enigmas linger. Voss and Sherman (and other supporters of this approach) attend almost exclusively to external organizing, and as a result do not deal directly with the full range of challenges facing local unions that embark on a radical reorientation. It is difficult to see how militant innovation on the organizing front translates into building a social movement. Selections from the organizational change literature offer a constructive framework for further investigation.

We turn first to authors who concentrate their attention on situations involving radical organizational change. Their theme is that the more radical the change, the more essential it is to develop a strategic approach based on careful assessment and thorough preparation. Alaire and Firsirotu (1985) emphasize strategic analysis and goal setting regarding the organization’s culture and structure. They conclude that



modifying the structure without a corresponding shift in the mindset of organization members is ineffective or even counterproductive.

Nord and Tucker (1986) identify four characteristics that are required with radical organizational change: (1) those leading the effort must have sufficient internal political power to overcome opposition, (2) members of the organization must have the technical skills required to handle new duties or approaches, (3) those responsible for implementing change must have a role in deciding how to proceed, and (4) the organization must be flexible enough to adapt to challenges as they arise. The point is, as for other organizations attempting to move in a new direction, it is important for local unions to assess all aspects of current practice and to identify and address cultural, structural, and technical impediments to the change to organizing.

The literature on organizational readiness provides further guidance. As summarized by Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993), the consensus of this stream of research is that a program to create organizational readiness is a necessary precursor to a successful change effort. Three components of a comprehensive readiness program are (1) effective internal communication by leaders regarding both the need for and feasibility of change, (2) dissemination of credible external information that demonstrates the urgency to change, and (3) a program to actively involve members of the organization in preparing for and implementing change (Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder 1993, 688–89). In unions, organizational readiness translates into building political will among members and staff to support an organizing priority (Fletcher and Hurd 1999).

A model of strategic organizational change offered by Tichy (1982) is particularly helpful. Tichy identifies three key strands of an organization's strategic rope—the technical strand, the political strand, and the cultural strand. According to the model, successful organizational change requires attention to all three strands. An organization may prepare technically for change by marshalling all of the necessary resources and acquiring relevant skills, but if the change does not fit the organization's culture or is not supported politically, the strategic rope will unravel. Similarly, cultural and political readiness for change will not be enough if the organization is not able to meet technical requirements.

Although Tichy's model makes sense on its own, we believe that it is even more telling if applied in conjunction with Poulantzas (1973).

An important contribution of Poulantzas to Marxian analysis of the class struggle is the thesis that power exists in a capitalist society along multiple dimensions. Gaining power along only one dimension is insufficient for successful revolution. In this regard he refers specifically to economic power, political power, and ideological power.

This analysis, if we apply it to a particular organization, is similar to Tichy's strategic rope. Economic power is associated with the technical strand, political power with the political strand, and ideological power with the cultural strand. Thinking about unions engaged in the change to organizing, shifting resources, hiring organizers, and developing effective organizing strategies attend only to the technical strand and economic power within the organization. No matter how effective an effort is along this dimension, organizational change may unravel because of political or cultural/ideological opposition. Similarly, a union may have all political forces lined up to support the change to organizing, but deficiencies in resources or technical organizing skills may undermine the effort; at least as likely, the change may fail because the culture of the union does not fit, or the ideology of the members and staff is inconsistent with the organizing priority. Organizational change can succeed only if all three strands of the organization are intertwined and all power bases are aligned.

We can use the Tichy/Poulantzas model to further elucidate differences among the three approaches to organizational change in local unions. In Table 8-1 each row corresponds to an organizational strand, and each column corresponds to a local union function (for simplicity we limit ourselves to organizing and representation, but it would be reasonable to add columns for political action, coalition building, etc.).

**Table 8-1** Change to organizing: Local union strategic rope

<i>Organizational Strands</i>	<i>Local Union Functions</i>	
	<i>Representation</i>	<i>Organizing</i>
Technical/Economic	Skills	Skills
	Resources	Resources
Political	Parent union	Parent union
	Local leaders	Local leaders
	Members	Members
Cultural/Ideological	Servicing model	Self-interest
	vs. organizing model	vs. Social movement

If we look exclusively at the representation column, for the technical/economic strand to be strong, staff and activist members need to have the skills necessary to protect members on the job and to bargain good contracts, and the local needs sufficient resources to maintain representational quality. For the political strand to be strong, the representational priorities of the parent union, elected local leaders, and members need to be aligned. For the cultural/ideological strand to be strong, there must be consensus regarding representational style; in particular, a comfortable mix of reliance on staff and members with expertise (the servicing model) and member mobilization (the organizing model) needs to be worked out. If all three of these strands are strong, then the local's representational strategic rope will be strong.

If we look exclusively at the organizing column, for the technical/economic strand to be strong, staff and member organizers need to have the skills necessary to pursue an effective organizing program, and the local needs sufficient resources to support the effort. For the political strand to be strong, the level of support for organizing from the parent union, elected local leaders, and members needs to be consistent. For the cultural/ideological strand to be strong, consensus must exist regarding the rationale for organizing: Is the organizing effort targeted at increasing bargaining power to benefit current members, or is the objective to reach out a helping hand to unrepresented workers and build the labor movement? In this regard, attention needs to be given to the cultural match between the experiences of workers being organized and life inside the local. This is a particular concern when the organizing targets are not a demographic match for the current membership (Fletcher and Hurd, 2000). Where all three strands are strong, the local's organizing strategic rope will be strong.

It is a special challenge to move to the next level and weave together all of the representational strands and organizing strands to make a powerful strategic rope for the local's overall program. This is particularly difficult because organizing and representation compete for resources and because representational skills are not directly transferable to organizing. It is here that the three approaches to the change to organizing diverge. The organizational evolution approach concentrates on keeping the representational rope strong and tolerates weak strands in the organizing rope. The organizational combustion approach con-

centrates on strengthening the organizing rope and tolerates unraveling of the representational rope, even running the risk that it will catch fire. The idea behind the organizational transformation approach is to strategically balance representation and organizing so that all strands are strong, although this is a difficult objective to achieve.

## Obstacles to Change

The key obstacle to organizational change is the absence of careful evaluation, prioritization, and planning in most locals.<sup>1</sup> Every local we visited had been forced to innovate in order to pursue an organizing agenda while continuing to provide representational assistance to its members. In some cases the innovations were pursued systematically, but more often they evolved from practice as leaders, staff, and activists struggled to respond to crises associated with the change process. In most locals the change was the organizing itself. Resources were shifted, staff were added or reassigned, members were recruited as volunteer organizers, and some effort was initiated to win member support.

Interestingly, in a few cases the shift into organizing was introduced by a newly elected local officer whose ascendance was fueled by poor or inconsistent servicing under the old regime. This leader's first priority was to upgrade representational work, but this was accomplished in the traditional insurance agent mode. The leader bought into the changing-to-organize trend but to some degree as an afterthought. Ultimately, these new leaders encountered the same problems as established leaders who decided to pursue organizing without altering representational practices simultaneously.

The picture that emerged from the cases included in this project was that there is no simple set of specific programs that can be prescribed for locals who want to simultaneously represent members and free resources for organizing. The best practices summarized in the follow-

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<sup>1</sup>In deference to the willingness of the officers, members, and staff of the unions we studied to share both successes and failures with us, we refrain from identifying specific locals in our discussion of obstacles to change. At any rate, this section covers more than the fourteen cases we studied, as explained in the methodology section.

ing section offer some clues about how various aspects of the challenge may be addressed, but there is no easy formula for success. The experience is more consistent regarding the difficulties locals encounter as they go through organizational change.

### Leaders

Two basic barriers to change emanate from local leaders themselves: political concerns and lack of managerial skills. Because local unions are democratic institutions, local leaders must attend to internal politics or face removal from office. In this situation it is not surprising that a leader's commitment to organizing and organizational change may falter if there is a legitimate political threat in the form of a respected officer or staff member committed to traditional servicing, or if there is vocal opposition to organizing from key members. The temptation to pull back will be particularly intense for those leaders whose original support for organizing is based on aspirations for higher office rather than commitment to building the labor movement. Even if the leader's belief in the value of external organizing is strong, political concerns may interfere with a willingness to promote internal organizing and the development of effective rank-and-file leaders. The current leader may be afraid of losing control of the local. Unfortunately, entrenched leaders may surround themselves with dedicated assistants who go overboard and in effect engage in cult building rather than movement building. In all of these situations the net result of political concerns is that the substance does not match the form of organizational change.

The second barrier to change for local leaders is a lack of managerial skills. Most local leaders manage based on instinct and personal style. Because organizing requires resources, effective financial management can be very important and yet most local leaders have neither the interest nor the training to attend to financial matters. Leaders also manage staff without appreciation for basic principles of human resource management, with styles varying from authoritarian to complete delegation of decisions. Of course, these gaps in management expertise are not unique to locals that are changing to organize, but managerial weaknesses tend to be magnified during periods of change. On the flipside, good local managers may be ill equipped to deal with organizational change because the experience is new to them, their staff,

and the members. There is a tendency for many local leaders simply to announce or even mandate change, an approach that invites a backlash and the assumption of failure among those staff and members who do not personally support the new direction.

## Staff

There is widespread resistance from representation staff. In some cases this bubbles just beneath the surface, especially when there is a potential political challenge to the current leader that may ultimately reverse the local's course. In some cases the opposition is open, especially when staff members are unionized and therefore have a forum that allows them to resist (in the cases studied this was evidenced only among regional representation staff). Most common, however, is a sort of passive resistance. Representation staff accept and even support the shift to organizing but are concerned that the quality of representational efforts on behalf of current members is suffering as a result. In most organizing locals, representation staff are assigned a heavier load (which they naturally view as a speedup), and in many cases they feel that the attention to organizing diminishes their importance. Some staff are quietly skeptical and support organizing only because they feel that they have little choice.

There also are problems with organizing staff. The most common difficulty encountered is the assignment of staff to organizing who do not have the requisite skills. Staff with experience in servicing may be reassigned to organizing, or rank-and-file activists with little or no organizing experience may be hired as organizers. Often political supporters of the local leader who are chronological contemporaries are assigned to organizing without attention to the demographics of potential organizing targets. The net result is a local staff of organizers with little background in organizing strategy, tactics, or campaign management.

Some locals do hire organizers from the outside, many of whom are younger than other staff and often have limited union experience beyond organizing. Although the locals that follow this practice seem to have greater success in organizing, other problems may arise. The most common is a separation between organizing and representation staff. Usually they simply do not interact, but in some cases representation staff are peeved about organizers ignoring protocol when, for instance,

they visit units unannounced to recruit volunteers. Similarly, when thrust together during initial contract negotiations, organizers prefer activist tactics and are frustrated by representatives who want to keep things calm while they try to work out differences at the table. The most extreme criticism representation staff have about organizers is that they do not care about current members, and this is given some credence by the interview responses of a few organizers who displayed a cynical attitude about the apathy in established units and the conservatism of representation staff.

Another difficulty applies to both homegrown and imported organizers. With the rapid increase in demand for experienced organizers, the best local union organizers all too often leave to pursue other opportunities at higher levels of the labor movement, most often within their own national union. Whether these are viewed as promotions or raids, the result is that local unions have a hard time maintaining momentum on the organizing front.

One final observation about staff. When a local union changes to organizing, this almost always means increased pressure on representation staff both because they are expected to accept a greater servicing responsibility and because they are often called upon to help with organizing. For their part, organizers are driven to work long hours and to be available nights and weekends because there is a sense of urgency about the challenge at hand. The organizing values most commonly voiced are justice, dignity, and fair treatment, but it is troubling that these values are seldom operationalized in the treatment of staff in local unions with a strong organizing agenda.

## Members

Even in locals with reputations for organizing success, most members are unaware and unconcerned. Acceptance of and tolerance for their union's organizing program is not based on deep support. In most cases, leaders tell us that their members will go along with organizing so long as "telephone calls are returned," in other words, on the condition that traditional servicing is maintained. But active members who serve as stewards sometimes become jealous of their union's focus on organizing, especially if their own contributions to representation are not publicly recognized. They are particularly frustrated when they can't reach

their representative when they need assistance. Similarly, members react negatively when shop floor leaders are pulled out too often to work as volunteers on organizing campaigns.

Members, especially activists, are more supportive of organizing when they feel a clear connection to the workers being organized. Thus, it is easier for a local to win support if it is organizing unrepresented units of the same employer at a nearby location in contrast to workers in another industry or a distant city. In short, members are more positive about organizing if they perceive that it will benefit them personally. Unfortunately, locals that have won internal support for organizing based on the premise that bargaining power would increase have begun to experience a backlash from members impatient for a payoff. There have been related problems in construction unions in which some members have turned on new recruits from the nonunion sector who are rated as journeyman who have not completed the union's apprenticeship program. Long-term members are concerned that instead of enhancing power, organizing may be degrading the craft.

The source of member resistance to organizing is attributed by local leaders to a lack of appreciation for unions and union values. It is difficult to achieve participation of members in any activity not directly related to their own situation. Thus, members may get excited about a grievance and often rally in support of contract negotiations, but they are reluctant to get involved in other union activities one step removed. When locals attempt to get members to participate in political action, coalition building, supporting other struggles, or organizing, they often end up relying on the same small core of activists. Members feel little connection to labor as a movement.

### Structure

Except for construction locals that operate from a much larger dues base, the smaller locals in this project (those under 5,000) had an extremely steep challenge simply funding an organizing program. With the majority of local unions even smaller than the smallest considered here, it is clear that national unions will have to provide financial subsidies if they expect locals to pursue an organizing agenda. Money alone will not solve the problems faced by organizing locals, but without significant resources, local unions cannot even consider changing to organize.



There is a caveat here. When the national union funds organizing, it typically exercises control over organizers. This can exacerbate some of the staff difficulties delineated above and increase separation between representation staff and organizers. Furthermore, the instability created in local organizing programs may intensify if the national union shifts organizers around from campaign to campaign.

There are nonfinancial structural impediments to organizing as well. The local programs with the least focus and the most problems are those carried on in isolation. Local unions are ill equipped to pursue a strong organizing agenda without support from regional and national staff and leaders. In those cases in which the regional union office is indifferent to organizing and those in which substantive national commitment is lacking, local unions founder. Locals typically lack the expertise to organize effectively and find it difficult to maintain political will without higher-level leaders openly voicing encouragement.

### **Local Union Best Practices**

Before turning to a description of local union innovations, it is important to point out that there are surprisingly few to report. In fact, a description of what these and other organizing locals have *not* done is necessary to set the stage for consideration of the accomplishments.

Few locals have initiated any substantive changes in how they handle grievances and arbitrations. In most cases staff are heavily involved from step 2 onward, often with the assistance of a chief steward or the equivalent. Innovations that have been initiated typically have resulted because a staff member wanted to improve representational efficiency, but they occurred without consideration for organizing or organizational change. Several locals have talked about getting stewards to handle steps 2 and 3, some have made tentative efforts in this direction, and in one case it was mandated. But the results have been modest to date.

Bargaining is also handled in traditional ways. In some cases members' input is solicited, but this is usually informal or only at a special local meeting for this purpose. Most often a small bargaining team is selected to assist the staff member in charge of negotiations. Although some locals regularly develop mobilization networks to support bar-

gaining, most mobilize members only if a crisis is brewing at the table. Other than release time for union business, there are few innovations in contracts that contribute to organizing. Labor-management committees are common but usually are proposed by management and are seldom viewed as sources of leverage by the union.

The story is similar with coalitions and political action. Although several locals have active political programs, they either are quite traditional or focus narrowly on issues directly related to the members' craft or industry. A couple of locals pursue coalitions systematically as part of a movement-building philosophy, but participation by members is infrequent. More often coalitions either are sought sporadically to increase bargaining power in crisis situations or are part of a community services tradition.

The remainder of this section offers "best practices" of the locals we visited in matters of representation and changing to organize. These practices are not presented as part of a recipe for success but as possible approaches for unions that are implementing change. As such they will need to be adapted to specific conditions faced by individual locals.

### Grievances

Although the locals participating in this project have not experimented extensively with their grievance-handling process, there are a few best practices that warrant attention. Perhaps the most important innovation was negotiated by American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 which covers all of their Illinois state government units. On the surface one step was removed from a five-step grievance procedure, but more was involved. Council 31 leaders have been looking for ways to free staff time from grievance work. The long-term goal is to phase staff out of the grievance process except as trainers and advisers. Under the old contract there were three steps in the unit with the third step handled by the staff representative and a hearing officer from the state. Few grievances were settled before the third step, and about half were appealed to the fourth step in Springfield (the state capital). Under the new contract the third step has been eliminated with the intention of increasing the importance of the first two steps, the only ones at the unit level.

To reinforce the effort to push decisions down to lower levels, Council 31 has developed a training program for the new grievance process. All staff representing state units have been trained in the delivery of the half-day program and are expected to offer training to stewards in all units. The training goes beyond administrative details and emphasizes that "we want to make the grievance procedure work at the unit level." In fact, almost half of the training is devoted to problem analysis and alternatives to the grievance. In other words, the union has used the new procedure to build responsibility at the grass roots and to redefine the staff role as training rather than grievance handling. The preliminary results have been positive: about half of all grievances are resolved at step two (approximately equal to the results at step three of the old process).

Another innovation worthy of attention is the systematic computerized approach of American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 987 in Warner Robins, GA. Because it represents federal employees, Local 987 not only pursues grievances under its collective bargaining agreement but also represents members who file complaints under federal personnel rules. Furthermore, filing Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) under the Federal Labor Relations Act is another tool that must be utilized regularly given the limited scope of bargaining in the federal sector. To handle the complexity of this broad grievance arena, Local 987 subscribes to several databases and maintains computer archives for all of its own grievances, personnel cases, and ULPs. Stewards are trained by a staff representative in the local's filing system which is meticulously indexed, and they regularly stop by the local office to use a computer station set up specifically to assist their work. Staff specialization in the different sets of regulations reinforces the effectiveness of the local's representation work.

A third innovation in grievance handling has been negotiated by Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7777 in their contracts with units of USWest. For discipline and discharge cases various forms of alternative dispute resolution have replaced or augmented the standard grievance and arbitration process. From the perspective of Local 7777 the most effective approach has been the use of advisory bench arbitration. This expedited process has resulted in more prompt resolution of discipline and discharge cases and simultaneously reduced staff time devoted to grievances.

## Bargaining

AFSCME District 1199C represents workers at over 150 hospitals and other healthcare facilities in the Philadelphia area. The local has a policy of seeking common expiration dates for all of its contracts, and it has achieved this objective in most cases. When the contract expiration approaches, staff representatives for each facility work on individual contracts while the local president floats from one negotiating table to another. In the final days all bargaining is moved to a central location, usually a downtown hotel. This process has two distinct advantages: First, it allows 1199C to establish a pattern by getting its best deal then applying the pattern to all employers participating in the master negotiations. Second, it affords the opportunity to mobilize all units simultaneously in support of bargaining, culminating in a mass rally as the deadline approaches.

Several other locals also regularly incorporate mobilization into their bargaining strategy. CWA Locals 4309 in Cleveland and 7777 in Denver have standing mobilization structures that are rejuvenated at each major contract negotiation. Local 4309 recruits one mobilizer for each group of twenty members. The key role of mobilizers is to organize workplace actions, signs of solidarity, and rallies in support of the local's bargaining demands. During multilocal negotiations with employers like Ameritech, the CWA District 4 office coordinates mobilization across units to ensure maximum impact. The Local 7777 mobilization structure is permanent and viewed as a two-way communication network between leaders and members. Although active on occasion during the life of the contract when issues affecting the entire unit arise, the mobilization structure goes into full gear during negotiations.

Contract campaigns are not new to the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) nationally, but during 1997 negotiations at two factories in the Tennessee-Kentucky District, mobilization penetrated down to the shop floor. District staff delivered a training program for the leaders and stewards in both locals. Contract committees surveyed members on negotiating priorities, organized members for action, and staged rallies. The district is extending the training to other units in the hopes of revitalizing dormant locals.

In terms of how bargaining is handled, the most notable innovations have been implemented in response to the difficult challenge posed by first contract negotiations. The New York City-based Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 153's organizing program has added a number of new units over the past several years. To handle the special demands of first contract bargaining, an effective negotiator on staff has been assigned to specialize in first contracts. Similarly, in UNITE's Southern Region only the most experienced negotiators handle first contracts "because it's a war."

Based on the cases reviewed in this project, there seems to be a consensus emerging that organizers should stay on to assist during first contract negotiations at least during a transition period. In AFSCME Council 31 the organizer works with the staff representative to set up a bargaining team and stays through the early stages of negotiations; if there is a fight, the organizer continues to work with the members of the unit to maintain commitment and build activism.

UNITE's New England Joint Board goes one step further. After each of eight election wins over the past five years, the Joint Board has kept the organizer working with new members to conduct a contract campaign in support of bargaining. The organizer works closely with an experienced negotiator to ensure that workplace and public actions are timed appropriately based on developments at the table. This approach has produced contracts for every organizing victory.

CWA's District 4 (Ohio) also has adopted a systematic approach to first contract negotiations. After concluding that it is hard to use a standard contract for initial bargaining because the employer is almost always unwilling, the district devised a standard strategy. A time line was developed to guide staff assigned to negotiate first contracts. A key feature of the time line was the expectation that the organizing committee would be converted to a mobilization committee. The time line essentially required that both the negotiator and the mobilization committee develop and follow a plan that coordinates bargaining and action.

### Bargaining to Organize

AFSCME Council 31 has negotiated voluntary recognition for units outside their current membership with some of the large public-sector

employers. These agreements have facilitated organizing with what is essentially a card check process. There is also an equal time agreement with one private-sector employer that essentially would allow the union to respond to a captive audience speech, but this arrangement has not yet been tested. Several other unions have reported a range of neutrality provisions, but the consensus is that they do not work well.

What does work is release time. Most of the local unions visited have some allowance for time off for union work (usually unpaid). Although union time is most frequently used for representation work, a few locals have taken advantage of the practice to support organizing. CWA Local 7777's organizing program is coordinated by a full-time organizing director hired from outside the union, but it is staffed by an eight-member organizing committee. All eight members take advantage of the release time provision and are paid by the local for time lost; four members work full time at organizing and four work part time.

UNITE's New England Joint Board has built an extensive volunteer organizers program over the past four years. When initial assessment of an organizing target is positive, a weekend blitz is scheduled. The blitz is staffed by forty to sixty members who take Friday off from work under release time provisions then donate personal time on the weekend. Friday is used for training and coordinating assignments, with the blitz of home visits held Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday. The blitz allows the union to determine whether to file for an election and is viewed as essential to the Joint Board's organizing success. This approach has had a spillover benefit, as participants return to the shop floor with greater appreciation for the union and become more active rank-and-file leaders. At the 1997 regional meeting 80 percent of the delegates had worked as volunteer organizers. To support the program, the Joint Board makes release time a bargaining priority, and it has secured appropriate language in nearly 90 percent of contracts.

Construction locals of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have found another way to use the bargaining relationship with employers to support organizing. IBEW Locals 611 in Albuquerque and 613 in Atlanta have secured the cooperation of union contractors for their campaigns to organize the nonunion sector. A key organizing tactic is to identify and "strip" the most skilled electricians from nonunion sites. After passing an exam designed to assess their

skill level, the electricians are rated “intermediate journeyman” and participating contractors place them on union jobs. Contractors also cooperate by allowing the locals to delay responding to a work request in order to keep a salt on a nonunion project and occasionally will allow an electrician to leave a job temporarily to serve as a salt.

### Shifting Resources

To fund an organizing program, locals need to free resources. This is facilitated in some instances by growth, as has been the case at AFSCME Council 31. More often, resources need to be shifted from other functions. CWA Local 4309 lost a longtime secretary who accepted a position with the Cleveland Central Labor Council. The local decided to seize the opportunity to expand its organizing efforts. The members voted to replace the half-time paid job with an organizer’s position. A successful volunteer organizer from the ranks was hired to work with the District Organizing Director to identify targets and develop an organizing plan.

The most common method used to shift resources into organizing is to reassign staff. Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers (BCTW) Local 26 (Colorado) and OPEIU Local 153 both assigned staff to organizing with the open understanding that the servicing load of representation staff would have to increase as a result. AFSCME District 1199C adopted a policy several years ago requiring representation staff (referred to as administrative organizers) to spend 40 percent of their time on organizing. This was increased to 60 percent in 1997.

IBEW Local 177 in Jacksonville, Florida, determined that it needed to win member support to increase resources for organizing. After putting 75 percent of its members through COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training), the president proposed an increase in the local’s assessment from 2 percent of pay to 5 percent with the entire increase earmarked for organizing. After members approved the increase, the six-hundred-member local was able to hire three full-time organizers and with organizing success the local has grown to eleven hundred members.

### Building Member Support

AFGE Local 987 has used monetary incentives to convince members to support organizing. Because the local operates in the federal sector’s

open shop environment, the targets for organizing are the coworkers of the members. After joining, a worker must retain membership for at least a year; most stay beyond that. To win member approval for organizing, the local president demonstrated that the local would come out ahead financially even if it spent \$50 for each new member. To make the proposal even more appealing, the local offered to pay its members the \$50 for each new recruit. The end result was a membership increase of 30 percent over five years.

IBEW's District 5 (Southern states) also won member support for organizing by appealing to self-interest, albeit indirectly. With the help of COMET and MEMO (Membership Education for Mobilization and Organizing), participating locals have convinced members that the only way to increase bargaining power is to take wages out of competition by increasing market share. And to increase market share, traditional top-down organizing must be supplemented by bottom-up organizing. As noted above in reference to Local 177, this message has won support for organizing and in some cases even convinced members to increase dues to pay for it.

UNITE's Southern Region holds an annual summer school for sixty rank-and-file activists. For one intense week these activists live and breathe union values and learn union-building skills. Similarly, at the region's conference, five hundred members celebrate struggle, participate in demonstrations, and attend workshops on organizing and mobilization. The message of the summer school and the conference is that UNITE is an organizing union because it is fighting for justice. Participants take this message back to their locals and the members clearly understand the priorities.

#### Education and Administration

In some cases educational programs are used primarily to build support for a union's organizing initiative, such as those just mentioned. Similarly, BCTW Local 26 has used an annual education conference to build awareness of and support for organizing and the organizing model among stewards and other unit leaders. But in one case education is an essential everyday ingredient in the union's overall operation. AFSCME District 1199C has secured employer financing for



its Training and Upgrading Fund and has supplemented this with external grants.

The District 1199C training program has an annual budget of approximately \$4 million. The district considers education and training as important as collective bargaining. The fund serves union members and the public. It offers credit and noncredit classes on union leadership, public speaking, literacy, algebra, and computers. It runs a nurse's aide training program. It administers a job security fund for members who lose their jobs due to restructuring which offers retraining and job search assistance. It operates a hiring hall for laid-off members and training program graduates. And it administers a tuition reimbursement program for members enrolled in college classes.

The 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund demonstrates the potential for unions to operate large-scale programs with huge budgets. On a smaller scale, AFGE Local 987 administers its own operation very efficiently. When a new set of officers was elected in 1992, the local was determined to make changes to operate on a more secure financial footing and to deliver representational services more effectively. A clerical assistant was replaced with a bookkeeper, the local purchased a new union hall and paid for it in four years, and net assets nearly tripled, in part because membership increased by one-third. This was accomplished with financial planning and careful budget management. Similarly, the staff was reorganized and given specialized assignments that improved the quality of representation. This experience demonstrates that locals can operate in a more businesslike manner and simultaneously enhance union strength and effectiveness.

IBEW Local 177 has applied efficient operational techniques to its organizing program. Since 1991 the local has annually updated a strategic organizing plan. Each staff member is required to set goals with action steps annually; these are updated several times a year and reviewed with the local president. This strategic planning and goal-setting process has increased accountability and enhanced the local's organizing success.

### Structure

In UNITE, the national union funds all organizing programs. The programs are implemented at the Joint Board level by the Manager,

an Organizing Director, and organizing staff and volunteers. The New England Joint Board, then, has its own organizing programs but also participates in national campaigns. The organizing staff, including the Joint Board's Organizing Director and three organizers, report both to the Manager and the national Organizing Director. Although this dual reporting situation adds some complexity to both planning and conducting campaigns, it works because the Manager and the national Organizing Director communicate and coordinate effectively.

In the IBEW, locals are responsible for organizing in their geographic and industry jurisdiction. District 5 supports organizing by providing COMET and MEMO training and by convening retreats for local business managers to develop districtwide strategic organizing plans. Two of the district's ten staff members are assigned full time to organizing. Their role is to work with individual locals on their own organizing plans, to mentor local organizers, and to coordinate organizing across locals.

In CWA District 4 the Organizing Director has set up an Organizing Network which now includes 46 of the district's 201 locals. The network sponsors organizer apprenticeships, an annual educational retreat for local organizers, and a periodic newsletter. Successful volunteer organizers may be sent to an Organizing Institute three-day program or sometimes to a week of training at the George Meany Center. Because most CWA locals are small, the Organizing Network is essential for promoting and supporting local organizing initiatives.

#### Best or Second Best?

The best practices we have described are positive examples of local union innovation, but taken as a whole they are hardly revolutionary. Because they are seldom conceived as part of a systematic effort to promote permanent organizational change, they may be more appropriately considered second-best solutions to difficult problems. Based on these cases we are struck by how difficult it is for local unions to develop alternative approaches to representation and to manage the shift to an organizing priority in isolation.

## Conclusions

The organizational change literature helps us interpret the experiences of local unions attempting to operationalize the organizing priority. It is clear that even under the best of circumstances local unions will confront barriers to such radical change. The challenge is to overcome these obstacles in order to lay the foundation for sustainable growth. At a rudimentary level this involves attention to technical requirements so that representational effectiveness can be maintained while the capacity to organize successfully is developed. As a corollary, sufficient economic resources are needed for both representation and organizing. Even as these basic needs are being met, local leaders must attend to political demands (which come from both above and below) so that the organizing priority can be retained for the long term. Also required are awareness and effective handling of the inevitable cultural transformation in order to sustain organizing momentum. It is essential to recall that in most local unions the organizing activity itself amounts to cultural change; success brings in new members and elevates this change to another level. It is impossible to imagine that this kind of upheaval can be sustained without ideological acceptance from all corners of the organization.

The challenge is complex. Earlier we identified three distinct interpretations of changing to organize: organizational evolution, organizational combustion, and organizational transformation. It is clear to us now that (rhetoric notwithstanding) the organizational evolution approach is common at the local union level. It is also clear that in locals that attempt merely to evolve, traditional representation prevails, organizing efforts are token, and backsliding is common. The obstacles to change are too substantial for this approach to achieve more than minimal results.

In those locals that have experienced the most notable change, the organizational combustion approach seems to be providing a substantial jolt. Shifting resources does force some creativity in representation, and in many settings progress on the organizing front is evident. However, representational innovations are spotty and invite skepticism and a political backlash from existing members. In short, obstacles to change are undermining these efforts, and the political and ideological separation between the organizing priority and the internal life of these locals is troubling. The pressure to retrench is widespread.

We conclude that the organizational transformation approach offers the most hope for lasting change. Local unions need comprehensive programs that attend to all aspects of the organization. Durable transformation presumes technical efficiency, resource reallocation, political will, and cultural change. These dimensions cannot all be addressed successfully without strategic analysis and enlightened leadership. Control over resources and the power to shift resources in support of the organizing priority is indeed important; however, they alone are not sufficient to ensure that other aspects of a union's operation will fall into line. We argue that political and ideological opposition to change should be attacked simultaneously with the resource shift in order to consolidate the momentum for transforming unions.

We are concerned that the change to organizing is too complex for local unions to tackle on their own. National unions cannot promote changing to organize and ask locals to shift resources only to leave the locals to fend for themselves. It is likely that except for large financially secure locals some type of budgetary support will be needed from the national, especially in the early stages. At least as important, local leaders and staff need training in strategic planning and organizing, and they would benefit from access to information on innovative approaches to representation.

Perhaps the most important question is, how can locals build political will among members to embrace organizing as movement building? Education can win support for organizing, but for long-term commitment a movement orientation is required. National unions need to work with locals on building activism, and they can support these efforts with carefully conceived educational initiatives that challenge members to reconsider their worldview and embrace union values. Failure to address ideological issues openly could undermine the potential to achieve the organizational transformation needed to rebuild the labor movement.

In short, there are three mutually reinforcing ingredients that must be present for the change to organizing at the local level to be self-sustaining:

1. Sufficient resources to support new organizing without compromising representational effectiveness;
2. Strategic planning to prepare the local technically, to identify internal barriers, and to address staff deficiencies and reticence; and

3. Member education and mobilization to build political will and prepare the local for cultural change and ideological reorientation.

This set of requisites is consistent with the organizational change literature. The concept of organizational readiness and the lessons drawn from organizations undergoing radical change seem to apply directly to the union experience. Especially relevant is the reminder from Tichy that failure to address technical, political, and cultural challenges simultaneously could undermine the entire effort to transform a local union. Add to this Poulantzas' insight that in a capitalist society power exists along many dimensions and that no revolution can succeed without victory on all fronts, and we can see why a comprehensive effort at organizational transformation is essential. If there is one thing that stands out based on our field research, it is that there are no easy answers, nor any blueprints. The process of developing twenty-first-century trade unionism is a work in progress, and all progressive-minded trade unionists can and must have a role.

## Appendix

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### AFL-CIO Education Department Representation Project Case List

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AFGE Local 987, Warner Robbins, GA

AFSCME Council 31, Chicago, IL

AFSCME District 1199C, Philadelphia, PA

BCTW Local 26, Denver, CO

CWA Local 4309, Cleveland, OH

CWA Local 7777, Denver, CO

IBEW Local 611, Albuquerque, NM

IBEW District 5, Birmingham, AL

Locals 108, 824, Tampa, FL

Local 177, Jacksonville, FL

Local 613, Atlanta, GA

OPEIU Local 153, New York, NY

UNITE New England Joint Board, North Dartmouth, MA

UNITE Southern Region, Atlanta, GA

Tennessee-Kentucky District, Knoxville, TN

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