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Beyond the Organizing Model: The Transformation Process in Local Unions

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Abstract

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The upheaval has forced new questions and problems to the surface and has set the stage for an internal debate about the future. The dialogue has included little that is fundamentally new. There have always been disagreements over labor strategy and tactics, the relationship of unions to capital, and the appropriate form of organization for the labor movement. This debate has taken on new urgency since the mid-1980s, however, and has concentrated on whether there is a viable alternative to the prevailing form of business unionism, which appears to be leading workers nowhere.

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The upheaval has forced new questions and problems to the surface and has set the stage for an internal debate about the future. The dialogue has included little that is fundamentally new. There have always been disagreements over labor strategy and tactics, the relationship of unions to capital, and the appropriate form of organization for the labor movement. This debate has taken on new urgency since the mid-1980s, however, and has concentrated on whether there is a viable alternative to the prevailing form of business unionism, which appears to be leading workers nowhere.

Borrowing from the South African antiapartheid movement, we could say that two camps have formed that we could label TINA and THEMBA. TINA (There Is No Alternative) has included the defenders and practitioners of the bureaucratic insurance agent form of unionism. THEMBA (There Must Be an Alternative, and the Zhosa word for *hope*) has included

those who have challenged the status quo and who have spent the last ten years trying to reach consensus on just what the alternative is.

An internal organizing manual published by the AFL-CIO in 1988, *Numbers That Count* (Diamond 1988), provided the nucleus for a new way to conceptualize the debate. A brief section entitled "Servicing Model vs. the Organizing Model" contrasted the "servicing model of local union leadership—trying to help people by solving problems for them"—with the "organizing model—involving members in solutions" (Diamond 1988:6). This contrast was elaborated in an important article by Andy Banks and Jack Metzgar in a 1989 issue of *Labor Research Review*. As Banks and Metzgar portray it, the servicing model is equivalent to stale unionism; there is an overreliance on union staff and the grievance and arbitration process and a concomitant suppression of rank-and-file involvement. By contrast, the organizing model emphasizes the need for member mobilization, collective action, and militancy. A later issue of *Labor Research Review* reinforced this conceptualization through articles and case studies, most notably "Contract Servicing from an Organizing Model" (Conrow 1991).

The organizing model has an irresistible logic. Banks and Metzgar promise that by involving "many more people in [its] daily life, . . . [the union] will be able to take on and solve more problems" (1989:50). Similarly, Teresa Conrow argues that the answer to staff burnout "is to involve more people and expand leadership roles" (1991:54). Banks and Metzgar project that as a result of the mobilization of a militant membership, unions will have a "transformed self image" but only "when organizing becomes the norm, the everyday experience of unionists on the shop floor" (53). Banks and Metzgar's conclusion ultimately caught on and has been articulated by progressives throughout the labor movement: "The fundamental task confronting the labor movement is the challenge to switch from a reliance on the servicing model of unionism to an organizing model" (54).

Although we ascribe to the perspective we have labeled THEMBA, we are concerned that the organizing model has proved to be an insufficient antidote to labor's ills. We have reached this conclusion based on discussions with local leaders and staff in SEIU and several other unions. To explain our emerging anxieties, we will briefly describe SEIU's "local union transformation" initiative and then report on the experiences of SEIU locals that have been experimenting with strategies for moving beyond the insurance agent/servicing model morass.

Local Union Transformation in SEIU

Discussions regarding the organizing model evolved in SEIU over time. Great enthusiasm was expressed for finding new methods to increase membership involvement. This commitment took several forms, including pro-

duction of the *Contract Campaign Manual,* of which SEIU is justifiably proud. This document presents an approach to bargaining that emphasizes internal organizing, building alliances, and conducting the struggle in a militant fashion.

But even while pushing for implementation of the best elements of the organizing model, there was a growing conviction within SEIU that something else was needed, specifically, a way for local unions to shift greater resources to *external* organizing. (In most of the literature regarding the organizing model, there is little reference to this issue.) Would mobilization of the members for militant action on the shop floor create momentum that would induce bottom-up support for external organizing? Alternatively, could the existing members essentially be ignored while efforts and resources were put into such organizing? Was there a different way to perform representational work that would emphasize the role of existing members rather than that of the staff?

Attempting to grapple with these questions led a work group at SEIU to consider what the characteristics of an organizing local would be. These discussions and the experimentation they encouraged came to be known as local union transformation. Unable to reach agreement as to the features of such a local, except in a general way, the work group decided to look at local union "best practices." The idea was to examine how local unions actually conduct representation, to identify innovative approaches to representation that streamline the process, and to explore the relationship of these efforts to external organizing. It was in this context that Cornell University was engaged to study the best practices of twelve local unions within SEIU.

The locals were selected based on their commitment to external organizing and their implementation of innovative approaches to representational work.[1] Although they were not selected randomly, one objective was to ensure that they were representative of all SEIU locals, by region, size, and industry. Each of the twelve locals was visited for on-site interviews with elected leaders, staff, and rank-and-file activists. The remainder of this chapter reports on the results of the study. Although most of the specific experiences we relate come from these twelve locals, the interpretation is based as well on discussions with leaders of other locals and staff of SEIU and other national unions.

The Organizing Model in Practice

Half the locals in the best-practices project have made an explicit commitment to the organizing model. Two have engaged for ten years in internal

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1. Interview schedules and a list of the locals involved may be requested from Mary Ann Collins at SEIU.

practices now associated with this approach. But even among locals committed to the model, there is a lack of clarity regarding what this means in practice. There is a general understanding that some application of organizing principles to representational work is desirable. For some unionists, this implies that internal practices are more democratic; for others, it means there is an emphasis on activities aimed at mobilization and on direct action; and for others (in the public sector and in right-to-work states), the aim is to involve members in actions that attract coworkers who then join the union. Many unionists presume that a direct link exists between the internal implementation of the organizing model and the local's potential ability to organize externally, but very few unionists could clearly articulate the connection.

In spite of the diversity in interpretations, some patterns have surfaced among those locals with the deepest commitment to the organizing model. We have identified three such patterns. The three cases described below are compilations based on information about several of the locals included in the project. Although the details are drawn from actual practice, the cases do not match precisely any specific case.

Local X has made the organizing model its byword; it is the standard against which all the local's work is measured. Staff representatives are referred to as internal organizers. They keep up-to-date charts on each workplace to monitor members' commitment and place top priority on recruiting rank-and-file leaders. Depending on the size of the unit, a specified number of positions need to be filled—unit officers, chief steward, stewards, work site organizers, and political activists. These volunteers are expected to conduct the day-to-day work of the local within their units. Formal training offered by the union combined with informal training by the internal organizers ensure that the volunteers have the tools to perform the roles they have accepted. Stewards handle all grievances through step 3, for example.

The internal organizers focus on identifying issues that can be used to mobilize members, and each internal organizer is expected to schedule a minimum of two major actions each month. In addition to regular actions around workplace issues, a more extensive contract campaign is implemented for each contract negotiation. Political activists are encouraged to become involved in grassroots political action in local and statewide campaigns. Rank-and-file leaders are selected as media spokespersons. In short, Local X does everything with the organizing model in mind and pushes decisions and actions down to the lowest possible level.

More common than the situation just described is the case of Local Y, where, to a person, staff voice commitment to the organizing model but there is only periodic mobilization of members, mainly at the time of con-

tract negotiations. This local negotiates multiple contracts annually and organizes member-driven contract campaigns for each negotiation. New stewards are recruited, a contract committee is created, and the staff representative assigned to the unit trains the activists in campaign principles. A contract survey is developed and distributed using one-on-one techniques. Workplace actions are planned and implemented by the members, the filing of grievances is accelerated, and, where appropriate, OSHA complaints are initiated. There is a high level of energy, members are mobilized, and involvement is maximized.

Between contracts, however, this level of activism is rare unless there is a crisis. In the better units, the day-to-day business of the local is conducted by rank-and-file leaders, some of whom hold the position of unit chair for years and essentially perform as unpaid staff. Some of these units are always ready even if they are not always active. Many other units are more passive and rely heavily on staff during the lulls between contract campaigns.

Local Z represents the third standard interpretation of the organizing model. At the center of Local Z's operating style is an emphasis on communication. The president of the local meets with staff weekly to discuss recent developments and upcoming actions. Stewards councils have been established in most units, and field representatives meet with them monthly. In addition to the face-to-face communications made possible through these channels, the local publishes a monthly newspaper that discusses the direction in which the union is heading and highlights militant campaigns conducted by or supported by the local. In addition, site-specific newsletters are distributed quarterly in all workplaces with three hundred or more members.

At Local Z, all contract negotiations are approached as campaigns to involve the members. In addition to promoting activism at contract time, Local Z has a strong presence in Jobs with Justice and supports the struggles of other unions in the area. Nonetheless, only a small percentage of the members are highly active, creating an image of member involvement that is not matched in reality. The local's creativity in actions and demonstrations is enhanced by what is acknowledged to be a "shell game" or "smoke and mirrors."

Elected leaders and staff in Locals X, Y, and Z voice commitment to similar values and objectives. All three locals seek to involve the members, to promote activism and militancy, and to "move to the highest level of collective struggle." There is a consistent refrain that "people change when they take on the fight." Also present though not as universal is a belief that the role of the union is "to radicalize the members."

Although operating with a common set of values, there are also important differences among Locals X, Y, and Z. Local X attempts to achieve a com-

prehensive program that fits the organizing model. Member involvement in all the work of the local is paramount, and democratic process is a priority. Stewards handle grievances, members are politically active, and a high degree of mobilization has been achieved. Staff at Local Y are no less zealous in their enthusiasm for the organizing model, but in practice the local has been successful at achieving its objectives only during contract campaigns. Nonetheless, its philosophy is rooted in member activism and the contract campaigns are "bottom-up" events. Local Z has done more than either Local X or Local Y to integrate its work with progressive elements of the broader labor movement, but it has not achieved a comparable level of member involvement. Local Z's activism and militancy are heavily dependent on staff.

Although there are unions like Local X scattered throughout the labor movement, the experiences of Locals Y and Z are more common in practice. But even in this more limited form, organizing model locals have accomplished a great deal and their efforts are laudatory. At the same time, these locals have encountered significant difficulties; it is to these experiences we now turn.

Limitations of the Organizing Model

When a local adopts the organizing model as a way of doing business, it encounters resistance. Staff representatives are experienced in servicing, and most were hired because of their negotiating skills and expertise in the grievance/arbitration process. They are proud of their work, and many oppose the shift to an approach that may leave them behind if they cannot adapt. These concerns are often mirrored in the initial response of members, who have not been expected to take responsibility and are accustomed to being serviced. The typical member is not interested in the activities of the union except at contract time and when there is a problem at work. A worker with a grievance will want to talk to a representative rather than trusting a steward; a common refrain is "That's why I pay dues."

Locals experienced with the organizing model address these problems over time. Staff either change or leave, or in some instances a few representatives specialize in grievance and arbitration work, which frees others to concentrate on internal organizing. Training is offered to stewards, and members learn to trust them with grievances. The demands to be serviced do not go away, however. Even where staff embrace the organizing model, they "have a hard time letting go and letting members run things." Stewards continue to rely on staff for advice and often are reluctant to take independent action. And elected leaders are moved by angry phone calls from members. As one representative expressed it, "Don't say we're going away

from the servicing model when we pamper every squeaky wheel." In practice, then, there is a constant tension between the organizing model and the servicing magnet.

A more significant problem is the increased stress on staff in locals that work the hardest to involve members in the work of the union. The staff at Locals X and Y have continual problems with burnout; the staff-driven approach of Local Z creates a similar challenge, but it is less severe. Every staff member interviewed in Locals X and Y agreed that following the organizing model creates more work than sticking to the servicing model. This position was echoed in discussions with experienced leaders of locals in other international unions. It is easier for staff to handle grievances and arbitrations than continually to recruit and train stewards to do this work. It is also easier for staff to plan and run contract campaigns (as Local Z does) than to recruit, train, and support campaign committees.

A few comments reveal the dilemma these locals face. The first are from Local X, where there is strong staff support for the organizing model in spite of the drawbacks: "It is an exciting democratic process—our local is absolutely member driven"; "It's more work for staff, but the rewards are better"; "You get to be in the field, you find out the issues, you offer training —but the workload is the downside."

Other staff at Local X do not temper their concerns. Most simply state the reality: "The organizing model demands an incredible degree of commitment from staff." Some express regret: "We are on a platform of a high level of activity which interferes with family. The local should appreciate the value of breaks and time off." The most committed staff view these concerns with suspicion, lamenting that "some staff don't see this as a religion."

The views of the staff at Local Y are similar. On the positive side, "Power emanates from the members' unity," and "Getting members involved brings in energy." But the concerns qualify the praise for the organizing model: "It is a myth that the organizing model will free staff; you constantly have to train members to do things you could do faster yourself," and "More active units mean more work and less time for external organizing."

Staff burnout is directly linked to members' reactions to the organizing model. The typical member is either timid or disinterested and reluctant to be too active. Some members are dedicated but are willing to take on support functions only. Even those with a more activist bent find it difficult to be involved all the time. People tire of fighting. There is little or no emotional support at work for what these activists do on behalf of their coworkers and their unions. And inevitably there are conflicts because of the loss of personal time. The result is that stewards and other leaders at the grassroots level rotate through these positions.

Recruiting stewards is difficult, and training them is time-consuming. As one longtime rank-and-file activist in Local X sees it: "The organizing model works well with a group of experienced union people in the unit. However, it is intimidating to those without experience. . . . Members really want a combination of servicing and internal organizing."

Staff and leaders in Locals X, Y, and Z agree that it is easier to mobilize workers at contract time and in workplaces where the boss is really bad. Otherwise, there is a "constant tension to come back to servicing." In fact, "members even see mobilization as a staff responsibility." To return to our point, it is more work to solve problems with the organizing model.

These limitations lead to some substantive questions. First, there are strategic concerns. The organizing model works in some settings but not in others. Locals with small units and multiple contracts have more difficulty maintaining high levels of mobilization than locals with large units and few contracts. Similarly, units of workers who face a crisis or arbitrary tyrannical supervisors are easier to mobilize than units in stable situations with more reasonable bosses. Furthermore, many workplaces face occasional crises (such as at contract time) but also experience long periods of relative calm. Does it make sense to pursue an organizing model at all times in all workplaces given these variations?

Second, there are budgetary limitations associated with the organizing model. Considering the demands this approach places on staff, there are clear resource implications that accompany full commitment. A staff member at Local Z summarized the dilemma: "Is mobilization a luxury we can't afford or a necessity we can't live without?" The resource constraint is particularly problematic for locals with an active external organizing program. The leaders of Locals X, Y, and Z are convinced that following the organizing model has helped them activate their members, reinvigorate their unions, and fight their bosses more effectively. When asked whether they are better off than they were five years ago, however, they confess that the *external* environment of economic restructuring and declining union membership has seriously limited potential gains. They are left explaining how adhering to the organizing model has enabled them to hold their own or minimize losses. As one high-ranking staff member at Local X lamented, "We're a stronger union, but without better contracts and increasing membership, what's the point?"

Leaders of other locals (not Local X, Y, or Z) raise concerns about the value of the organizing model as a vehicle for lasting change. In particular, they object that the model fails to elucidate any clear path from internal mobilization to external organizing. Their analysis concentrates on the decline in the power of unions, which they argue can be addressed only through growth. For growth to occur, they say, resources must be reallo-

cated to external organizing. Although they are as critical of the servicing tradition as are proponents of the organizing model, these leaders believe that the focus of the labor movement should be on finding ways to free resources and staff from representational work. As one leader put it: "Start from the premise that organizing is the priority. Next ask yourself, 'How much of our disposable income is allocated to organizing?' *Then* ask, 'How do we service?' "

Concerns with resources and declining power have persuaded some leaders to reject the organizing model explicitly. They believe that it is more important to embrace a comprehensive program of external organizing. A particularly sharp critic explains why: "The organizing model is not about building power. It points unions in the most narrow way. The better job you do with 15 percent of the market, the more it motivates the boss to wipe you out. We have to direct our energy outside."

The next section reviews the experiences of locals that have decided to make external organizing their priority. These locals have not necessarily repudiated the organizing model, but they have decided either to bypass it or to move beyond it.

Organizing Locals

All the locals involved in the best-practices project have active external organizing programs, and about half have dramatically reallocated staff and other resources to support the effort. From among this latter group, we have identified three types of "organizing locals." Again, these are composite sketches drawn from actual practice.

Local A is a public-sector union for which organizing is the top priority. All staff members are referred to as organizers, and the only rank-and-file committee is the organizing committee. For many years Local A attempted to attract members by offering representational services, but membership stagnated. Six years ago the local's leaders concluded that "super-servicing is a recipe for disaster" and decided to become an organizing local. Since then, membership has tripled. Approximately equal shares of the growth have come from newly organized units of the same employer and from increases in membership in existing units.

Local A has freed resources for organizing by dramatically reducing staff time devoted to representational work. All grievances are now handled by stewards and by "grievance technicians," part-time union employees hired out of the unit. Members are required to play an active role in preparing their own grievances, and, as a result, there has been a decline in the number of grievances filed. As one steward describes the new philosophy, "If we don't make each person feel responsible, we won't have a union." Some

staff members are a bit less charitable. "The goal is not to make people happy but to build the union," one staff member said. "We believe in tough servicing, which is like tough love," another commented. And, finally, another remarked, "The job of the union is to create power, not protect whiners."

Freed of most servicing responsibilities, organizers spend their time in the field. All new employees are visited personally, and unorganized units are targeted systematically. Organizers are assisted by "lost-timers" out of the shop, members who take leave without pay one day per week (covered by the union). Members of the organizing committee conduct much of the recruiting activities among nonmembers in existing units. Local A's philosophy was summarized succinctly by a steward: "Strength doesn't come from individual grievances but from getting a better contract; better contracts come from organizing more workers."

Local B operates in a different setting and takes a decidedly different approach. The local represents low-skilled workers in a private-sector industry, negotiates multiple contracts, and has a geographic jurisdiction that includes several municipalities. About eight years ago, Local B, faced with a gradual erosion of membership, decided to shift its attention from servicing to organizing. It adopted a long-term objective to organize the entire market in its jurisdiction. The local moved resources from representational work to organizing and facilitated the shift structurally through staff specialization. Standard servicing duties are handled by field representatives, while external organizing is coordinated by a separate organizing staff.

Because of the shift in resources, field representatives have been required to take on much larger routes with a corresponding increase in responsibility. A variety of experiments have been tried to ease the burden. Part-time grievance technicians out of the rank and file assisted the field representatives for a while, but the positions were eliminated because of budgetary concerns. A service center was set up, where a full-time staff member took all phone calls from members and assisted them with their questions, but members and field representatives were uncomfortable with the arrangement. A temporary employee with organizing experience was hired to conduct an internal organizing campaign to mobilize the members but was eventually assigned to the external organizing staff. Currently, one field representative has a reduced route and is handling all arbitrations, while a specialist on loan from the international has assumed some of the local's bargaining load. Although there have been some difficulties in conducting the representational work, Local B has been willing to accept this as a cost it must bear to support the organizing program.

The organizing story is quite different. Local B has pushed an aggressive agenda; demonstrations, civil disobedience, and creative actions have at-

tracted public attention and have helped mobilize workers in the targeted companies. These activities have been supported by some activist members from established units, and some field representatives have assisted. Local B's membership has increased by about one-third as a direct result of the organizing, although no major breakthroughs have occurred recently. Some subdivisions of the local's jurisdiction are fully organized, but the share of the entire market is still less than half.

Local C has an industry jurisdiction that is similar to Local B's but a much larger territory. Local C is a private-sector union with multiple employers operating in related industries. It has concentrated on external organizing for ten years and has gradually adapted its structure. The organizing and representational work of the local are integrated, and all the staff endorse the local's organizing mission and the members support it. Although there are a few full-time organizers, the rest of the staff ("administrative organizers") are assigned geographic territories and are responsible for representational work and some external organizing in their areas.

Local C abandoned an earlier structure in an effort to move its external organizing to a higher level. To free administrative organizers from handling grievances, an educational program was established and a grievance chair was trained for each chapter. To be a grievance chair, one must support the local's organizing program. As one staff member explained it, "We need rank-and-file leaders with political commitment, not bureaucrats." Grievance chairs are expected to handle all step 3 hearings, and administrative organizers are responsible only for arbitrations. In many chapters, the result has been fewer grievances because "our members are telling problem workers, 'Get off it and get on with your life.' "

Perhaps the most exciting characteristic of Local C is the high degree of member involvement in organizing. The local runs an organizing internship program that brings six members out of the shop at a time for five weeks. This program trains about fifty members per year, who go back to their chapters to become chairs of organizing committees. Each chapter organizing committee is expected to identify a target and initiate an organizing campaign. Once a campaign is up and running, an administrative organizer lends assistance, but the members own these campaigns, which supplement the local's central organizing program. Local C has gained member support for organizing by projecting a straightforward message: "Organizing is about building power to protect the members we have." In recent years members have voted a dues increase to support organizing and have voted to commit more than one-third of the local's budget to organizing. Membership has grown steadily by about 10 percent per year.

The organizing locals we have described are all succeeding in increasing their memberships. Their styles are quite different, however. Locals A and

C have integrated organizing into all the work of the union and are healthier as a result. Local B has created an organizing program that is separate from the day-to-day activities of the union and its members.

Unlike the organizing model cases, there is no ideological consistency across these locals. Local A leaders, staff, and activists talk about empowering individual members, while their Local C counterparts voice concern about social and economic justice and the fight over the distribution of wealth. These differences in part reflect the different objective conditions of the members. Local A's members are public-sector workers with stable jobs and decent pay and benefits, while Local C's members are private-sector workers with low wages and bad working conditions. What is important is that the values articulated by the two locals seem to fit the workers they represent. Local B, by contrast, has not reached agreement on a coherent set of values. Organizers and workers involved in organizing are concerned about achieving economic power and "taking it to the streets." Field representatives and members in established units envision a union that protects workers. This ideological dissimilarity reflects underlying discontent that has the potential to undermine the local's commitment to organizing. It is to this and other difficulties that we now turn.

External Organizing, Internal Dissonance

As happens when a local embraces the organizing model, there is resistance when a local decides to shift from having a servicing orientation to being an organizing local. Many experienced staff are uncomfortable with organizing. In Locals A and C, staff either changed or left. In Local B, however, the creation of a separate organizing team was inspired by respect for the experienced servicing staff, and there has been very little turnover. The continued presence of staff who do not fully support the need to make organizing a priority has spawned constant tension with organizers. As one field representative describes the environment, "The organizers have been separate from day one; there is no connection; we don't even talk." Another complains, "The organizers have an attitude because we're not into their actions." The organizers voice similar frustrations. One organizer simply observes, "Servicing and organizing don't mesh; there is no coordination, no bridge." Another is more bitter: "The field reps don't block organizing, they just don't get it. They're scared . . . on a power trip . . . hiding their own failure."

Because organizing locals are attempting to do more with the same resources, "Every talented person is incredibly overworked." But this increased workload does not seem to lead to complaints of burnout as frequently as in organizing model locals. In Local B, the greatest stress is on

the field representatives. As the staff director explains the situation, "Servicing is still staff intensive, and people get tired; the problem is that members are very dependent." The extra workload is handled by setting priorities and letting less pressing demands slide: "We are always scrambling to keep up. . . . We usually default to damage control."

The organizers in Local B, who network with other organizers in the area and in other locals of SEIU, have adjusted to the long hours and intense job pressures. As an official from another national union with a full organizing agenda commented, "Burnout is not the result of hard work and long hours but of not feeling part of the movement." This assessment fits the situation in Locals A and C, where organizers talk of feeling fatigue but quickly move on to express great pride in their union's record of growth as an organizing local.

Members of Locals A, B, and C have been affected indirectly by the splits in staff. One union leader believes that "if organizing staff are separate and apart with no integration, there will be no member ownership of the [organizing] program." This has certainly been a problem at Local B, where the organizing director concedes that the local "is not coming together" and recognizes a need to "integrate staff and members into organizing." Field representatives and members of the local are skeptical, however, about organizers' efforts to do this. One representative, who strongly supports making organizing a priority, complains, "External organizers see members and staff as bodies for rallies and marches; members feel tension from being taken for granted." Another is less critical but relates a similar problem: "Members need to be educated about organizing; you ask them to participate in an action and they look at you like you are crazy." A rank-and-file leader assesses the situation this way: "Members rightfully have a 'me-first' attitude—we need to take care of our members before sending people out to organize more." A member of the executive board echoes this view: "Our members see no connection to external organizing in [a city sixty miles away]; we're doing good there, but we need our staff here." With these sentiments, it is no wonder that a proposal for a dues increase was overwhelmingly defeated in 1995, shortly after we heard these comments.

Member apathy is also a problem in Locals A and C, in spite of their more integrated approaches. In Local A, "Getting people involved in organizing is difficult—they have second jobs, other priorities, and they are scared." Similarly, in Local C, "Most of [the] members are passive; you have to get them past their fears to get them to participate in organizing."

Probably more important than the apathy is the outright opposition. Members have difficulty understanding why they should support organizing unless there is a direct link to their own situations. Local A, which initiated an organizing campaign in 1995 in the private sector in response to privatization, has run into resistance from members: "Members don't recognize the

need to organize. . . . They ask, 'How can we fight privatization when we're organizing it?' " Although a substantial majority of Local C's members support its external organizing, a large unit of professional workers do not. They find it "difficult to feel a connection" to an organizing program that focuses on low-skilled workers, even though they are from the same industry.

Most organizing locals push some representational work down to unit chairs and stewards to free staff and resources to do external organizing. As an unintended side effect, a cadre of rank-and-file leaders is created who become familiar with and often wedded to servicing. Thus, in Local B, "the most effective leaders in the workplace are problem solvers," and "the most active executive board members focus on grievances." Similarly, in Local A, "Sometimes stewards get into a social worker mold." It is not surprising that this commitment to servicing can turn into opposition to organizing. A chapter president in Local B reflected: "We don't have time to help with organizing because we're too involved in our chapter. We're not too happy that so much of the local's resources are devoted to external rather than internal. . . . We lost our conference room to organizers."

The dissonance around a local's external organizing reflects a failure to achieve consensus. This failure may be caused in part by the local's ineffectiveness in addressing the problems of its current members. The staff director in Local B is concerned that "as well as we do in organizing, we haven't been able to get respect from employers on the job." One staff member mused: "How do you service, get better collective bargaining agreements, and organize? The devil is in the detail." An equally important concern was voiced by the organizing director: "Organizing is not having a lasting impact on the local." The members have not considered organizing victories as their own, which makes deficiencies in the representational realm all the more noticeable.

When Local A decided to shift direction six years ago, the idea was to build a different culture. By collapsing all committees into an organizing committee, the local was making a statement. An intense one-on-one campaign was initiated to reach every member to convey the local's new image. Every educational function and chapter meeting reemphasized the organizing theme. As the local's office manager describes the philosophy, "Part of the organizing approach is education—what it means to be a union, what it means to be an organizing local." In the process of breaking the hold the servicing mentality had on the local, some rank-and-file leaders were alienated and quit. The end result, however, was a clear focus and strong support for organizing. Every organizing victory is a victory for every member.

Over the past ten years, Local C has gone through a similar process. The local's president recalls that "members and staff were perverted by the old ways. We had to struggle with the question 'How do you build political will?' " Diligent attention to the organizing mission accomplished the objec-

tive. Every staff meeting and executive board meeting starts with personal reports from participants involved in organizing victories. The local's extensive training program emphasizes the need to organize. Local C's education director explains the message this way: "You have to have conversations with people about power and numbers." Another staff member notes that "enthusiasm for organizing is contagious once it takes off."

Locals A and C have succeeded in building a coherent program supported by staff and members by making clear the link between organizing and the members' self-interest. Local A's focus on organizing other workers with the same employer has made the connection obvious. Not all locals will have this option. Local C has convinced its members of the importance of organizing other workers in the same industry and geographic area. The more widespread the feeling among members that the local's organizing targets are unrelated to or too far removed from their own labor market, the more difficult it will be to elicit members' enthusiasm.

It is extremely important for organizing locals to command the unified support of staff and their executive boards. Divisions at higher levels translate into dissension among the members, an untenable situation for a local that is breaking new ground. For locals in which staff specialization is necessary, attention must be devoted to cultivating and reinforcing political will among those responsible for representational work. The servicing magnet is powerful, but disproportionate commitment to servicing can undermine the commitment to organizing.

Members must identify with external organizing. Mere participation in actions is not enough if the members have not been involved in planning those actions. In both Locals A and C, the members are with the program. Although only the most activist members actually participate, most members understand the need to organize and are proud to be part of an organizing local. Assuming continual attention is paid to maintaining political will, the president of Local C concludes, "We need to build a structure that works, then train people and get out of the way."

Reflections on Building a Movement

In our opening discussion of TINA versus THEMBA, we noted that those who believe that "there must be an alternative" have not yet reached consensus on what the alternative is. We have endeavored to provide practical information from local union experiences that point us toward a workable solution to this conundrum. SEIU's local union transformation initiative is helping to identify the characteristics of a viable form of progressive unionism at the local level and in the process is contributing to the development of a positive program of innovation.

We have reviewed two broad approaches: the organizing model, which

relies on internal organizing, and the organizing local, which focuses on external organizing. Locals that follow the organizing model stimulate member involvement, increase the ability to fight the boss on the shop floor, and generate the development of a more cohesive local with improved member commitment. Few locals achieve the ultimate objective of organizing as the everyday norm on the shop floor, however, because workers prefer normalcy and find it hard to take on the fight continuously. As a result, in practice, mobilization is staff driven and leads to stress and burnout.

The evidence from locals committed to the organizing model convinces us that as *the* alternative to the status quo, the organizing model is not realistic and is not good strategy. We believe that the inadequacy is conceptual as well as practical. If the weaker definition of the word *model* were intended ("an example to be emulated"), we would not hesitate to endorse the approach; however, most trade unionists have assumed the stronger definition of *model* ("a schematic description of a system or theory"). Thus, some unionists do not view the organizing model as a step but as the answer. We do not agree with the implication that militant rank-and-file action by itself can build a working-class movement.

The juxtaposition of the organizing model with the servicing model is essentially descriptive rather than analytical, insofar as it tends to address elements of the crisis of labor unionism rather than its source. The prescribed militancy and mobilization around issues of common concern are appropriate tactical steps to breathe life into local unions that have relied too heavily on bureaucratic methods. These tactical improvements do not translate into a comprehensive "model," however. To state this observation another way, that the organizing model has relevance to representational functions does not render it a sufficient antidote to the broader deficiencies of business unionism.

If the organizing model is not a viable alternative to business unionism, then what is? Although we are not prepared to answer that question definitively, we tend to agree with those who argue that attention should be directed toward achieving power in the marketplace and therefore toward external organizing. The experiences of organizing locals are instructive. These locals have been experimenting with different ways to free resources for organizing by reducing the scope and extent of their representational activities. Many of these experiments have involved initiatives parallel to the organizing model idea that more responsibility should be placed in the hands of rank-and-file leaders. The objective, though, is not to organize around grievances but to reduce the emphasis on grievances. These locals have determined that trivial grievances and problem workers should not chew up resources needlessly. These efforts make a lot of sense, and further experimentation in this direction seems warranted.

A key to institutional stability for organizing locals is consensus. In most cases in which consensus has been achieved, the local has emphasized its need for power and has appealed to the self-interest of its members ("organizing is about building power to protect members"). There appear to be two essential components to consensus building: a leader with vision who aggressively promotes organizing as critical in building political will and a comprehensive educational program that offers training in organizing and representational skills *and* that promotes the organizing mission.

In spite of the success of those organizing locals that have achieved consensus, it is difficult to think of local union transformation that is self-perpetuating without going beyond simply organizing for market power. The advantage of the market power approach is that it appeals to self-interest and is consistent with the U.S. tradition of job-based unionism. This approach is self-limiting, however, because once the relevant local labor market is organized, from the perspective of the members the need has been met and the tendency will be to return to servicing. We conclude that organizing locals offer a useful strategic approach for unions to regain market share in the short run, but they cannot serve as the basis for a legitimate alternative to business unionism.

Not addressed directly by either the organizing model or the organizing locals are a series of larger questions about the strategic direction of the entire labor movement. These go to the very ideological basis of U.S. trade unionism. These questions include the following: Who is identified as the constituency of organized labor? What is the mission of the labor movement? What is the relationship of organized labor to corporate America? How do those in the labor movement deal with issues of globalization and international solidarity?

However these questions are answered, a vision needs to be articulated that offers a clear alternative to business unionism, a vision that can touch a large segment of members and be relevant to everyday life. Consistent with the experience of the organizing locals, this vision should encompass principles such as empowerment, social justice, and equitable distribution of wealth. For now, unions such as SEIU can only assist locals in the process of philosophical, practical, and organizational transformation based on the principle of organizing for growth and power. We believe that by learning from the experiences of innovative best-practices locals that are willing to take risks, we will be able to develop a clear picture of what unionism should look like in the twenty-first century. Through this transformation of local unions, we expect to advance toward a new model of unionism based on social and economic justice.