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Is Organizing Enough? Race, Gender, and Union Culture

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Is Organizing Enough? Race, Gender, and Union Culture

Abstract

[Excerpt] We argue that the quantitative interpretation of Changing to Organize is self-limiting, if not self-defeating. If unions hope to attract a mass influx of new members, they must first address seriously the internal transformation required to build a labor movement of all working people. The highest priority should be on creating a culture of inclusion. We envision a movement that embraces, attracts, and promotes women, people of color, immigrants, and lesbians and gays. We reach this conclusion in large part based on work with local unions that have endorsed the change to organizing. Although national unions play a central role in establishing the organizing priority and coordinating the organizing efforts, the changes that affect the day-to-day life of unionism occur at the local level. And the reality is that locals engaged in organizing face a host of substantial internal challenges. To the extent that these challenges relate to the organizing itself, they are well understood and are receiving attention at the national level (for example, the shortage of trained organizers and experienced lead organizers is widely recognized).

Keywords

labor movement, unions, organization, labor rights, revitalization, AFL-CIO, race, gender

Disciplines

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Comments

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by Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Richard Hurd

IS ORGANIZING ENOUGH? *Race, Gender, and Union Culture*

AS WE ENTER THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, THE NEW AFL-CIO IS ATTEMPTING TO LEAD THE transformation of the U.S. labor movement. The centerpiece of this revitalization effort is the campaign to establish organizing as *the* priority. Unions are being challenged to shift resources to organizing, to develop strong organizing staffs, to devise strategic organizing plans, and to involve members in the process. The totality of the initiative has been captured by the slogan “Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize!”

Clearly the message has taken hold. Major national unions have reallocated significant resources to organizing, activist locals have created or expanded organizing departments, and the rapidly growing Organizing Institute, created by the AFL-CIO in 1988 to recruit and train organizers, struggles to meet the demand. And there have been results, however modest. In 1999, for the first time in two decades, union density in the private sector did not decline.

As gratifying as it has been to witness this reorientation, and as crucial as it has been to establish the organizing priority, we are convinced that it is essential to move the transformation process to another level. The “change” in *Changing to Organize* is more profound in its implications than some of its strongest advocates recognize. The prevailing view as to organizing and the rebirth of the U.S. labor movement is actually quantitative rather than

qualitative. That is, it largely comes down to increasing the number of members in the existing trade union movement. Thus, the emphasis on reaching and organizing the millions of unorganized workers largely assumes that little will change in the structure, function, leadership, and culture of organized labor.

To the extent that qualitative issues are considered at all, the emphasis has been on building support for organizing among the members. The standard approach is to appeal to self-interest; the argument is that we have to organize to increase market share so that we can have more bargaining power and, in effect, take wages out of competition. As rational as this line of reasoning might be, it in essence accepts the narrow conceptualization of unions as bargaining agents that has dominated and limited the U.S. labor movement for the past fifty years.

We argue that the quantitative interpretation of Changing to Organize is self-limiting, if not self-defeating. If unions hope to attract a mass influx of new members, they must first address seriously the internal transformation required to build a labor movement of all working people. The highest priority should be on creating a culture of inclusion. We envision a movement that embraces, attracts, and promotes women, people of color, immigrants, and lesbians and gays.

We reach this conclusion in large part based on work with local unions that have endorsed the change to organizing. Although national unions play a central role in establishing the organizing priority and coordinating the organizing efforts, the changes that affect the day-to-day life of unionism occur at the local level. And the reality is that locals engaged in organizing face a host of substantial internal challenges.¹ To the extent that these challenges relate to the organizing itself, they are well understood and are receiving attention at the national level (for example, the shortage of trained organizers and experienced lead organizers is widely recognized).

We are much more concerned about the challenges that are only indirectly related to the organizing per se. We have witnessed widespread skepticism among servicing representa-

The prevailing view as to organizing and the rebirth of the labor movement is quantitative rather than qualitative.

tives who doubt the viability of the organizing agenda and resent the perceived holier-than-thou attitude of young organizers. We are troubled that members' concerns are largely swept under the rug. Yes, a few of the more activist members are recruited as volunteer organizers and enthusiastically support the change. But most members do not really understand how the organizing relates to them and are primarily concerned about maintaining the level of representational services to which they have grown accustomed. And we are convinced that ultimately internal union politics will define the limits of elected leaders' commitment to the organizing priority. Local leaders want to be on the gravy train of labor's revitalization, but they are often not willing to risk loss of political control in the process.

What we see at the local level, then, is tremendous institutional inertia. This in and of itself is not necessarily a fatal flaw if locals can overcome internal obstacles and support an organizing program, and if unions as they exist offer an attractive home for unrepresented workers. Problems arise, however, when the workers in the organizing targets are not a demographic and cultural match for the dominant leadership group in the local they are being invited to join. The qualitative issues involved in Changing to Organize become especially clear when we look at them in the context of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

We envision a movement that embraces, attracts, and promotes women, people of color, immigrants, and lesbians and gays.

The scenarios presented in the following discussion are drawn from five years of field-work with organizing locals. The situations are factual and the quotes are real. They come from site visits and in-depth discussions with leaders and activists at about thirty large local unions, supplemented by interviews with staff and regional officers of several unions heavily involved in organizing. We incorporate formal input from sixteen different national unions concerning locals in a broad range of settings.

After considering the practices of these unions, and reviewing notes from the interviews with special attention to comments that reflect experiences with diversity and inclusion, we have identified three paths followed by locals whose leaders voice strong support for the organizing priority. The dominant path is traveled by locals that treat *organizing as*

Local leaders want to be on the gravy train of labor's revitalization, but they are often not willing to risk loss of political control in the process.

symbolism. These locals establish organizing programs not as a primary feature but merely as a symbol of the union's vitality. A second path is pursued by militant locals that promote the *sanctification of organizing.* These unions are absolutely committed to organizing, but representational activities and relations with members suffer as a result. The third path is explored by locals committed to *organizing for inclusion.* These unions strive to balance internal and external organizing and are intent on

creating a culture of inclusion that transcends divisions based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

THE DOMINANT PATH— ORGANIZING AS SYMBOLISM

WHEN WE LOOK TO SEE HOW THE change to organizing is operationalized at the local level, in most cases we find modest deviation from standard union practice, but little evidence of dramatic transformation. The locals that join the move to organizing are mostly good, traditional operations with a business union orientation and an insurance agent's mentality. The leaders of these locals want to be out front, but are ill equipped for the challenges they inevitably encounter. They typically take pride in the services they offer and view organizing in the same general context as political action—important work that supplements the core responsibility of the local.

One local leader's description of his commitment to organizing captures a common theme: "I run the local like a business....We sign people up to increase the budget." Organizing, then, is a pragmatic extension of the union's basic responsibility to bargain effectively on behalf of the members. In this context, staff assigned to organizing have other responsibilities as well. In one local we visited, for example, the newly hired organizing director has a law degree and is expected to assist with arbitrations. In another local the organizing coordinator still carries full responsibility as a business agent, and has volunteered to take on the extra duties because "organizing is the ticket to go anywhere with this [national] union."

The net result in locals that manifest *organizing as symbolism* is that representational

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work is at the core while organizing is an appendage. Local leaders are hesitant to push reluctant staff too hard, and they are quick to respond to vocal members who question new organizing. It is common for the commitment to organizing to wane over time, especially if initial efforts are not successful. Even in locals with the resources to maintain the established level of representational services while supporting an active organizing program, there is little effort to integrate the organizing into the heart of the union. Newly organized units are assigned to experienced representation staff, standard bargaining and enforcement practices are followed, and there is barely a ripple in the local's culture.

In the same vein as their approach to organizing, leaders of these locals also express a desire to reach out more effectively to a diverse constituency. Thus, one local leader promoted an African American woman from steward to business agent because "the guys respect [her]." Although her presence on staff is symbolically important and she serves as a point of contact for those members who are women and people of color, her assignment requires that she assist

When organizing is merely symbolic there exists the potential that a dangerous and divisive racial opportunism might hide behind the organizing façade.

in the office; meanwhile, the responsibility to be in the field is reserved for the white male business agents. In another local the five-member volunteer organizing committee includes two

African Americans and one open lesbian, but they report to a white male staff member who has designated a white male on the committee to coordinate its work. A large local in the Southwest has hired a Native American as organizer and assigned him to work on a large reservation. However, he complains of isolation: "I asked [the local president] to send organizers up to the reservation every month, but they don't come and I'm pretty much on my own."

The leaders, then, often understand the need to include women and people of color in the life of the union, but their gestures are marginal and translate into tokenism. As one African American woman suggests, "You could characterize it as a good old boy system.... [They] still prefer leadership that is male.... I always need to be superior plus. They tell me to shoot for the moon, and then when I do, they say I should have shot for the stars."

In locals that practice *organizing as symbolism* the result is usually a benign pragmatism. However, this approach can take a pernicious turn in certain circumstances. In one local in a right-to-work state, a white male was elected president as part of a racially integrated slate.

He appointed an all-white staff and in subsequent elections replaced all of his African American running mates with whites. One former officer complains, "Blacks don't get attention from stewards or help with grievances." Even more troubling, the local's organizing program (focused on building membership within the unit) is headed by a white woman who "has no respect for blacks." The local president is proud of organizing success that has helped

stabilize the union's budget, but he fails to mention how he has used the organizing to consolidate power and disenfranchise African American members.

In another local an African American president was thrown out of office when white union activists became dissatisfied with his conciliatory relationship with management. The former president and many of his African American supporters renounced their union membership, and subsequently crossed picket lines during a strike. When the strike failed, the African Americans re-joined and recaptured control of the local. A regional officer (and a leading figure in his union's change to organizing) described this local to us; he calls this situation a serious challenge; "Because of right-to-work, splits like this become dysfunctional; one whole group stays out because the other is in control."

These last two stories demonstrate that when organizing is merely symbolic there is the potential that a dangerous and divisive racial opportunism might hide behind the organizing facade. While we believe that such instances are rare, these locals offer a stark reminder of the potential for political manipulation of the organizing priority.

THE SANCTIFICATION OF ORGANIZING

PERHAPS THE MOST EXCITEMENT ABOUT organizing is generated by locals that are openly militant, building support among disenfranchised groups of workers by involving them in struggle in the form of public demonstrations and direct confrontation with bosses. Certainly, these locals are not content to accept the labor movement as it exists, and indeed see organizing as a way to change unions. A closer look at many of these militant organizing locals reveals a troubling disconnect between the life of the union as it exists for

long-term members and the external organizing, which takes place in a separate world as a by-product of *the sanctification of organizing*.

A common scenario is for the leaders of the militant locals to be white males with long-standing reputations as leftists, often with backgrounds as student activists in the 1970s, or as

The sanctification of organizing legitimizes the separation of organizers...from the day-to-day life of the union's established units. In almost every case...the situation is further complicated by racial and ethnic tensions.

community organizers. These leaders recognize that their political perspective is not necessarily shared with the members: "Myself and the staff have leftist politics. These ideas are embraced secondarily in the larger view by the leadership, but only by a minority of the membership." Or as another puts it, "This ought to be a revolutionary movement... This is more explicit with the staff, but the members have a sense that there's something different about us." The leftist views are closely tied to a preference for direct action: "Let it rip and we'll win more than we lose ...", "When in doubt, be militant...", "I enjoy action...crazy shit is energizing."

The militant tilt is evident in the organizing program and in the views of the organizers: "It ain't a union, it's a religion; this local is about a movement," and, "The revolution is around the corner." This fervor, unfortunately, does not inspire confidence and commitment

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among members in established units. As one representative (a former organizer herself) complains, "Organizers don't see members as having any use except as bodies for a rally or march, and the members feel it." This disconnect is also felt by staff as a field representative in another local reveals: "Organizers have an attitude because we're not into their actions."

The slight that members and representation staff feel is not imagined. The leaders of these militant locals have fashioned a *sanctification of organizing* by elevating organizing to a position that transcends all of the other work of the union. They are particularly impatient with day-to-day workplace concerns. One leader talks of the need to "take piddly grievance shit off of the organizers." Another echoes this: "Grievance work doesn't move anybody anywhere. We've got to push that work onto the members." These comments reflect initiatives in many organizing locals to shift resources away from representation work in order to fund organizing. When a proposal in one local to increase dues three dollars per month to fund organizing was overwhelmingly defeated by the members, the union's executive director was openly annoyed: "I don't have time for union politics and that silly shit."

The separation between progressive leaders and the members in the same locals endangers progress on the organizing front, and, simultaneously, raises questions about the entire effort to transform unions. In many militant locals we have visited, the members want to be participants in the organizing effort and the transformation process, but they do not glorify organizing. They want their own needs and opinions taken seriously. A representative who had been on staff for a little over a year, after several years as a rank-and-file activist and volunteer organizer, sums up the feeling of detachment: "They're asking members for more support for this campaign to improve the organization, but why end representation?... The organizers decide what the actions will

be—the members agree with them, but why do they reject the members' ideas...? The leaders and staff need to have more identification with the workers." Similarly, a steward complains about his local's president: "He makes the decisions and doesn't want our help. His attitude is, You guys don't know anything; I can do it myself."

Discussions with those on the other side of this divide confirm the suspected attitudes. An organizing director admits that members are not involved in discussions of strategy, but then describes how "information transfer" and "participation in actions" involve members at the appropriate level. A local union staff director protests "Members are not prepared to run the union; even with experience we're having a hell of a time running the union." And in the ultimate depersonalizing comment, another organizing director notes, "We experiment with workers.... Mistakes are okay if they're part of the fight to move forward."

With organizing sanctified and separated from the rest of the work of these locals, it is little wonder that representational effectiveness suffers. One local leader confesses, "As well as we do with organizing, we have not been able to get respect from employers for members on the job." This is echoed by the organizing director of a different local: "Organizing success is not having a lasting impact on the local; it's not coming together."

The militant organizing local, then, operates as a bifurcated world. Successful organizing campaigns built on militant direct action function in isolated cloisters. The *sanctification of organizing* legitimizes the separation of organizers and volunteer organizing teams from the day-to-day life of the union's established units. In almost every case with which we are familiar, the separation is further complicated by racial and ethnic tensions. The organizing brain trust in these locals is almost always totally white. The organizing staff is diverse and matches the demographics of the

targeted workers, but the decision makers are white. In one local, the situation is particularly tense because the organizing is concentrated in market segments where Latino workers predominate while the union's core membership is African American. One long-term officer observes, "The two groups distrust each other; the African Americans feel that immigrants are taking their jobs." A staff representative in the same local notes, "Blacks founded this local, and they're grumbling because there's no emphasis on them."

In another local, half of the members are African American, yet six of the seven staff members are white. An African American woman who serves as chief steward puts it mildly, "I have no problem with a lack of people of color on staff; there should be more though, because there are a lot of intelligent African Americans out there." The lone black on the representation staff observes that "members notice and it hurts in terms of belonging." An African American woman who spent some time with this local as an organizer looks back on her experience and reflects, "White male dominance alienates working people."

The observations are similar from a Latino activist in a local with a white president, a white staff director, and a white organizing director. "We have conversations about barriers every day; there are white people in positions of leadership while the rank and file don't have the opportunity to play a higher role." The white organizing director of a different local recognizes the inconsistency. "We have a cultural norm of white upper middle class on staff, and the structure is self-perpetuating."

When militant locals engage in the *sanctification of organizing*, a natural by-product is that attention to members is reduced, which comes across as lack of respect. Racial splits between established members and newly organized workers, or between members and leadership, exacerbate tensions. What is most troubling is that these divisions are not being

addressed. The leftist leaders surround themselves with simpatico staff and set themselves apart from the workers. Commitment to organizing overshadows other concerns, and splits are ignored or suppressed so as not to detract from the perceived higher objective.

ORGANIZING FOR INCLUSION

The most promising interpretation of the change to organizing takes place in locals that balance the organizing priority with the need to engage members in the life of the union. The basic philosophy of these locals is that the members need to be at the center of everything the union does. As one local president explains, "The member is the most important aspect of what we do. We are there for them, not them for us." Along with this attitude goes a faith that members will rise to the challenge. A president of a different local suggests, "Workers are way in front of union officers and bureaucrats.... We need to free people to do their stuff."

Although the locals we are describing have a strong commitment to organizing, they explicitly reject the style of other organizing locals. In reference to traditional insurance agent locals, an organizing director comments, "I've seen organizers with sweet tongues promise the world, but they leave and the servicers come in and don't do anything with the members or for the members." The militant organizing locals described in the previous section fare no better: "There are four problems with these organizing unions: the egos of the leaders, concern about numbers rather than building the union, lack of concern for members, and poor treatment of staff."

So exactly how are these locals different? First, although they focus on the members, they are very conscious about not creating dependency. "Servicing is not a concept that we allow." Similarly, every effort is made to concentrate on collective concerns rather than individual concerns. "We have no tolerance for

people worried only with their own problems.” These locals work very hard to balance external organizing with internal organizing. All of the work of the local, whether with current members or prospective members, is considered organizing work. “We need to keep organizing, regardless. It is the only way to pick up the pieces that divide us socially and politically.” And part of this organizing explicitly confronts issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These locals are committed to *organizing for inclusion*.

The African American organizing director of one of these locals explains why inclusion is central to how the union defines itself: “We now incorporate diversity awareness in staff training. We cover cultural and class differences, because black is more than a color.... We organize around economic factors; yet in trickle down, women and minorities are the losers, so diversity issues *are* economic.” This general philosophy is evident in the daily life of the union. “If we stand for justice, that means we have to behave justly towards members and staff.” Similarly, members need to learn to take charge. “We need a lot of emphasis on leadership development; we have to develop our membership.” And such efforts pay off. “It’s great to see people grow, especially women who stand up and take on the world.”

Although the spirit of these locals is tied to *organizing for inclusion*, this does not mean that they explicitly organize workers around issues of race or gender. Most of these locals handle diversity with finesse rather than confronting problems head-on. As a regional director explains, “We are reluctant in a mixed unit to charge racism, because employers know how to use race to divide workers.” Rather than emphasizing race or discrimination, these locals concentrate on building unity. “The more events members attend, the more race and gender constructs get broken down.... We have pictures of stereotypical ‘Bubbas’ holding hands with middle-aged African American women singing ‘We

Shall Overcome.’” Similarly, a white male organizer in one of these locals explains, “Members may have biases, but we have to earn their trust.... It’s through events and interaction that the attitudes change.”

The effect of this approach on members is indeed remarkable, and their enthusiasm for their unions is palpable. As one fiftyish white woman from a rural area in a border state explains, “I don’t have to play a role. I don’t have to lie about my mixed African American-white grandchildren.”

One local that fits this description has a white man as president, an African American woman as secretary-treasurer, and another African American woman as one of five vice-presidents, along with two white women and two white men. Also a gay man and a lesbian are elected members of the larger executive committee. The six key staff positions are held by four women (one an African American) and two men. A majority of the members are women, and about 10 percent are African American. One of the vice-presidents summarizes her union’s outlook this way: “Discrimination is all of our problem. We let bosses put up barriers and we fall for them—race, sex, homophobia. Any worker anywhere has a problem, it’s our problem. We fight for workers’ rights, that’s the whole philosophy of our union.”

The unions *organizing for inclusion* have aggressive external organizing programs that can be just as militant as those of the locals described in the preceding section. These campaigns are balanced by internal organizing and member education that focus on maintaining representational effectiveness in established units. This balance helps convince current members that their concerns will not be sacrificed on the altar of external organizing, and simultaneously, it demonstrates to potential members that attention will not disappear once the organizing campaign is over. This is especially important with diverse constituencies because of the temptation for one group to

blame the other for perceived problems. The member focus of these locals invites *all* of the rank and file to participate in the life of the union, and a diverse leadership and staff demonstrate that all are welcome to the table where decisions are reached.

The glue that holds these locals together is a deep commitment to building an inclusive movement of working people to create a just society. As one executive board member says, "This is the first time I've been around people who truly believe in the rights of all workers." Given the values associated with the culture of inclusion, the members support the local's organizing priority and are open to learning from their diverse group of union brothers and sisters. "Members understand organizing. We don't appeal to self-interest; we do it because we're fighting for justice."

Among the thirty organizing locals we have observed firsthand, only four embrace the key principles of *organizing for inclusion*. Although membership in these locals has increased in recent years, we cannot claim conclusive proof that unions with this grounding are certain to grow. We are more confident of qualitative success; these unions have found a path that makes organizing central while simultaneously winning member enthusiasm for building a movement of all working people.

Balancing internal and external organizing is very difficult, as we have argued in detail elsewhere.² And it would be premature to offer a formula that guarantees success. We suggest, however, that the following steps are associated with promising efforts to implement organizing for inclusion:

- A strong educational component that enhances members' union skills while building a culture of organizing and inclusion.³
- Leadership development that specifically (but not exclusively) targets women and workers of color.
- Support from the national union that includes advice, perspective, and (usually) resources.

NOTES ON BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT AS IT EXISTS does not share a unified ideology. It consists of an amalgam of conservative business unions and progressive social unions, occupational unions and industrial unions, unions of professional workers and unions of low-wage service workers, skilled-trades unions and general unions. With the absence of a unifying philosophy or approach, it is no wonder that the leaders of the revitalization effort have chosen to emphasize a quantitative interpretation of union transformation. If the Change to Organizing simply means growing bigger, then there is something in it for every union and every union leader.

By avoiding the question of qualitative transformation, though, we avoid questions about serious flaws inherent in our movement. In particular, we must confront the reality that the labor movement as it exists is rooted in white male culture. This is just as true of the militant unions involved in the *sanctification of organizing* as it is of the more traditional unions that interpret *organizing as symbolism* and limit themselves to a marginal effort to increase the reach of their locals.

One possible outcome of the narrow interpretation of the organizing imperative is that it will succeed and unions will be forced to change to accommodate the demands of their new members. To put it bluntly, the new workers will wish to see themselves reflected in the leadership and staff of the unions that have organized them. In this vein is the presumption that if we change the culture on the organizing front, this effort will seep backwards into unions. We believe that the experiences we have described demonstrate that this view underestimates institutional inertia and the power of union politics.

We believe a more likely scenario is that efforts to organize women and people of color will not succeed on a grand scale unless there