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### Committed to Organizing: An Interview with Richard Bensinger, Director, AFL-CIO Organizing Institute

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## Committed to Organizing: An Interview with Richard Bensinger, Director, AFL-CIO Organizing Institute

### Abstract

[Excerpt] The Institute's materials emphasize that organizing is difficult, frustrating work. But it's also the best job in America because it is personally rewarding to help workers organize and fight against injustice.

Richard Bensinger, a former ACTWU organizer, has been the OI's Executive Director since its inception in 1989. Labor Research Review's Jack Metzgar asked Bensinger to assess the OI's first two years in operation.

### Keywords

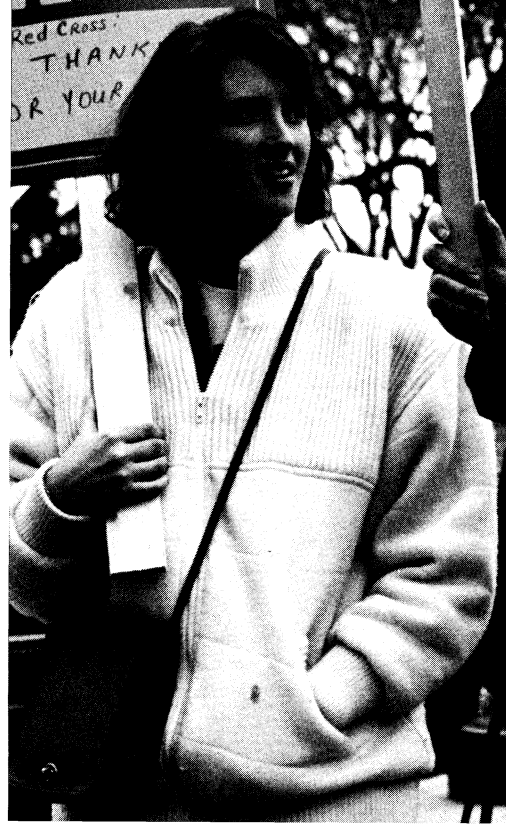
AFL-CIO Organizing Institute, Richard Bensinger

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# Committed to Organizing

## **An Interview with Richard Bensinger, Director, AFL-CIO Organizing Institute**

"Union Organizer. The *Best Job in America*." This is what the multi-colored brochure of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute proclaims in recruiting for its organizer training program.

The Institute's materials emphasize that organizing is difficult, frustrating work. But it's also the best job in America because it is personally rewarding to help workers organize and fight against injustice.

The OI offers its initial weekend training session in a different city each month and in Washington, D.C. every other month. About 20 people at a time attend these three-day classroom sessions. On the average half of these go on to a three- or four-week internship on an organizing campaign. Then the education really begins. Interns who stay on become apprentice organizers.

Defining organizing as "a craft that must be learned on-the-job," the OI places apprentice organizers in a campaign for up to three months and gives them substantial organizing responsibilities. Those who complete their apprenticeship become full-time organizers, either with their own union or with one of the OI's "participating unions"—AFSCME, ACTWU, CWA, HERE, the Teamsters, SEIU, the Carpenters, UFCW, and the Steelworkers.

Though the Institute's recruitment, training and placement (RTP) activities are the most publicly visible part of its work, its mission involves a range of other activities. It also aims to facilitate the

work of union organizers and help build a "culture of organizing."

The OI, for example, offers a range of continuing education services for experienced organizers. It acts as a clearinghouse for information about successful tactics and strategies. With the Meany Center, it provides a week-long training for experienced organizers "who want to expand their skills and learn what's working in organizing campaigns today." Experienced organizers are teachers in the OI's program to train new organizers, and once a year they get together to share their experiences, both in teaching and in organizing. There's even a program where a lead organizer from one union can work with and observe how another union implements a new tactic or strategy.

The Institute also provides consulting to unions who request it—anything from advice on a particular campaign to helping unions restructure their organizing programs. Institute staff concentrate on helping local and regional unions set up programs to use rank-and-file members as organizers.

Richard Bensinger, a former ACTWU organizer, has been the OI's Executive Director since its inception in 1989. *Labor Research Review's* Jack Metzgar asked Bensinger to assess the OI's first two years in operation.

**LRR:** Given that we've lived through more than one "me decade," have you been surprised at how many people are responding to your social justice-style appeals to become organizers?

**Bensinger:** When the labor movement gets across to people as a cause or as a struggle for social justice, we strike a chord with many people who perhaps did not have that image of the labor movement. There's a great deal of what I would call "idealism" or "desire to serve" among people. In addition, there's a growing anger on the part of workers who for this so-called "me decade" have had their desires and expectations completely suppressed. For working people in this country, the "me decade" was really the "them decade." Although Reaganism has dominated the media, when you scratch beneath the surface, what happened during that decade was increasing anger and frustration among working people.

**LRR:** Do you have a run-down on the composition of your graduates? Are they representative of the workforce unions are trying to organize?

**Bensinger:** We make every effort to recruit a representative group. We're committed to ensuring that a significant number of our organizers are women and people of color. And so far there's been a large number of people of color and women who have come forward, who want to do this work. Since the program was created, around 55% of our graduates are women and 33% are people of color.

**LRR:** Your recruiting materials are pretty frank about the demands of life as a union organizer, including the likelihood of having to travel and relocate. Do those life conditions make it difficult for people with family responsibilities and community roots to become organizers? If so, won't most of your graduates inevitably be young people?

**Bensinger:** The average age in our program during the first year was around 33 or 34. So that sort of speaks for itself. But there are people in our program who are 21 and there are people in our program who are in their 50s. People with family responsibilities do find it difficult to reconcile that with the life of an organizer, which is often seven days a week, traveling, weekends and night work. And it's just hard for people to reconcile. But some people find a way.

**LRR:** As you know, there's a spirited debate within the labor movement about using recent college graduates as organizers. Some people say there's evidence that college graduates are more successful organizers, while others insist that the best organizers come from the ranks. What's the Organizing Institute's take on this debate? Has it affected your recruitment and selection strategy?

**Bensinger:** I think it's a false dichotomy. Nothing can take the place of the experience of being a union activist or member. Most of our recruitment, in fact, comes from people with union backgrounds, people who grew up in union families or are union members. And many rank-and-file union members have been to college. It's also true that there are activists who play many roles in building a movement for social justice in this country besides the labor movement—civil rights, the women's movement, community organizing, the Peace Corps—and these are all places that we're actively recruiting as well.

**LRR:** Tell us about one of your apprentices. What do they actually get to do during their apprenticeship?

**Bensinger:** As much as they can handle. I was just in the South

where we have 20 people—graduates, interns and apprentices—involved in an ACTWU campaign.

To give an example, one of our apprentices comes from a union family. She's 23 years old and had been working in a women's health clinic in Minneapolis. She now has 500 workers she's responsible for, and she's got interns in our program working with her. It's just a pleasure and honor to be around somebody like her. She's every bit as good an organizer as I would ever hope to be. I saw her in the leaflet line, where she creates instant rapport walking up to people. She's a natural organizer, but she doesn't ride only on the strength of her personality. She's constantly critiquing herself, and assessing and learning and asking questions.

**LRR:** But this is a woman from Minneapolis. How good are people from Minneapolis at talking to Southerners? Doesn't that cultural difference, their articulation, their speech patterns—doesn't that make a difference?

**Bensinger:** There are positive things to being from the culture you are organizing in. On the other hand, organizers from different cultures can be very interesting to people. One of the worst things you can say about organizers is, "They're good, but they can only organize in their hometown."

If you cannot relate to people from other backgrounds, then it's a problem. It's good to have roots, but if somebody can only function well within the culture they are—whether it's the older culture, or the male culture, the white culture or the black culture, the Northern culture or the Southern culture—then they're not going to be able to step out of themselves and truly empathize with what other people are going through. People are looking for something special here. You're asking them to put their job on the line. Being able to relate to people, being able to move workers—that's fundamentally what all this is about. And it can help you, not hurt you, if you're different.

**LRR:** In your first full year in operation, 1990, you placed 44 people as full-time organizers, and you've set a goal of 70-a-year now that you're fully operational. Are unions hiring enough organizers every year for you to place that many people? Conversely, doesn't the labor movement need a lot more fully-trained organizers than that to really have a significant impact?

**Bensinger:** Part of our mission is to help create a culture of organizing within the labor movement where unions will divert as many resources as possible to hire organizers. There's no doubt



One of the exciting aspects of the Organizing Institute is that it brings together interns from different unions to work on campaigns. Pictured at a Carpenter's campaign are: *(back row)* Edgar Fields, Regional Organizing Director, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and an Organizing Institute Teaching Fellow; *(front row)* Vivian Thomas, USWA; Peter Rider, Campaign Specialist, Organizing Institute; Ietecia Daniels, SEIU; and Carl Hall, USWA.

in my mind that if we currently had a 150 or 200 organizers, good organizers, we could find places for them.

It's more than just making a statement that "organizing's a priority." The real issue is a question of channeling the resources to make it so.

I want to make it clear, though, that the issue of the number of organizers, when you're talking about staff organizers, is just one part of building an overall organizing program. The central part of any union's efforts to turn around or restructure is going to be the need to involve union members as volunteer activists who are not full-time staff people. So, increasing the number of staff is only a part of the process.

**LRR:** We don't have space to talk about all the other responsibilities the OI has undertaken, but could you tell us a bit about your program to help unions restructure their organizing efforts. Are there many unions who are open to that?

**Bensinger:** There are a lot of unions interested in getting input on their organizing programs, particularly at the regional level. There are unions interested at the national level too, but it's our opinion that fundamentally it's decisions and resource allocations



at the local and regional level that determine whether we can help nonunion workers achieve what's due them.

Given how completely inadequate the law is and the brutality of most of these employer campaigns, it's understandable why unions sometimes get discouraged about organizing. But still, a major commitment is necessary. When I worked in a sporting goods factory in Colorado, I got discouraged and I walked off the job in the middle of our organizing campaign. We had only about three weeks left to go to our vote. Hubie (the guy I worked with, the guy that got me involved in this) grabbed me by the collar, and I was yelling at him, "This is too hard, it's too unfair, it's too hard. We can't win." He kept screaming at me, "It's not too hard. It's just hard." And, those words, I use that all the time: It's hard, very hard, but we don't believe it's too hard.

As organizers we're shaped by the people who trained us. I was very fortunate to have a mentor, whose name is Richard Rothstein, and his view was: don't sit around and mope and complain. What makes organizers special is that they take pride in dealing with life as it's handed to them, not as we wish it to be. And that was something that he always imbued his staff with and all of us in the shop, that we shouldn't sit around waiting for the world to change or complaining about it. We should make a difference, and that's what an organizer is. It's somebody who meets life as its handed to them and takes on that challenge, rather than trying to make excuses for not being able to do something.

So, even though the law is unfair, it's our job to organize in this current climate. At some point, we in the labor movement have to contend with the fact that unions are virtually outlawed in this country and someday there's going to have to be a change, a complete overhaul of labor law in this country. But that change—change and legislation in general—follows the creation of a movement. It's not the other way around. The movement is not created by the legislation.

**LRR: If a union wants to restructure, what kind of thing does the Institute do to help it?**

**Bensinger:** We meet with the regional and elected leaders and the heads of those unions at the national level, and we do a complete critique of the current organizing program. Then we simply make suggestions on restructuring, suggestions about involving members, staffing, resources, targeting and generally about creating a culture of organizing in the union.

Our meetings with regional leaders have three components. One is discussing whether or not there's a will to revamp a program.

If there is, then it goes into evaluating what's working, what's not working and then looking at how to make changes. Part of making changes is to put the regional leaders or executive boards of unions who are trying to retool into a relationship with people who are successfully building an organizing program. We look to use not necessarily a given organizer but a region as a mentor. If a region of one union, for example, is doing it well, why is that? Let's take a look at it, and couldn't they share that with another union's region that is looking to retool?

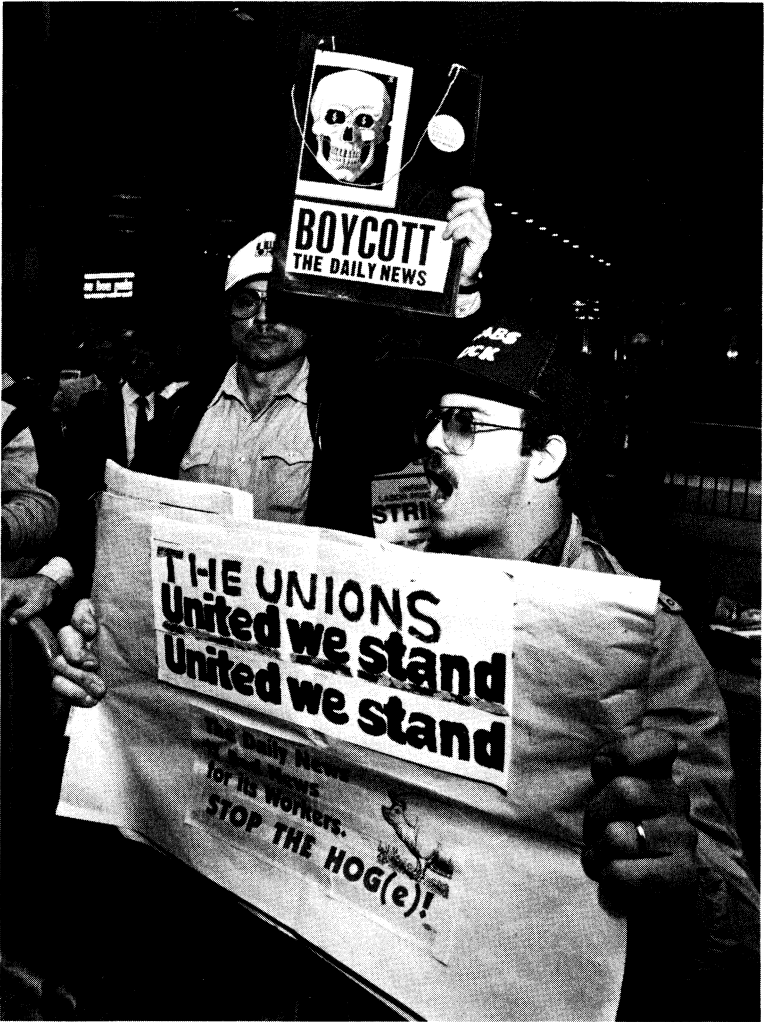
Also part of what we do involves how to create the political will within a region around making the decision to organize. Members of unions have to be willing to spend a good portion of their dues money on not just having this fight within the four walls of their own workplace, but taking this fight into the community by assisting other workers. In many cases, that's going to have a positive effect on their own ability to bargain. Members look beyond their narrow self-interest and rediscover what the movement's about. Organized workers find it very meaningful to share their knowledge of unionism with nonunion workers.

**LRR:** In helping unions restructure their organizing programs, it seems like you always encourage them to develop programs to use rank-and-file members as organizers. Why is that? How important an element do you see this being in turning labor organizing around in this country?

**Bensinger:** There's 80 million unorganized workers out there. It's going to take more than the staff of unions to organize them. We have done internships this past year at campaigns covering thousands of workers with the UFCW, HERE, SEIU, AFSCME and USWA. In each instance, large rank-and-file committees were indispensable to the union's ability to tackle large units.

At a large ACTWU campaign in the South there are now 30 or 40 rank-and-file activists out there. They're practicing what a professor from Duke told our interns is the only real politics in this country today—union organizing. It is pretty exciting to see 30 or 40 union members out there day in, day out, affecting the entire political climate of a several county area. We have that many people talking one-on-one to workers. That has to have an effect. Hopefully, in this case it will help win the representation election, but this grassroots organizing is part of the success of any movement, regardless of whether the immediate objective is achieved.

**LRR:** In a variety of ways, the Institute provides opportunities for organizers from different unions to share insights



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and experiences. How important is this cross-union fertilization among organizers?

**Bensinger:** The one good thing that Reagan did for the labor movement was to show us that we all have to work together, and that includes sharing our knowledge and experience. Where there are regions or locals or individual organizers who are developing new strategies or techniques, we need to have a way to share those experiences. Hopefully, our Institute can play a role in that clearhouse function.

Our Institute itself is in many ways owned by the organizers who want to participate in it. We have calls from them all the time, saying "I'm on a campaign" and asking questions. We're constantly on conference calls, plugging people in who graduate from our program or people we've met at VOCs (training programs for volunteer organizers). We say, "I'm not sure I know the answer, but let me get so-and-so." We get two of the three of them and set up a call. We're constantly trying to get people into a relationship with each other. And we try to spotlight the people who are doing it well, not necessarily by putting their names in lights. One way to spotlight people is by calling on them to help new organizers.

Very often we labor organizers don't think of ourselves as mentors. I remember when somebody said that to me after about ten years in my career. I didn't know what he was talking about. I lost my temper once about something—somebody did something wrong on a campaign—and this guy lectured me and said, "You should think of yourself as a mentor. You shouldn't be just getting angry." And I said, "I'm no mentor. My job is to win this election." But he made me think about that whole issue of the role of an organizer to train other people.

Down on a campaign last week, we're sitting there at one o'clock in the morning and there's a couple senior ACTWU organizers who probably between them have 30 or 40 years' experience. And here's a person from the Chemical Workers, another from the Service Employees, a Steelworker, one recent college graduate, and somebody else from electoral organizing. They're all sitting around talking, partly about organizing tactics and partly about where the labor movement's going. What struck me about these two organizers, both of whom had come out of the shops for ACTWU, was how much this man and woman have to offer our trainees, who were there listening to them. They just kept answering questions, some on this campaign, others on campaigns in general. I sat there just thinking to myself: we don't write or talk about this. . . . But that 1 a.m. conversation is sort of what our program's about—putting these people in a relationship with each other. It's not only informative. It's inspirational. ■

**RESOURCE**

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