



Organizing Clericals: Problems & Prospects

■ *Roberta Lynch*

One of the central goals of contemporary feminism has been the full integration of women into the workforce. While broader economic and social forces were decisive in propelling women into full-time employment, the women's movement took as its particular task shaping the nature of that participation. The movement sought to achieve economic equality for women workers through two primary strategies: 1) gaining entry to traditionally male-dominated jobs and training, and 2) upgrading the pay and status of traditionally female-dominated jobs. The clerical sector—with its overwhelming concentration of women workers, its rock-bottom pay scales, and its gender-based work culture—was a logical focus of that second strategic course.

Historically, the rate of unionization among clericals has been low. Some feminists blamed this on the indifference of male-dominated unions to the particular problems of women in the workforce. Others believed that there were unique circumstances which made clerical workers resistant to traditional trade union

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approaches. Out of such analyses, a small but determined network of activists shaped an alternative conception of organization for office workers, beginning in the early 1970s.

This new formation, known as a "working women's organization," sought to dramatize the lack of respect and elementary job rights that characterized clerical work. Like the early women's movement, its central mission was consciousness-raising—convincing office workers they deserved such rights and respect. Its chief weapon was the media, which was used with great skill and frequency. It backed up such public relations activity with anti-discrimination laws to win concrete victories that demonstrated the possibility of change.

By the end of the 1970s, many of the activists in the working women's movement agreed that if office workers were to permanently alter their status, they would need organizations based in workplaces that could contend directly with employers. Although some of these feminists had reservations about both the capabilities and the sensitivities of organized labor, they came to see trade unions as the most potentially viable means of changing the dynamics of power in America's offices.

They hoped that the tactics and philosophy they were pioneering could provide the impetus and the model for a new wave of labor organizing among clericals. In particular, they envisioned a massive assault on the banking and insurance industries with their huge armies of underpaid and unrepresented office workers.

It was an exciting vision. But translating it into reality has proven a far more complex challenge than it seemed in those early, heady days. There have been anti-discrimination law suits filed and back-pay judgments won. There have been demonstrations abounding and sexist practices abolished. There have been innumerable magazine and newspaper articles—and even a major motion picture—about the frustrations of clerical work. There has not, however, been any significant breakthrough in the unionization of the private sector clerical workforce. Moreover, the working women's groups themselves never materialized into genuinely popular formations; and were continually plagued by shifting membership and financial difficulties.

Why has it proven so difficult to shift from consciousness-raising to the institutionalization of new power relations for clerical workers? Put another way, why haven't the working women's groups provided a natural bridge to unionization?

The answer to this question doesn't lie in tactical errors. Rather, it has to do with fundamental assumptions. The feminist interests in organizing office workers was not simply based on some

ideological construct. It derived from a sophisticated analysis of changing historical circumstances: the widespread participation of women in the workforce; the growth of female-headed households; the expectation of equity generated by the women's movement, and the routinization of office work. In other words, there was an objective basis for believing that the time was ripe for such organizing.

All of these factors remain valid more than a decade later. But they have to be viewed in the context of further societal changes and actual organizing experiences. There are four key variables that have shaped clerical organizing in this period: 1) the general economic and political climate; 2) the strength of employers; 3) the approach of the labor movement; 4) the character of the clerical workforce.

Economic and Political Climate

The office worker movement expected to come of age in the 1980s. It did not anticipate that the 1980s would be the age of Ronald Reagan. The current administration's policies have created a tight web of negative forces: an aggressive assault on the prerogatives of the labor movement; a drastic weakening of equal opportunity enforcement; the pursuit of economic programs that have fostered unemployment and reduced public support systems; and the promotion of an ethos of individualism that elevates personal success over all forms of collective action.

In this context, the value and function of labor unions is increasingly called into question. They are portrayed as irrelevant or obsolete. Plant closings and concessionary contracts contribute to a picture of a movement with its back against the wall. In the face of widespread job loss in basic industry, the constant threat of layoffs in trucking and communications and tight labor markets almost everywhere, the labor movement finds it difficult to make significant gains.

As a result, *all* union organizing faces a steep uphill climb. But this anti-union climate has a particularly detrimental impact on the potential for organizing clericals, for it reinforces prejudices that have always lodged in their ranks. They have been particularly susceptible to media myths that unions can no longer produce. For instance, more and more unions are being forced into lengthy or losing strikes, sometimes marked by extreme rhetoric or illegal activities, exactly the aspects of unionism that have always seemed most alien to office workers.

Employer Offensive

Thus, this is an era that provides sustenance to employers in their conflict with labor. Management is on the offensive, forcing lower wages, speed-up and shrunken benefits packages. Employers have become more aggressively anti-union than at any time in the past 25 years.

They have been especially hostile to the idea of unionization among clerical workers. The widespread depression of wages in the clerical sector is a fundamental factor in business profit margins—and in this highly competitive age, management does not want to risk losing such an edge.

This hostility has a dual character. Employers have not hesitated to fire, demote or transfer those deemed to be "troublemakers." That's the stick. The carrot is a wide array of pre-emptive measures—sophisticated schemes for "job enrichment," "employee participation," and the like. A booming industry of management consultants has emerged to shape such strategies. When these dual tactics have been introduced during union campaigns, they have greatly hampered the organizing effort.

Labor Strategy

It's important to keep in mind that organized labor has probably done more than any other institution in our society to improve the status of women workers. Not only did women benefit from the legal and political gains the labor movement has won, but those women who are covered by union contracts receive far better wages and benefits than their non-union counterparts. In addition, there have always been unions that focused on organizing industries with high female participation.

But there was also widespread sexism in the ranks of the labor movement. Women have traditionally been underrepresented in unions, and drastically underrepresented in staff and leadership positions. Feminists have argued that this absence has prevented organized labor from appealing to women workers and from crafting campaigns that address women's unique problems.

Over the past decade, however, a shift has occurred—at least partly in response to such criticism. Some unions are recognizing the importance of reaching out to include women workers—and are beginning to change their style and staff accordingly. The major changes in this regard have been in public sector unions, where the organizing potential is greater and internal flexibility more common.



Sammy Carr

Unfortunately, there has not been any dramatic change in orientation toward the private sector, perhaps because the most crucial issue goes beyond women's issues to more fundamental questions: To what extent is the labor movement committing its resources to organizing drives? And how skillfully is it carrying out its efforts?

So far, the answer is not encouraging. Some unions remain complacent, content to maintain current membership levels or to quietly suffer a slow leakage. Others are at a loss; they want to expand, but do not know how to translate their specific image and style to different constituencies.

Public sector unions have been the most notable exception to this sluggishness, and there have been some hopeful breakthroughs by unions in the private sector. But on the whole, the resources presently committed to organizing the clerical workforce are no match for the task.

Character of the Workforce

The wholesale characterization of women workers as more conservative, more hostile to unions, has been widely challenged over the past two decades both by the growing numbers of female teachers, librarians, social workers, autoworkers, electricians, bus drivers who have become part of labor's ranks and by the willingness—indeed eagerness—of women to take on labor leadership roles when the doors were opened to them.

At the same time, recent history has also demonstrated that there are unique features of the clerical workforce that seem to make

it particularly resistant to unionization. Although such broad generalizations are always risky, there are several "collective characteristics" that should be noted.

For a variety of reasons, the clerical workforce has a high proportion of women who are more traditionally "feminine" in their orientation. Often, they don't see their job as a career, but as a way-station before marriage or between babies. They tend to place a high value on their personal skills and less on job-related skills. As a result they have little identity with their job.

In general, clerical work is designed in a manner that reinforces these female traits, especially passivity. The salaries are among the lowest in the entire labor market; the pace and nature of the work is tightly structured leaving little room for creativity or initiative; the workday can be highly regimented; and supervision is often intensive. Clerical workers are rewarded for their agreeableness, their willingness to follow orders, their attention to detail.

Moreover, precisely because clerical work is so drastically undervalued, women office workers sometimes identify with management in order to develop a greater sense of their own importance—just the way housewives tended to derive their identities from their husband's work because they did not value their own.

"Appropriate" female behavior is also emphasized through appeals to "niceness" and a pressure to conform. Lower-level supervisors will often seek to exercise control by developing friendly relations with employees. For instance, in some offices, it is the supervisors who organize birthday parties, showers, etc. Where charm doesn't work, supervisors will rely on scorn or playing workers off against one another. Women are thus hesitant to go against the supervisor either because they don't want to personally offend her or because they don't want to risk being ostracized.

In our society, the ways in which individuals experience their "personhood" are very much linked to their gender. In any work situation, low wages are a powerful impetus for organizing. But seldom are they sufficient. Normally, it is conditions that threaten identity that compel people to action. It is an assault on one's basic sense of self that leads people to get angry, to take risks, to extend their reach.

Not long ago, I was interviewing unemployed male steelworkers about their attitude toward their union. Almost uniformly, what they stressed about the union was that "it let you be a man." What they seemed to mean by this was that the union had given them

a means to stand up to management, to resist being pushed around. Their manhood was seen as synonymous with pride, with independence, with defiance.

Women—especially women who are more traditional in their orientation—respond differently. Pride and independence are not as important to their identity, their sense of self, their womanhood. What matters much more are human connections, relational issues, fairness. Women in this society are used to being patronized, even to humiliation. That doesn't mean they don't find such attitudes hurtful or enraging. But it does mean that they will be less likely to view such conditions on the job as a fundamental assault that mandates a response. Although more and more "independent" women—especially minorities—are entering the clerical ranks and adding a new dimension of assertiveness, the tone is still set by the traditional women.

Which Way From Here?

All of this adds up to a formidable convergence of obstacles. Given such circumstances, what is remarkable is not that there has been only limited success in organizing the clerical workforce, but that there has been a continuing commitment to that goal.

In part this is due to the growing awareness within the labor movement that its future lies in reaching out to new constituencies. It is also due to the increased influence that women have within organized labor. But, most importantly, it is due to the fact that there continue to be clerical workers who defy the odds and seek union representation. Though such campaigns are rare, and victories are even more rare, they are extremely vital for the inspiration and the experience they provide.

We are in many respects in the formative—and experimental—stage of this effort. At this point, what is needed is much more careful analysis of why specific campaigns succeed or fail, what the lessons are that can lay the basis for further activity.

One of the most critical issues that has emerged is the previous level of internal organization—ranging from formal employee associations to the kind of informal linkages provided by social clubs, sports leagues, etc. One reason for the greater receptivity of public sector clericals to unions is that they have very often been part of an employee association and covered by civil service procedures. Such experiences have given them some degree of internal coherence, a sense that they have rights as employees, and less fear of arbitrary firings. It is very likely that the potential for successful organizing drives among private sector clericals will

AFSCME's Success with Public Sector Clericals

In December 1985 the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was certified as the bargaining agent for more than 11,000 State of Ohio clerical employees. This victory followed a string of similar successes: 1981, Florida, 23,000, and Connecticut, 7,500; 1983, California university clericals, 19,500; 1984, Iowa, 6,000.

Other unions have been able to organize only a small fraction of the 67,000 clerical workers that AFSCME has, although the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has gained recognition for a large number through the affiliation of state associations.

As the labor movement goes through this period of self-examination as a follow-up to the AFL-CIO's *Future of Work* report, it might be instructive to reflect on the reasons for AFSCME's success in the 70s and 80s.

Under the direction of the late Jerry Wurf, AFSCME established a centralized organizing structure which enabled the union to marshal its resources anywhere that conditions were ripe for organizing. Many other unions were handicapped by locals which insisted on keeping all the resources at home, leaving their national unions without the resources to organize.

Secondly, AFSCME, perhaps more than any other union, was willing to reach beyond its ranks when necessary to find staff who could relate to a clerical constituency.

Thirdly, AFSCME, well before the AFL-CIO's self-examination began, was using more sophisticated techniques such as polling and direct mail, and was hiring the best in the business to do it.

Fourth, in most instances AFSCME has been the most successful union in winning victories for the clerical workers it already represents and this is an important selling point. Starting with AFSCME's pay equity win in San Jose in 1981, the union has had a string of pay equity settlements which have helped its organizing efforts. Our organizers have concrete victories they can point to and live bodies they can produce for employees interested in organizing.

Now that almost all the large state government clerical units in the North have been organized, the focus must shift to the South, where unions will face not only the problems inherent in organizing clericals but the problems of organizing in the South. It will be no easy task.

be greatly increased if there is some form of internal organization in place, even if it is limited in strength or scope.

The reality, however, is that in most offices, no such structures exist. Thus, the broader question is whether there needs to be some form of interim association established among clerical workers prior to union organizing. Many other white-collar workers began their journey to collective action through such "associations"—with their attendant connotations of professionalism and their less antagonistic posture toward management.

These associations crossed workplaces and were viewed as vital professional credentials, as much as advocates for employee rights. To some extent the working women's groups sought to become such a membership association, raising the status of the clerical profession. But given their inability to attract large numbers of members or to establish themselves as broadly representative of office workers, there's little reason to believe that such an association is feasible. Moreover where would the resources or initiative for such a formation come from?

It is more reasonable to imagine that associations could be formed in specific workplaces, as suggested in the AFL-CIO's *The Changing Situation of Workers And Their Unions*. However, if unions were initiating such formations, it seems likely that management would immediately perceive the threat and would burden them with all the same negative baggage that it heaps on a union's organizing committee. While an association might be easier to get underway than an organizing committee, it probably would have less staying power. While it would certainly be worthwhile to further develop and test out this approach, it should not be seen as a substitute for direct initiatives by unions to organize clericals.

But if unions are going to make any significant breakthroughs in clerical organizing, recent experiences suggest that major internal changes are needed.

The labor movement will have to intensify its efforts to improve its image. To some extent this is a matter of more sophisticated and skillful use of public relations. But it must go beyond such cosmetics to more basic renewal to weed out corruption; to shape its issues so that their relevance to the public good is more apparent; to develop leaders, staff and spokespeople with whom new constituencies can identify.

It's probably worth stressing here that while it is crucial to have more minority and female leadership in the labor movement, that by itself will solve little. The need is broader: for leadership and

issues that are more representative of and in touch with the contemporary workforce—and for dynamic leadership that does not fear change.

A second, and related, issue is the need to utilize technologically advanced techniques to improve organization and communication. Computer-generated “personalized” mailings have proven far more effective in organizing drives than random leafletting. Polling can be a valuable aid in issues development for a campaign. And professionally-designed and written organizing material can improve outreach efforts.

The ability of unions to effectively use such modern tools may be of particular relevance to office workers who witness firsthand the vast technological forces that management has at its disposal. Unions need to be able to operate on that turf in order to seem ultimately capable of taking on management’s power.

Finally, and most importantly by far, is the need for greater attention to the art of organizing. The science of organizing is the basic techniques in which the labor movement is well-schooled. But the art of organizing is the ability to shape a drive to a particular constituency and set of circumstances. In the case of clerical workers, there are several unique considerations.

- Although there are certain general characteristics and conditions of office workers, there is also immense variety. And, for the purposes of organizing, the variety may be more important. For instance, university clericals have very different work situations than clericals in an insurance company—and the former have demonstrated much greater interest in unions. Black clerical workers often do not have the same kind of anti-union bias or identification with management that many whites do—and so can provide a stronger base of support. Clerical workers in a town or neighborhood with a strong union tradition often dress, act and respond differently than those who work for a downtown employer.
- In this same vein, it is also essential to realize that each work situation generates its own work issues. Recently, we’ve seen a new kind of orthodoxy that says that to organize women you have to focus on “women’s issues,” such as childcare, VDIs or pay equity. In fact, though these are very vital issues, the experience of organizers has been that they usually lack either the breadth or depth of support that is needed to spark or sustain a unionization campaign.
- Probably the most decisive factor in successful campaigns has been the ability to develop strong internal networks. A personal dimension is needed. Three factors are critical to this process.

- 1) Employees need to be able to get to know and trust the organizers, to view them as concerned individuals rather than just labor representatives.
 - 2) There need to be effective means of internal communication, ways that organizers and committee members can speak regularly and directly with employees, to learn what their concerns are, to counter management propaganda, and to involve them in the development of the campaign.
 - 3) Leadership development is absolutely crucial. Union supporters who can relate well to their co-workers need to be given intensive training and ongoing support.
- It is also essential to note that good internal organizing must often be supplemented by effective outreach that can build public support for employees and focus public opposition on employer resistance or unfair tactics.

Conclusion

Given the difficult conditions that face organizing attempts and the fact that campaigns will often have to be undertaken as long-term efforts that will not produce immediate results, one of the dilemmas is whether any individual union has the resources to spearhead a major organizing effort in the private sector—not just in a few small companies, but against key employers. Some activists believe that this challenge would require an amalgamation of unions—however loose-knit—something akin to the spirit, if not the exact form, of the CIO when it took on basic industry.

It would be a mistake to minimize or simplify the terribly difficult conundrum the labor movement faces. It needs desperately to develop a new momentum, to draw new members, to reach out to new constituencies. Clerical workers represent the potential for that essential renewal. So there is a strong self-interest—as well as a principled interest—in committing the resources necessary to mount a major organizing effort.

At the same time, the odds against significant success are great. And the resources of many of the major unions are severely strained. It involves a tremendous risk for any individual union—or even a coalition of unions—to take on a challenge like this in an era like this one.

How or when clerical workers can be unionized is obviously still very much an open question. But it is a question with immense weight for the economic equality of women in our society, for the overall standard of living of working people, and for the future potential of the American labor movement. ■