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Home-Made Organizing

**CWA's strategy in the South
relies on the folks who live there**

■ Lisa Oppenheim

The CWA's got some down-home organizing cooking down South. Unlike other organizing in the South where the workforce is either predominantly black or white, CWA's targeted workforce in the public sector is composed of black and white workers. The CWA is not new in the South: there are 160,000 CWA members in the region—nearly one quarter of the union's entire membership—80% of whom are based in the private sector.

How do you organize a local composed of black and white workers in the South? *LRR* Editor Lisa Oppenheim turned to Marilyn Haith, organizer for CWA's District 3 which is composed of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Florida, and Louisiana.

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LRR: How long have you been with CWA?

Haith: I started off in North Carolina, working as a long distance operator for Southern Bell 24 years ago. I didn't become active until I moved to Washington, D.C. where I became shop chairman and then worked as a volunteer organizer for MCI, cable companies, and other campaigns. I went on staff as an organizer in New Jersey seven years ago and returned home to North Carolina in January 1992 to assist the Raleigh city workers in becoming united.

LRR: What's your basic strategy for organizing in Southern communities?

Haith: I go into every campaign in the South with the premise that workers have a right to join a union and, just as in New Jersey, they shouldn't have anything to be afraid of. What hurts us here is that people in North Carolina don't know about labor; only 3% of the workforce is organized in the state. So there's a lot of fear, but it shouldn't stand in the way of doing the right thing.

What I try to do is hit it straight on. We have a couple of secret meetings then either we're going to go with it or we're not. Then we're open and it's a public campaign.

LRR: I understand there was already a workers committee in Raleigh when you came. Why did CWA come in?

Haith: There was a loose group of Raleigh city workers organized by the Black Workers for Justice. They had tried to organize for two years but without having the resources or proper training to organize they started to have problems. BWFJ had done tremendous work: they put out a newsletter periodically to keep the workers informed; they had somewhat of a committee, but they still had a long way to go. We (CWA) were called in to help the workers organize a union.

LRR: How did you build a union from this core group?

Haith: We had to broaden the committee. One principle in CWA is unless we have a core group that's representative of the group we're trying to seek, then we're going to have a hard time successfully organizing. So I had to go in and build a committee that would be representative. The core group of six people were all male, all African Americans, coming from the sanitation and recreation departments: no one was represented from the other departments such as streets, equipment depot, municipal building. . . no clerical forces. . . none of them.

I looked at the situation and said frankly that we cannot have an all African American union here—nor could we have an all Caucasian. We had to have a mix of races; we also had to have females here. The group had a negative image because it seemed to be dealing with "black issues." So we had a group of blacks who did not want to be part of the committee because of that reason and of course we had whites who did not want to be part of it because they felt this was an organization only for African Americans. We had black women workers who saw the organiza-

LRR FOCUS: "When You Stop Organizing, You Really Lose the Union"

An Interview with Larry Cohen, Organizing Director of the CWA.



LRR: My interview with Marilyn Haith, CWA organizer for District 3, focuses on the work going on in North Carolina to build a union composed of both black and white members. I'd like our discussion to focus on the broader context of organizing in the South. What's your approach to organizing there?

Cohen: No matter where we're organizing, our strategy is based on the same two things: knowing the industry and knowing the community. Every community is different and the organizing we do best is when it's rooted in the community. All our organizers are either from the area or now live in the area where they're organizing—there's nobody in a hotel. It's *community-based workplace organizing*.

We say to our people that the union is three things: it's collective bargaining and representation; it's political and community action (which includes everything from electoral work to Jobs with Justice coalition-building); and it's organizing the unorganized. A triangle approach.

The typical CWA local in the South has to build the local by actively organizing members or else they'll drop out. This fits in with one of the key principles to rebuilding the Union: every member counts. There's tremendous strength in a system where the member has to come first or they don't join, they don't pay dues.

LRR: Labor Research Review covered your mobilization approach in "LRR 17: An Organizing Model of Unionism." It sounds like you follow the basic premise of that issue: "organizing never stops."

Cohen: You have to do that in the South. We have extremely active locals with terrific leadership and we base the organizing program on that. So we can go to those locals and say, "You're going to have more power in your communities and therefore in dealing with your existing employer if you're growing."

Now this again is a similar strategy to what we would employ anywhere, but it's particularly obvious in the South where people feel "Hey, we need more people on our side. We feel like we're the only union people in town."

With our approach, the outsider is *management*—the insider is the union. The union activist has lived in the community for her or his life. Corporate America's typical response to union organizing is to claim, "The union is a third party." CWA organizers can say "NO—management is the third party. We're the community. We're your neighbors. We're your co-workers. We're your sisters and brothers and we have to stand together."

LRR: You have over 20 full-time organizers in the South. Why the push now? Did you develop enough people to take on these roles or are you getting the institutional support?

Cohen: There is increasing support for organizing from the District level but more importantly, the local leadership increasingly is supporting it. People who are learning organizing skills through our mobilization approach to bargaining and political action then become eager to use their skills elsewhere. If you're building solidarity inside your workplace, and talking one on one to people about key issues, you're learning the same skills which allow you to talk to people in your family or neighborhood who don't have a union where they work.

LRR: Except for Florida, none of the states in the South recognize collective bargaining for public sector workers, so how do you become an effective force there?

Cohen: Our community-based workplace organizing in its *essence* depends on political activism as well as more traditional organizing strategies. By building political power in those communities will lead to the different stages of union recognition: first, recognition of the right to belong to a union voluntarily and eventually, collective bargaining. Many unionists who are active in the public sector argue that political clout—mobilizing people in communities around key issues—is vital even in states like New Jersey where public sector bargaining rights exist. When you stop mobilizing, you really lose the union.

LRR: Your community-based strategy must put more emphasis on community alliances than traditional organizing. The South has a longer history of associations and grass-roots organizations, and other social justice networks than it has in labor unions, so what's your approach?



Cohen: First, we look for alliances with other organized workers. Secondly, we look to organize coalitions around economic justice issues. We say to people, "The union is a center in the community for economic justice—it's not an x-rated movie where non-members have to keep out."

Our strategy compels us to establish coalitions to address economic justice issues—either Jobs with Justice, or something like it. (See *LRR 18: Let's Get Moving*.) In Atlanta, for example, we are part of a very strong JwJ coalition led by Stewart Acuff of the Central Labor Council which includes religious folks, community and civil rights organizations, and both public and private sector unions. It's a step beyond asking people to support our contract fights to saying, "Let's decide as a group what issues are we going to mobilize on in this community."

In that sense, our alliance with AFSCME in both North Carolina and Texas is important. We're both going out of our way for each other. In North Carolina, our lead organizer works very closely with her counterpart in AFSCME. They share contacts and support each other's campaigns. This strategic alliance is particularly important in the South where it's tough enough to organize without having competition. We don't believe that any one union is really going to make that much of a difference but if we can help create an "organizing spirit" in North Carolina then we're all going to do better.

tion as only for African American men. We also had problems changing the mindset of the people who had been organizing for a long time because they said we were trying to get the white folks in here to take over the union. We had to get them to see that it wasn't the case: we were getting people who represented the entire workforce.

LRR: So the core group had to understand the need to expand and represent all workers, and all the other workers had to see that the union represented them too. What did you do to move folks in this direction?

Haith: We sent letters to people who had sporadically attended meetings over the past two years saying that CWA was now here to assist you in your organizing effort; we organized one on one; did home visits; sat down with people and found out who the leaders in each department were. When we handbilled, we pulled in our Southern Bell workers who are white and African American to help us in the campaign.

Here I am, an African American woman leading the campaign for the International; I work with a white female who's on the staff of Southern Bell local, Doris Weaver. Through our actions, we showed people that the union is just not a black thing or a male thing—we showed what CWA looks like.

We also changed from dealing with issues which only affected black workers or any particular ethnic group and made them *workers'* issues. For instance, African Americans saw discrimination in job posting and promotion as a real serious problem—they were unable to move into other jobs. But the key to organizing around the race thing was to show everyone that the problem doesn't hurt only African Americans, but it hurts Caucasians as well. It's been an uphill battle to prove the CWA's for all workers, but we've dealt with it successfully. So we don't want to hear anything about this being an African American union because all our issues concerns everyone here at the union—that's the way we approach it.

LRR: Still, there must have been some skepticism. . . .

Haith: We've been working on it for the past year—it's taken us all this time to overcome that. When we first chose the name for our local, the Raleigh Alliance of City Employees (RACE), we didn't think anything about it. But the city management picked right up on it and claimed we were a racist organization. Our union friends in the police department advised us to change our name, but we

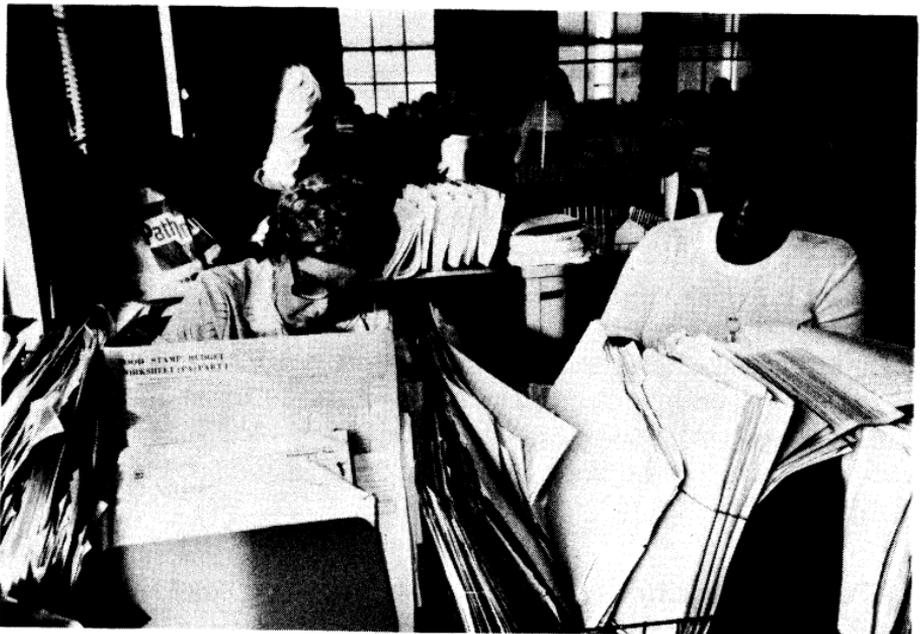
thought about it and decided not to do so. Nothing was meant by it; it didn't mean we're racist. If we were to change our name under those circumstances, we would be admitting that management was right.

We tried to address it in our newsletter. First we wrote it's a "RACE for JUSTICE" but we also tackled it head on. We kept hearing for so long that it was a "black thing" we wrote an article in the newsletter that said "This is not a 'black thing'—this is a union for all workers." The way we approach grievances, our hand-billing with both black and white workers also served as examples.

LRR: How's it going now?

Haith: Well, let me tell you we have put together. We have a steering committee of 24 people who act as the executive board. And we are no longer called the Raleigh Alliance of City Employees. It's been changed to CWA Local 3656 of the North Carolina Public Workers because we've successfully organized other workers in Wake County (where Raleigh is located) and we've got campaigns going on in other parts of the state.

LRR: That's pretty good: you successfully broadened the scope of the organizing so you could legitimately change the name of the organization without succumbing to management claims. Now that the local is going, are you running into tensions based on race?



Haith: We've been fortunate so far and haven't had to do that. Since we worked that through I think we're a very cohesive bunch. . . now things do change. When we get ready to have union elections we'll probably face it again.

LRR: You mentioned that the Black Workers for Justice had been organizing the city employees before they called in the CWA. We're very interested in knowing what's your relationship with them now because we think it's crucial that unions work with independent minority and immigrant-based organizations.

Haith: We have an on-going dialogue with BWFJ. We need to figure out which ways we can work together, understanding that we may not always be able to do so.

Often BWFJ is there before unions are there. If you look at the objectives of BWFJ, they're organizing the South. Labor has this thing about "They're out here leading our agenda and they're not a labor organization. . . ." But labor is only one part of BWFJ's agenda—labor has to understand that.

On the other hand, BWFJ needs to understand the problems we face as labor organizers. Many folks in BWFJ don't have labor organizing experience so they don't understand our constraints. When we go into a campaign and know its going to be tough, we need people who are willing to assist—not take control. The bottom line is they're not going away and we clearly aren't going away and so we need to find ways to work together.

LRR: To get back to the broader issue of organizing in the South, on what basis do you organize when the union won't be recognized?

Haith: The law does not say they can't recognize us, it says no public municipality can enter into a collective bargaining agreement with a labor organization. Our strategy is to use our political clout and our numbers within the public sector to win on issues.

Right now we hand collect dues which is not an effective way to do it. We brought the dues collection issue up at the Raleigh City Council in January of last year and lost by two votes. Even though we lost that vote, we won our political freedom in a different way.

LRR: "Win political freedom"—what does that mean?

Haith: North Carolina had something like a mini-Hatch Act where public employees could not participate in political races. The state legislature in 1991 voted to change the Civil Service Act so that employees could actually endorse and support candidates. Raleigh never changed that law. The three Raleigh unions (Firefighters, Police, and CWA's Southern Bell local) and the AFL-CIO lobbied the state again and got another bill passed in July that forced the city council to change the local law.

So now we're using political clout by saying we represent all these numbers here in the city—and CWA represents another 1000 represented in the Bell system.

We can use this political clout to make sure that those who voted against us on the dues check off issue are not around to vote against us again. And it's worked. No sooner was the law passed that we started getting letters from city council members saying "Now that you have the political freedom, you have the political clout to get your dues deduction passed. Call us when you're ready." We've also had two city council people call us to say, "Well the new year's coming up, let's sit down with the three unions and talk about your agenda." And now those meetings are being set up. So that's the way we're going to win.

I don't think it's necessarily so important that we win collective bargaining. Take a look at those states that have it such as New Jersey: for the past two negotiations we've won successful contracts but the government comes along and doesn't want to honor them. So what did the collective bargaining agreement mean? The way we're going to achieve the things that we want is to grow in numbers. If we had dues deduction, we'd have the financial and political clout that we need to say "You either vote for this or we're going to vote against you."

LRR: As you branch out of Raleigh and into the county, have you had any different situations to deal with, particularly around race relations?

Haith: Not really, it's basically the same Actually, we had an interesting experience recently in Wake County. We now have a campaign going with the Wake County school employees. It started off with the 400 custodians from Wake County Schools but as soon as word got out that the custodians were organizing, we were contacted by some other support personnel and the secretaries who have something of an association. All told it will lead up to a potential of 4000 people! At our first meeting we had 43 people in an office; we figured our next meeting would have more people



so we got a hotel meeting room that seats 400 people—and it was filled!

However, one seat was filled by the director of that department for Wake County. Of course, we expected spies who would report back to management, but I never expected the director to show up at this meeting. He is white but we had other white people there, so he didn't exactly stick out. One of the workers passed up word to me that the director was present so when we got ready for the next phase of our program which was to sign union cards, I singled him out. I said, "Hey we know you're here," and I called his name out. So he said to me "Well you said you didn't have anything to hide." I replied, "Clearly the union doesn't have anything to hide, however we're getting to the next phase of the meeting and I don't know if the workers here would want you to see them signing union cards." So he said, "I came to look out for my employees" —no, he said "my people!"—like gosh who picked him in charge of them like they can't think for themselves.

"OK, we're a democratic union," I said. "Let the workers decide if they want you to stay here and see them sign their union cards." Then every one of them started yelling, "Give us a union card—we don't care. Let him stay—we're signing!" After a minute, he got up and left. We were on a high all weekend after that.

I mean the mentality of this man to think that he could sit in our meeting and say he's looking after "his people." But I think it made us stronger. I couldn't have written a better scenario myself: here were North Carolina workers taking a stand and overcoming their fear. That's what they did that day: they overcame their fear. ■