



# Setting a Research Agenda

**Knowledge is power. . .  
If you know what to do with it**

■ *David Chu*

Whether we call them “corporate” or “strategic” or “comprehensive” or “pressure” campaigns, they all boil down in good street slang to “Fight the Power!”

At the core, corporate campaigns share a common mind-set: *unions can advance the interests of workers and their communities by thinking more broadly, creatively, and carefully about how to confront the boss.* Corporate campaigns work because they bring together the various strengths of a union, and fight the employer on many different battlegrounds. An effective campaign wages war on the street and in the boardroom to neutralize the boss’s edge in money and power. Unions, in turn, use the resources available to us: leaders and workers willing to fight, insight and a sense of justice on issues of the day, strong ties in our communities, a good staff of able organizers and aggressive lawyers. . .and maybe a sense of humor thrown in for good measure.

Research is an important tool in developing and implementing these campaigns, but it doesn’t lead anywhere without some strategic thinking. Alone, research simply creates a lot of charts and memos. When we look at things strategically, good information should help the union better understand its industry, the

---

■ *David Chu is Research Director of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).*

employer, the worksite, the workers, the community, and the issues that bind all these elements together. Good strategic research identifies the issues, targets the union's actions, prepares testimony for regulatory hearings, pushes the union's activities onto the agenda of the corporate boardroom, or simply gives the boss a well-earned headache.

### **SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THE BOSS'S EYES**

There's virtually an infinite amount of data available in today's high-tech, media-rich, it's-a-shrinking-world, Information Age. So stay focused on the type of information that will most benefit the union, keeping in mind both the short and long term pictures. The trick is to see the world through the boss's eyes.

■ **Know the Industry.** A strategic understanding of one's industry is a basic foundation for figuring out when, where and how to pick a fight. Industry knowledge doesn't tell the union how to win a fight against a specific company, but it certainly helps the union understand what's at stake and which are the most important fights (and often we need to fight just as hard in battles we know we'll lose).

Read the business press, subscribe to industry trade journals, visit libraries and business schools, attend conferences and talk to people. Learn how your industry works: Who's big or small? Who's growing or shrinking? What are the new products or services of the future and who's buying? Who bankrolls the bosses and how are profits generated? Where is the union strong or weak in the industry? Compare worker wages and benefits with similar employers and evaluate them as a factor in the overall profit picture.

■ **Know who the employer is.** Where is the business based (e.g. is it a foreign company with headquarters overseas)? What form of business is the union facing (e.g., a public corporation or a non-profit, tax-exempt organization)? These answers will help dig out more information. For example, the records of U.S. publicly-traded companies and tax returns of U.S. nonprofits are obtainable, but information on privately-held companies are found through different sources, and records on foreign companies aren't necessarily printed in English.

These features also reveal how a business is governed. Knowing who owns a firm (shareholders or a multinational parent) can pinpoint where ultimate decisions are made and allows the union to identify the people really in charge.

■ **Know what the employer does.** What does the employer own (additional plants, real estate, other companies)? Knowing how the union's worksite fits into the big picture provides the union with other places to confront the employer. What are the employer's various products and services? Who are key suppliers and how are the products and services prepared and brought to market? Who are the key customers? Understanding an employer's business plans gives the union a clue on where the boss wants to go. . . and where the union might want to follow.

Study the employer's world. Draw a map or "spider web" of relationships that exist among an employer and its worksites, and the multitude of other individuals, businesses, banks and financiers, customers and suppliers, attorneys and accountants, politicians and community leaders, and so forth. Businesses don't operate in a vacuum—a corporate campaign is built on learning how the world looks from the boss's desk.

■ **Follow the money.** One of the most basic avenues of researching a business is understanding a firm's finances. Profits, after all, are ultimately the bottom line for any boss. Gather and analyze financial records and determine whether a company is making money and how it generates such profits. Financial data is readily available from the Securities and Exchange Commission on publicly-traded companies. Other sources include commercial data bases, regulatory filings, and court records. To find out who bankrolls the boss look at the employer's creditors, financiers and investors. They make up a key constituency for every boss and are an important factor in any company's financial health and future growth.

■ **Know the key people.** If the union has identified who's really in charge, find out where they live, how they got where they are, and who they know. Successful people in business get there with the help of others and a union needs to understand a business at a personal level. Private investigators specialize in researching people but they're expensive, so consult the many "who's who" type of directories, check newspaper clippings, and talk to people.

■ **Know the labor issues.** Use bargaining information requests to gather corporate and financial information (discussed above). Review an employer's labor relations and health and safety records, discrimination and EEO compliance, employment tax status and health and retirement benefit plans. Also, establish how important are the worker wages and benefits in relation to the company's profits.

■ **Know the community issues.** Unions are often good, through their leadership and membership, at staying in touch with the problems and needs of their communities. Businesses have their own ways, and a researcher needs to understand the politics of business in the local community: who's allied with whom, who are the key politicians, what's key on the business agenda. An important part of crafting an effective campaign strategy is to meld together the union's fight with the community's concerns and the employer's schemes.

■ **Know the government regulatory environment.** Regulatory agencies often contain useful and informative business filings: regulatory processes frequently include provisions for public intervention where community concerns can be brought to bear. Investigating the regulatory apparatus can reveal where and why a business builds its ties to political leaders.

Also, always keep in mind that employers pursue the dollar, and one of their favorite targets are tax-funded programs, public subsidies, and "economic development" incentive programs.

Throughout the research process, there's a good rule of thumb: keep your eyes and ears wide open. Businesses lie, cheat, and steal (and not just from workers), so a researcher should always be looking for self-dealing, inaccurate, and misleading government regulatory filings, hidden profits, and the myriad ways our "free enterprise" system really works.

Once the union has established a full profile of the employer, it's often apparent who or what the target(s) should be: a key ally or major investor, an important regulatory decision on the horizon, a big potential customer or new product market. It may be necessary to undertake an entire research exercise of that issue or firm. Always try to complete the overall picture before a corporate campaign strategy is undertaken. It's tempting to run with the first thing that smells bad or looks weak, but many a union fight collapses because of this hastiness.

## **CONCLUSION**

A research agenda such as the one laid out here can sound intimidating. For large campaigns, unions have devoted sizable resources to undertake thorough research. But for many campaigns a unionist doesn't need an MBA or year's time or a hefty budget to do the research and wage an effective fight. Corporate campaigns are as much a way of looking at information as they are a basket of fancy corporate tactics or sophisticated research.

## LRR FOCUS: Tips for Researching Your Boss

- Talk to the workers who often know a lot even if they don't know they do. Also, mobilizing employees to research their own employer can be useful organizing tactic for the union to build strength for a fight.
- Be creative—and be diligent. There are many ways to gather information so consult with experienced researchers, keep an open mind to try out some ideas of your own and be ready to slog through piles of records to find that useful nugget.
- Get information from the government. Records generally exist for most business regulations such as OSHA, EEO, and environmental and securities matters. Exercise your rights provided by the Freedom of Information Act. Obscure regulatory filings are a treasure trove of corporate and financial documents.
- There is a multitude of business information sources out there. The press is invaluable—read it daily, look at old clippings, talk to reporters (who are often expert on a company or industry or person and sometimes willing to exchange information). Local public and university libraries, including business school libraries, court records (civil, criminal, tax, probate, and divorce courts), trade associations, commercial business information databases, and business licensing records can all add to the profile.

---

Unions do need to start early. Make a research plan and allocate some time and energy to acquiring a strategic understanding of the boss's world through his eyes. Reach out to others in the industry and the community to monitor what's happening—on an on-going basis—not just in preparation for contract negotiations. Consult with more experienced researchers when necessary. But the key is to think creatively and broadly about where the employer is trying to go, muster all the resources the union has, and fight the power. ■