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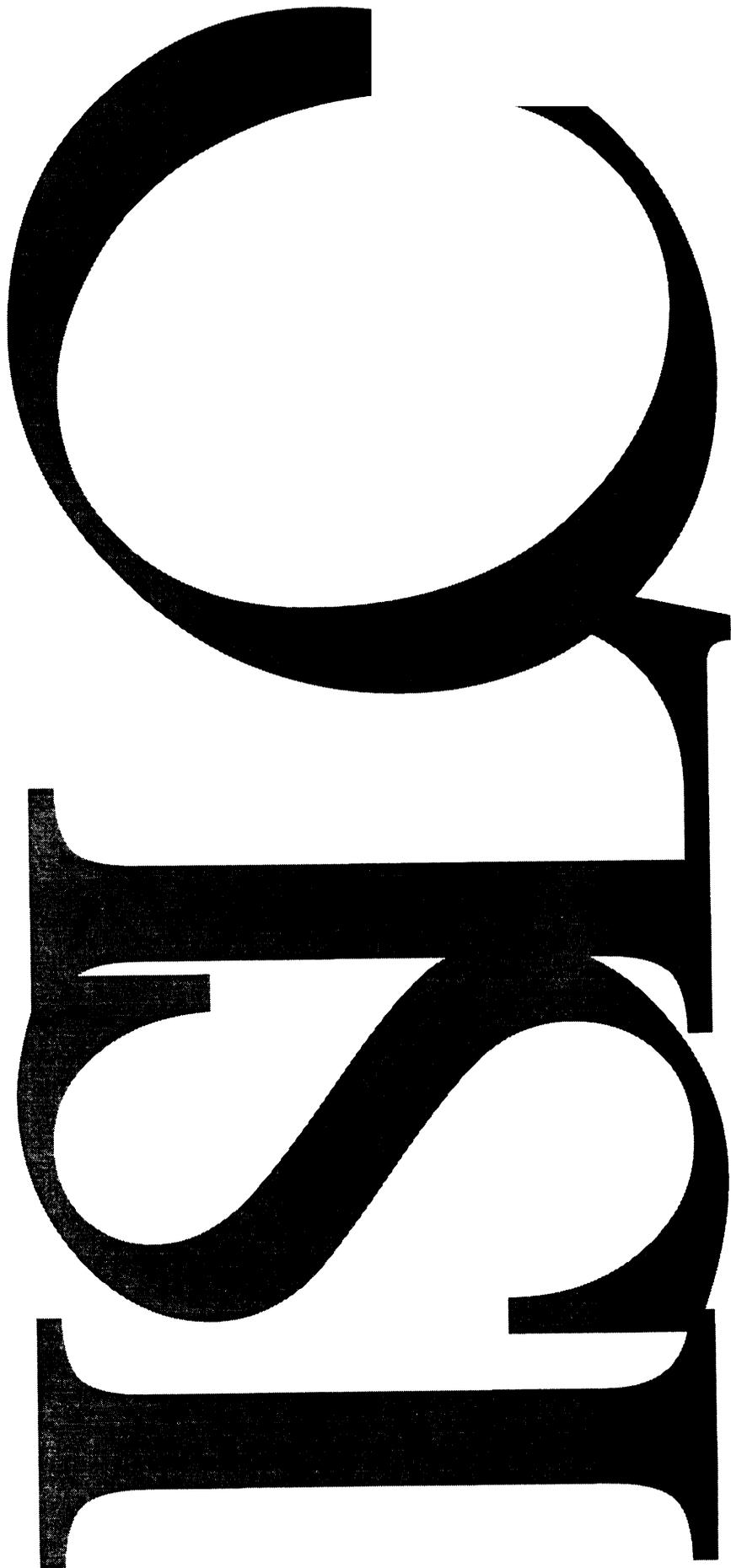
**UNION TACTICS
MATTER:
The Impact of Union Tactics
on
Certification Elections,
First Contracts
and Membership Rates**

by

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WORKING PAPERS



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Executive Summary

This study examines the impact of union tactics on certification election win rates, first contracts and post-contract membership rates in the public sector. Based on an in-depth survey of union organizers in a national sample of public sector certification election campaigns the findings suggest that a grassroots, rank-and-file intensive strategy, building a union and acting like a union from the very beginning of the campaign are critical components of union organizing success. By comparing these findings with Bronfenbrenner's earlier study of private sector union campaigns (1993) we found that not only are these strategies important to the union's ability to win elections and first contracts, but they are equally important to the union's ability to sign up new members, and build a lasting, viable organization, after the election is won and the first contract is signed.

Highlights of the study include:

- In private sector NLRB campaigns, a grassroots, rank-and-file intensive organizing strategy including representative committees; personal contact; escalating pressure tactics; the use of rank-and-file volunteers from already organized units; a focus on dignity, fairness, and service quality as the primary issues; and building for the first contract during the organizing campaign; were all found to be associated with win rates 10 to 30 percent higher than units which ran traditional campaigns with a focus on mass mailings and gate leafletting.
- In state and local elections in the public sector, unions have an 85 percent election win rate and an 88 percent first contract rate, largely because few if any public sector employers offer any significant opposition to union campaigns. Not surprisingly, the majority of unions organizing in the public sector run very low-intensity organizing campaigns, primarily focusing on letters, leaflets and mass meetings.
- In the eight percent of the public sector campaigns in the sample where the employer aggressively opposed the union campaign, election win rates plummeted to 33 percent and very few of the unions organizing in those units increased the intensity of their campaigns to match the employer campaigns.
- The use of grassroots, rank-and-file intensive strategies led to higher win rates in the public sector, even in the context of little employer opposition.
- Because of the prevalence of open and agency shops in the public sector, election win rates and first contract rates may not be the most valid measures of union success. Post-contract membership rates better capture union organizing success in the public sector.

- Using rank-and-file intensive tactics during organizing campaigns led to significantly higher post-contract membership rates. House calling, representative committees, establishing bargaining committees before the election, and using one-on-one surveys all increased the likelihood of signing up a significant portion of the unit after the contract was signed. Post-contract membership rates increased by six percent for each additional rank-and-file intensive tactic used by the union.
- The findings suggest that the use of rank-and-file intensive tactics both increases membership rates and builds strong and vital unions. These tactics become even more important, given the recent political sea-change and the likelihood that this will lead to dramatically increased employer opposition in the public sector.

The future of the American labor movement depends on a dramatic resurgence in union organizing success in both the public and private sectors. Precipitous losses in membership from plant closings, sub-contracting, and layoffs in heavily unionized sectors such as manufacturing and state employment, coupled with employment growth in the largely unorganized service sector, have made it difficult for unions to organize enough new workers to keep membership levels stable, much less to grow. Yet such growth is absolutely necessary if the labor movement is to remain a significant force for social and economic justice in our workplaces and communities.

A combination of unfettered employer opposition and weak and poorly enforced labor laws have made union growth even more difficult. Faced with this increasingly hostile external environment for organizing, the labor movement has begun to focus its energy on the one element of the organizing process which they can control — union strategy and tactics. For some, this has meant going beyond traditional NLRB campaigns to broader community-based and industry-based organizing. For others, this has meant a critical analysis of union organizing strategies during the NLRB election process, from targeting, to winning elections, to bargaining first agreements. Still others have looked to more aggressive public sector organizing as a significant opportunity for union growth.

Unfortunately, while there has been considerable macro-level research documenting the magnitude of labor's decline in the private sector, there has been surprisingly little micro-level research that looks intensively at the organizing process itself, especially the role played by union strategy and tactics.

Bronfenbrenner's research (1993), conducted with the cooperation of the AFL-CIO, was one of the first systematic examinations of the private sector certification election process. Her study examined both employer and union tactics in detail, as well as bargaining unit demographic and election background variables. Despite her confirmation of the prevalence of egregious employer behavior, she found that union tactics — what unions actually do during a campaign — as a group matter more than employer behavior or any other set of factors. Overall, her work suggests that if unions begin to act like a union and build strong rank-and-file organizations from the very beginning of the campaign, they can overcome the aggressive employer campaigns that have become so commonplace.

Until recently, there had been no comparable research which focused on organizing activity in the public sector. During the same period that private sector employment and unionization rapidly declined, public sector employment and unionization rose dramatically. Although research on public sector organizing is especially difficult because data are only gathered by individual state-based labor relations

boards, the potential for union growth in the public sector has made it critically important for the labor movement to learn all that it can about successful public sector organizing strategies.

To fill this gap, we recently compiled the first national database of public sector elections. The database included all certification elections which took place in state and local units in 1991-1992 in states which have some form of collective bargaining (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995b). We found that unions are winning 85 percent of their elections in the public sector across a broad spectrum of occupations, bargaining units, and employers. Our research showed that the dramatic difference between the consistently high win rates in the public sector and win rates in the private sector that average below 50 percent is primarily a function of the relative lack of employer opposition in the public sector (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995b).

It is important, however, to look more closely at what unions are doing in these public sector campaigns. In this paper we will examine the impact of union tactics on union elections and first contract rates based on an in-depth survey of union organizers in a national sample of public sector certification elections. But in the public sector we must go beyond election and first contract outcomes. Quite distinct from the private sector, most public sector units are open or agency shops where membership is voluntary. In this environment, election and first contract win rates are not necessarily valid measures of union success. Consequently, the primary focus of this paper is the impact of union organizing tactics on the union's later ability to sign up a majority of the unit as new members after the first contract is reached.

Union Tactics in Private Sector Certification Election and First Contract Campaigns

Most union organizers understand that union tactics matter in determining the outcome of certification elections and that NLRB elections are often lost and won based on the effort, creativity, and resources that organizers put into the campaign. Yet, despite the large body of research, very few studies have examined the role played by union tactics in the organizing process.

In part this is because many industrial relations researchers are not convinced that union tactics play a significant role in determining election outcome. Some, like Dickens, believe that union tactics are entirely reactive, determined solely by management tactics, and therefore should not and do not need to be included in organizing research models (1983). Others may believe that union tactics matter, but are unable to include them in their research models, both because they have a limited understanding of what tactics unions have available to them in organizing drives, and because

they lack access to union campaign data beyond what is available in LM2 forms. Thus most industrial relations research on private sector organizing continues to focus primarily on the election, unit, and employer variables easily accessible in NLRB databases¹.

In 1988, Bronfenbrenner, in cooperation with the Organizing Department of the AFL-CIO, launched a study specifically designed to expand the body of knowledge available to the labor movement and scholars of the labor movement regarding factors contributing to union success or failure in certification election campaigns (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Through a survey of the lead organizers of 261 NLRB certification election campaigns, Bronfenbrenner was able to determine which union tactics had the most positive impact on union certification election outcomes while controlling for the impact of election background, organizing climate, bargaining unit demographic, and employer characteristic and tactic variables.

Perhaps the most striking finding of the study was that union tactics as a group played a greater role in explaining election outcome than any other group of variables, including employer characteristics and tactics, bargaining unit demographics, organizer background, or election environment. This reveals that union strategies not only matter in determining election outcome, but that they may matter more than many other factors.

For the labor movement, this means that union strategy and tactics can make a significant difference in whether they win or lose elections, even in a climate of intense employer opposition, economic decline, and weak public support. It also means that industrial relations research models which exclude union tactics are failing to capture one of the most important elements of the organizing process.

What the study showed is that unions are most likely to win certification election campaigns when they run aggressive and creative campaigns utilizing a grassroots, rank-and-file intensive strategy, building a union and acting like a union from the very beginning of the campaign. Thus, campaigns where the union focused on person-to-person contact, housecalls, and small group meetings to develop leadership and union consciousness and inoculate workers against the employer's anti-union campaign, were associated with significantly higher win rates than traditional campaigns which primarily utilized gate leafletting, mass meetings, and glossy mailings to contact unorganized workers. These results do not imply that something is inherently bad about union leaflets and mailings, but rather that they act as a proxy for traditional campaigns where the focus of the union's energy and resources is on more indirect means of communication rather than the personal contact necessary to build the union and counteract the employer campaign.

Unions were also more successful when they encouraged active rank-and-file participation in and responsibility for the organizing campaign, including a large

rank-and-file organizing committee representative of the different interest groups in the bargaining unit. The importance of rank-and-file participation extends beyond the committee to include rank-and-file involvement in escalating internal and external pressure tactics which build solidarity and commitment to the union and compel the employer to run a less aggressive campaign.

The findings also showed that it is essential that the union develop a long-range campaign strategy that incorporates building for the first contract into the original organizing process by conducting bargaining surveys, selecting the bargaining committee before the election, and working with the rank-and-file to develop proposals before the election.

The issues the union focuses on during the campaign also play a very important role in determining election outcome. Unions which focused on issues such as dignity, justice, discrimination, fairness, or service quality, were associated with much higher win rates than those which focused on more traditional bread and butter issues, such as wages, benefits, and job security.

Lastly the study showed that unions were more successful when they placed an emphasis on developing a culture of organizing that permeated every activity and structure of the union. This includes a serious commitment of staff and financial resources to organizing, the involvement of the international in local union organizing campaigns, and the training, recruitment, and effective utilization of rank-and-file volunteers from already-organized bargaining units.

In combination, what the results of Bronfenbrenner's study of private sector elections show is that union electoral success depends on the use of an aggressive rank-and-file intensive campaign. Not only did Bronfenbrenner find that all of the individual "rank-and-file intensive" tactics were associated with win rates 10 to 30 percent higher than win rates in campaigns which did not use these tactics, but when these tactics were included in a regression equation controlling for the influence of employer tactics and characteristics, and unit and election background variables, Bronfenbrenner's findings suggest that the use of many of these tactics can improve the percentage of votes received by the union by as much as 3 percent and increase the probability of winning the election by as much as 10 percent. Given the fact that so many union NLRB election campaigns are lost by only a few percentage points, the results strongly suggest that if unions organizing in the private sector began to utilize all or most of these rank-and-file intensive campaign tactics, they could significantly improve their election win rate.

Bronfenbrenner also found that the importance of this kind of rank-and-file intensive strategy did not stop with the union certification election. The complexity of the first contract process makes it difficult to find any direct link between union organizing

tactics during the certification election campaign and first contract outcome. What Bronfenbrenner's results suggest is that rather than directly impacting on first contract outcome, union tactics during the organizing drive influence employer and union tactics during the contract campaign, as well as employer resistance to unionization, and rank-and-file and community support for the union's first contract effort. All of these factors in turn affect the ability of the union to bargain a first agreement.

Bronfenbrenner's findings also suggest that unions significantly improved their chances of winning a first agreement if they continued to utilize a rank-and-file intensive strategy during the first contract campaign. This strategy includes: continuing the organizing after the election through housecalls, one-on-one contact and solidarity days; keeping the members informed through newsletters and regular membership meetings; and pressuring the employer from the outside through community-labor coalitions, corporate pressure tactics, and media campaigns.

Just as in organizing campaigns, employers do have a great number of legal and illegal tactics at their disposal to thwart union efforts to bargain a first agreement, and a significant percentage of employers are using these tactics very effectively. But what Bronfenbrenner's findings showed is that there are union tactics which can effectively defuse the employer campaign during both the organizing drive and the first contract, if they are used consistently, aggressively, and creatively.

Organizing in the Public Sector

Unions organizing in the public sector operate in a very different environment than those organizing in the private sector. Rank-and-file intensive strategies are essential to union success in NLRB election campaigns because they are the only way to generate the worker participation and commitment necessary to withstand an aggressive employer anti-union campaign and to counteract the anti-union impact of the economic, political, and legal climate. Yet, as our research on public sector organizing has shown, unions organizing in the public sector operate in a climate largely free from the aggressive anti-union behavior that is so pervasive in the private sector (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995b).

We found that in the public sector nearly one quarter of the employers do not mount any campaign at all against the union. Even in those cases where public sector employers do oppose the union effort, most of the employer campaigns are limited to a few legal actions of extremely low intensity. This contrasts sharply with the private sector, where the overwhelming majority of employers launch aggressive anti-union campaigns. Private sector employers are six times more likely than their public sector counterparts to commit unfair labor practices such as discharges for union activity, and are twice as likely to use other tactics such as captive-audience meetings,

employer leaflets and mailings, supervisor one-on-ones, and illegal wage increases.

Given this much more favorable organizing climate in the public sector, it is not surprising that union win rates in the public sector average well above 80%, compared to an average win rate of just below 50% for NLRB election campaigns. The question then becomes what role do union tactics play in organizing in this very different labor-management context?

Specifically, we will test if rank-and-file intensive campaign tactics have a positive impact on election win rates, first contracts, and membership rates. We would suggest that even with little employer opposition, these grassroots, union-building tactics are fundamental to creating a viable, lasting union. Without opportunities for participation by a diverse group of rank-and-file members in a structure that creates opportunities for activism and leadership development, it is difficult to sustain a strong union, particularly in the context of open and agency shops.

Given the high win rates and lack of employer opposition in both certification election and first contract campaigns, we would suggest that union tactics would play a significant but not major role in determining the outcome of these public sector campaigns. Nevertheless, it is important to document the current organizing tactics of unions in the public sector to assess to what degree rank and file intensive strategies are being utilized.

The higher variation in post-contract membership rates suggests that organizing campaign tactics play a much more important role in determining the ability of the union to sign up members once the first contract has been settled. To choose to become an actual member of a union involves considerably more commitment to the organization and is a direct function of the perception of and commitment to the union developed during the organizing campaign. Given the relative lack of employer opposition, a union may be successful at winning a certification election and first contract even if they run an extremely limited union campaign. However, without a rank-and-file intensive and inclusive campaign, it is unlikely that a significant number of unit members would feel strongly enough about the union to become members. This is not only important for membership numbers and dues payment, but in the long run it is fundamental to the union's efforts to create an organization strong enough to win grievances, conduct contract campaigns, and win significant gains at the bargaining table.

Research Methods

Our research on public sector organizing strategies is based on a random sample of 195 single union certification elections in units of fifty or more workers. A sample of 250

elections was drawn from our database of all public sector elections held in 1991-1992 in the 35 states that have some form of collective bargaining (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1995b). Information was gathered from the lead organizer in each of the elections in our sample using an extensive survey on union tactics, bargaining unit demographics, and employer behavior.

This paper is based on 195 survey responses which represent an 83 percent response rate. A comparison of elections where we have survey responses with the total sample indicates no bias in terms of geographical distribution, unit size, bargaining unit type, or public entity when compared to the total population of single-union certification elections in units over 50 in 1991-1992.

Table 1 reports the basic characteristics of our sample. Elections are equally divided across years and across a wide variety of entities, divisions, and bargaining units. As in the population, elections are concentrated in school districts and in support staff and professional units. Significant activity is also occurring in clerical and wall-to-wall units, at colleges, public works departments, and social service agencies; and in cities and towns. While there is slightly more variability in win rates in the sample than in the overall population, win rates remain high across a diversity of entities, units, and divisions. Over three quarters of the elections are consent elections and there are very few elections in units larger than 500.

The Role of Union Tactics in Public Sector Certification Election Campaigns

Given the relative lack of employer opposition it is not surprising that public sector union campaigns are significantly less intensive than those in the private sector. As we can see from Table 2, only a small percentage of the public sector unions in our sample ran the kind of aggressive rank-and-file intensive campaigns that Bronfenbrenner's private sector research showed are so critical to union success in NLRB elections. Instead, in the majority of these public sector organizing drives, the union ran a fairly limited campaign, with a focus on mass mailings, leafletting, and large group meetings, rather than union building, leadership development, and person-to-person contact. Fewer than 10 percent of the public sector organizers housecalled the majority of the unit, and only 23 percent developed active and representative rank-and-file organizing committees. Yet 46 percent of the unions sent out at least two mass mailings and 28 percent sent out at least four mass mailings during the organizing campaign.

As shown in Table 2, the intensity of the union campaigns increased only minimally as the intensity of the employer campaign increased. If we compare the 8 percent of the campaigns where the employer ran aggressive anti-union campaigns to the 46 percent of the campaigns where the union faced little or no employer opposition, we find that less

than a third of unions in the sample had an active representative committee, housecalled the majority of the unit, used solidarity days, elected the bargaining committee before the election, or signed up at least 70 percent of the unit on cards before filing the petition. In fact, the primary response to the more aggressive employer campaign was to dramatically increase the number of leaflets and mass mailings, from an average of 2.68 letters and 3.51 leaflets in campaigns with little or no employer opposition, to 18.73 letters and 21.33 leaflets in campaigns with intensive employer opposition.

The weakness of the union campaigns in the face of employer opposition is reflected in the variation in win rates depending on the intensity of the employer campaigns. As shown in Table 2, union win rates averaged 90 percent in the 46 percent of the elections in the sample where there was little or no employer opposition, but dropped down to 66 percent in the 46 percent of the elections where the employer ran a campaign of medium intensity. For the eight percent of the campaigns where the employer ran an intensive campaign, the union win rate plummeted to 33 percent.

This dramatic drop in win rates stands in sharp contrast to the private sector where, in units where employers ran aggressive anti-union campaigns, the union win rate dropped to 39 percent, from an overall win rate of 43 percent. This occurred despite the fact that employer opposition in the private sector, on average, was much more intensive than even the most aggressive public sector anti-union campaign. However, unlike in the public sector, unions organizing in the private sector tended to run more aggressive campaigns when faced with more intensive employer opposition.²

Because the majority of public sector employers offer little or no opposition to union organizing efforts, unions can and do win the overwhelming majority of public sector elections with only a minimal amount of effort. Yet, when faced with employer opposition, it is also clear that public sector unions are not, for the most part, rising to the challenge. Because of the lack of employer opposition, these low-intensity campaigns had only a small impact on public sector unionization. However, given recent political changes and increasing attacks on public sector workers and their unions, it is clear that the climate of organizing in the public sector is changing rapidly. As these threats become more commonplace, the same kinds of rank-and-file intensive campaigns that have proven successful in the private sector will become equally necessary in the public sector.

Beyond winning or losing election campaigns, what are the implications of these low-intensity campaigns in the public sector in terms of building a viable local or chapter? In the private sector the intense employer opposition — if the union is able to win an election — is a powerful force drawing people together behind a common goal. This unity is fundamental in mounting a campaign for a first contract, subsequent agreements, contract campaigns, grievance handling and so many other

functions of the union. The question is, without these forces to coalesce against, are long term viable organizations possible in the public sector?

Union Tactics and Public Sector First Contract Rates

The dramatic contrast between the public and private sector organizing experience continues beyond the certification election to the first contract process. Not only are unions winning 85 percent of all public sector certification elections but our study showed that they are then going on to achieve first agreements in 88 percent of the units where they won the election. This compares to a private sector first contract rate that most studies have found to average 75 to 78 percent (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Cooke, 1985; Pavy, 1994). This lower first contract rate, combined with a certification election win rate of 48 percent, means that in the private sector, for every 100 units the labor movement attempts to organize, only 36 percent end up being covered under a collective bargaining agreement. In contrast, in the public sector, unions win first agreements for 75 percent of the units they attempt to organize.

Although there has yet to be an in-depth study of employer behavior in public sector first contract campaigns, our research once again points to the relative lack of employer opposition as the primary explanation for the difference in first contract rates between the public and private sector. As Bronfenbrenner found in her research on private sector first contract campaigns, more than a third of private sector employers violate the National Labor Relations Act through unilateral changes, surface bargaining, stalling tactics, or outright refusal to bargain. Still others shut down the plant, or contract out the entire workforce, to avoid signing a union agreement. Yet, under current law, the worst penalty for employers engaged in such actions is an order to bargain in good faith (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

In the public sector, employer vulnerability to public and political pressure coupled with state collective bargaining laws more conducive to facilitating first contract settlement, has made such out-right union busting during the first contract process, a relatively rare occurrence. Given our findings that only eight percent of public sector employers aggressively opposed union efforts to organize their workforce, and that unions were only able to win a third of the campaigns where they faced such opposition, that leaves only a handful of public sector employers who might continue the anti-union effort during the first contract campaign.

Because of the lack of employer opposition, unions bargaining for first agreements in the public sector are able to do so even in those cases where they ran relatively low-intensity organizing campaigns. Just as public sector certification election win rates remained extremely high regardless of the intensity of the organizing union campaign, first

contract rates also were consistently high regardless of the union organizing effort. As we can see from Table 3, first contracts rates were several percentage points higher in those units where unions use more rank-and-file intensive tactics such as a representative committee, housecalling the majority of the unit, using solidarity days, and establishing the bargaining committee before the election. The number of mass mailings and the number of leaflets distributed was also lower in units where a first contract was achieved. However, first contract rates were also well above 80 percent in units where they did not use rank-and-file intensive tactics during the organizing campaign.

Once again, because of the lack of employer opposition in the public sector, unions are able to win first agreements, even in those cases where they do not build a union and develop leadership during the organizing campaign. The question becomes: without that effort, what kind of union do they have once that contract is in place?

The Role of Union Tactics in the Public Sector Membership Process

Because of the prevalence of open and agency shops in the public sector, election and first contract win rates may not be the best measures of union success in the public sector. In this context, post-contract membership rates may be considerably more appropriate. Particularly because membership in most cases is voluntary, membership rates indicate significantly more commitment to an organization, precisely the kind of commitment that is necessary to ensure a vital functioning union over time. The question is: how do union tactics utilized in the organizing campaign impact on post-contract membership rates?

From Table 4 we can examine this relationship by looking at the impact of union tactics on campaigns that resulted in less than 60 percent post-contract membership, those with between 60 and 90 percent and those with over 90 percent membership. It is clear from these data that unions tactics matter in post-contract membership rates. Furthermore, the data suggest that the rank-and-file intensive and union-building strategies and tactics Bronfenbrenner found to be so important in the private sector are equally important here. For, just as these tactics build the membership commitment and rank-and-file leadership necessary to withstand an aggressive employer campaign, this same membership commitment and rank-and-file leadership becomes critical to membership participation in the union which develops once the first contract is in place.

For example, representative rank-and-file organizing committees were used in only three percent of the campaigns that resulted in a post-contract membership of less than 60 percent. However, they were utilized in 34 percent of the campaigns that achieved 60 to 90 percent membership and 35 percent in those units that reached more than 90 percent membership. The size of the organizing committee also had a

positive impact on membership rates. Unions achieving over 90 percent post-contract membership rates had committees representing nine percent of the unit, compared to only three percent of the unit in those campaigns that yielded less than 60 percent post-contract membership. These data show that unions that utilizing more inclusive organizing tactics are much more successful in achieving high membership rates after the election is won and the first contract has been settled. The use of active and representative rank-and-file committees not only demonstrates to workers that the union is an inclusive and democratic organization, but also these committees develop the leadership necessary to build a lasting and vital organization and to organize members once the contract has been achieved.

From Table 4 we can see that building for the first contract prior to the election was also key in achieving a high post-contract membership rate. Unions formed bargaining committees before the election in only three percent of those campaigns where less than 60 percent of the bargaining unit became members after the contract was bargained. Yet unions established bargaining committees prior to the election in 24 percent of the units with a 60 to 90 percent post-contract membership rate and 15 percent of the units with a 90 percent post-contract membership rate. Here the data suggest that it is important not only to be inclusive but to develop rank-and-file leadership and begin acting like a union from the very beginning of the organizing campaign.

Housecalling had a similar impact. Only 38 percent of the membership were housecalled in elections that yielded less than 60 percent membership, while 40 percent and 44 percent were housecalled in campaigns that yielded 60 to 90 percent membership and more than 90 percent membership, respectively. Unions were also more than twice as likely to housecall the majority of the unit in campaigns where they achieved post-contract membership rates of more than 60 percent.

Housecalling is a particularly effective means of building membership commitment and developing leadership because only through housecalls does the organizer have the time and opportunity to listen to members' concerns and teach them what it means to be a union member. Unions which housecall the majority of the unit are also much more likely to be in tune with the primary issues and concerns of the bargaining unit and, therefore, much better able to address those concerns once the election has been won. Equally important, during housecalls the organizer is able to speak with both the worker and the worker's family, building family support for the union. This in turn could have a very positive impact on whether or not the worker later decided to become a dues-paying member of the union.

The importance of personal contact is also supported by the findings on the percentage of workers who were surveyed one-on-one regarding their contract pri-

orities and concerns. Unions surveyed an average of 17 percent of the bargaining unit in campaigns that resulted in a more than 90 percent post-contract membership vote, compared to only 10 percent of the unit in those campaigns which resulted in 60 to 90 percent and only three percent of those campaigns which resulted in less than 60 percent post-contract membership. Clearly this kind of direct contact with rank-and-file membership is a significant determinant of membership rates both because of the input the union receives and because these surveys demonstrate that the union is seriously interested in addressing the workers' concerns.

As would be expected, the use of printed materials such as letters and leaflets had a negative impact on post-contract membership rates. On average 5.28 leaflets were distributed in campaigns where unions achieved less than 60 percent membership, 4.88 were used in those which achieved 60 to 90 percent post-contract membership, and only 4.04 were used in those highly successful campaigns where the union achieved more than 90 percent post-contract membership. A similar pattern emerges in terms of campaign letters. Once again, leaflets and letters act as a proxy for more traditional campaigns that fail to focus union resources and energy on personal contact, leadership development, and union building, all factors critical to membership participation and commitment after the first contract is achieved.

For other union tactic variables listed in Table 4, such as solidarity days, the impact on post-contract membership rates is less clear. Unlike the private sector, where wearing a union button or t-shirt involves considerable risk and therefore represents a serious commitment to the union, in the public sector these actions involve very little risk for the employees involved and therefore are less significant in the union-building process. Not surprisingly then, the use of these tactics has less of an impact on post-contract membership rates.

In addition to the positive effect on membership rates exhibited by each of the individual union tactic variables, an overall rank-and-file strategy, incorporating as many of these tactics as possible, was also found to be associated with significantly higher win rates. As shown in Table 4, the mean number of rank-and-file intensive tactics used by the union was 1.79 in units with a post-contract membership rate of less than 60 percent, increasing to 2.55 in units with 60 to 90 percent post-contract membership, and 2.59 in units with 90 percent membership.

Even more striking is the finding that none of the units with post-contract membership rates of less than 60 percent used five or more rank-and-file intensive tactics during the organizing campaign, while seven percent of the units with 60 to 90 percent, and 17 percent of the units with over 90 percent post-contract membership, used five or more of these tactics.³

Overall, the public sector findings are clearly consistent with Bronfenbrenner's

earlier research on the private sector. Campaigns that build the union from the very beginning using person-to-person contact through housecalls, small group meetings, and surveys, instead of traditional gate leafletting or letters, are able to achieve significantly higher membership rates. Furthermore, unions were able to achieve higher membership rates when they focused on leadership development through the use of active representative organizing committees and establishing a bargaining committee before the election. But as our findings suggest, unions cannot simply graft individual union tactics to a more traditional organizing approach. Instead, these tactics are only truly effective when they become integrated into an overall grassroots, rank-and-file approach to organizing.

Conclusions

Our data overwhelmingly demonstrate that union tactics are fundamentally important for organizing in the public sector. By utilizing grassroots rank-and-file strategies, unions can raise their certification election win rates even higher. While the findings are somewhat less dramatic than in the private sector, they are no less important. Like in the private sector, involving a diverse group of rank-and-file members in building and acting like a union from the very beginning of the organizing campaign, works.

For beyond winning elections, our data suggest that the use of this grassroots strategy is fundamental to achieving high membership rates in the public sector. Winning elections and achieving first contracts are indeed hollow if too few workers join their union to enforce that contract or maintain its long-term viability. It is only by involving rank-and-file workers in a democratic and inclusive process and developing an activist structure, that workers are going to become part of a union that will live up to its full potential.

The use of these tactics is even more important given the rapidly changing workforce. With the entrance of a massive numbers of women and people of color, unions must recognize that these workers are central to the future of the labor movement. Instead of seeing these workers simply as pressure groups to be integrated into extant union structure, the labor movement needs to begin this process of democracy and inclusion early on in the organizing campaign. While there has been a great deal of discussion about the organizing model of unionism as a way of making unions more inclusive and responsive, this model is unrealistic if inclusiveness, participation, and leadership development are not integral to union organizing itself.

While this research points to the importance of these rank-and-file intensive strategies, it is also clear that they are not the norm in organizing campaigns in the public sector. The lack of intensive employer opposition has allowed unions in the public sector to win with very low-intensity campaigns. As we have seen, these

campaigns yield election victories and first contracts, but do not necessarily yield union members and strong, vital organizations.

Data from our original public sector database on decertification and challenge elections may indicate the consequences of not conducting rank-and-file intensive campaigns. One out of every six elections in the public sector is a multi-union challenge election where another union challenges the incumbent union which already represents the workers in that unit. Furthermore, in two-thirds of these elections the incumbent union loses representation to the challenging union. There are also a significant number of single-union decertification elections with unions winning only 45 percent of those elections. While it will require further research to examine the factors behind this turnover and loss, the high decertification rate suggests that the low-intensity campaigns that are more typical in the public sector are not building units and unions strong enough to withstand a challenge.

Organizing in the public sector will continue to be central to all efforts to rebuild and revitalize the American labor movement. As we have demonstrated, the increased utilization of rank-and-file intensive, grassroots tactics are crucial to efforts by unions in the public sector to improve their organizing efforts. Given recent political changes, we may very well see a frontal attack on public employees and their unions in the coming months and years. As our data show, if in fact this becomes the case, then the use of these tactics will be fundamental for unions to organize and stay organized.

Endnotes

- 1 For a detailed review of the literature on union tactics see Bronfenbrenner, 1993 and Lawler, 1990.
- 2 In her private sector study, Bronfenbrenner found the majority of “rank-and-file intensive” union tactic variables to be significantly and positively associated with the certification election outcome when included in regression and Logit analyses controlling for the influence of other election background, employer characteristic and tactic, bargaining unit demographic, and organizer background variables. Similarly, traditional campaign tactics, such as the number of union mass mailings, were associated with significantly lower union win rates. Not surprisingly, in our public sector analysis, it was employer tactics rather than union tactics that were found to have the greatest effect on certification election outcome when included in a regression or Logit model controlling for the influence of other variables. In fact, we found that for every additional anti-union tactic utilized by the employer, the probability of the union winning the election declined by 7 percent and the percent of the votes received by the union declined by 3 percent. In contrast, with the exception of the percent of the unit which signed cards before the petition was filed, the percent of the unit which was surveyed one-on-one during the election campaign, and the number of union mass mailings, none of the individual union tactic variables exhibited a statistically significant effect on certification election outcome when included in a regression or Logit model. Union rank-and-file intensive tactics as a group did exhibit a statistically significant positive impact on election outcome in both the Logit and regression models. The probability of the union winning the election increased by 6 percent and the percent of the votes received by the union increased by 3 percent for each additional rank-and-file intensive tactic used by the union during the organizing campaign.
- 3 To further test our findings we used ordinary least squares and Logit analysis to test several models of membership rates. Through these models we were able to test the independent effect of individual union tactic variables, holding other variables, such as election background, bargaining unit demographics constant. The actual equations varied depending on which variables were included and which methods were utilize, but across all methods and models several important union tactic variables exhibited strong independent effects. The percentage using representative committees, the number holding small group meetings and those that had a bargaining committee prior to the election all had strong positive impact on membership rates. The number of letters had a strong negative effect. When individual union tactics were combined into a single rank-and-file intensive scale variable the multi-variate results were even stronger. The probability of the union achieving a post-contract membership rate of at least 60 percent increased by nine percent and the percent membership rate increased by six percent for each additional rank-and-file intensive tactic used by the union.

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Appendix

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the Sample of State and Local Public Sector

	Number of Elections	Percent Wins 91-92
Year		
1991	100	70%
1992	95	80
Public Entity		
State	12	83%
City	32	84
County	36	75
Town	7	100
School District	77	71
Special District	13	69
Higher Education	18	61
Employer Division		
All or Cross/Entity	32	91%
School District	77	71
Public Works	16	81
Courts	7	71
College/University	18	61
Social Services	17	71
Hospital	7	57
Police	4	100
Fire/EMT	5	80
Administrative	6	100
Corrections	4	75
Transit	2	0
Bargaining-Unit Type		
Clerical	16	56%
Blue Collar	10	80
Support Staff/	85	69
Security	4	75
Technical	1	100
Combined	9	78
Professional	31	77
Wall-to-Wall	18	94
Police/Fire	10	90
Supervisory	11	82
Election Type		
Consent	111	79%
Stipulated	20	65
Ordered	39	79
Unit Size		
50-99	112	76%
100-499	74	73
500-999	1	100
1,000-10,000	8	75
<i>Total Elections</i>	195	75

Source: Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1995b)

TABLE 2: Union Tactics in Public Sector Elections

	Overall Sample			No or Weak Employer Campaign*			Medium Employer Campaign			Intensive Employer Campaign		
	Sample Proportion or Mean	Proportion or Mean for Wins	% Win Rate**	Sample Proportion or Mean	Proportion or Mean for Wins	% Win Rate**	Sample Proportion or Mean	Proportion or Mean for Wins	% Win Rate**	Sample Proportion or Mean	Proportion or Mean for Wins	% Win Rate**
Outcome												
Election Outcome	.75	1.00	.75 (.00)	.90	1.00	.90 (.00)	.66	1.00	.66 (.00)	.33	1.00	.33 (.00)
First Contract Outcome	.66	.88	NA	.81	.90	NA	.58	.88	NA	.28	.80	NA
Post-Contract Membership	.70	.72	NA	.67	.68	NA	.75	.77	NA	.76	.71	NA
Union Tactics												
Percent cards	.60	.63	NA	.60	.62	NA	.59	.64	NA	.59	.76	NA
At least 70% cards	.31	.38	.92 (.68)	.36	.38	.97 (.86)	.26	.34	.87 (.59)	.33	.80	.80 (.10)
Organizing committee used	.77	.77	.74 (.77)	.70	.72	.92 (.85)	.81	.81	.67 (.65)	1.00	1.00	.33 (.00)
Percent on committee	.07	.07	NA	.06	.06	NA	.08	.08	NA	.08	.11	NA
Representative committee	.23	.23	.77 (.75)	.16	.16	.93 (.89)	.29	.33	.76 (.64)	.33	.40	.40 (.30)
Diagrammed workplace	.59	.53	.68 (.84)	.46	.44	.85 (.94)	.66	.66	.66 (.67)	.93	.80	.29 (1.00)
Percent housecalled	.40	.40	NA	.39	.41	NA	.42	.40	NA	.33	.10	NA
50% or more housecalled	.09	.07	.56 (.77)	.06	.05	.80 (.91)	.11	.10	.60 (.67)	.20	.00	.00 (.42)
Number of mass meetings	4.82	4.37	NA	3.74	3.85	NA	5.14	5.05	NA	9.67	5.60	NA
Number of small group meetings	11.63	10.34	NA	6.90	7.21	NA	12.30	14.61	NA	36.87	12.40	NA
Percent surveyed one-on-one	.10	.11	NA	.10	.09	NA	.11	.13	NA	.09	.09	NA
Rank-and-file did housecalls	.17	.17	.76 (.76)	.08	.08	1.00 (.94)	.23	.27	.83 (.66)	.25	.00	.00 (.33)
Solidarity days used	.17	.19	.82 (.73)	.13	.15	1.00 (.88)	.18	.20	.75 (.64)	.33	.80	.60 (.20)
Number of letters	4.47	3.21	NA	2.60	2.68	NA	3.98	3.25	NA	18.73	11.20	NA
Number of leaflets	6.07	4.59	NA	3.51	3.69	NA	6.16	5.88	NA	21.33	4.80	NA
Dignity, fairness primary issues	.38	.36	.71 (.78)	.35	.35	.90 (.91)	.40	.38	.63 (.69)	.40	.20	.17 (.44)
Bargaining committee before election	.15	.16	.79 (.74)	.14	.16	1.00 (.88)	.15	.15	.69 (.66)	.20	.20	.33 (.33)
At least 1 organizer per 100 eligible voters	.76	.78	.77 (.67)	.77	.75	.88 (.95)	.75	.81	.72 (.50)	.80	1.00	.42 (.00)

* The employer campaign breakdown was created as follows: "No or Weak Employer Campaign" includes all elections where the employer ran no campaign or used only one tactic (46% of sample); "Medium Employer Campaign" includes all elections where the employer used 2 to 5 anti-union tactics (46% of sample); "Intensive Employer Campaign" includes all elections where the employer used more than five tactics (8% of sample). The anti-union tactics include: captive audience meetings; anti-union committees; anti-union leaflets; supervisor one-on-ones; unscheduled wage increases during the campaign; promises of improvements in wages, benefits, or working conditions; promotion of key union leaders; and media campaigns.

** Number in parentheses lists the percent win rate when the characteristic did not occur.

TABLE 3: Union Organizing Tactics and First Contract Rates

	First Contract Rate		
	Sample Proportion or Mean	Proportion or Mean for First Contract	% Contract Rate*
Union Tactics			
Percent cards	.60	.63	NA
At least 70% cards	.31	.39	.91 (.87)
Organizing committee used	.77	.77	.88 (.88)
Percent on committee	.07	.07	NA
Representative committee	.23	.25	.94 (.86)
Diagrammed workplace	.59	.56	.91 (.85)
Percent housecalled	.40	.40	NA
50% or more housecalled	.09	.07	.90 (.88)
Number of mass meetings	4.82	4.33	NA
Number of small group meetings	11.63	10.13	NA
Percent surveyed one-on-one	.10	.10	NA
Rank-and-file did housecalls	.17	.17	.92 (.92)
Solidarity days used	.17	.19	.89 (.88)
Number of letters	4.47	3.14	NA
Number of leaflets	6.07	4.63	NA
Dignity, fairness primary issues	.38	.37	.90 (.87)
Bargaining committee before election	.15	.15	.90 (.84)
At least 1 organizer per 100 eligible voters	.76	.80	.84 (.89)

* Number in parentheses lists the first contract rate when the characteristic did not occur.

TABLE 4: Union Tactics and Post-First Contract Membership Rates

	Post-Contract Membership Rate*			
	Proportion or Mean for All Units With Contracts	Proportion or Mean with Less than 60% Membership	Proportion of Mean with 60-90 % Membership	Proportion or Mean with 90% or More Membership
Union Tactics				
Percent cards	.63	.58	.62	.67
At least 70% cards	.39	.22	.41	.48
Organizing committee used	.77	.78	.74	.80
Percent on committee	.07	.04	.08	.09
Representative committee	.25	.03	.34	.35
Diagrammed workplace	.56	.57	.64	.46
Percent housecalled	.40	.28	.40	.44
50% or more housecalled	.07	.03	.10	.07
Number of mass meetings	4.33	4.42	4.50	4.09
Number of small group meetings	10.13	8.11	14.81	7.57
Percent surveyed one-on-one	.10	.03	.10	.17
Rank-and-file did housecalls	.17	.14	.23	.13
Solidarity days used	.19	.19	.21	.17
Number of letters	3.14	4.89	2.05	2.76
Number of leaflets	4.63	5.28	4.88	4.04
Dignity, fairness primary issues	.37	.36	.26	.46
Bargaining committee before election	.15	.03	.24	.15
Number of R&F Intensive Tactics Used***	2.32	1.78	2.55	2.59
Union campaign included 5 or more tactics	.09	.00	.07	.17
At least 1 organizer per 100 eligible voters	.80	.78	.76	.85

* Twenty-nine percent of the elections in the sample had a post-contract membership rate of less than 60%, 34% had a membership rate of between 60 and 90% and 37% had a membership rate of 90% or more.

** Number in parentheses lists the first contract rate when the characteristic did not occur.

*** Rank-and-file tactics include the following: 70% or more of the unit signed cards before the petition was filed; union had a representative committee; union used small group meetings; union housecalled the majority of the unit; union used rank-and-file volunteers to do housecalls; dignity, fairness, and service quality primary issues; union used one-on-one contract surveys; and bargaining committee established before the election.