

## **Organizing for Keeps: Building a Twenty-first Century Labor Movement**

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In the last several years a great deal of discussion has taken place both inside and outside the labor movement about the need for American unions to organize massive numbers of unorganized workers. Who exactly this target workforce should be, ranging from low-wage contingent workers in home care, janitorial, or food service occupations, to the legions of unorganized clerical workers in business services, to the expanding professional and technical workforce in our "high tech" economy; to both skilled and unskilled production workers in the light manufacturing plants which have sprouted up across the South and rural Midwest, remains a topic of debate. Agreement has also not been reached as to which strategies are most effective to organize which workers. Nor is there a clear understanding of what it takes to move beyond the initial certification election or recognition campaign to build lasting, vital unions in these newly organized workplaces— to organize for keeps.

But in one area there seems to be near universal agreement: the background and experience of the majority of unorganized workers currently being targeted by American unions are much different from the background and experience of labor's traditional base. Whether home care workers in California, hotel employees in Las Vegas, ticket agents across the nation's airport; or production workers in light manufacturing plants in the deep South, the majority of newly organized workers today are women and people of color.

As we have learned, in the current hostile organizing climate, unions only succeed in organizing when they run aggressive grassroots campaigns, with an emphasis on developing active leadership among the rank-and-file workers being organized. Consequently, many newly organized workers come into the labor movement already armed with organizing and leadership skills and experience. The challenge for the American labor movement is to nurture and develop these new leaders so that they can assist in the effort to rebuild and revitalize their unions.

However, all too often unions see newly organized workers as simply dues payers to fund the status quo and rank-and-file leaders as little more than bodies to do housecalls and staff picket lines. In doing so they seriously risk alienating those workers most interested in joining and strengthening the labor movement, those who, with good reason, would question why they go through the very difficult process of organizing a union only to be denied a seat at the table once they have won.

This shift in demographics and experience raises many important questions. Who are unions actually organizing in the 1990s? What success have they had in going beyond their traditional base? How, if at all, have the demographics of the organizers changed to match the changing workforce being organized? Which models of organizing have been most effective

with which workers? To what extent are unions developing active and representative rank-and-file leadership in both the organizing and first contract campaigns and how has that affected their success in organizing? What is the interplay between contract campaigns, strikes, and union organizing success? How have unions adapted to organizing in the global economy? What are the implications of current organizing practices and outcomes for the future of American unions and their leaders?

In the fall of 1997, in the hope of challenging union and university researchers and educators to try to answer some of these difficult questions, the University and College Labor Education Association (UCLEA) and the AFL-CIO Education Department sent out a call for papers for their joint annual conference to be held in San Jose, California, April 30 through May 2, 1998. The stated goal of the conference was to "bring together union and university labor educators, researchers, and activists who are committed to revitalizing and strengthening the labor movement through developing rank-and-file leadership for the long haul." Paper proposals were encouraged which addressed issues such as effective models of rank-and-file leadership development during and after organizing and first contract campaigns; the effectiveness of different organizing models and strategies and their varying impact on different workers and industrial sectors; strategies for union building through strikes, contract campaigns, community coalitions, and cross-border solidarity; inter-ethnic and inter-gender contradictions in new organizing; and labor's experience in taking on tough issues such as immigrant bashing, affirmative action, welfare cutbacks, and homophobia. In particular, the conference planners were interested in case studies and quantitative research that used original data to provide fresh insights into factors contributing to union success in developing lasting and effective rank-and-file leadership, a subject that had been sorely neglected in academic research and writing to date.

The response to the call for papers was overwhelming. We received more than sixty proposals from a broad mix of labor educators, industrial and labor relations researchers, and union leaders and staff. Fifty of those papers were presented at the San Jose conference, which brought together 300 union and university educators and activists from a diversity of academic disciplines, unions, and industrial sectors. Each session included a mix of paper presenters and union practitioners, with the union and UCLEA co-chairs actively encouraging discussion from the floor. In the end, the conference succeeded in both generating new and accessible research in the areas of organizing and leadership development and providing a forum for a serious debate on some of the toughest issues facing the American labor movement—namely, how to build lasting, powerful, democratic, and inclusive union organizations despite the magnitude of the challenge. Perhaps most important of all, the conference recognized and nurtured the critical link between labor educators and organizers, challenging organizers to think more about leadership development and labor educators to think more about union building, and both groups to work more together.

In the hope that this debate would extend well beyond those who were able to attend the conference, the conference conveners decided to pull together a collection of some of the best papers from the conference in this special issue of the *Labor Studies Journal*. The volume

begins with AFLCIO Education Director, Bill Fletcher, Jr.'s keynote address to the San Jose conference. In his speech, Fletcher laid out the challenge to participants that "to truly build unions for keeps, in order to organize and sustain those new members, we must be about building class consciousness" and set the stage for the paper presentations that followed. The articles touch on many of the different themes that were the focus of the conference. Both the article by David Kieffer and Immanuel Ness and that by Tom Juravich and Jeff Hilgert focus on organizing immigrant workers outside the traditional NLRB process, but with two very different work forces in two very different campaigns. Juravich and Hilgert tell the story of the UNITE campaign among primarily El Salvadoran women garment workers at Richmark, while Kieffer and Ness examine the campaign to organize asbestos removal workers in New York City. Bruce Nissen and Seth Rosen evaluate CWA's membership-based organizing model, while Teresa Conrow and Linda Delp look at using popular theater techniques to teach organizing through workers' experiences. Matt Witt and Rand Wilson analyze the UPS contract campaign and its impact on organizing and building the labor movement. The final two articles, by Henry Frundt and Frank Borgers, examine union global solidarity campaigns, with Frundt focusing on UNITE's efforts to build linkages with apparel workers in Latin America and Borgers examining CWA's global initiatives in the telecommunications industry.

As UCLEA vice-president and Professional Council Chair and as the person responsible for working with the AFL-CIO Education Department to coordinate the annual conference, it has been my pleasure to edit this special issue. I was assisted in this effort by the conference planning committee, including Bill Fletcher, Tony Sarmiento, and David Alexander from the AFL-CIO, and Kent Wong, Ruth Needleman, Nancy DellaMattera, Jean Troutman-Poole, John Remington, Bruce Nissen, and Tom Juravich from UCLEA. Nancy DellaMattera, in particular, put in a great deal of time assisting me with reviewing papers and pulling together the special issue, while Beth Berry provided her invaluable copy-editing skills to the final volume, and Katie Briggs, Nina Davis, and later Anne Sievcrding coordinated all the details that ensured that both the conference and the subsequent special issue were a success. As editor of the *Journal*, John Remington also played a critical role in ensuring that the special issue came to fruition.

But most of all we need to thank all of the labor educators, organizers, and union leaders who are out in the field wrestling with these tough issues, struggling against great odds to engage in the major structural, cultural, and strategic changes necessary to build a stronger, more aggressive, more progressive, more inclusive, and more democratic labor movement in our nation and around the world.