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Organizing for Justice

**ILGWU returns to social unionism
to organize immigrant workers**

■ *Jeff Hermanson*

■ In El Paso, an apparel subcontractor padlocks his factory, then moves down the street to reopen under a new name. Led by the community organization La Mujer Obrera, the Latina garment workers from the original shop, owed six weeks' back wages, occupy the new factory and chain themselves to sewing machines. The cops cut the chains and haul the workers off to jail, where they continue their protest by refusing to eat. After their release, the workers take their struggle to New York's fashion center, and in alliance with the ILGWU, confront the owner of Jou Jou Designs (the company whose clothes they had sewed for free). Embarrassed and fearful of negative publicity, Jou Jou's owner flies to El Paso and directly pays the workers their back-wages, bypassing the subcontractor who tried to cheat them.

■ After six years of bitter struggle, Latino workers at New York's largest sweater factory finally win an ILGWU contract. The factory's owner, in financial difficulty and desperate for skilled workers, turns to his former enemy, the ILGWU, for assistance. The Union, through its "Campaign for Justice," recruits Chinese nonunion operators from the Workers' Center's ESL and workers' rights classes, and secures funds for a labor-management training

■ *Jeff Hermanson is Director of Organizing for the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).*

program. Productivity and piece-rate earnings increase, as does in-shop militancy, when the workers demonstrate that the combination of efficient labor and a union contract is a force to be reckoned with.

■ A San Francisco nonunion sweatshop owner borrows money from her own workers, then disappears, leaving 450 workers unemployed and owed more than a half-million dollars in back wages and loans. Tears streaming down their faces, the desperate workers seek help from the ILGWU's newly-opened Workers' Center in Chinatown. The Union, in alliance with community and political supporters, pressures the jobbers: two of the jobbers, The Gap and Byer of California, come up with \$450,000. With the ILG's assistance, a new shop is set up to employ some of the displaced workers.

Desperate situations bring forth desperate responses. But garment workers are demonstrating that when educated of their rights and assured of support, they are ready to struggle for justice, even when chances of success seem poor. The ILGWU currently faces many challenges: How do we organize an industry composed of thousands of tiny subcontractors? How do we build on isolated collective actions to create a groundswell for change in the workers' communities that cannot be ignored? How do we restrict the flight of jobs from unionized communities to nonunion areas, within the U.S. and beyond its borders?

The ILGWU's Campaign for Justice puts forth a controversial thesis: the conditions exist or can be created for the rapid organization of thousands of garment workers at a time. A community-based strategy, properly implemented, can bring about an upsurge such as the ILGWU experienced in its early years. Through such a strategy, the Union can regain its position as a power in the garment industry, and begin to restrict the flight of jobs and deterioration of standards.

Broad-based, mass organizing is our Union's legacy. The ILGWU was built in the early 1900's, not by organizing one shop at a time, but by industry-wide, community-supported strikes. Anarchist, communist, and socialist agitators within the immigrant community acted as a catalyst, stirring their fellow workers to unite to improve their horrible working conditions. The great strike of 1909, the "Uprising of the 20,000", was led by young, newly immigrant women who the owners were sure would never strike. But these young women struck with a vengeance, and through their struggle they built the ILGWU, winning by waging economic



Shirtwaist workers on strike march to City Hall in 1909.

warfare and battling for public awareness of their exploitation. They found allies outside their close-knit community, including the native-born, mostly middle-class women of the Women's Trade Union League, the Socialist Party, students at Vassar and Wellesley, progressive journalists and other reformers. This coalition provided support for the struggle which formed the ILGWU, not as a business union nor as a "trade union, pure and simple", but as a mass movement to fight widespread industry oppression and to remake society in a broad-based struggle for justice. The ILGWU calls this "social unionism."

Our founders did not organize one shop at a time: they organized hundreds of shops at once. The garment industry manufacturers of the early 1900's not only maintained inside shops, but also sent out large amounts of work to homeworkers and subcontractors. In order to effectively cripple production, the union had to unify the workers in all segments of the industry. Again in the 1930's, whole industry sectors were organized overnight as the workers rebelled en masse against the Depression-era sweatshops. Throughout most of the ILGWU's history, our organizing strategy—by choice and necessity—has been the general strike.

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN FOR JUSTICE

As in the past, the dazzling wealth of Seventh Avenue is created in dingy sweatshops in poor immigrant communities. The power

of the millionaire designers arises from thousands of tiny subcontracting shops, employing an average of less than 30 workers each. To successfully wage battle against this wealth and power, garment workers must unite their own ranks *and* seek support from the wider community, as in 1909. We must return to the social unionism of our founders: organizing thousands of workers at a time, becoming the voice of the *all* garment workers, and mobilizing our allies outside the labor community in order to increase our influence and leverage. Once again, conditions exist which suggest the strategy of the general strike.

The ILGWU's Campaign for Justice strategy first identifies concentrated employment and living areas of garment workers. We aim to develop the existing conditions that are favorable to organizing and then initiate struggles. Within the community, the tactics will vary and are dictated to some extent by each community's particular circumstances and conditions. We have developed the following five principles:

First, the Campaign for Justice must be community-based. We create links to the community of workers through meeting their immediate needs and concerns, including those which go beyond the shop floor. We establish a physical location, a worker's center, in the midst of our battleground so that everyone can find it. We build alliances by reaching out to existing religious, community, and political organizations that are trusted and supported by the workers. In the past five years the ILGWU has established five workers' centers: Brooklyn, El Paso, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Manhattan.

Second, after recruiting enough members to establish a base, an elected "workers' council" guides the center's activities. Subcommittees on membership, education, political action, services and social and sports activities are formed. One of the lessons we've learned is to avoid pushing to form factory-based committees. Many times it's impossible to get a broad committee going in any one factory, but we can get three or four people from that factory to a bigger, community-based committee. From that larger committee we can maintain contact with particular factories and work to recruit more members.

Third, the workers' center provides concrete services to garment workers and their families that immediately improve conditions. We offer classes in English, Spanish literacy, and skills training. There is immigration counseling and discussions about workers' rights. We organize social and sports activities, leadership training and newsletters, and provide economic services, such as food buying co-ops, store discounts, and job referrals.

In all our activities and services, we utilize a participatory, "consciousness-raising" approach, and seek to develop the workers' leadership abilities. For example, English classes are used to encourage workers to articulate their feelings about, and develop their understanding of, their position in the society and the system of production, the concepts of unity and struggle, and the legal and political system.

Fourth, once workers begin to develop a basic understanding of their common oppression, and wish to take action to improve their living and working conditions, struggles are initiated. These are not contract struggles: in one instance, a boss was an outrageous sexual harasser; in order to protect the identities of the inside workers, workers' center members leafletted. We have also leafletted to protest unheated shops, locked fire exits and other unsafe working conditions. One day work stoppages have also been effective. We've organized mass demonstrations and boycotts at grocery stores that were dirty and didn't post prices on each item. We look for victories that resolve the immediate problem and show the workers their own potential power, without risking everything.

Finally, we try to use each localized struggle to sensitize the broader community to the conditions that exist. We develop a mass media strategy which emphasizes the human rights and social justice issues. We couldn't afford to pay for the kind of free press coverage that we've received in El Paso, with front page stories almost every day for months. We try to present a clear issue in compelling form and then mobilize prominent local, regional and national groups to actively and publicly support us. Hunger strikes and factory occupations give our struggles a dramatic face; people see the pictures and begin to understand.

THE CAMPAIGN IN BROOKLYN & EL PASO

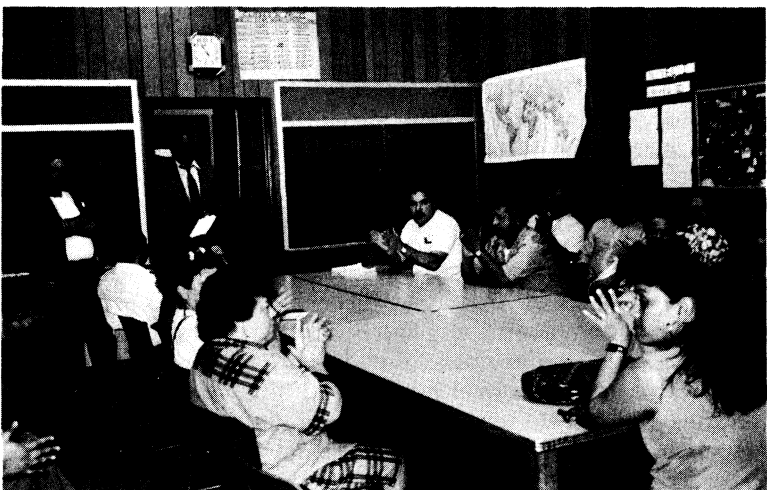
We are still at the initial stages of testing our Campaign for Justice strategy. The Brooklyn workers' center, located on the border between Williamsburg and Bushwick in a largely Mexican, Dominican and Haitian community is in a "working poor" neighborhood that contains over a hundred knitwear and sportswear factories. Most of these shops belong to the Williamsburg Trade Association (WTA), an employers' organization that has a sweetheart agreement with an independent union of their own creation, the "United Production Workers, Local 17-18." Five thousand garment workers have been exploited by this unholy alliance, and for the past 15 years these workers have been coming to the

ILGWU and asking, "Isn't there something we can do?"

Since the NLRB presumes this multi-employer association to be a single, appropriate unit for collective bargaining, we were faced with organizing 5,000 workers in over 125 shops. We began by targeting workers at the 35 largest plants in the Association. In six months we signed up over 2500 workers, and in January 1989 filed over 30 separate petitions, as well as a petition for an association-wide election.

In the years that followed as the NLRB considered which petition(s) to accept, we realized that the factory-based organizing committees we had set up were not adequate to maintain the workers spirit over the long haul. To build and sustain the movement, we needed to bring the workers from many factories together. This led us to form the first workers' center in Williamsburg in late 1990.

We found that workers were eager to join our workers' center. In a short time, we recruited hundreds of workers willing to participate and to pay annual dues of \$12.00 to become associate members of the ILGWU. We also formed an area pastor's council of eight ministers and priests who wanted to work with us. The ILGWU's Immigration Project helped undocumented workers get their green cards through the amnesty program, and at the workers' center we taught basic English, Spanish literacy, and GED programs.



ILG Vice President Edgar Romney discusses contract negotiations at the Williamsburg Worker's Center with newly organized workers from Mademoiselle.

Our most significant victory to date came when the WTA's largest shop, Mademoiselle Knitwear, a sweater factory of over 500 workers, decided to drop out of the Association and fight us on their own. The employer, who had been a founder and long time president of the Association, was sure he could defeat us in an NLRB election. The subsequent election was indeterminate, and while the challenged ballots lay uncounted, the ILGWU built pressure. The presence of the workers' center, and the activities in both the factory and the neighborhood, caused Mademoiselle to realize that not only were we not going to quit, but that we were getting stronger. The battle waged by the workers on the shop floor and the high turnover of dissatisfied workers continually disrupted production, and distracted the employer from his business. In the meantime, several sets of unfair labor practice charges ate up hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees. Finally, over a year after the election, tired of fighting and forced into Chapter 11, the employer buckled and came to the Union to make peace.

Our victory at Mademoiselle Knitwear gave a tremendous boost to the workers' center staff and membership, and we continue to build toward a final struggle with the rest of the Williamsburg Trade Association. An NLRB election in the remaining WTA shops, employing about 3000 workers, is expected in early 1993.

Taking on the subcontractors in El Paso

We have replicated the Campaign for Justice strategy in other major garment centers. In El Paso we are organizing in communities on both sides of the United States/Mexico border, since many of the garment workers live in Ciudad Juarez, and commute daily across the border into El Paso. This is a virulently anti-union environment—it's still against Texas law for a non-citizen to be a labor organizer.

In the 1970s, El Paso was the site of the ACTWU's epic four year strike against Farah. A tremendous effort by the Farah workers and ACTWU resulted in an historic victory and a union contract for thousands of workers. But in the '80s, Farah, along with many other employers, moved their operation to Mexico, and thousands of El Paso garment workers lost their jobs or were forced into the tiny sweatshops that remained.

Due to our alliance with a community organization called La Mujer Obrera ("Working Women") we were able to move quickly into action. La Mujer Obrera had an already established center, El Centro Obrero ("Workers' Center") and a membership organization of the type that we are now establishing elsewhere. They

agreed to set up a joint garment workers' center with the ILGWU and we began to work together to carry out the struggle. Although we ultimately were unable to maintain our alliance with La Mujer Obrera, we learned a great deal from our work with them.

Energized by the Jou Jou Design victory described earlier, we took on a union organizing campaign. We struck DCB Apparel Group, a Los Angeles firm that produces their garments in El Paso. They had four contractors in El Paso with a total of about 150 workers. DCB Apparel's contractors were also guilty of non-payment of wages, with one shop, Sonia Fashion, owing their minimum-wage workers \$85,000. We began the strike there, then extended it to the other shops.

Seventy-five workers occupied Sonia Fashion for three months, and a dozen workers engaged in a hunger strike that lasted for 23 days. Community support and extensive local publicity prevented the employer and building owner from challenging the occupation. Upon leaving the building, the workers seized the sewing machines in lieu of their back wages, and placed them under lock and key for the duration of the strike. We chased DCB's production into Mexico, and pressured their customers from New York City to Los Angeles. The struggle got national press attention. The Texas Attorney General used a new interpretation of Texas law to hold the jobber, DCB, responsible for the wages owed by its subcontractors.

After eight months we won the strike and achieved a "jobber's agreement" from DCB that guarantees employment for 125 workers in their shops, health insurance, and other benefits and increases wages. We won a ground-breaking restriction on the company's right to source production abroad. We met incredible resistance by other area employers, who collaborated with DCB and donated resources to try to beat us. But our broader coalition, militant tactics, and most of all the determination of the workers won in the end.

BUILDING FOR THE DECADES TO COME

We haven't organized large numbers through our Campaign for Justice workers' centers yet, and they are far from self-sustaining. But we have positioned the ILGWU as a leader in the struggle, both in the workers' communities and in the broader public arena. We are building for the decades to come, not just for any particular campaign. Such long-term thinking requires a substantial risk and the commitment of substantial resources by the ILGWU, literally millions of dollars.

Since we can already mobilize hundreds of workers in struggle in each area, we can reasonably expect to mobilize thousands in the near future. Given time, we will revitalize our union and recover the strength and militancy of our early years.

We have already learned many important lessons. First, it's possible to develop a rank and file leadership experienced in organization and militant methods of struggle through the workers' council approach. Secondly, a commu-

nity-based organizational structure can both anchor and sustain factory and strike committees over a long term. Finally, it is not easy to build lasting alliances with community organizations, especially under the pressure of lengthy and difficult struggles.

This approach may generate mass strikes on the scale of the 1930's if conditions are right and we choose to do so. But if it simply provides a broad base of support for factory-based campaigns, such as the Mademoiselle Knitwear and DCB Apparel Group campaigns, and enables us to take on bigger, more complicated multi-plant campaigns, then this approach will have proved successful.

The impact on the political environment and on public consciousness may be the most important short-term effect of highly visible community-based union organizing. We must make the broader public become aware of, and take responsibility for changing the miserable, unjust living and working conditions that exist within our borders. The reality remains that in 1993, children in the U.S. suffer in sweatshops and garment workers are often not paid for their labor.

For the long term, the key to the labor movement's survival is its self-transformation. Unions must take responsibility for effectively addressing the issues that deeply affect the working class beyond their own ranks. If we in the labor movement are committed to organizing the unorganized, we must first learn to serve their needs, win their trust, and engage them in struggle. If we do so, the labor movement can once again aspire to lead a broad, mass movement for social justice. ■



JOEL SAICIDO/EL PASO TIMES