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Organizing Never Stops

■ *Robert Muehlenkamp*

When we have a demonstration or we have a picketline in our local union and we want the members to come out and we want the members to participate, why is it that Eddie's area in our union has the most participation, even though the buses from his area of the union have to come the farthest?

Now, there are a lot of ways we can answer that question: That his workers are from a small town and everyone else is from a big town, except that they aren't—they're all from the same metropolitan area. Or that those workers work in a different industry, but they don't—they're from the same industry. Or that they're from a different union with a different tradition, but they're not—they're from the same union.

So why does Eddie's area always have more participation by the members? Why is it, in effect, always stronger?

And the only answer to that we can come up with—after years and years of looking at this question—is that it does not depend on some kind of skilled mobilizing for that event, and it doesn't depend on the charismatic personality of the organizer or the office

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involved, and it doesn't depend on any other differences among workers because they are pretty much the same. *What it does depend on is the kind of day-to-day organization and representation among the members.*

Now, what kind of organization is effective? One way to answer that question is to contrast the kind of organizing we do *before* workers establish their union and what we do *after* they negotiate their first contract.

Prior to winning a union election, we work very intensively with the workers in a shop building the union. We identify leadership, we educate the leadership, we learn everything we can about every single worker in the shop. We mobilize workers around issues, we jump on every mistake the boss makes, we mass distribute newsletters and other materials, we inform the community about the campaign.

And then what do we do the day after the workers sign their first contract?

It is as though an entirely new ballgame is being played. It is as though we were playing football before and now we're going to play baseball.

Instead of constantly developing new rank-and-file leaders, we act like they have all the information and skills they will ever need. Instead of recruiting more leaders, we act like whoever already came forward as leaders at that point are the union's permanent leaders. Instead of targeting active workers to get them more active, we abandon them. Instead of mobilizing workers—now dues-paying members—around issues, we write letters and file grievance forms. Instead of recruiting new workers to be good union members, we are satisfied just to get their dues.

Why do we act one way before the election and so differently the day after?

Before we establish the union, we know who the employer is and what he is going to do during an organizing drive. And we know what we have to do to defeat him. No one who has been through this as a rank-and-filer or as an organizer has any illusions. We know the boss makes destroying the union his number one priority, even more important than production. We know that they will fire people, that they will make threats, that they will bribe lead workers and promote people out of the union. We know that they will threaten to close down if the union wins. We know that people who step forward and show courage will be isolated and slandered. We know the bosses will set up fink committees and finance them. We know that the local news coverage in the town will be violently anti-union. That every employer and busi-



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ness organization in the community will be lined up against us. We know that no expense will be spared in delaying the NLRB election. We know that the workers will be subjected to endless, vicious, racist, divisive propaganda.

And we know that in order to prevail against this kind of employer campaign, we must treat every single worker who is eligible as an important person who must be persuaded to vote for the union.

And to accomplish that, we build and run the union in certain ways. For example, we chart every work area and every classification in every shift and building, and we identify every eligible worker somewhere on the chart—and we learn everything about that worker that we need to know. Including whether or not they signed a card, whether or not they have attended meetings and which ones, and whether or not they have stopped attending, and whose relative they are, and whether or not they signed a petition or handed out a leaflet. And if we find someone who we think is weakening, we will visit that person at home—and throughout the campaign we make a whole lot of house visits. And we do this *because each worker is seen as an individual and as important.*

And we see to it that every aspect of the campaign—month after month—is carried through by the workers. If there is a press conference, the workers hold the press conference. If there is a need to visit churches, it is the workers who visit the churches and talk to ministers. If there is a presentation to the Central Labor Council, the workers come and make it. If there is a mass leafleting to be done, the workers carry out that task.

And when the boss does something that abuses workers to take away their rights, we jump on it. Whether it is unilaterally changing an interpretation of sick leave policy or threatening to subcontract some jobs, we immediately call meetings, pass petitions,

send delegations to the employer—and maybe even go public. And we mobilize as many of the workers to do this as we can *because we know that only by having all the union supporters fully informed and involved can we defeat the employer in the kind of campaign that we know the employer runs during an organizing drive.*

And we know we have to organize this way before workers have an election because we know that there is one central theme that every employer tries to drum into the heads of the workers we are trying to organize in order to defeat their efforts to have a union. And that theme is that there are three parties involved: there is the employer, there are his employees, and then there is the union which is an outside third party.

Now, we all know there are only two parties: there are the bosses and there are workers, and when workers unite they have a union and there still are two parties—there are bosses and there are workers who are now united.

But the employer, in every piece of propaganda, in every speech and in every word they say to every worker, is simply attempting to convince the workers that they don't really need another boss, that the union is another boss, a third party who will do further harm to them. And if you go through the files you have on any campaign and you pull out as many leaflets and letters and press releases as you can find, no matter what the employer appears to be talking about—a union's dues structure or its undemocratic constitution, or violence it has committed against other workers, or the reputation of the local union president, or financial corruption in the union, or substandard contracts—the real theme the boss is trying to get the workers to believe is that the union is an outside third party that is trying to do something to them.

That is why we organize this way before the election.

And what do we do the day after the election? All of a sudden instead of playing football, we're playing baseball. We act like the rules entirely change. Instead of working so hard to get workers involved, we take short cuts and do things without workers. Instead of showing *in life* that there are only two parties, we fall into the trap of making it three parties. Business agents handle grievances, or the shop steward handles them alone, or with only one worker. We don't inform every member in a department about a problem; we try to "settle it" with just the workers affected knowing anything about it, as though the boss can hurt only one worker. A boss can't hurt only one worker—a contract violation is against the collective that bargained the contract.

Before the election we lived by the creed "an injury to one is

an injury to all." After the contract we act like "an injury to one is an injury to one."

And if politicians or other unions are to be met with, "the Union" (whatever that is) issues statements and press releases and goes to talk with people. We, in effect, become a third party. We help to de-mobilize the workers whom we have just mobilized.

What a contrast to how we organized the union to get it started.

Now let's go back to the question we started with: Why does Eddie's area have more people come from a longer distance on a regular basis, year after year, to participate in demonstrations and picketlines?

And the answer is that internal organizing in Eddie's area continues after the first contract—the same organizing drive we needed to start the union.

That means we continue to keep our charts up to date. And if a shop steward retires or quits, we just as intensively and seriously and immediately recruit a member to replace that shop steward as we do a committee member during the organizing drive. And if a new hire comes on board, we target who will organize them to support their union, including house visiting them. And if the employer does something which is outside our clear rights under a contract, instead of just letting it pass, we mobilize the workers in every way we can think of to fight against it. And it means that if the union is to be represented in organizations outside the union and to the public at large, it is the rank-and-filers—and not always the same ones, but different ones—who are targeted and recruited on a constant basis to represent the union.

And it means that after we establish the union, we continue to follow the fundamental principle of all organizing: that it is the job of the organizers—which means every union leader—not to talk to those who are already convinced, not to preach to those who are already in church, but constantly to reach out to those who still have an open mind but are not with us. That is the only way to stop from becoming a "club"—and having our leadership seen by the members as some kind of third party.

The only way we will do this and successfully involve members is if we treat each member as an individual who is important. I think that is the answer to the question of why participation in Eddie's area is always greater. Because, does the boss change after we win an election? Is any union "safe" today with the boss?

The theme here is "organizing never stops." We can't afford to stop. That is why we must in our internal organizing work be as serious and as intense as we are during an NLRB organizing drive about building the union to fight the bosses. ■