

LRR FOCUS: "When You Stop Organizing, You Really Lose the Union"

An Interview with Larry Cohen, Organizing Director of the CWA.



LRR: My interview with Marilyn Haith, CWA organizer for District 3, focuses on the work going on in North Carolina to build a union composed of both black and white members. I'd like our discussion to focus on the broader context of organizing in the South. What's your approach to organizing there?

Cohen: No matter where we're organizing, our strategy is based on the same two things: knowing the industry and knowing the community. Every community is different and the organizing we do best is when it's rooted in the community. All our organizers are either from the area or now live in the area where they're organizing—there's nobody in a hotel. It's *community-based workplace organizing*.

We say to our people that the union is three things: it's collective bargaining and representation; it's political and community action (which includes everything from electoral work to Jobs with Justice coalition-building); and it's organizing the unorganized. A triangle approach.

The typical CWA local in the South has to build the local by actively organizing members or else they'll drop out. This fits in with one of the key principles to rebuilding the Union: every member counts. There's tremendous strength in a system where the member has to come first or they don't join, they don't pay dues.

LRR: Labor Research Review covered your mobilization approach in "LRR 17: An Organizing Model of Unionism." It sounds like you follow the basic premise of that issue: "organizing never stops."

Cohen: You have to do that in the South. We have extremely active locals with terrific leadership and we base the organizing program on that. So we can go to those locals and say, "You're going to have more power in your communities and therefore in dealing with your existing employer if you're growing."

Now this again is a similar strategy to what we would employ anywhere, but it's particularly obvious in the South where people feel "Hey, we need more people on our side. We feel like we're the only union people in town."

With our approach, the outsider is *management*—the insider is the union. The union activist has lived in the community for her or his life. Corporate America's typical response to union organizing is to claim, "The union is a third party." CWA organizers can say "NO—management is the third party. We're the community. We're your neighbors. We're your co-workers. We're your sisters and brothers and we have to stand together."

LRR: You have over 20 full-time organizers in the South. Why the push now? Did you develop enough people to take on these roles or are you getting the institutional support?

Cohen: There is increasing support for organizing from the District level but more importantly, the local leadership increasingly is supporting it. People who are learning organizing skills through our mobilization approach to bargaining and political action then become eager to use their skills elsewhere. If you're building solidarity inside your workplace, and talking one on one to people about key issues, you're learning the same skills which allow you to talk to people in your family or neighborhood who don't have a union where they work.

LRR: Except for Florida, none of the states in the South recognize collective bargaining for public sector workers, so how do you become an effective force there?

Cohen: Our community-based workplace organizing in its essence depends on political activism as well as more traditional organizing strategies. By building political power in those communities will lead to the different stages of union recognition: first, recognition of the right to belong to a union voluntarily and eventually, collective bargaining. Many unionists who are active in the public sector argue that political clout—mobilizing people in communities around key issues—is vital even in states like New Jersey where public sector bargaining rights exist. When you stop mobilizing, you really lose the union.

LRR: Your community-based strategy must put more emphasis on community alliances than traditional organizing. The South has a longer history of associations and grassroots organizations, and other social justice networks than it has in labor unions, so what's your approach?



Cohen: First, we look for alliances with other organized workers. Secondly, we look to organize coalitions around economic justice issues. We say to people, "The union is a center in the community for economic justice—it's not an x-rated movie where non-members have to keep out."

Our strategy compels us to establish coalitions to address economic justice issues—either Jobs with Justice, or something like it. (See *LRR 18: Let's Get Moving*.) In Atlanta, for example, we are part of a very strong JwJ coalition led by Stewart Acuff of the Central Labor Council which includes religious folks, community and civil rights organizations, and both public and private sector unions. It's a step beyond asking people to support our contract fights to saying, "Let's decide as a group what issues are we going to mobilize on in this community."

In that sense, our alliance with AFSCME in both North Carolina and Texas is important. We're both going out of our way for each other. In North Carolina, our lead organizer works very closely with her counterpart in AFSCME. They share contacts and support each other's campaigns. This strategic alliance is particularly important in the South where it's tough enough to organize without having competition. We don't believe that any one union is really going to make that much of a difference but if we can help create an "organizing spirit" in North Carolina then we're all going to do better.