



Union Organizing Campaigns for a New Age

by Mark Busto and Laura Edwards

Over the past 30 years, the labor movement in the United States has steadily declined. Union membership rates have plummeted from 20.1 percent to just 11.3 percent. With membership at historic lows, unions are turning to new organizing strategies in an attempt to stay relevant to the working class.

The Rise of Non-Union Labor Groups

In this changing labor landscape, unions are starting to recognize the value of non-union workers' groups and religious organizations. While non-union labor groups cannot engage in collective bargaining, they can organize workers to strike or lobby for better terms and conditions of employment. In this manner, non-union labor groups allow workers to accomplish union-like goals, such as higher wages, through different means. Non-union labor groups are a particularly good option for workers not entitled to union rights, such as independent contractors like taxi and truck drivers. Unions are noticing the successes of these labor groups and are forming strategic partnerships to work in conjunction with them. In return, the labor groups are benefitting from the unions' organization, clear agenda, and funding.

For example, in New York City, non-union labor group the Restaurant Opportunities Center United ("ROC") is making headlines by successfully organizing non-union workers to bargain for better wages and benefits. Unlike a union, the ROC cannot engage in collective bargaining or enforce union contracts. However, the ROC assists workers in the restaurant business by organizing strikes, lobbying lawmakers for reforms, and taking legal action against companies that violate wage and hour law. Due to ROC's tactics, many restaurant workers in NYC now receive paid sick days. Further, unlike union members, ROC members are free to organize protests against companies that are not their direct employers. The AFL-CIO has reportedly partnered with ROC and supports its efforts. In fact, a ROC co-founder was one of the hundreds of guests from non-union labor groups invited to the September AFL-CIO convention.

Old Dogs, New Tricks

Non-union labor groups are also benefitting unions utilizing another tactic: pushing union agenda through legislation. Unions have long been using the legislative process for this purpose, but we are increasingly seeing union-backed legislation branded as social justice issues. Locally, we are seeing this new approach via tactics such as the City of SeaTac's Proposition 1 "living wage" initiative. Voters in SeaTac considered whether to approve a \$15/hour minimum wage and paid sick leave benefits for hospitality, transportation and airport workers. Prop. 1 also imposes restrictions on employers' labor practices, which is not surprising given that Prop. 1 made it to the ballot through support from a large coalition of labor organizations, particularly the SEIU. The unions captured endorsements from several non-union groups, such as the NAACP, Faith Action Network, and the Statewide Poverty Action Network, which helped to garner support from the social justice-minded voter. At the time this Note went to press, the vote on Prop. 1 was extremely close and its passage remained unclear. There is also a lawsuit in federal court challenging its legality.

Another new organizing tactic unions are using is the informal organization of non-union workers. For example, unions orchestrated fast food workers' strikes in more than 60 cities nationwide this year, including Seattle. The level of organization and participation was unusual given that the fast food workers are not formally represented by unions. Even more significant is that the workers were persuaded by unions to participate in the strikes at considerable risk to their jobs, which indicates their willingness to organize. These strikes allowed unions to introduce themselves to the workers and to start securing their position among them.

Unions are also doubling their efforts to organize industries with younger workers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2012 union membership rate among workers ages 16 to 24 was only 4.2 percent. Unions are specifically aiming to organize young worker industries in an effort to reverse membership decline. For example, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) successfully targeted and organized more than 60 young workers at 11 H&M stores in New York City this year. Unions are also forming subcommittees specifically for young workers and allowing young worker representatives to sit on their boards. The AFL-CIO hosts more than 800 young workers annually at its convention "We Are NextUP," which is specifically marketed to recruit and retain young workers.

Conclusions

Organized labor has experienced dwindling membership and power for the past 30 years. Unions will be unable to remedy that kind of steady decline overnight. Yet it is important to note that unions are utilizing new strategies. With the help of inventive tactics and non-union labor groups, organized labor is attempting to reinvigorate and transform itself. If you would like further assistance or information concerning the topic of this note, please contact Mark Busto or Laura Edwards at (425) 454-4233.

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