



THERE IS POWER IN A UNION: REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM HISTORY AND PRAXIS

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Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry

By WILLIAM Z FOSTER

National Chairman of the Communist Party and Leader of the 1919 Steel Strike

Note

“Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry” is written with the object of aiding the most active workers in the steel industry and steel workers generally in organizing the industry in the present campaign. There can be no doubt that a mastery of the principles developed in this pamphlet, principles based on practical experiences, would result in a greater efficiency on the part of all those now engaged in organizing the industry. It is really a manual of organization methods in the organization of the unorganized in the mass production industries.

The organizational principles and methods here developed can be easily adapted to problems of organizing other mass production and large-scale industries such as auto, rubber, chemical, textile, etc. There is a great poverty in the labor movement of such literature. This poverty is felt also in labor schools. This manual should prove very popular for trade union courses in the various workers’ labor schools. Let us hope that this is a beginning of the development of such literature to fill the need in the present growth of the trade union movement.

—Jack Stachel

Introduction

The methods outlined below of doing organization work in the steel industry are based upon the general principles of organization strategy and tactics developed in my pamphlet entitled: Unionizing Steel. They embody the lessons of the 1919 strike and of other steel struggles and they are suggested to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee for its consideration. The general principles in my pamphlet may be very briefly summarized as follows:

1. The organization work must be done by a working combination of the progressive and Left-wing forces in the labor movement. It is only these elements that have the necessary vision, flexibility and courage to go forward with such an important project as the organization of the 500,000 steel workers in the face of the powerful opposition of the Steel Trust and its capitalist allies. As far as the Right-wing reactionaries (crystallized in the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor) are concerned, they will not and cannot organize the steel workers. In 1936, even as in 1919, their attitude is one of sabotage and obstruction.

2. The organization campaign must be based upon the

principles of trade union democracy. That is, every effort must be made to draw the widest possible ranks of the workers into the activities of the leading, decisive committees, and also into the work of the organizers and the union generally. Only with such democracy, or systematic mass participation, can the great task of building the union be successfully accomplished.

3. The organization movement must be industrial and national in character. That is, (a) it must include every category of workers in the steel industry, not merely a thin stratum of skilled workers at the top; and (b) the drive must be carried on energetically and simultaneously in every steel center, not simply here and there spasmodically in individual mills or steel centers.

4. The campaign must develop a strong discipline among the organizers and workers in order to prevent the movement from being wrecked by company-inspired local strikes and other disruptive tendencies. The necessary discipline cannot be attained by issuing drastic orders, but must be based upon wide education work among the rank and file and the development of confidence among them in the cause and ultimate victory of the movement.

5. The organization campaign must be a fighting movement. It must realize that if the steel workers are to be organized they can only rely upon themselves and the support they get from other workers. While every advantage should be taken of all political institutions and individuals to defend the steel workers’ civil rights and to advance their interests generally, it would be the worst folly to rely upon Roosevelt, Earle or other capitalist politicians to adopt measures to organize the steel workers. There is every probability that only through a great strike can the steel workers establish their union and secure their demands, and this perspective must be constantly borne in mind.

6. Although the steel workers must not place their faith in capitalist politicians, they should utilize every means to develop working class political activity and organization in the steel areas. Especially there should be organized local Labor parties in the steel towns and thus foundations laid for an eventual Farmer-Labor Party.

7. The movement must be highly self-critical. That is, there should be a constant re-examination of the organization methods used. Only in such a way can the necessary adjustments be made in tactics to fit the different situations. And only thus can the workers and organizers avoid defeat and pessimism and be given a feeling of confidence and sure success. It is a fatal mistake to try to apply blue-print methods of organization to an industry that presents so many and varied situations as steel. Flexibility in the work is a first essential, and to achieve this requires drastic self-criticism.

The situation in the steel industry is now highly favorable

and if the organization work is prosecuted energetically, with due regard for the mistakes and weaknesses of past strikes and struggles, it will succeed. The present campaign of the Committee for Industrial Organization, of which John L. Lewis is the head, has many advantages over 1919. The industry is increasing production, the political situation is more favorable for maintaining the civil rights of the workers to meet and organize, the workers are in a more militant mood, the right of the workers to organize is more generally recognized, the campaign is being carried on upon the basis of one industrial union instead of 24 crafts, the illusions about company unionism are less now than ever, the campaign has the solid support of a dozen powerful trade unions, there are ample funds for the organizing work, the language problem is not as severe as in earlier years, the radio now enables the message of unionism to evade the employers' censorship and to be carried directly into the steel workers' home. And, lastly, there is now in the field a strong Communist Party (which was not so in 1919) that is lending all its support to the success of the campaign.

The steel workers have every reason to enter into the present campaign with full confidence of victory. Now is the time to break down the open-shop slavery that has cursed the steel industry ever since the defeat of the heroic Homestead strikers in 1892. Now is the opportunity to build the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers into a great union, powerful enough to bring a happier life to the steel workers and their families.

I. General

1. The steel workers cannot be organized by agitation alone ; it requires thorough organization work to unionize them.
2. The work must be coordinated and planned—per organizer, per locality, per day, per week, etc.
3. Not mechanical blue-print tactics, but flexibility. The degree to which the proposals below can be applied depends on local conditions; the workers' mood and strength of organization, the attitude of the bosses and government towards the campaign, etc.
4. The organization work must be carried out upon the basis of an energetic drive, not spontaneously and spasmodically, or merely a slow, gradual growth; sags in activity and loss of momentum are very dangerous in the drive by weakening the confidence of workers.
5. A strong discipline should prevail all through the campaign, but each unit must develop a healthy initiative, based on a vigorous trade union democracy.
6. A central aim must always be to draw the largest possible masses into direct participation in all the vital activities of the union ; membership recruitment, formulation of demands, union elections, petitions, pledge

votes, strike votes, strike organization, etc. This gives them a feeling that the union is actually their movement.

7. Self-criticism at all times is absolutely indispensable to the working out of proper tactics.
8. High morale among the organizers and enthusiasm and confidence among the workers are indispensable conditions to the success of the work.
9. Organizers do not know how to organize by instinct, but must be carefully taught.
10. Every organizer and unit in the campaign must be activated at all times. The whole organizing force should move forward as one machine to the accomplishment of its goal of building the union.
11. Hard work and sobriety are basic essentials for success. Chair-warmers and irresponsibles should be made to feel unwelcome in the organizing crew.
12. Every step taken in the campaign must have as its central purpose the direct recruitment of new members. The main slogan is: "Join the Union".

II. Organizational Forms and Functions

1. Structure of Organizing Forces.

The organizing force of the steel campaign should be formed on the following general basis:

- (a) The full-time and part-time organizers in the localities and districts should be formed into definite committees, each with a secretary and with sub-committees for publicity, Negro, youth, women and defense. They should hold regular weekly meetings at definite times and places.
- (b) A corps of volunteer organizers should be created, carefully selected to avoid unreliable elements. Each paid organizer should be commissioned as a captain of a crew of volunteer organizers and made immediately responsible for their work
- (c) Each local of the Amalgamated Association should appoint an organizing committee of several members.
- (d) In the company unions informal organizing committees should be set up to bring the company union membership systematically into the Amalgamated Association.
- (e) Organizing committees should be set up in the various steel mills and in their departments, functioning either openly or privately, as conditions dictate. These should become the basis for future local unions.
- (f) The Central Labor Unions and other unions (especially the railroad organizations) should set up local commit-

tees to support the steel drive and to organize their own trades. The steel drive should aim at 100 per cent organization of all workers in the steel towns.

(g) Similar supporting committees should also be formed among fraternal organizations, churches and elsewhere, where active sympathizers be found for the steel campaign.

(h) These local union, mill and other organizing committees should meet together weekly (so far as is practical) jointly with the paid and volunteer organizers.

(i) One or more national conferences of all the local unions and organizing forces should be held to coordinate the whole campaign of organization.

(j) Periodic meetings of organizers should be held to study concrete methods of mass agitation and organization.

2. Structure of the Union.

(a) Local unions should be formed on the principle of one mill, one union. In large mills the local union should be sub-divided into branches according to main departments, but the local union branches should be kept linked together by a broad representative committee.

(b) In the localities and districts the local steel unions in the several mills should be joined together into Steel Councils based upon a broad rank-and-file representation.

(c) The obsolete constitution of the Amalgamated Association should be adapted in practice to permit of this form of departmentalized industrial union.

3. Functions and Tasks.

(a) Organizers should not work haphazardly. They should each be given very specific tasks and held responsible for their fulfillment, specified individuals being charged with the work in certain mills, language groups, company unions, etc.

(b) The principles of socialist competition should be introduced to stimulate the work of the organizers, to create friendly organizing rivalry between worker and worker, department and department, mill and mill, town and town

(c) The greatest care should be taken to guard against spies and provocateurs entrenching themselves in the organizing crew and official leadership of the union but the organizers should avoid starting a "spy scare". Spies that are uncovered should be exposed to the workers.

(d) Care should be taken to protect all lists of members. Loss of such lists and other important documents to company sources is highly demoralizing to the workers, and

careless organizers should be disciplined.

(e) An absolutely strict control should be maintained over the finances, as loose financial methods always constitute a grave danger in large campaigns.

(f) The headquarters of the organizing committee and the union should be located conveniently to the mills, but not directly under the eyes of the mill officials.

(g) Organized protection of organizers, officers, local headquarters, etc., should be provided for in local situations of acute struggle.

(h) All organizers should submit detailed weekly reports on their activities.

(i) Organizers and other union officials handling funds should be regularly bonded with a bonding company.

III. Mass Agitation

The main objectives of the educational work should be to liquidate fear and pessimistic moods among the workers ; to convince them of the necessity for trade unionism to win their demands and the possibility for success in the present campaign ; to rouse the enthusiasm, confidence and fighting spirit of the workers ; to win public sentiment behind the campaign.

1. Slogans.

The mass of workers support the drive and join the union in order to improve their conditions by securing the satisfaction of their most urgent economic demands. This elementary fact should never be lost sight of. The whole campaign of agitation must be based upon the popularization of the sloganized major demands of the workers, together with their local demands. The whole steel industry should be saturated with these slogans.

The economic demands of the union should be put forth immediately, but finally formulated and adopted at a broad national rank-and-file conference and then ratified by huge local mass meetings, pledge voted, etc., everywhere in the steel areas.

2. Publicity and Printed Matter.

The publicity material should be short and concrete, with concise facts about conditions in the industry and arguments for organization. Occasionally it should be printed in the most important foreign languages, the foreign-born workers liking to read their native languages even when they speak and understand english.

(a) Handbills should be issued regularly by the local organizing committees and upon occasion by the various local steel unions.

(b) Bulletins should be issued regularly by the local organizing committees giving local news of the movement,

and especially stressing the progress of the campaign in other localities.

(c) House-to-house distribution on a mass scale should be organized for handbills, bulletins and other literature.

(d) A circulation as extensive as possible should be secured for the weekly paper, Steel Labor.

(e) Shop papers should be issued wherever practicable by A.A. local unions.

(f) Advertisements in the local papers are valuable and should be used regularly for important announcements to the steel workers.

(g) Every means should be exercised to secure systematically favorable write-ups in the local press on the campaign.

(h) Stickers are effective, but care must be exercised that they do not become a nuisance and antagonize public opinion, by being stuck up indiscriminately.

(i) The wearing of union buttons in the plants is a very important organizing force, but care must be taken that it be not introduced until there is sufficient mass support and that the proper time is seized upon for its introduction, in order to prevent discharges of workers.

(j) Advertisements in movies in small towns are often practical and effective.

(k) Posters and window-cards should also be utilized on special occasions.

3. Radio.

The radio is an extremely important means for organizing workers in an industry such as steel where the company maintains terrorism to prevent workers from attending open meetings. The radio takes the union message directly into the workers' homes, thus avoiding the censorship of the bosses' spies.

(a) Local broadcasts should be organized weekly or semi-weekly in all important steel towns as one of the basic means of mass agitation.

(b) Where radio time cannot be secured in the given steel localities, often the objective can be gained by using the radio in nearby towns.

(c) Radio listeners' clubs should be systematically organized on a wide scale, as many steel workers have no radios.

(d) Radio speeches should be carefully prepared and should always give a direct stimulus to joining the union.

4. Mass Meetings, Demonstrations, etc.

The actual gathering together of workers in mass meetings and demonstrations is fundamental to the carrying on of a successful organization campaign. It gives the workers a confidence bred of their own numbers, and it enables the organizers to reach them personally with their educational appeal and organization methods. But such meetings, to achieve the best success, must be of the broadest mass character. This means that they have to be thoroughly prepared, and all the batteries of publicity, organizers, etc., should be coordinated and stimulated for their organization. The entire agitation among the workers should aim directly to culminate in the holding of such mass meetings. One good mass meeting is better than two dozen indifferent ones.

(a) The general mass meetings should be called not only under the auspices of the local organizing committees but also on a mill or department scale by the local steel unions and in special cases also by the Central Labor Unions and other sympathetic organizations.

(b) Meetings should be held especially in popular neighborhood halls, where the workers' fraternal lodges meet, where the workers dance, where their weddings take place, and where they are generally accustomed to going.

(c) Every effort should be made to bring the maximum number of women and children to the steel mass meetings.

(d) The question of mass meetings in company towns and in localities where the right of assembly is curtailed presents special problems. The danger of discharge of the workers makes it necessary that if mass meetings are held in such localities they must first have a broad basis of organization among the workers, and a wide preliminary publicity.

(e) At mass meetings it is important to get prominent out-of-town speakers to address the workers.

(f) Mill gate meetings should be held regularly at noon-time and at change-shifts where local conditions permit.

(g) Very effective are small delegations of steel workers from one town or district to another and large mass delegations of workers from organized mills to unorganized mills.

(h) Parades in steel towns are very effective in stimulating the workers, provided the parades are well organized and have real mass support. Auto demonstrations are easily organized and are effective agitational means.

(i) Music is important in a mass organizing campaign. Sound trucks should be freely employed in the mill gate and meetings. An extensive use should be made of bands in mass meetings and street demonstrations. Platform

singing should also be employed and mass singing wherever possible.

(j) Social affairs such as smokers, boxing matches, card parties, dances, picnics, various sports, etc., should be organized to establish contacts with the workers, especially in localities where more open mass work is difficult.

IV. Mass Organization

1. Individual Recruitment.

Individual recruiting is the base of all immediate organizational work in the steel industry. It is fundamentally important in every steel center and may be the only form for the time being in company union towns and elsewhere where terroristic conditions prevail. An elementary aim in the campaign should be to activate the greatest numbers of workers to do this individual button-hole work. The campaign can succeed only if thousands of workers can be organized to help directly in the enrollment of members. This work cannot be done by organizers alone. Their main task is to organize the most active workers among the masses in great numbers to do the recruiting. The tendency common in organization campaigns to leave the signing of new members solely to the organizers and to recruitment in open meetings should be avoided.

(a) The chain system of organization is one of the best means of individual recruitment. By this method workers undertake personally to organize their friends or to furnish their names so that they can be approached by other organizers. There should be a close check-up kept on all this work.

(b) The list system can also be effective in difficult situations. By this method trusted workers, volunteer organizers, women, etc., get lists upon which to collect the signatures and fees of workers in various organizations, etc.

(c) Individual recruitment in all its forms should be organized, as far as possible, according to department and mill.

(d) Thorough organizational arrangements should be made for signing up new members at social affairs radio listening groups, small home meetings, in fraternal lodges, etc.

(e) Key men in shops, fraternal organizations, etc., should be given close attention and all efforts made to sign them up, but this work should not be done at the expense of broad organization work among the masses.

(f) In closed company towns and elsewhere where terroristic conditions prevail, secret methods of organization work are often imperative to prevent demoralizing discharge cases. Irresponsible exposure of the workers to discharge must be strictly avoided. In such cases,

union organizers can often work temporarily as insurance agents, peddlers, etc.

2. Open Recruiting.

(a) Open recruitment should be carried on at all mass meetings, except where special conditions prevail that may expose the workers to discharge. Well-organized crews of clerks should be on hand to sign up the new members, issuing receipts on the spot. Often large numbers of potential members are lost through neglecting these elementary preparations for their enrollment.

(b) Local unions should hold mass meetings of the workers in their respective mills and sign up new members. There should also be special meetings held for the various numerically important crafts where necessary. Often workers will join at such meetings when they will not sign up at large, open mass meetings. It is very important from an organizational standpoint that the local unions and their branches be set up as soon as practical and a regular dues system established. This impresses the workers with seriousness and stability of the movement. Merely signing up a worker does not organize him. He must be brought into a local union, given a union card, got to paying dues, attending union meetings, etc.

3. Recruitment in Struggle.

(a) The presentation of local demands to the company must be utilized to facilitate organization work. If the demands are granted, the workers feel they have won the victory and can easily be brought into the unions by active organization work; if on the other hand the demands are rejected, the resultant anger among the workers can also be utilized readily for organization building.

(b) Departmental and local strikes in this early stage in the organization campaign may be very dangerous. They should be avoided, especially in mills of the biggest steel corporations and now when the union is still weak. Where strikes occur, no time should be lost in formally enlisting all the workers into the union and every effort should be put forth to win the struggle.

(c) Discharge cases for union activity should be taken care of immediately. Delay is very injurious to the workers' morale. While a vigorous fight for the reinstatement of the discharged workers goes on, these workers should be given relief in some form. Care should be exercised in the development of the organization work in the shops not to provoke discharges.

(d) Defense cases should also receive immediate attention, as it is demoralizing to the mass of workers to see their militant elements go to jail and nothing done for them. Especially vigorous campaigns must be made against all attempts at deportation of foreign-born workers. All this emphasizes the need to build the I.L.D. in the steel centers.

(e) In case of a stubborn suppression of the right of assembly in steel towns, the union forces, in addition to using every legal channel for the restoration of their rights, should not hesitate at opening a free speech fight on the streets to force the city authorities to grant the workers halls. Such activity greatly awakens the workers and prepares them for organization and it should be supported by a very active recruitment drive. Sometimes it is necessary to buy either buildings or lots in order to secure meeting places.

(f) The boycott can often be effectively used against hostile businessmen and professionals in steel towns and thereby to stimulate the organization campaign. In districts where the A.A. is strong (and there are well-established unions of miners, railroad men, etc.), the boycott can also be successfully applied against anti-union newspapers, Chambers of Commerce and city administrations.

(g) In the election campaign all candidates should be called upon to state their position regarding the steel campaign in their public meetings.

(h) The organization forces should take up concretely the question of placing demands upon the city and state authorities in connection with civic rights, etc.

V. Special Group Work

1. American Whites.

This group is highly strategical in the steel industry, comprising most of the skilled workers, and also occupying a key position in the social life of the steel communities. Every effort must be made to win them. Special efforts should be made to fight against employer-cultivated craft union, company union, anti-foreigner, anti-Negro and anti-Red tendencies among these workers. Active work should be carried on in their many organizations such as the American Legion, various fraternal orders, etc. Among the organizing crew there should be many American-born skilled steel workers.

2. Negroes.

It is absolutely essential that the large number of Negroes in the industry be organized. For this, special Negro organizers are imperative. Special demands for Negroes must be formulated and widely popularized. Prominent Negro speakers, including those of the National Negro Congress, should be brought into the steel districts to address the meetings. When necessary, special meetings of Negro steel workers should be called. The Negroes should become members of the regular local A.A. unions with full rights. Close attention should be paid to bringing them into responsible official posts in the unions and in the organizing crew. There should also be immediately developed an active campaign against the prevalent jim-crow practices in the steel towns and steel industry. Local

organizations of Negroes should be enlisted in support of the campaign.

3. Foreign-Born.

The foreign-born workers still form a very large mass of the steel workers and require special methods by the organizers. There should be organizers speaking the principal foreign languages of the mills. Literature must be issued in these main languages. Special methods should be put forth to enroll the militants among the foreign-born workers and systematic recruitment work in the many fraternal and other organizations that exist among this group of workers.

4. Youth.

In order to organize this highly important section of the working masses in the steel industry it is necessary to use certain special methods in addition to the system of the general campaign. Youth demands should be formulated and widely popularized. A corps of youth organizers should be developed. Youth committees should be set up in the organizing crew and in the local unions. Special meetings and mass delegate conferences of the youth should be held and attention given to cultivating sports activities of various kinds among the youth. Systematic organizational campaigns should be directed to the youth members of the Y.M.C.A. and such organizations. The connections of the American Youth Congress should be utilized to organize the youth throughout the steel industry.

5. Women.

The women relatives of the steel workers are a vital factor in the steel industry. They should be organized into Ladies' Auxiliaries of the A.A. The most militant among them should be drawn into all the activities of the general organizing force. Special meetings and mass delegate conferences of women should be held with prominent speakers, special literature dealing with women's problems, etc. There should be a corps of women organizers in the field, and the women's clubs and other organizations in the steel industry should be stirred into constructive activity in the campaign.

The steel corporations will make every effort to destroy the solidarity between the various groups of workers in the steel industry and thus to defeat them all by attempting to divide them upon political, racial, religious and national lines. In order to combat this campaign the essential thing is to keep the question of the economic demands and the need for a solid trade union aggressively in the forefront. Under no circumstances should the campaign leadership allow itself to be dragged from this main line and into abstract racial, religious, national and other questions.

VI. Company Unions

The company unions can with proper methods be developed into a strong force for building the A.A. In this

respect the work should be based upon the following general principles:

(a) The organizing crew and A.A. must develop a strong initiative in the industry by an intense advocacy of its slogans and by very active organization work. In this manner the union must be made the center of all movements of the workers against the employers. To develop such an initiative by the union forces is fundamental. Only in this way can the union crystallize the discontent of the workers into union organization and reap the full advantage and credit for such concessions as may be given by the company either directly to the workers or through the company unions. Otherwise such concessions can have the effect of checking the campaign, as the employers plan them to do.

(b) All activities within the company unions should be undertaken with flexible tactics in the sense of utilizing the company unions as an auxiliary force to the building of the trade union with the aim of eventually incorporating the company union membership into the A.A. In many cases the structure of the company unions can be readily transformed into trade union organizations. Many of the best company union leaders can be developed into leaders of the new steel union.

(c) The general policy in the company unions should be directed towards bringing the masses into conflict with the bosses in order to awaken the workers' fighting spirit, to demonstrate to even the most backward workers the insufficiency of company unionism, and thus to give a stimulus to the campaign to organize the A.A. and thus to lay the basis for the maximum permanent advantages for the workers. This should be the policy, rather than to make important settlements through the company unions with the bosses and thus to create illusions that the company unions are effective and that the trade union is not necessary.

(d) In submitting major demands to the companies, therefore, the company union should put forward the main union demands and stand by them firmly, thus identifying themselves with the union organizing campaign and making clear to all the need of the trade union to back up these elementary demands. So far as possible all important concessions from the company should be won directly by the trade union or under its immediate leadership, in order to avoid the strengthening of company union illusions.

(e) Minor shop demands should be freely submitted by the company unions, efforts being made at the same time to develop the local company union forces into shop grievance committees of a trade union character working in close cooperation with the A.A. Local strikes over these demands should be avoided, especially in the early stages of the campaign and in the major steel plants.

(f) The organizing crew and the A.A. should give active support to all the major and minor demands submitted by the company unions to the employers. Only in this manner can the workers be made to understand that whatever concessions they may secure through the company union are due primarily to the activity and strength of the trade union organizing campaign.

(g) In case of company union elections tickets should be put up of workers supporting the A.A. and the organizing campaign.

(h) Efforts should be constantly made to have the company unions in practice break with their narrow constitutions by holding mass local and district conferences, by issuing independent papers and bulletins, by meeting off company property, etc.

(i) In cases where such a step is possible and practical, trade union speakers should be invited to company union meetings and vice-versa. Joint trade union-company union conferences should eventually become possible and necessary.

(j) In all this work in the company unions the basic conditions for success are, first, for the organizing forces to maintain in the company union an active campaign of education, exposing the maneuvers of the companies and stressing the need for trade unionism and, secondly, to prosecute in the company unions an aggressive campaign of organization by recruiting key men, setting up of organizing committees in shops, activizing of company union members, drawing in of company union representatives into trade union conferences, meetings, etc.

(k) In working out the company union policy the great danger to avoid is that of the organizing forces of the trade union losing the initiative in the industry and hence the leadership of the masses to the company unions. The main source of this danger would be, first, failure of the union to come forward militantly with the advocacy of its demands and with active organization work, and, second, for the union to take a stand-off attitude towards the company unions and thus fail to give them the necessary leadership.

VII. Special Organization Work

1. Unemployed—W.P.A.

It is important that the strongest bond of solidarity be developed between the employed and unemployed steel workers. This is necessary in order to help the organization work at the present stage of the campaign and also to establish a complete unity in the eventuality of a strike.

(a) The organizing forces and the A.A. should give active support to the demands of the unemployed and W.P.A. workers, and should extend support in building the Work-

ers Alliance and other organizations of the unemployed and relief workers.

(b) Representative unemployed workers should be engaged as steel union organizers and brought into all the trade union organizing committees. Volunteer organizers should also be recruited from among the unemployed and relief workers.

(c) Mass conferences, demonstrations, etc., of the unemployed should be stimulated to popularize and organize the steel campaign.

(d) Representatives of the organizing crew should visit all organizations and meetings of the unemployed in order to make direct connections in behalf of the organizing campaign.

2. Fraternal Organizations.

These organizations play a vital role in the steel towns, especially among the foreign-born workers. It is very important to develop a strong educational and organizational campaign among them. Among the measures necessary are the following:

(a) There should be national and local mass conferences held in which these organizations should recruit members for themselves as well as for the A.A.

(b) There should be committees set up in the local organizations of these fraternal bodies in order systematically to recruit their steel worker members into the A.A.

(c) There should be an exchange of speakers between the meetings of the fraternal organizations and of the union. They should also send fraternal delegates to each other's conferences and gatherings.

(d) The fraternal organizations should assign organizers to the steel campaign.

(e) The organization campaign should make free use of the halls of the fraternal organizations and, in cases of suppression of civil rights, these may be the only halls available.

(f) Educational material on the steel drive should be systematically furnished to the press of the fraternal organizations.

3. Churches.

In many instances strongly favorable sentiment to the organization campaign will be found among the churches in the steel towns. This should be carefully systematized and utilized.

(a) Organizers should be sent to the churches to speak from the pulpits. If possible, Labor Sundays should be organized, with organizers speaking in many churches

simultaneously throughout the whole community.

(b) Sympathetic priests and preachers should be invited to speak at meetings in the organization campaign.

(c) Active work of recruitment should be developed in the local religious organizations, articles should be prepared for publication in the religious press, etc.

(d) In case of suppression of civil rights, meetings may sometimes be held in church premises.

4. Other Organizations.

Steel organizing work along similar lines to the above can and should be carried on effectively in local branches of such organizations as the American Legion, the National Union for Social Justice, the Townsend movement, farmers' organizations, cooperatives, etc.

In the steel towns the organizing crew should pay special attention to sending speakers into all organizations and meetings of professional and business men, in order to break down so far as possible the opposition of these elements to the organization of the steel workers.

No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age

By JANE MCALEVEY

Ch. 3. Nursing Home Unions: Class Snuggle vs. Class Struggle

Brown was a key leader of the contingent demanding greater union democracy at the national 1992 SEIU convention—the same convention where Stern earned his first anti-union democracy stripes. The reason for the 1992 convention’s clash of ideology, or understanding of union purpose and function, went back to late 1989, when many of the local unions in the national 1199 voted to affiliate with SEIU, fulfilling (1199’s leaders hoped) the vision of building a national health-care workers’ union. Brown had attended many of the conventions held by 1199, the former national union, but SEIU was new to him, as it was to a slew of other leaders who had recently voted, local union by local union, to join up and affiliate with SEIU—bringing with them different ideas of the purpose of the union, the role of workers in their own liberation, and the level of democracy a union should have.

On March 20, 2001, while Rolf was planning the campaign to win the ballot initiative to create the homecare authority in Washington state, 1199NE was launching the largest nursing-home strike in U.S. history.²⁷ The workers, overwhelmingly women of color, voted to walk off the job even though they already had the highest wage and benefit standards of any nursing-home workers in the nation, including a substantial pension (a real one, not a 401(k)), an impressive self-funded health-care plan, a robust employer-paid training and upgrading fund, a two- or three-step grievance and arbitration procedure, and more workplace rights than almost any other nonmanagement employee in the United States enjoys today.²⁸ The strike was a strike for increased staffing. Jerry Brown said, “The strike muscle is like any other muscle, you have to keep it in good shape or it will atrophy.”²⁹ Since the beginning of the new millennium, Connecticut’s nursing-home workers have gone on strike every year except 2008 and 2011, for a cumulative total of more than 100 strikes. The action in 2001 was a large multiemployer strike; there have also been thirty-eight work stoppages since 2002. By constantly engaging in strikes and by practicing what is called open collective bargaining negotiations, 1199NE is constantly engaging in the hardest of structure tests—that is, tests that measure both union democracy and the participation levels of the rank and file.

In the same period—more than a decade—that Rolf has exercised jurisdiction over nursing homes in Washington, 1199NE in Connecticut has run almost sixty successful NLRB elections: some big, some small. Like the Washington union, Connecticut’s leadership places a premium on securing multiemployer election procedure neutrality agreements. But unlike Nursing Home Unions: Class

Snuggle vs. Class Struggle 87 87 the Washington union’s agreement, 1199NE’s neutrality agreements are won by worker power and negotiated across the bargaining table, with workers in the room, in a collective-bargaining process transparent and open to all members of the union. Through this approach, they have been able to secure neutrality agreements such as one covering three unorganized nursing homes, an accord in which the workers surrendered nothing and are not bound by limitations in their contractual rights. In one such recent agreement, there are no binding contract provisions or clauses that are “automatically renewed,” and the union is not required to lobby for money to pay the workers. The language, far from being secret, is actually printed in the contracts of the workers who fought to win them, and includes the following:

The parties agree that the Employer will remain neutral and not conduct any campaign in any organizing drive conducted by New England Health Care Employees Union District 1199/SEIU in any unorganized center [for] long term care or assisted living owned or operated by the Employer or any of its related entities now or in the future in the State of Connecticut.

Fighting to expand their union to nonunion nursing homes, workers reached this agreement across the bargaining table in the final days of 2012. Under its terms, if the union can present union-authorization cards from 40 percent of workers from any of the three nonunion facilities, the employer must turn over a full employee list and release a letter to all employees declaring that during the union’s campaign the employer will remain neutral and bargain in good faith. Any violation of the neutrality agreement goes to “expedited” arbitration, with the final decision resting with a preselected neutral arbitrator. The workers at the biggest nursing home covered by the agreement, St. Joseph’s Manor, successfully won their election in July 2014. Despite the neutrality agreement, the organizers approached the campaign as seriously as they would have any organizing campaign—as a struggle. Rob Baril, the organizing director of the union and the lead on the campaign, explained the process:

We blitzed the home’s workers starting in February. We got a good idea of what the issues were and we began to do leader ID (identification) by work area. We talked about building to majority to fight the boss, and filed for an election with 70 percent of the workers on a petition. We had volunteer member organizers with us in every committee meeting from the same employer. They would stand up and say, ‘We won this for you, we expect you to now get strong, be prepared to fight and to strike because we expect you to win a common contract expiration with us, our standards are in jeopardy because you make \$3 less than us and you don’t have the pension, our future depends on you and you better be ready to stand up

and fight.’

When queried why this employer would give a neutrality agreement without asking the workers to surrender anything, David Pickus, the lead negotiator in the fight, explained,

We were negotiating with five other homes of theirs we already had under contract, so we said, ‘If you don’t give us these places, we are going to strike all five homes.’ They knew from past experience we could cause a big problem because we had struck them successfully before.

Even though the union had negotiated a neutrality agreement, Baril states, “the discussion with the workers was a traditional discussion. We didn’t know if the employer would actually follow the neutrality agreement, so we talked about a fight, we talked about building a majority to be able to build to fight the boss, so that the workers understood that they would have to do the work to build the union.”

Using the word strike early in the organizing process, as Baril says they did above, is part of a strategy that pays very careful attention to semantics, which are absolutely key to successful organizing. As 1199’s nursing-home case in this chapter shows, a key question in 1199 for generations has been “Are there two sides or three in a workplace fight?” Upon learning of a union drive, an employer will usually begin an anti-union campaign by declaring, “We don’t need a third party in here”—by “third party” the boss means a union as a third party, with the boss being one party, and the workers being a second party. In good organizing and in the 1199NE approach, a key to victory (and to a successful strike-vote and strike)—is that the workers see themselves as the union—in which case there are only two sides, a crushing answer to the employer’s message.

Below are two examples from the opening of two separate new-millennium training workshops in a CIO-style organizing approach. Both are titled “Semantics,” and they reveal the centrality of language and its meaning to the fight, and to the craft of organizing.

Introduction

Everything an organizer does must have a purpose that is about moving the vision and the plan forward in their industry. Conversations are the primary vehicle for doing that.

EVERY CONVERSATION MUST INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Have a purpose = 70% DISCOVERY—worker speaks
- Shift the worker = 30% UNION AS SOLUTION—organizer speaks
- Have an ask

Organizing conversations are **not about giving information**, giving updates, and leaving it up to the worker to decide what to do with that information. Good organizers **always have a conversation agenda**, which is about how to shift workers in their attitudes, beliefs, and commitment to both their coworkers and their campaign.

The second example is excerpted from a set of “semantics drills” developed by the local union with whom I worked in Nevada. We used fifteen examples of how to say something badly or the successful way; these were practiced for an hour daily in the organizing department:

Semantics Training

- Why do semantics matter (pose question to the group) 2-3 minute discussion
- Point = People learn about their union from us and how we talk about it.
- General Principles
- DO NOT 3rd Party the union
- Examples: (put up the bad statements on the flip chart and have people discuss why they are not good and then the group comes up with a better answer)

1. Bad = “Thank you” as a way to end a conversation
a. **Better** = Good talking to you / See you later / Look forward to seeing you soon
2. Bad = We need you to get a schedule for us.
a. **Better** = It’s important that you and your co-workers know who works at the facility, what days and when, so that you can be effective and efficient in building your worksite structure.

The 1199 nursing home campaign in 2014 that Baril was describing above was a textbook implementation of the *Advice to Rookie Organizers* (see below), including postulate #20, “We lose when we don’t put workers into struggle.” Even with a neutrality agreement, the organizers understand that if the workers don’t do the work of building their own union—including preparing for and having a fight—their leadership will not be tested or developed to the level of strength needed for a solid union, one where the rank-and-file workers themselves can govern the workplace after the election victory

The list below represents the key postulates taken from the characteristic 1199 organizing “manual”—a handwritten, dated, single sheet of paper that hangs on the door or is pinned on the bulletin board of most 1199 organizers’ offices. It is often covered with coffee stains and marking-pen notes and is called, simply, “Advice for Rookie Organizers.”

1. Get close to the workers, stay close to the workers.
2. Tell workers it’s their union and then behave that way.
3. Don’t do for workers what they can do.
4. The union is not a fee for service; it is the collective

experience of workers in struggle.

5. The union's function is to assist workers in making a positive change in their lives.
6. Workers are made of clay, not glass.
7. Don't be afraid to ask workers to build their own union.
8. Don't be afraid to confront them when they don't.
9. Don't spend your time organizing workers who are already organizing themselves, go to the biggest, worst.
10. The working class builds cells for its own defense, identify them and recruit their leaders.
11. Anger is there before you are—channel it, don't defuse it.
12. Channeled anger builds a fighting organization.
13. Workers know the risks, don't lie to them.
14. Every worker is showtime—communicate energy, excitement, urgency and confidence.
15. There is enough oppression in workers' lives not to be oppressed by organizers.
16. Organizers talk too much. Most of what you say is forgotten.
17. Communicate to workers that there is no salvation beyond their own power.
18. Workers united can beat the boss. You have to believe that and so do they.
19. Don't underestimate the workers.
20. We lose when we don't put workers into struggle

Realistically, only one of these postulates—#14—could be practically adopted by an organization like Local 775, and even if 775 did adopt it, it would be applied to external political campaigns in the midst of a machine-like, staff-run 'Get Out the Vote' (GOTV) campaign moment. The team running 775 does heed "*Every worker is show time—communicate energy, excitement, urgency and confidence.*" Professional staff make use of those qualities when driving hard to win a political race or ballot initiative.

But taken as a whole, these 1199 postulates can be seen as defining features that separate the organizing approach from the mobilizing approach. For example, most people who call themselves organizers in the New Labor model would probably adhere to the list below during the unionization phase, but abandon them soon after:

- [1] Get close to the workers, stay close to the workers.
- [11] Anger is there before you are—channel it, don't defuse it.
- [12] Channeled anger builds a fighting organization.
- [14] Every worker is show time—communicate energy, excitement, urgency, and confidence

Each postulate expresses a core value and reflects 1199's roots in the CIO era. Starting with the first one, a close relationship with all or a majority of the workers can only be formed in a majority-worker approach and by working through the organic leaders. And there are other postulates—the most important ones in terms of worker agency—that can only manifest in a model that vests pri-

mary power in the workers themselves. Postulate #2, "Tell the workers it's their union, and behave that way," is significantly worded: behave, not act—no pretense allowed. That's a commandment, and in the 1199NE tradition, it's a commandment with teeth: An organizer can be fired for not behaving that way. Similarly, postulates #17 ("Communicate to workers there is no salvation beyond their own power") and #18 ("Workers united can beat the boss—you have to believe that and so do they") conceive of workers as the primary leverage in their own liberation. A professional organizing staffer trying to play Bruce Lee—the lone hero outmaneuvering the boss in a series of high-flying karate moves—cannot replace the workers' army when it comes to the long march. Real organizers never underestimate the true fighting value of workers; workers' struggle is key to the pedagogy.

Confessions of A Union Buster

By MARTIN J LEVITT

Prologue

Union busting is a field populated by bullies and built on deceit. A campaign against a union is an assault on individuals and a war on the truth. As such, it is a war without honor. The only way to bust a union is to lie, distort, manipulate, threaten, and always, always attack. The law does not hamper the process. Rather, it serves to suggest maneuvers and define strategies. Each “union prevention” campaign, as the wars are called, turns on a combined strategy of disinformation and personal assaults.

When a chief executive hires a labor relations consultant to battle a union, he gives the consultant run of the company and closes his eyes. The consultant, backed by attorneys, installs himself in the corporate offices and goes to work creating a climate of terror that inevitably is blamed on the union.

Some corporate executives I encountered liked to think of their anti-union consultants as generals. But really the consultants are terrorists. Like political terrorists, the consultants’ attacks are intensely personal. Terrorists do not make factories and air strips their victims; they choose instead crippled old men and school-children. Likewise, as the consultants go about the business of destroying unions, they invade people’s lives, demolish their friendships, crush their will, and shatter their families.

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I entered the union-busting business in 1969 at age twenty-five. It wasn’t an informed career choice, but a move motivated by ambition. I answered a blind ad in *The Wall Street Journal* for a management consultant with knowledge of the National Labor Relations Act. I had never read a labor law, but I knew how to sell myself, so I sent off a resume to the post office box. At the time I answered the mystery ad, I had been running a successful executive recruitment firm for two years that did almost \$100,000 in business annually, so I was pretty cocky. I had no biases for or against labor unions and no career goals save the desire to make money.

I was called to an interview with John Sheridan, a former union organizer from Chicago. His labor relations consulting firm, John Sheridan Associates, specialized in running campaigns to thwart union efforts to organize workers. I knew little about the work but was flattered to be considered for the job, so I put on my best show. Sheridan liked me from the start. My golden tongue won me a job with a starting billing rate of \$250 a day.

Once I got a taste of the excitement, the power, the money, and the glamor in union busting, I was hooked. Right or wrong became irrelevant. It would be twenty

years before I saw the field for what it is.

There are many forms of union busting. Some labor consultants and attorneys take on unions that already represent a work force, squeezing negotiators at the bargaining table, forcing workers out on strike, harassing union officers. My career took another path. I refined the Sheridan specialty called “counter-organizing drives,” battling non-union employees as they struggled to win union representation. The enemy was the collective spirit. I got hold of that spirit while it was still a seedling; I poisoned it, choked it, bludgeoned it if I had to, anything to be sure it would never blossom into a united work force, the dreaded foe of any corporate tyrant.

For my campaigns I identified two key targets: the rank-and-file workers and their immediate supervisors. The supervisors served as my front line. I took them hostage on the first day and sent them to anti-union boot camp. I knew that people who didn’t feel threatened wouldn’t fight. So through hours of seminars, rallies, and one-on-one encounters, I taught the supervisors to despise and fear the union. I persuaded them that a union-organizing drive was a personal attack on them, a referendum on their leadership skills, and an attempt to humiliate them. I was friendly, even jovial at times, but always unforgiving as I compelled each supervisor to feel he was somehow to blame for the union push and consequently obliged to defeat it. Like any hostages, most supervisors could not resist for long. They soon came to see the fight through the eyes of their captor and went to work wringing union sympathies out of their workers.

Although I took on the supervisors face to face, my war on the union activists was covert.

To stop a union proponent—a “pusher,” in the anti-union lexicon—the buster will go anywhere, not just to the lunch room, but into the bedroom if necessary. The buster not only is a terrorist; he is also a spy. My team and I routinely pried into workers’ police records, personnel files, credit histories, medical records, and family lives in search of a weakness that we could use to discredit union activists.

Once in a while, a worker is impeccable. So some consultants resort to lies. To fell the sturdiest union supporters in the 1970s, I frequently launched rumors that the targeted worker was gay or was cheating on his wife. It was a very effective technique, particularly in blue-collar towns. If even the nasty stories failed to muzzle an effective union proponent, the busters might get the worker fired.

Such was the case of Jeannette Allen, an assembly-line worker at the Stant Company manufacturing plant outside Little Rock, Arkansas.

The Stant factory was torn by the conflict between a vigorous United Auto Workers organizing effort and a dogged

counterdrive by corporate officers and their consultants. One night, as graveyard-shift workers pressed and cut hot metal into the shape of radiator caps, the plant foreman's phone rang. The foreman answered and heard the voice of a black woman announce that there was a bomb in the factory. He then let the crew go on working for nearly an hour before evacuating the plant.

The police got a warning call from the same person that night. When they searched the factory they found nothing, but they had captured the caller's voice on tape. Two plant managers identified the caller as Allen. I believed it wasn't she. (When I heard the tape, I was sitting with Jeannette Allen herself. It did not sound like the same person.) A black woman whose intelligence and integrity had earned her the admiration and loyalty of her co-workers, Allen also happened to be an outspoken proponent of the UAW campaign. Company bosses, it seemed, considered her the driving force behind worker support for the union, particularly among blacks, who made up one-third of the work force. They feared her. As soon as Allen was implicated in the bomb threat, she was fired. Meanwhile, her co-workers wondered what kind of union could corrupt such a stalwart character.

The UAW lost the election.

In 1975 I left the employ of consulting firms and set out on my own. Over the next eight years I ran a series of one-man union-busting enterprises I called by such disingenuous names as Employee Synthesis Program and Human Resources Institute, and I struck it rich. But by 1983 I had become hopelessly alcoholic; the addiction had badly complicated my life, and solo work was taking its toll on me. I landed a counter-organizing job at an Ohio coal company five hundred workers strong, and I decided I needed backup. I called on some former colleagues from a Sheridan spin-off called Modern Management Methods and invited them to join me as I feasted off the carcass of the United Mine Workers. They did, gleefully, and my reaffiliation with MMM continued until the death of my shameful career.

Then the change started. Watching the crude and abusive behavior of my old associates during those years, I was forced to acknowledge the vile nature of my field. Slowly I began to realize that my more polished techniques were just a distilled version of the same villainy. Not only were working people crushed by the cruelty of the union busters, but the companies themselves were raped, as consultants and attorneys conspired to wring as much money as they could out of their clients. The executives paid whatever they were asked, the consultants having convinced them that a union-organizing effort amounted to the worst crisis of their business lives. In the end I understood that a union-busting campaign left a company financially devastated and hopelessly divided and almost invariably created an even more intolerable work environment than before, as managers systematically

retaliated against union supporters for the high costs of the campaign. I felt repulsed by what I saw and sickened that I was, in fact, a prominent member of the club. I renounced the field.

My awakening came in late 1987. I was making \$200,000 a year and living on a five-acre wooded estate in an exclusive community. I traveled, dined, and lodged in first class, drove only the finest luxury cars. By then I had directed more than two hundred anti-union campaigns—and lost only five—and had trained thousands of craven managers to go and do likewise at their own companies. I was at the top of my field, one of the best and one of the richest. No, I was not driven from the field by need. I was driven by horror and remorse.

As labor laws have proliferated, the arena of employee relations and contract negotiations has become infinitely more complicated; more and more professionals have built their careers on advising employers how to manage their work force and cope with the maze of federal and state worker laws. Some such professionals clearly are needed, and a few even do an honest job. But within the field of labor relations the big money is in union busting. When I entered the field, only a handful of law firms and consulting companies specialized in combating worker organizations. Today there are more than seven thousand attorneys and consultants across the nation who make their living busting unions, and they work almost every day. At a billing rate of \$1,000 to \$1,500 a day per consultant and \$300 to \$700 an hour for attorneys, the war on organized labor is a \$1 billion-plus industry.

Many consultants have given up union busting and quietly gone about building more honorable careers for themselves, sort of like former Nazis moving to America and setting up flower shops. Not I. At the time I made my conversion, I was struggling to overcome alcoholism. In my pursuit of recovery I also sought redemption, so I came to believe it was my moral duty to confront what I had done and somehow to make amends to my tens of thousands of victims. At that moment I vowed I would do whatever I could to stop the others in my trade from carrying out their hateful mission. I would not run and hide.

I placed a call to the AFL-CIO office in Washington, D.C., and spoke to Virginia Diamond, then a labor federation attorney who tracked the activities of more than five hundred union-busting firms across the nation in a publication called the RUB Sheet (for "report on union busters"). I told Diamond that she had one less union buster to worry about. That conversation led indirectly to my new vocation, as a consultant to unions on how to bust the busters. Not long after my change of heart became the talk of labor circles, the United Auto Workers called me to testify as an expert witness in Jeannette Allen's wrongful termination suit against Stant Company. I immediately recognized the bomb threat ploy as a typical union buster's dirty trick, and I said so in court. I believed

the voice on the police tape was not Allen's; after all, the company never prosecuted her, they just got her out of the way. I was convinced some of Stant's consultants had hatched the bomb scare scheme when their anti-union campaign was on the verge of collapse.

It was a contemptible plan. But it was a perfect one by the only measure that matters in the war on labor: it worked.

The Undercover Organizers Behind America's Union Wins

By JOSH EIDELSON

At Starbucks, Amazon.com and other big employers, activists known as “salts” have been a key to labor success. And they say they’re just getting started.

If you want to unionize a workplace, Will Westlake was saying, get used to unclogging the drains. At a secret off-hours gathering held in Rochester, New York, in March, the 25-year-old former barista told a few dozen labor activists that a great way to build trust with co-workers and bosses is to volunteer for thankless chores. In his case, that meant spending months at a Starbucks outside Buffalo in 2021 getting on his knees and reaching beneath the sinks to yank loose the grimy mix of mocha chips, espresso beans, congealed milk and rotten fruit that regularly stopped things up. “Be the person who’s willing,” Westlake said. “It’s going to make the company less suspicious of you.”

The proof, he told the crowd, came toward the end of 2021, after baristas at his Starbucks and others in the area had filed federal petitions to hold union elections. Executives and managers arrived from across the country to work shifts at the cafes and conduct mandatory meetings about the potential dangers of organizing. According to Westlake, the then-president of Starbucks Corp.’s North American division personally warned at least one new hire at his store to be careful about trusting other staffers, naming several baristas she suspected of being covert union operatives. Confused and distressed, the hire called up a trusted colleague that the big boss hadn’t

named: Westlake. (Starbucks has denied all claims of anti-union activity at its shops.)

The practice of joining a workplace with the secret aim of organizing it is called “salting.” Westlake was addressing recruits at the Inside Organizer School, a workshop held a couple times a year by a loose confederation of labor organizers. At these meetups, experienced activists train other attendees in the art of going undercover. Speakers lecture and lead discussions on how to pass employer screenings, forge relationships with co-workers and process the complicated feelings that can accompany a double life. Most salts are volunteers, not paid union officials, but unions sometimes fund their housing or, later, tap them for full-time jobs. Workers United, the Service Employees International Union affiliate that’s home to the new Starbucks union, hired Westlake as an organizer around the time the coffee chain fired him last fall. Through interviews and exclusive visits to undercover training sessions over the past year, Bloomberg Businessweek got an unparalleled look at the revival of American salting, which has been around for a century. Until now, salts have been the mostly secret ingredient in a once-in-a-generation wave of union organizing that’s spread from Starbucks and Amazon.com Inc. to other Fortune 500 companies in the Covid-19 era. At least 10 undercover activists, including Westlake, landed jobs at Starbucks cafes in the Buffalo area, where they quietly laid the groundwork for the first successful organizing campaign among the company’s US employees in decades. That victory inspired hundreds more successful union votes at Starbucks and other companies. Early on, a group of six salts made up half the organizing committee for the Amazon Labor Union that won an election at an 8,000-person warehouse in the Staten Island borough of New York last spring. “They didn’t make or break us, but they were definitely helpful,” says the Amazon campaign’s



A “Fight Starbucks’ Union Busting” rally and march in Seattle last year. Photographer: Jason Redmond/Getty Images

most prominent organizer, Christian Smalls.

High-profile wins have helped fuel salt recruiting. Last year, thousands of members of the Democratic Socialists of America said in an internal survey that they were interested in pursuing jobs in workplaces that would also be strategic targets for organizing. “Salting is really important and will definitely play a part in a lot of these upcoming battles,” says Atulya Dora-Laskey, a 23-year-old DSA member and Chipotle employee who helped lead the Mexican food chain’s first-ever union success. Dora-Laskey says that he wasn’t thinking about organizing until after he got hired, but that his victory has helped lead salts to take jobs at other Chipotles and that he’s advising them on their campaigns.

Interest in salting has been buoyed by a tight labor market and a broader resurgence in left-wing activism, especially among Gen Z. Some salts come from relatively privileged backgrounds—meaning they can better afford to get fired—but others are working-class people who go undercover at the sorts of jobs they’ve already been doing. Westlake was working full time as a barista to save money for college in 2017 when Workers United guided him through unionizing his first cafe before helping him do the same thing at other shops. His mother was a restaurant manager who didn’t have health insurance and died of cancer when he was 14 years old. “That’s been a big part of why I’ve gotten involved,” he says.

The resurgence of salting also reflects the desperation of the American labor movement. Workers who don’t remember Sept. 11 can scarcely imagine a time when collective bargaining was the norm. Union representation as a share of the US workforce peaked in 1954, and after decades of decline, it now sits at a record low 6% of the private sector. US productivity rose by two-thirds from 1974 to 2018, but average inflation-adjusted wages hardly budged.

Still, companies also seem to recognize that they’re more vulnerable to organizing tactics like salting than they thought. While the practice is legal, business groups are urging leaders in the House of Representatives, where Republicans regained control in January, to pass a law that would make it easier to reject or fire workers who are found to be salts. “There is a basic duty of loyalty that employees have to their employer,” says Roger King, a senior counsel for the HR Policy Association, a trade group.

Starbucks and other companies have also sought to dismiss any unionization effort involving undercover organizers as illegitimate. Howard Schultz, the coffee chain’s iconic three-time chief executive officer, stressed in his March 29 testimony to the Senate labor committee that the key organizer at his company was also on a union’s payroll. “If that’s not a nefarious act, I don’t know what is,” he said. Schultz, who retook the CEO job on an

interim basis last year as the union votes multiplied, stepped down slightly ahead of schedule on March 20 amid growing scrutiny of the company. The committee chair, Bernie Sanders, had threatened to subpoena Schultz to appear at the hearing, an investigation of alleged illegal union-busting at Starbucks.

In a statement, Workers United President Lynne Fox noted that the campaign has spread far beyond Buffalo, and said her union represents more than 8,000 Starbucks employees so far. “Workers United is proud to stand with all of those workers, and the thousands more that will join them in the coming months,” she said.

Salting can backfire when it leaves potential union supporters feeling manipulated. Some workers who’ve stood up to organize with salts’ backing have gotten fired. But salts say they’re not forcing unionization on anyone—they’re just showing people that it’s possible and how it can be done. While Westlake acknowledges that salting gets awkward, he bristles at the idea that salts aren’t loyal or dedicated enough to count as real workers. He says that he’s poured a whole lot more coffee than the Starbucks higher-ups who flew to Buffalo to talk about the dangers of unions and that he spent weeks laid up with a pinched nerve after all his drain-unclogging. “I don’t think executives should really be throwing stones,” he says. “Who’s more of a fake worker than them?”

Salting draws its name from a bygone form of fraud: sprinkling gold in a spent mine to trick someone into buying it. Over the past century, salts have gone to work in just about every US industry, sometimes calling the practice “industrializing” or, more awkwardly, “colonization.” Stories from salting’s previous peak, circa the Great Depression, have been a touchstone of Inside Organizer School workshops since a pair of longtime organizers, Richard Bensinger and Chris Townsend, began holding them in 2018. Those tales, like one salt’s account of swapping names and haircuts to keep getting hired at the same 1930s stockyard, have remained a fixture now that Bensinger’s protégé, 25-year-old Workers United organizer Jaz Brisack, is largely spearheading the trainings.

Brisack, who spent their home-schooled teenage years in Tennessee working at Panera Bread, had been waiting a long time to salt somewhere. They’d defied their Christian fundamentalist parents by renouncing religion, and the labor movement offered an outlet for rebellion and a stand-in for the sense of community and greater purpose that faith used to provide. While they were studying public policy at the University of Mississippi, a professor introduced them to Bensinger. Brisack began assisting Bensinger’s efforts to organize a nearby Nissan Motor Co. plant and then, during breaks from their Rhodes scholarship in 2019, at a series of coffee shops in upstate New York.

The first Starbucks employee Brisack met with about

gauging support for a union quickly got fired. After that, Brisack says, “I had a grudge.” When they returned to the US from the UK in 2020, the upstate New York chapter of Workers United hired Brisack as its organizing director. That December, Starbucks, none the wiser, brought Brisack on as a barista. Their union office in Rochester sat mostly empty for the following year, the nameplate on the door reversed to hide their name. After a couple of months picking up shifts at Starbucks around Buffalo along with another salt, Brisack was confident that the stores could be organized and that the task would require more backup. The union recruited Starbucks salts through the Inside Organizer School, friends of friends and a cryptic online job posting for “Project Germinal,” named for Emile Zola’s novel about labor strife in French coal mines. When applying for jobs at Starbucks, the salts would lay it on thick. “When she wasn’t at work, my mother was running down Franklin Street in Syracuse to get a grande iced coffee, no sugar, and one-inch room for cream,” Westlake wrote in his cover letter. “She taught me that the efficiency and quality that Starbucks offers is unlike any other cafe.” (This was a half-truth, he says: “My mom hated Starbucks, but she did really love coffee.”)

He also told his interviewer that he would report any colleague he heard complaining about working conditions and that he hoped eventually to ascend to management. Another Starbucks salt, Arjae Rebmann, spent their job interview with their arms crossed or at their side, so the manager wouldn’t notice the hammer-and-sickle tattoo on their left wrist.

With Covid raging, Brisack convened salt training sessions over Zoom, discussing how to get hired and how to make friends. Starbucks salts hosted brunches, gave thoughtful birthday gifts and boned up on their co-workers’ favorite TV shows. Westlake says he changed his look partly to make it more obvious he wasn’t a straight dude and to help his mostly female co-workers feel more comfortable around him. Another salt, Zachary Field, dug into astrology because it was popular with his fellow baristas. When he told them he was a Scorpio, more than one said that was weird—he didn’t seem like the secretive type.

Field and Westlake lived in a group house with a couple more salts. That crew avoided hosting co-workers or even bringing home dates. Instead, some of them hung up pictures of Karl Marx and United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta, and the group used flashcards to quiz each other on Starbucks recipes and compared notes with other salts on which co-workers could be key to a successful union drive.

Westlake chose Gianna Reeve, a charismatic and sardonic Buffalo native. At 20, Reeve was a shift leader who commanded respect from baristas and bosses. She encouraged baristas to take bathroom breaks whenever they needed, and she wasn’t shy about bad-mouthing corporate. In the summer of 2021, each salt broached the

subject of organizing with a co-worker, asking them to meet up outside of work. Reeve says she thought Westlake might be asking her out on a date, but she’d been reading about the industry’s labor unrest on Reddit and wasn’t shocked when the subject of unions came up. Westlake told her he’d heard about the movement from someone who’d helped organize his last coffee shop, asking if he wanted to be involved in a new union campaign.

Reeve, whose dad was a United Auto Workers member, replied that she was all for the idea as long as it wouldn’t get her fired. Westlake didn’t tell her that he’d been dismissed from the first coffee chain where he led a union drive. He gave her tips on organizing more support, and she helped him figure out who else to ask. Other pairs at other cafes did the same, and by the end of August, Workers United had sent an open letter from 50 Buffalo-area employees to the company’s CEO and begun filing for union elections at several shops.

Workers say Starbucks quickly dispatched extra managers to suss out union sympathizers and hold mandatory meetings warning that unionization could cost them their benefits. In November, it sent in Schultz, who’d retired, to win back wayward baristas. During a speech in the ballroom of Buffalo’s downtown Hyatt Regency, he told several dozen staffers about his upbringing in public housing in the Brooklyn borough of New York, his care for the extended Starbucks family and the perks the company had already delivered. Starbucks workers from across the country say this meeting also led to one of the most galvanizing moments for the organizing campaign, in which Reeve challenged Schultz to sign a pledge against union-busting and Schultz ducked out the back door instead. (A Starbucks spokesperson says Schultz visited to reconnect with employees and share the company’s values.)

Unbeknown to Reeve, four salts had helped lead her to that moment. Westlake had recruited her. At the Hyatt, Brisack riled Reeve by describing how the management rep checking names at the door insisted on using the legal names for trans and nonbinary employees instead of their chosen ones. Another salt, Casey Moore, gave Reeve a copy of Workers United’s anti-union-busting pledge and suggested confronting Schultz with it. As Schultz was wrapping up, Reeve turned to James Skretta, a salt seated next to her in the front row, and whispered, “Should I do this?” Skretta nodded and whispered back, “If you stand up, I’ll stand up with you.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to do what I did without Jaz, without Casey, without Will, without James,” Reeve says now. “They basically reset my life trajectory.” She says she was unfazed to learn they were all undercover.

During the confrontation, several executives awkwardly circled Reeve while Schultz exited and she declared, “The

strength we have is our strength with each other.” Video of the incident ricocheted around the internet, and employees who’d been avoiding engaging with the pro-union camp say it helped lead them to reconsider. A year and change later, staffers at 367 of Starbucks’s roughly 9,000 corporate-run US locations have held elections, and 296 have voted to unionize. Reeve’s cafe wasn’t one of them, but in early March, a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) judge ordered Starbucks to recognize and bargain with the union anyway, owing to what the judge called egregious violations of labor law during the election campaign. Starbucks is appealing the ruling.

Reeve has started attending the Inside Organizer School herself. On a panel at the workshop in March, she said the organizing campaign gave her a new sense of hope. Among the salts-in-training, she was a minor celebrity. Between singalongs to Lady Gaga and Rihanna at a nearby Irish pub, a former Tesla worker gushed that Reeve’s showdown with Schultz was an inspiration. “It was badass of you to do that,” she said. “I was scared shitless,” Reeve replied. “It was just adrenaline.” The next morning, during a session in which retail and flight attendant union organizers portrayed managers in a mock anti-union meeting, one barista texted another “LETS REENACT GIANNA,” and they did.

From the start, these training camps have been designed both to attract prospective salts and to hone existing employees’ organizing skills. The March session opened with an icebreaker: Participants introduced themselves by describing the most outrageous thing a boss had told them. The next couple of days included a presentation called “TikTok as Class Struggle,” a role-playing session about raising the idea of a union with co-workers, a panel discussion about trans rights in the workplace and a closing presentation from Amazon salts in Canada. Presenters shared tips on documenting illegal threats from management and using divorce records to find out how much certain executives make. During breaks, participants did yoga, ate barbecue and joked about unionizing their dogs. Several presentations made the case for the necessity of salting in the context of organizing’s steep challenges. A Buffalo barista said she’d spent months loudly opposing unionization in part because she feared getting fired and believed she’d be promoted if she fought the campaign. Townsend, the training camp co-founder, looking Santa-esque in a red cap and suspenders, told the crowd, “Repeat after me: The workplace today is a dictatorship.” During a session about writing cover letters and acing job interviews, Brisack emphasized the value of sounding like a snitch. They shared a list of screening questions they said were used by leading service industry companies, including “Do your emotions ever affect your work?” and “Would you turn in an employee you caught stealing a candy bar?”

America’s labor organizers have reason to be secretive. In the US, it’s illegal to fire employees for trying to unionize,

but the penalties are minor and can take years to litigate, so bosses have every incentive to do so. A former Starbucks store manager in Buffalo testified at a labor board hearing last year that higher-ups gave him a list of pro-union employees and told him to find ways to punish them. NLRB prosecutors have accused Starbucks of terminating more than 40 employees in retaliation for organizing. (The company denies this.)

Yet while salts rarely express regrets about misleading a boss, several say they wish they’d been more forthright once their union drives went public. “It was difficult,” says Skretta, who invented a story about a significant other in med school to explain the recent move to Buffalo. “Exercising more trust in the leaders at an earlier stage wouldn’t have been harmful.”

More than a few workers have said they’ve felt burned after finding out their co-workers were salts. “It’s very unsettling, because some of these people I thought were my friends,” Buffalo-area Starbucks barista Hannah Scott told Businessweek last year. “It was very scheme-y.” Another employee there, Taylor Shaw, said after learning about Brisack’s prior work with Workers United that Brisack was just thinking of their union career and not the other baristas.

At Amazon, where salts were more open with co-workers about their roles in the union campaign on Staten Island, their intentions were thrown back in their faces more than once, according to one of them, Justine Medina. “There would be disagreements on tactical things,” she says. And then would come the trump card: “You’re just a salt.” But hard work helped win over her peers. “I was unemployed, I needed a job, but I also wanted a union,” she says. “As long as I work at Amazon, I’m an Amazon worker.”

Salts say some amount of subterfuge is unavoidable while activists are vulnerable to retaliation. “I don’t think we should be apologetic about it,” says Brisack, who advocates fighting companies “by any means necessary” and is writing a book about the Starbucks campaign. Brisack says their biggest regret is that they haven’t always been able to protect workers or to predict what Starbucks would do next. They mentioned Cassie Fleischer, one of the employees the NLRB alleges the company terminated illegally. “The one thing I do feel guilty about is that I told Cassie she wouldn’t get fired,” Brisack says. “I said, ‘They’re not going to do that.’ And then, yeah, that was not true.”

The Inside Organizer School remains a loosely organized confab, not some formal union body, but its leaders say they aim to start holding workshops every other month and to spread some of them across the country. “I don’t think there’s any company that you couldn’t salt,” says Brisack. Townsend says he sees potential in industries that employ a lot of downwardly mobile college gradu-

ates, like education and entertainment, as well as the service and technology industries, adding that he'd also like to see more recruits who, like him, never went to college. Activists have also been getting themselves hired at high-profile union shops where they hope to influence upcoming labor battles, including at United Parcel Service Inc., which is facing a potential strike this summer.

To reduce the risk of hiring salts, companies might be screening job applicants more carefully. "It would be nice if a recruiter could ask, 'Are you now, or have you ever been, a union member?'" anti-union consultant Walter Orechwa wrote in a 2022 research note. "Unfortunately, that is not legal." He advised hiring managers to select candidates with exclusively positive feedback from past employers. His firm, IRI Consultants, has worked with Alphabet Inc. and, according to the California Nurses Association, the hospital affiliate of Stanford University. Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina, a potential Republican presidential candidate, teamed with Representative Rick Allen of Georgia, another Republican, to introduce a bill last year that would make it easier to fire salts. The bill would legalize refusing work to anyone "who seeks or has sought employment with the employer in furtherance of other employment or membership in a labor organization." Its endorsers include the National Restaurant Association, the Retail Industry Leaders Association and the US Chamber of Commerce.

Even for many fierce union advocates, undercover work remains a tough sell, and some salts say the secrecy was lonely and draining. Many Starbucks salts and co-workers, however, say the undercover organizing changed them for the better. Reeve, who was planning to become a social worker after getting her psychology degree, now says she wants a career in organizing instead. Field, who's now a grad student studying water policy, says he'd salt again: "This is the only cool thing I've done in my life."

After Westlake's presentation on Saturday afternoon, a fortysomething man in blue jeans and a black hoodie told the salts-in-training about what it's been like to do the work on and off for years. He's worked the front desk and waited tables at hotels in California, sold bagels at a university in Washington, DC, cleaned toilets at a makeup factory in Pennsylvania and dried hospital sheets at an industrial laundry in New York. He tried to give up the life and teach middle school history but decided he preferred the undercover work.

"I wanted to change the world," said the man, who requested anonymity because he may salt again. "Am I a guy slamming my head against a brick wall? Or is that wall part of a prison we're all living in, and I'm breaking out? Maybe both."