

L A B O R

Getting organized

***The AFL-CIO's
Organizing
Institute
could herald
a new era
of labor
mobilization.***

By David Moberg

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tuck in a managerial job he took to pay off college debts, 33-year-old Dave Johnson began to wonder about the purpose of life. "When I'm 85 and looking back," he reflected, "I don't want to say, 'What did I contribute? I just made a lot of money for some corporation.'"

He recalled his childhood in Minneapolis, growing up on welfare with his divorced mother, and hanging out with his black friends. Johnson, a cheerful and unassuming man with light blond hair, had gravitated toward business in college in order to make money, but his heart wasn't in it. A course on class analysis and critical theory finally "made sense" of the world around

him, he says. He thought his background could help him do some good as an industrial relations manager, but on that job he soon concluded that workers could only improve their lot by "taking action" on their own behalf.

Johnson decided to take action himself. He applied for a three-day training session offered by the Organizing Institute, a labor organizer training program funded by the AFL-CIO. "I just loved it," he said of the weekend he spent with 50 union members and college graduates learning the ropes of organizing. "I felt like a fish back in water. I could express my true beliefs and not hold stuff in." Later, after working three weeks as an intern on a campaign to organize asbestos workers in Milwaukee, Johnson was even more committed to his new career.

As unions steadily lose their share of the labor force and their power in the face of intransigent opposition from employers, becoming a union organizer might seem an improbable, quixotic choice. After all, for many years unions have spent an average

of less than 5 percent of their budgets on organizing (compared with more than half of their budgets in the late 1930s). In many unions, organizing departments are little more than patronage havens or dumping grounds for otherwise unwanted staff. Moreover, organizing is demanding work.

Nevertheless, since the Organizing Institute began operating in 1989, it has had remarkable success attracting union members and recruiting college students. Although it started with scant support and a small budget, the institute has had a dramatic impact in its first six years. It has provided differing degrees of training to several thousand organizers and nourished a new culture of organizing.

"Probably the most important thing the Organizing Institute has done," says Steve Lerner, the architect of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors campaign, "is to promote the idea that it's possible to win again. People had given up and thought it was hopeless to organize."

As founder Richard Bensinger originally hoped, the institute has begun to make organizing one of the central missions of the labor movement, rather than an often neglected enterprise grafted on to the main business of representing union members. Though woefully underfunded, the institute still has wide support. Indeed, both candidates in this month's election for AFL-CIO president, John

As union leaders debated organized labor's future at this month's AFL-CIO convention, the six-year-old Organizing Institute was widely seen as a model of how labor can revive itself. This article is part of an ongoing series that examines innovative strategies to reverse the decline of the U.S. labor movement.

Sweeney of SEIU and Kirkland appointee Tom Donahue, pledged to greatly expand the institute's budget. "There's nothing else under the compass of the AFL-CIO that's in the same league," says Paul Booth, organizing director for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which was among the five national unions that initially supported the institute. "Their material contribution is great—providing bodies with energy and skills," Booth says, "and their moral impact is great—inspiring and educating everyone."

The main work of the institute is recruiting and training labor organizers. Bensinger, 44, for many years an organizer for ACTWU (now merged with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union into UNITE), conceived of the institute in 1988. He first found support from some international union officers such as Steelworkers President Lynn Williams and SEIU President Sweeney. Bensinger then moved on to win the support of Donahue (then AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer) and Dick Wilson (then director of the Department of Organizing and Field Services), while garnering a less-than-enthusiastic endorsement from then AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland. In 1989, the federation's executive council cautiously approved and provided a budget for a free-standing institute independent of normal AFL-CIO activities.

The distance was salutary: Throughout the institute's existence, many AFL-CIO staffers, especially from the Organizing and Field Services, have criticized and attempted to undercut the work of the institute, which they see as a challenge to their bureaucratic power and procedures. The institute's relative independence has helped it withstand those attacks. Moreover, explains deputy director Mark Splain, a veteran organizer for both community groups and the SEIU, the institute has emerged as a partnership among unions committed to organizing. Launched with a first-year budget of \$385,000, the institute now has a \$2.9 million budget and a full-time staff of nine.

Bensinger and other organizers like Splain have ambitions beyond the simple improvement of organizing techniques: They are challenging the labor movement to drastically change how it operates—starting with where the money goes. Some big unions spend as little as 2 percent of their budgets on organizing, and only a very few—like SEIU

and UNITE—spend as much as 25 to 30 percent. And local unions, which control much of the labor movement's resources, often do no effective organizing. One survey in the 1980s, when union strength was rapidly ebbing, found that only 194 of California's 7,000 full-time union employees were organizers.

"The labor movement got into a servicing rut," Bensinger says. "We mistake servicing [members' grievances] for power, but we can only service members if we get more power, and we can only get more power by organizing more of the workforce. If unions put 30 percent of their resources into organizing, that would change the world."

Even an extra \$25 a year from each union member, whether through new or reallocated resources, would produce \$375 million more each year for organizing, enough to at least maintain the current union share of the workforce. As unions won fewer representation elections over recent decades—dropping

from a postwar peak of around 80 percent to 44 percent by 1982—many concluded organizing was not cost-effective. But, as Bensinger notes, organizing gains power for current members and, by a narrower calculation, actually pays. David Kieffer, a former organizer with ACTWU, figures that dues money from new members in that union represents roughly a 20 percent return on the investment in organizing—though job loss to exports and capital flight has still undermined ACTWU's finances.

In 1971, at age 20, Bensinger was the head of his company workplace committee in an AMF/Head ski factory in Colorado. When ACTWU moved to organize the plant, Bensinger became the head of the pro-union committee during a successful organizing drive. A union organizer since then, Bensinger is an energetic and sincere leader, whose bluntness is leavened by a lively sense of humor. His primary message to would-be organizers is that "we're not about selling a union. We're training leaders."

Applicants who make it through an initial screening attend a three-day training session. The key to that training—and to contemporary organizing—is simple and old-fashioned: the house call. In the house call, organizers encourage workers to talk about their jobs, discover their grievances, encourage them to think about what their rights on the job should be and ask



them to join the union.

Bensinger cautions organizers not to beg or even persuade workers to join a union, and not to thank workers for helping or joining. Instead, he says, organizers should listen and then agitate, building on workers' anger while respectfully acknowledging their fears, especially of reprisals by their boss. Organizers should encourage workers to take action and convey the message that they are the union. Rather than doing a favor for the organizer by joining, they are doing a favor for themselves. It is a message designed to give workers a sense of power and, in the institute's favorite catchphrase, "ownership" of the organizing campaign.

Bensinger also tells his employees that the most successful campaigns act like unions from the beginning, recognizing that winning an election and a contract is likely to be a battle at every point. Organizers should form the largest in-plant committee of union supporters that they can and encourage that committee to do much of the organizing work. In many cases, organizers will use the power of this union-in-formation to force recognition through strikes, pickets or other actions, bypassing an election.

These tactics make a difference. When unions make house calls to 60 to 75 percent of workers, according to an AFL-CIO survey, they win 78 percent of elections. When they don't, they win 41 percent. When they have no in-plant committee, they win 10 percent of elections; a small committee leads to victory only about 27 percent of the time. But if the committee includes at least 15 percent of workers, unions win 61 percent of the elections. Partly as a result of such strategic changes, unions are increasing the rate at which they win elections; they are also organizing thousands of workers without holding elections. Indeed, after many years of decline and stagnation, the last two years have seen slight increases in union membership.

Yet Bensinger still cautions trained organizers to guide the in-plant committee and prod members to make house calls and take action even when they're fearful. "The only way people learn is through action," Bensinger says, recalling that the first time he and other workers stood in front of his factory's gate and handed out union leaflets, he was convinced they would be fired. "But only when we did it and didn't get fired, did we have power."

Some observers fault the institute for providing little education about labor history. Bensinger stresses education through action and focuses on role-play in the initial training sessions: New recruits act as "organizers," conducting in-plant committee meetings, or knocking on doors to talk to "workers" played by trainers or other students. Trainers often throw students curves: playing passive, contented workers, pro-union workers who are racially prejudiced, or workers who fear losing their jobs or have had past problems with unions.

The next stage of training is a three-week internship. Although typically only one-fifth of the three-day trainees continue with the internship, Allison Porter, director for

recruitment and training, says individual unions offer additional training for many of their members who, although they do not complete the program, may work as volunteer organizers once they return to their old jobs. Many student recruits get jobs that assist organizing campaigns from the inside before trying to become organizers themselves. In any case, plenty of jobs are available. In 1994, the institute graduated 155 organizers (up from 118 in 1993). But that was still less than half the number unions had requested.

During the three-week internship, students put their role-playing experience to the test. In Milwaukee, at the start of the asbestos-workers organizing drive in September, Juan Carlos Pons, 33, took to the road with trepidation and excitement, following his carefully marked map of the city. A refugee from Cuba, Pons had managed to sneak into the Carpenters union during Boston's '80s construction boom and enrolled in a labor studies program before applying to the institute. "It's like a magnet," he said. "I should finish school, but it seems like a perfect idea."

Pons' first organizing house call (to a man in suburban Cudahy) threw him for a loop. Though the man was on the state list of certified asbestos removers, he had become part-owner of a removal company. But Pons recovered quickly and talked at length with the surprisingly receptive boss about why there should be a union. The next stop was more promising. Pons talked with an industry veteran with a list of complaints a mile long about how the work has deteriorated in pay, safety and quality of workmanship. Pons was so excited that the worker had to ask him several times for a union card to sign. "I am tired, but I am pleased," Pons said, as he reflected on his first day, "but I'm not going to be so naive to think it will continue this way."

Other interns, particularly the women who were trying to organize an all-male group of asbestos workers, faced steeper hurdles. Rhea Laughlin, 21, a graduate of the women's studies program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, faced both condescension and come-ons. "I'd never experienced sexism to this degree or with this frequency," she said. But Laughlin managed to fend off advances and keep herself—and the eyes of the asbestos workers—focused on building the union. "The union is just the beginning of our struggle," she said. "I definitely want to do this work."

All in all, the interns were remarkably successful. At the end of the first week, four-fifths of the workers whom interns visited that week signed union cards. And a crowd of about 40 workers showed up at the first union meeting.

The institute's interns and trainees come from a wide range of backgrounds. Although union members constitute a growing share of trainees, the institute spends more than half its budget recruiting on campuses. Using a network of sympathetic professors and institute graduates, recruiters primarily look for students who have been politically active on a wide

range of issues from school budgets or Central America to feminism or racial injustice. Even at the elite schools, most recruits come from working-class and union families. The institute makes special efforts to recruit women (about 60 percent of graduates) and Latinos, Asians and African-Americans (about 40 percent of graduates), since polls show women and minorities are most open to unionism, and most unions lack female and minority staff. But without vibrant political movements generating would-be organizers on most campuses (especially blue-collar, commuter colleges), recruiting is itself a labor-intensive organizing project.

Even among socially aware students, "most aren't thinking of the labor movement when they think of making a difference," says the institute's Porter, who was a campus political leader in the '80s before she went through an early Organizing Institute training session. "We've got to build bridges from their issues to the labor movement."

About 60 percent of the Organizing Institute's three-day trainees have been rank-and-file members, nominated by their unions. Increasingly, unions rely on turning members into volunteer organizers as a key tactic. They know the job, know what a union means and can talk with authority to nonunion workers. This strategy threatens typical union hierarchies; teaching workers to be leaders shifts power away from union staff and into the hands of members. But this tactic also increases the power of the union by using its greatest untapped resource, its members.

The Organizing Institute can already boast many impressive achievements: luring students into the labor movement, graduating 560 well-trained organizers and providing less extensive training to more than 3,000 others. But the institute has also contributed something equally important, if less immediately tangible: It has quickly become the central catalyst in creating a new culture of organizing within the labor movement. It encourages organizers to share their knowledge, inspires unions to work harder and invest more in organizing, and (in a departure from the secretive and competitive way organizers from different unions have typically treated each other) nurtures a spirit of cooperation among the 16 unions that actively support its work.

Indeed, besides its central training mission, the staff consults with union locals and internationals that want to radically revamp themselves to step up organizing drives. The institute also brings together veteran organizers, elected local officials and other union staff. "It's a school for everyone, not just for young people," says former ACTWU organizer Kieffer, who worked with interns on the Milwaukee project. "The best organizers get to elevate their game."

Next year the Organizing Institute hopes to more than double its training, bringing 1,800 recruits to three-day training sessions and graduating 400 organizers. And, given the support of both the insurgent and old guard forces during the recent AFL-CIO election, chances are strong that the institute will play an expanded role in the federation. Already the AFL-CIO Executive Council has

approved a new organizing fund, starting with \$5 million in 1996 and increasing to \$20 million a year by 1999. To tap that money, international unions would have to put up \$4 for every \$1 from the fund. Several organizing directors, such as Bob Muehlenkamp of the Teamsters, hope that the Organizing Institute will establish the guidelines for allocating the money to guarantee that it generates new efforts to organize, not simply fund campaigns that unions would have undertaken anyway.

While there is widespread agreement that the Organizing Institute must grow, there are worries about how fast it can expand and how many new tasks it can take on without compromising the quality of its work. Even now, Muehlenkamp cautions that too many unions want the institute to assume responsibility for overseeing their organizing campaigns, threatening to divert its efforts from the core task of recruiting and training new organizers.

Bensinger, however, remains convinced that rapid expansion is necessary—and that the entire labor movement must vastly increase the scale and intensity of organizing. First, that means targeting large corporations (such as Wal-Mart), geographic regions or industries for organizing, rather than moving site by site. Such campaigns will require large numbers of new organizers, but they also hold the potential for inspiring more union members and outside recruits to join in organizing.

Second, a dramatically expanded organizing strategy will have to use direct action and civil disobedience where necessary, especially when the laws do not adequately protect workers' rights. "When an employer fires a worker in the middle of an organizing campaign, we have to guarantee there will be more than an unfair labor practice charge filed," Bensinger says. "We need to fill the moral vacuum out there with hundreds, thousands of rank-and-file workers. ... If some poultry plant or office wants to fire a worker, it needs to understand it'll face an unprecedented challenge from its area churches, consumers, community groups and stockholders."

With corporate hostility toward workers unabating and Republicans in political control, union advocates of other leading strategies such as labor-management cooperation and dependence on the Democrats are losing their credibility. "The systemic, strategic alternatives are largely not there," argues institute deputy director Splain. "What we're fighting is mainly accepting the status quo and letting [the labor movement] die while waiting for a pension." Moreover, as the bottom four-fifths of the American population lose ground financially during supposed good times, the potential for an explosive union drive exists. Increasingly, the mass, militant organizing route seems the best alternative to oblivion. "I believe the stars are aligned for a union resurgence," Bensinger says, eager for the fight. "Somewhere along the line, the labor movement lost its soul. But combine the anger of the working poor with moral authority and the power of labor, and you've got a movement again." ◀

POLITICS

Food first

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*A new
national
movement
is proving
grass-roots
work can be
nutritious and
delicious.*

**By Christopher Cook
and John Rodgers**
SAN FRANCISCO

edged between a six-lane highway and a barren hillside, the beige buildings of San Francisco's Alemany Housing Development and their litter-strewn grounds have long been a familiar sight to passing motorists on their way elsewhere. Isolated from middle-class neighborhoods and the glitter of the city's financial district, Alemany's residents live without the conveniences that San Francisco's better-off citizens take for granted. As with public housing projects in cities across the country, the nearest "grocery" store is a cinder-block liquor and deli market a block away.

But in this community, long wracked by poverty and joblessness, residents have turned a blighted field into the nation's first urban

youth farm. Now boasting rows of organic vegetables, flowers and a greenhouse, the four-acre farm is a meeting ground for teen jobs, community pride and fresh, nutritious food. In newly landscaped backyards, Alemany residents tend six-foot-square planter boxes bursting with tomatoes, collard greens, red chard and string beans—an impressive display of produce often unavailable in low-income areas. Instead of sacrificing their tight food-stamp budgets to high-priced convenience stores or busing across town in search of a supermarket, Alemany residents—and people in low-income communities across the country—are gaining direct access to affordable, nutritious food by growing their own.

Situated about a mile from the Alemany projects in one of the poorest sections of the city, the office of the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) bustles with energy and optimism. Teen gardening interns drop by to pick up paychecks and brag about their vegetable crops, or to prod Director Mohammed ("Mo") Nuru to give them more farming work. Once strictly a gardening

group, SLUG now promotes, with help from city government and foundation grants, small-scale urban agriculture projects such as the Alemany farm as a means to help develop economically depressed communities. SLUG's aim, Nuru explains, is not only to give summer jobs to kids or provide inexpensive produce to the poor, but to restore vitality to the community by directly involving its members in its welfare. "It's a whole cycle we're addressing," Nuru says, "not just one issue."

While local projects such as the Alemany farm encourage people to grow their own nutritious food, a wide array of other grass-roots efforts—involving sustainable agriculture advocates, urban redevelopment organizers and environmental activists—are working to open up consumer markets in the United States for small-scale, diversified agriculture. These groups argue that the extreme competitive pressure exerted by multinational agribusiness corporations has made it difficult to preserve community-oriented and ecologically conscious agriculture. As a result, both small farmers and poor consumers have suffered.

Under the banner concept of "community food security"—the notion that all people should have access to a nutritious diet that comes from ecologically sound, local, non-emergency sources—these groups have come together to form the Community Food Security Coalition, an embryonic national movement that promotes what co-founder Andy Fisher calls "a more democratic food system." The

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