

Leadership Development and Organizing: For What Kind of Union?-Reply

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Michael Eisenscher's (1999) basic point, that unions need to mobilize the rank-and-file members rather than rely primarily on staff, is valid and important. There is a real danger that unions will atrophy if members view unions as businesses from which they buy certain representation services, rather than as part of a social movement in which the members personally participate. Still, I have a number of quibbles:

First, the need for mass mobilization is something that good organizers have known for a long time. For example, Karsh (1958) documents an organizing drive in the early 1950s that relied on extensive personal contacts with the employees of a garment factory and rallied support from other unionized workers in the community and church leaders. A more recent example of mass mobilization was the organizing drive among Harvard University clerical and technical workers that began in the 1970s and brought union representation in the 1980s (Palmer et al., 1990; Hoerr, 1997).

Second, although excessive reliance on staff and degeneration of unions into bureaucratic or autocratic institutions have undoubtedly weakened the labor movement, other factors have also contributed significantly to the erosion of union strength:

- Changes in labor law make a difference. Ellwood and Fine (1987) found that right-to-work laws substantially hindered union organizing. Saltzman (1988) demonstrated that, even in the absence of changes in the climate of public opinion toward unions, the enactment of public-sector bargaining laws led to union growth.

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- Interpretation and enforcement of labor law also affect unions' ability to organize. The Reagan appointees to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), for example, overturned dozens of NLRB doctrines that favored unions. Despite the general aversion of Reagan's appointees to a large role for government, they expanded "the scope of labor law, but only when to do so would contain union and not management power" (Weiler, 1990). In contrast, the Clinton-appointed NLRB chairman, William Gould, and NLRB General Counsel, Fred Feinstein, applied for temporary injunctions under Section 10(j) of the National Labor Relations Act to force the prompt rehiring of workers who may have been fired illegally for union organizing activity. Decades earlier, Les Aspin (1966), who subsequently served in Congress for many years, had shown that prompt reinstatement of employees fired for organizing activity led to substantially higher support for unions in representation elections. The Republicans in the House of Representatives apparently agreed with Democrat Aspin on the importance of this matter, for they responded to the Gould-Feinstein policy by voting in 1995 to cut the NLRB budget by 30% and adopting a rider that limited the NLRB's ability to seek 10(j) injunctions (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, 1995). They also prohibited the NLRB from spending federal funds to implement a proposed rule allowing unions to organize a single site of a multi-site employer (which is often easier than organizing all the sites at once) and continued that prohibition from 1995 through at least 1998 (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, 1998).
- Intensified employer efforts to avoid unionization have thwarted organizing. Foulkes (1980) described the sort of enlightened personnel policies, such as avoiding layoffs, that some employers adopted to dry up the grievances that can lead to unionization. Weiler (1983), in contrast, stressed employer coercion as a reason for declining unionization. Similarly, Freeman and Medoff (1984) reported a very large increase, beginning in the 1960s, in illegal anti-union activities by employers. By 1980, they noted, "one in twenty workers who favored the union [in a representation campaign] got fired." More recently, Saltzman (1995) detailed the increased use of expensive personnel selection procedures to weed out union supporters during the hiring process for recently built auto plants.

There are also other factors, such as changes in industrial structure and the migration of industry to the South that have eroded union strength. Thus, the factor that Eisenscher identified is only one of several and may not be the most important.

Third, Eisenscher's preference for participatory democracy rather than representative democracy ignores that national or global nature of many product markets. The kind of decentralization needed for participatory de-

mocracy is practical for the Painters union or the International Association of Fire Fighters because the employers with whom they negotiate typically only compete on a local basis. It is less practical, however, for the Steelworkers because they need an industry-wide contract or pattern contract in order to take wages out of competition. Participatory democracy only works well when the group involved is small, and national or global product markets mean that union contracts or essentially similar contract provisions must cover a large number of employees in order to be effective.

Fourth, Eisenscher is right to point out that it is preferable for unions to avoid relying heavily on hired staff who have never worked in the occupation they represent. Certainly, unions representing skilled workers, such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, can easily find rank-and-file members who can bargain contract language effectively. Nevertheless, unions representing unskilled workers, such as the aides in a nursing home, often cannot easily find rank-and-file members who could fill this role well without the assistance of a hired staff member.

Finally, Eisenscher seems to indicate that the reluctance of American unions to adopt socialist ideology has weakened the labor movement. Certainly, socialist ideology has motivated some individuals to become active members of the labor movement or union staffers. Nevertheless, as Howe (1985) and others have noted, the barriers to socialism in America are both considerable and persistent. As a result, there is less popular support for socialism in America than in Canada or Europe. I doubt that the adoption of an unpopular political doctrine would increase the ability of American unions to recruit large numbers of new members.

Furthermore, efforts by unions to change conservative political views of some union members are not always successful. For example, the politically liberal United Auto Workers (UAW) was unable to keep large numbers of white UAW members from voting for George Wallace in 1968 and 1972 and for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 (Greenberg, 1996). My guess is that the UAW would have even less success persuading members to support avowed socialists than it did persuading them to support self-described liberals such as Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale.

In summary, I agree in part with Eisenscher, but I doubt that he has discovered a universal formula to revitalize the American labor movement. Rather, he presents a partial solution that applies only in certain circumstances.

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