

Amplifying the Voices of Workers: An Organizing Model for Labor Communications

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Abstract

Today it is technologically and financially feasible for labor to develop its own forms of advanced media production and distribution. However, a major obstacle to effective labor communications is its reliance on corporate communications models. To serve labor's prime directives to organize and represent workers, unions need a different approach to communications; one based in assumptions explicitly opposed to corporate communications methods developed to serve corporate goals. New media technologies can and should be wedded to labor education goals to create an organizing model for labor communications.

The Old Ways and the New

Labor communicators used to be the people who produced newsletters, brochures, flyers, and other printed materials for union members. Some (not many) were called on to carry the union message across the treacherous waters of the corporate media to broader publics. Over the past decade, in a new media environment rich with possibilities for unions, they have evolved to become people who also make videotapes, send out blast faxes, deal regularly with mass media inquiries, and design and implement Web-based communications.

With all this communicating, you might think we're spreading the word better and faster than we ever have. Unfortunately, despite important efforts by the AFL-CIO to turn around labor's decades-long decline, membership recruitment and retention numbers tell us we're still sliding. We're also losing basic battles to inform the public about union values.

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According to recent polling data, as union density has fallen, so too has the public's knowledge of, simply, what unions do (Mitchell, 2001).

Part of our problem is the evolving communications environment. While it provides useful tools, the highly technological culture of communications practitioners is dominated by a corporate mindset inappropriate to labor's prime directives to organize and represent workers. We need a different approach to communications, one based in assumptions explicitly opposed to corporate communications methods. We need communications that attempt to engage workers in a collective effort at self-enfranchisement.

Common Sense is Wrong

Union density, despite a stepped-up organizing orientation and budget on the part of the labor federation, remains lower than it's been in three-quarters of a century. It continued to fall last year. That's mostly due to obstacles like outdated labor laws, indifferent politicians, hostile corporate leaders operating in a cowboy global economy, and generations of workers outside the fold unfamiliar with the benefits of unionism. It's also because the desire for transformation—the starting point for real change—still eludes many unions.

Given these difficulties, it is essential for union leaders and communicators to understand that an organizing model of unionism requires an organizing model of labor communications. This runs in the face of “common sense” communications theory drawn from corporate practices.

Our challenge is to come up with balanced communications strategies that cull what we can from the bag of innovations originating in corporate-oriented media, while not losing sight of crucial differences between “them” and “us” and how that plays out in labor communications theory and practice.

Their Handbook

The question to ask in whatever game we're playing is, toward what ends? Corporate communications theory is built on two cornerstones: selling commodities and, less explicitly, selling capitalism. That neither of these goals matches labor's goals should be self-evident. But, apparently it's not. If you listen carefully at union communications seminars, you can usually hear a set of assumptions right out of the corporate PR and advertising handbook: People don't like a lot of words. Serious content is less important than slick form (although what form is, beyond

trendy design elements, remains unexplored). People don't think for themselves, so we have to do it for them; and critical thinking comes with a special sign on the door: for executives only.

Moreover, people are so bombarded all the time by advertising, mass media, direct mail, e-mail, voice mail, faxes (in short, data overload), that the only way we can get anyone's attention is by using even fewer words, more garish design, and shrinking our message down to slogans approved by the highest authorities save God: focus groups and polls.

The logic of these positions leads to a Social Darwinist communications theory: survival of the fittest message means reduction to the most nearly illiterate. We could play by the accepted wisdom of corporate media ideologists, because "theirs is the only game in town." Or we can come up with new rules, because our team needs something different—from communications, and from society—than their team does.

We already do play in their game, of course. And, some of that work has become very good in recent years, probably because that's what one aspect of corporate communications theory is set up to accomplish: clearly stating a message and getting it into the mass commercial media. Best examples: tying theme-based paid electronic media advertising to political campaigns, as practiced in the last few election cycles; and John Sweeney's ready availability to the press, compared with the previous leadership's hermit-like non-relationship with the media (Mort, 1998: 47).

We also already play in our own game, consisting of the labor press and, increasingly, various emerging forms of electronic media. But, our own game is characterized by a great unevenness and some rather wishful applications of common sense. Let's take a look at some of the work and its assumptions to assess how it functions.

On Matching Audience with Methods

America@work, the flagship AFL-CIO publication, features pages of bite-sized info nuggets, many colors, contemporary design (described by one union communications staffer to me as "capable of inducing a headache in the reader") and rather more cheerleading than analysis. Despite the effort to retool a look in step with current Madison Avenue thinking about what "average people" like to read, its circulation is mostly limited to union leaders and staff. (I don't mean to pick on the AFL-CIO publication alone; it simply provides a handy example of a genre of publication that can be found, for the most part, at the high end of affiliate publications.)

This isn't entirely the fault of the AFL-CIO. It's up to the international unions, the AFL-CIO affiliates, whether they want to distribute the magazine, and, if they do, how widely. Most unions choose not to distribute *America@work* to members, perhaps because they publish their own internal organs. (One has to wonder if these union leaders or staff honestly believe an *America@work* subscription would burden the members with too much union information in their lives.) But, that's demand side. The Federation is responsible for the design, on the supply side, and that's a mismatch with audience.

Some union media gurus believe that if you repeat something often enough (a shibboleth of advertising, commercial as well as political) people will begin to believe it. Hence, after the AFL-CIO decided to rename its "right to organize" campaign a "voice at work" campaign, *America@work* shoehorned the slogan or variations on the theme into virtually every nook and cranny of the publication, including articles with but remote natural linkage to the phrasing. The term "working families" was given the same treatment, appearing, for instance, no less than 23 times in a four page article (Hall, 2000).

This does work in big-time advertising, where 40 or 50 million dollars can be dropped into a few months of prime time TV buys, or simultaneously into the 12 highest volume mass-market magazines. The public might indeed as a result go into the store, turn glazed orbs at the shelf, and intone like Homer Simpson, "Hey, there's those things I've been hearing so much about." Or rethink cherished but outmoded positions: "You know, that oil company really is pretty environmentally friendly."

There are two problems with this idea as it applies to labor's communications work. Externally (leaving aside the quaint notion that we aren't actually selling something, but attempting to engage workers in a collective effort at self-enfranchisement), we don't have 40 million dollars a year to spend this way.

Internally, *America@work* isn't exactly prime time. Mass media persuasion techniques are herein applied to a thin layer of leaders, staff, and activists who need and want, as Sam Gompers might have declaimed, "more": more analysis, more information about policymaking and leadership decisions and the thinking that went into them, and, perish the thought, coverage of losses as well as victories and some ideas as to why things went wrong so that they might be done differently next time.

The design/audience mismatch and repetition compulsion, in place of compelling analysis, represent pages torn from the wrong notebook. Lurking somewhere around here is a lack of trust that union leaders—let

alone workers—can understand “more”; or perhaps the feeling that they don’t have the time to absorb more. This is not, to use David Elsila’s telling phrase, “taking readers seriously” (Elsila, 1992).

“Working Families”

On the positive side, the “working families” rhetoric currently marking labor’s public discourse represents a laudable effort to contest the middle ground of family values, rather than cede it to the right wing. Labor needs to maintain that we are the normal ones and that our normalcy embraces a wider set of options than theirs does. If the other team tries to define family values by the measure of Ozzie and Harriet, we can and should brand them as living in an irrevocably gone and irrelevant world. This effort has borne some fruit.

A measure of message discipline has been taken up by the often provincial international unions, and “working families” has therefore been appearing relatively consistently in corporate media reportage featuring quotes by union leaders and spokespeople, and sympathetic politicians. At one point in even Al Gore’s presidential run, “working families” rhetoric briefly replaced the more fuzzy and familiar “middle class” in his speeches. Symptomatic of his deeply confused campaign, after intensive usage of “working families” for a few weeks, back he flopped to “middle class” (*New York Times*, 2000).

During discussion at a recent West Coast union communications conference, one labor educator made clear his principled dislike for the use of “working families.” For him, it was yet a further step back from the already compromised “working people,” itself descended from “working class.” His idea has some merit. A monthly for legislative policy wonks recently ran a cover story on “Working Families and the High Cost of Child Care.” Despite a decent gloss of the issues, including problems stemming from high turnover due to low pay, no mention was made of the key role played by unions (where they exist in the industry) in boosting pay and conditions, and no union source was quoted. Somehow the use of a union-inspired catch phrase in the article’s title didn’t translate into deeper engagement with a labor viewpoint (*California Journal*, 2001).

But, I think the idea behind “working families” is basically sound. It might be argued that the very lack of contextual understanding evidenced by the journalist demonstrates the success of the “working families” phrase, in that it has entered common usage beyond union circles. You start where people are and find a reasonable lever to move them where you can.

For this purpose, “working families” is a necessary soft end to a stick that, however, also needs a sharper end. And, what might that sharp point consist of? I would suggest that it is any communications tool that successfully allows its audience to discover its own class consciousness.

Two Obligations

In our increasingly digital economy, where humans are forced to function as the connecting nodes between machines—their assigned central purpose: to speed up the global passage of capital—it’s hard to put the brakes on for even a moment. But what kind of friends (let alone victories) do chicken nugget-sized thoughts win us? We have one obligation to convince and reach people where they are, since we always need to win this election right now. We also, however, have an obligation to kick the discussion to a higher level. If we ignore that responsibility, eventually we may be talking to a lot of people, but it won’t matter, because we won’t be saying much.

For an unfortunate example of the latter we have but to turn to *Livelihood*, the most recent incarnation of *We Do the Work*. Rightfully irked at unfair funding rules, which blocked the monthly half-hour TV show from national PBS distribution, its producers morphed the original into a “workplace”-oriented hour-long quarterly program. Supported by corporate grants, its producers can now revel in national distribution, but at the cost of the show’s political edge, which in its best moments used to pay direct attention to working class issues from a working class perspective. Those who lament the loss of the labor beat in daily newspapers and its replacement by workplace columns know what I’m talking about.

Another problem with this program (common with people who produce video for labor) arises from its reliance on MTV and television advertising aesthetics. This entails rapid-fire cutting, weird camera angles, and reduction of interviews to one thought at a time. “That’s what people are used to,” say the corporate theorists. “That’s what works.” Academic researchers specializing in developmental psychology who have recorded their observations of people watching TV might respond, yes, it works: for overstimulation, premature exhaustion, and putting people into a near-trance state (Mander, 1977). Useful for sales, certainly. For critical thinking and encouraging people to look at the world from the non-typical standpoint of labor? Not likely. Form and design, again, don’t line up with intent and audience.

Problems with “Class”

Outside relatively thin layers of social activists and academics, “class” isn’t the first thing on most anyone’s mind. The category is a slippery little devil, at best, and psychologically troublesome for many American workers. Not to mention that efforts to develop worker class consciousness, as they surface, are instantly the target of hyper-alert right-wing pundits.

The recession of 2001-2 put something of a damper on corporate media enthusiasm for various forms of Horatio Alger stories, especially the virulent strain flourishing before the dotcom implosion. But, this standard American folk tale never goes away and many American workers never tire of hearing it. Continuously bombarded with heartwarming rags to riches narratives, workers often can’t accurately run the numbers on the likelihood of falling into untold millions of dollars next week. Consequently, they can vote against their own best interests during political or union certification elections, scab during strikes, and make other bad choices in daily life, signifying an incomplete class identification. It may not be as bad as robber baron financier Jay Gould’s infamous boast that he could hire one half the working class to kill the other half, but solidarity just doesn’t occupy center stage of American working class life.

But, if we don’t try to go there, we certainly won’t ever get there. The first rule of an organizing model for labor communications should be simply to trust workers. At a national meeting of local communications staff employed by a large public sector union, I showed a short videotape I had recently produced for new employee orientation. It raised and answered questions and fears many people (subjected as they are to the commercial mass media’s endless distortions of working class realities) have about unions. Mostly the 15-minute tape depended on interviews with workers to describe the reasons why they belonged to and were active in their union. Afterward a communications staffer from a large statewide federation approached me. Brow furrowed, he let loose the question bothering him: “You didn’t script those interviews, did you?” No, I replied. “But those workers were really articulate,” he said, puzzling over how this had happened.

Workers are the best experts at their own lives. Given enough room for reflection, most know they are working class, suspect they are likely to remain working class until the day they die, and can be convinced their interests are ultimately best taken care of in concert with folks like them. Through the video interview process, I provided a few workers with some-

thing they don't often have: a moment of structured space for reflection on class as it relates to their lives; and their responses emerged readily and far more eloquently than I could possibly have scripted.

More Room or Bite-sized?

How do we get that room for thought? Let's start with the "bite-sized" fallacy. In order for someone to join a union in today's political atmosphere, she has to be a critical thinker, be able to get around plausible sounding lies to understand what's best for herself and—this is crucial—what's best for the most people. It's this last part that's absolutely necessary for the success of organizing unionism. Because an individual who joins only because it's best for her as an individual (the bite-sized pitch) is not someone to whom you can appeal to divert resources, which might otherwise go to servicing her, to organizing someone else, in another workplace or another industry.

Some people will get it right away. Others take more time. So, we must take more time, to give them the room to think. Not everyone is ready to be a critical thinker right off the bat, especially when the other side works long and mostly successfully to make a working class perspective in the United States in the year 2001 seem counterintuitive.

One Good Example

As one good example of the complexities involved in, but also the necessity of "taking more time" with core working class issues, let me cite the case of the single payer health care initiative, placed on the California ballot in 1994 by a progressive health care coalition, backed by public sector unions. It took a half-million dollars and a lot of street talking to get the signatures to put single payer on the ballot. With just under two million dollars to spend on the campaign itself, against the sea-deep pockets of the health insurers, we decided to save as much of our money as possible for media buys in the last few weeks and to focus on organizing house meetings. These had the dual purposes of raising consciousness and money.

We made two discoveries. The first was a no-brainer: no matter how much money we could spend and raise, the other side would keep at a steady 10-to-1 advantage. Two million? Fine, they said, we'll spend 20. If we had raised 10, they would have spent 100 without blinking.

The second discovery was more interesting. We found that once we got a voter into a room, in short order (unless they were heavily ideological, or an insurance company executive) they were ours. The logic of

single payer is simple and persuasive; the arguments of the other side rely on big scare tactics and lies. Working people and their natural allies on such issues, recognized their own class interests in 10 minutes of basic labor/health education around a few key messages: single payer costs less, cuts out the parasitic insurance industry middleman, covers everyone, and already exists and works well in Canada.

The only problem was, we couldn't get 50 percent plus one of the voting electorate into a room with us for 10 minutes on two million dollars. And, the other side, by buying up the airwaves for months, could and did get into their living rooms for 30 seconds, over and over again, reinforcing already familiar conservative electoral themes: big government is bad, big bureaucracy is bad, health care delivered by a big government bureaucracy would be bad.

In this case, mass media repetition trumped one-on-one communication—because we didn't have the resources for enough one-on-one, or hadn't figured out how to leverage the best resources we have (people) heavily enough to counter the big money boys' approach. If we lose that advantage (and we've been losing it steadily for decades) or fail to properly combine that strength with new communications technologies, then we're goners.

What's needed here, rather than chicken nugget ad copy politics, is a commitment (time and money!) to a long-term education project, and to its ongoing linkage to organizing communications.

Designing to Organize

In the workplace, individuals are forced into an identification that elsewhere they are continuously exhorted to replace with another. You may be about to become a millionaire any moment when you open your mail, or watch a TV game show, or drink with your friends. But, when you're at work you're more likely to agree that you're someone who could find yourself on the street without a regular paycheck at someone else's whim. This is why one-on-one workplace contact generally remains the best mode of organizing. It is also why the distribution of union communications at work ensures the most effective reception.

So, do we concentrate on flyers, surreptitiously handed from one cubicle on to the next? Not always and not exactly, because the flyer these days can as easily appear in your incoming e-mail box. Particularly in office-based work or with employers who separate co-workers across vast geographies, Internet and Web-based communications are increasingly routine in organizing campaigns. One advantage is that this is a cheap

form of communication. Another is that increasing numbers of members know how to design and maintain Websites and listservs, involving people who might not otherwise go to meetings or volunteer other types of union work. (The same might be said about home video enthusiasts.)

The disadvantage here lies in a temptation to fetishize the technology, accepting the tendency to compute more and have direct human contact less. Communications should never substitute for that contact. Communications media just represent another set of tools, which are changing. But, the rules for organizing are not. They are and must remain human contact centered, as the best one-on-one union organizing programs do.

The design work of the other side delightedly envisions robotic consumers as its end product. Its ideal result is the passive customer headed directly into a purchase, with as little contact with other human beings or activities as possible in the intervening moments. Its utopian moment is e-commerce.

In contrast, our communications design ideally proposes the consumer of our messages to be an active collective, because the members of a union need each other to get their own individual needs met. I say "ideally" because we don't always have the luxury to pursue things this way. When a "paycheck deception" initiative is on the ballot, or before a legislature, telling members that the sky is falling is not far off the mark. In such circumstances, doing it with slogans on postcards in bright colors may well help the message to stand out from the rest of the direct mail avalanche. But, if the sky is perpetually falling, for fewer and fewer members, and we have failed to do the harder work of educating (as opposed to just scaring or sloganeering), eventually there won't be enough of us to hold the sky up, and fall it will.

How Do We Do It?—A Start

Given the very real obstacles to communicating a class-based perspective to working people in the United States, how do we nevertheless do it? Nelson Rockefeller, in 1960, proclaimed that celebrating May Day in the United States was a subversive act, akin to treason. He was right. To note the anniversary of the birth of the struggle for the eight-hour day assumes the historic existence of a class opposed to his own. Worse (from his perspective), it marks a form of resistance by that class which, as it spreads, encourages the development of solidarity, based in class consciousness.

An organizing model of communications needs, at least, to think about communication, education, and organizing at the same time. It begins with respect for and the desire to listen to workers, not simply to hear where they're at as targets for messages, but because they are often the best crafters of their own messages. We might do better providing workers with a "voice at work" by giving them the microphone and getting out of the way, than by handing them a script.

Wait, you argue: hand whom the microphone? Didn't I just finish saying that workers can be their own worst enemies? What good does it do any union to give a forum to the worst instincts of some of its members (see the "free speech" areas on strike Websites, which can rapidly devolve from democratic discussion to name calling or red-baiting)?

Pre-organizing and Labor History

Organizing takes place in our mass commercial culture all the time. Unfortunately it's usually the wrong kind. That doesn't necessarily mean straight on anti-union messages, but simply ignoring work, its discontents, and the possibility of alternatives to anti-worker social structures. The erasure of the working class from mass commercial culture is a type of pre-organizing by the other side: the creation of conditions under which workers feel bad about themselves, powerless, and inclined toward individualistic responses toward problems that can better be solved collectively.

The presentation of labor history to working people who have never been exposed to it can be eye-opening and empowering. Especially for young workers, conditioned by "great man history" in school to yawn reflexively at first mention of the H-word, stories of the dramatic struggles by people like them for rights supposedly guaranteed by our society can inspire an identification with workers' struggles and stimulate the desire to learn more.

One recent example in California: the declaration of Cesar Chavez's birthday as a legal holiday gave educators the chance to present farm labor history curricula under the auspices of teaching about the United Farm Worker (UFW) leader's life and values. Small grants provided by the state sparked the development of lesson plans, murals, service learning, and reflection by students at all grade levels on the historical connections between the civil rights and labor movements and, most importantly, on the relationship of these social movements to their own lives.

I worked with a small but focused coalition to create materials for teaching farm labor history to kids in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oak-

land. Once the product was completed, I sat with four second-graders at a time before a CD-ROM, examining short histories of different farm labor struggles stretching back a century. These eight-year-olds had no difficulty emerging from the half-hour unit of instruction understanding its central lesson: that the difference between Chavez's UFW and earlier farm worker unions was that he built a union that lasted.

Ignorance of the easy successes of this type of labor communications perhaps explains (but doesn't excuse) the extension of the peculiarly American anti-historical bias to labor communicators. Thrilled by his own first-time success at placing a pro-labor op-ed piece in several daily newspapers and a number of weeklies on Labor Day, a community college history instructor and union activist organized a meeting of labor-friendly academics to explore creating a labor op-ed writing group. Present were a number of historians interested in using anniversaries as a hook to publicly commemorate important events in labor history. The communications director for the state federation of labor spoke ably about the upcoming legislative calendar and agenda of the state fed, provided a few op-ed writing tips, and then offered some parting advice: "Don't waste anybody's time writing labor history. The history of the labor movement is its future. No workers today are interested in those old fuzzy black and white images of struggles in the 20s and 30s."

Rockefeller couldn't have said it better. The unconscious echoing of the capitalist's views on labor history by a labor communicator underscores the obstacles in front of an organizing model of communications. Absorption of the values of the oppressor happens as readily as the digestion of "common sense."

Our Handbook Isn't About Ventriloquism

Providing workers with a voice means more than saying to them, here, sit in my lap, and you be the dummy and I'll be the ventriloquist. Our own pre-organizing requires a serious commitment to labor education, internal and external, especially including new member orientation programs, local communications with a goal of building a sense of working class solidarity, and labor curricula in the schools which bring to life the neglected history of the working class.

Union communicators who come up informed by a labor education background will more readily grasp an organizing model of communications than those who, notwithstanding their commitment to and identification with labor, have arrived under the influence of corporate media theory.

Let's imagine how it might look if we elevated an organizing-oriented communications agenda to the priority level of the day-to-day need to battle for public opinion in the corporate-owned mass media. We might start with a bulk purchase plan for a cadre of rank-and-file video producers and Web activists, along with courses in how to use the equipment. Their explicit mission: to create images and ideas that nurture solidarity with workers' issues, struggles and perspectives. In other words, to create class consciousness.

A useful example is the cutting edge communications structure developed for the Seattle WTO battle (and each one thereafter), which arose from the Independent Media Center movement. Video and Web activists, in touch locally and nationally through meetings, but also via the Internet, shot and edited their material on the street and uplinked it to a satellite daily, mere hours after the events they taped. Even faster was a Website with streaming media, to which video producers uploaded their clips directly. This work, coordinated through an independent media center set up for demonstration coverage in a storefront, provides a model of affordable state-of-the-art organizing media.

These activists got out an alternative perspective on the events, making it impossible for the entire picture to be spun by the corporate media as "lunatic fringe on the loose." The AFL-CIO's Public Affairs Department was working overtime, too, to bust labor's message through the corporate frame; but it did so through the more traditional direct approach to mainstream reporters and editors. This is not an either/or; both tactics were needed. The lesson to draw here is that since the alternative views came mainly from the streets, not the suites, they carried a legitimizing immediacy. Not slick, but competent. Not funny camera angles and MTV editing routines, but compelling point of view and content, in the right place at the right time, with careful planning: that's how these messages forced their way into the commercial news coverage and public awareness.

Labor Media Resource Centers

While not as inexpensive as simpler Website and e-mail models, the budget for creating slightly modified labor versions of these media centers would not be prohibitive for a large union local or central labor body in a major city. Distribution of messages created here can take advantage of corporate media outlets when possible. But, the time has now arrived when it is just about technologically and financially feasible for labor to

develop its own forms of bypass distribution, through which our messages will not have to worry about breaking or being broken by corporate frames.

The body of work produced by this communications cadre will be linked through Web-centered organizational nodes. A network of labor media centers, which rely on emerging broad band audio and video streaming technologies, will provide regional structures capable of supporting the necessary connections between education, communication, and organizing.

No need to completely reinvent the wheel: existing labor studies programs in colleges and universities, and internal union education and communications departments, can be tapped to work closely with the labor media centers. Indeed, the work of the Labor Education Service (LES) at the University of Minnesota, while unique among university-based labor education programs, has shown for years how labor educators and labor communicators can work together to craft organizing media.

Along with a long-running weekly cable TV program, produced in cooperation with the Minnesota AFL-CIO, the LES also generates numerous videotapes for use in organizing and other important union campaigns. Four full-time staff work on labor media projects, including a daily on-line labor news service on the LES Website, *Workday Minnesota*. According to LES Telecommunications Director Howard Kling, the LES is “poised to integrate the Internet, video, and audio when the technology makes this truly feasible (Kling, 2002).

In spreading this type of work, younger labor studies students will be key players. Their familiarity with new communications technologies can be matched with labor education to create a new generation of labor media activists.

The technological linchpin here is the convergence of computer, telecommunications, and video technologies with transparent user interfaces. These have merged in inexpensive but powerful digital recording and editing systems that can be purchased for a relative song: \$15,000 can set you up with camcorder, editing hardware and software, and the means to uplink broadcast-quality results to the Web. Less than a decade ago, similar configurations would have cost more than 10 times as much.

Implicit in the independent media center work in Seattle and beyond is a critique of the corporate media, both in the careful planning for an alternative information source and in the content that was created there. Analysis of and opposition to the corporate news perspective—alongside traditional nuts and bolts training on how to effectively row labor’s message across the shoals of the capitalist media—will be woven

throughout an organizing communications strategy that allows union members to grow in their understanding of who is saying what to them and for what purposes.

This is the bottom line: at the same time as we do what we need to win this campaign now, tapping modified corporate manipulation techniques, we must devote resources to long term education, to setting in place a technical infrastructure, and, most crucially, to developing communicators with a labor perspective, in order to build from the ground up an organizing model of labor communications.

Overcoming the Barriers

It won't be easy. The Trojan Horse of corporate media theory within the house of labor is one formidable barrier. The common sense of the surrounding media environment will not readily be replaced by a communications theory and practice based in union organizing. The decentralized structures of the labor movement, jealously guarded by the adherents of business unionism, also militate against coordination on the scale necessary to make this vision—Rockefeller's nightmare—a reality.

No doubt, not every video, e-mail barrage, or Website created along the lines advocated here will reflect precisely the thinking and goals of labor leadership. Nor should they. An over reliance on labor leaders and staff over the past 50 years helped get us into the mess we're in. Let's try trusting workers enough to provide them with the education and tools they need to figure out and deliver labor's messages.

Labor communicators can't continue to uncritically absorb and reuse corporate PR methods, with diminishing returns, unto the vanishing point. If, instead, we rise above corporate common sense to a class-conscious communications practice, sending the ghost of Charlie McCarthy packing, workers could gain a voice that capital will be unable to ignore.

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