



State of the Unions: New Tactics Target Unorganized Workers

Insights

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If you've been following the news, you probably realize that it has been a busy year for organized labor. The percentage of unionized workers in the private sector has fallen to historic lows, leaving unions with fewer dues-paying members, and motivating them to adopt new tactics to stem the decline. Exploiting a more favorable environment created by recent NLRB decisions promoting unionization, unions are turning their focus to grassroots organizations, social media, and previously uncharted geographical territory in an effort to revitalize their base.

This article describes some of those efforts, focusing on new strategies to organize American workers. Unions are struggling to find ways to reach younger Americans, who will be the future of the workforce. Companies that wish to remain union free may need to adjust their strategies as well. Reviewing your organization's policies, and the way you communicate with your employees, will be crucial to achieving that goal.

Operating At Full Strength

For the first time in more than a decade, the National Labor Relations Board is operating with a full complement of five confirmed Members and a confirmed (rather than appointed) General Counsel. This General Counsel spent the majority of his pre-Board career as an attorney for the International Union of Operating Engineers, unlike the most recent GC who spent most of his career working at the Board.

What do these changes mean? The current Board and GC will be actively pursuing alleged violations of the National Labor Relations Act in an effort to spur unionization. We can expect a much more union-friendly environment than in years past. Unions will certainly look to the Board for favorable rulings and to the GC for Advice Memos that support their cause.

Taking It To The Streets

Reaching beyond traditional organizing campaigns, unions have begun to partner with non-labor groups that share common goals. This past summer, the AFL-CIO entered into a new national partnership with United Students Against Sweatshops. The goals of this partnership are to "strengthen workers' rights and build power for students and workers."

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has contributed more than \$2 million to New York Communities for Change, which funds the Fast Food Forward movement. Fast Food Forward

staged protests in several major cities this year, demanding \$15 per hour for workers in the fast-food industry.

Why are unions teaming up with grassroots organizations? AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka's statement earlier this year sheds some light on this issue: "We are not going to rebuild the labor movement solely through NLRB elections and voluntary recognition by employers, no matter how smart and strategic our campaigns."

Building partnerships with non-labor organizations, unions hope to teach young Americans to band together towards achieving a common goal. The challenge for organized labor will be to translate these efforts into concerted activity in the workplace.

#unions

Unions have increasingly turned to social media to promote their interests. Discussing unionization in 140 characters or less, AFL-CIO President Trumka held a Twitter chat on May 6, which reached more than 2,250,000 Twitter accounts during the hour long Tweetchat. The same day, the AFL-CIO began the Facebook engagement, which attracted nearly 150,000 views of posts in the first four days. The SEIU has more than 40,000 followers on Twitter, up from only 5,400 followers in September 2010.

Why are unions employing social media to reach workers? The AFL-CIO has stated that "The survival and future of the labor movement is directly tied to our ability to engage the next generation of workers and develop the next generation of union leaders." With more than 50 million active Twitter users in the United States, unions have begun ramping up their efforts to reach a younger audience through social media. We expect to see these efforts continue to grow over the next year, as unions become more social media savvy.

Targeting The South

Recognizing that "the U.S. labor movement has never successfully developed a concerted and coordinated effort to organize workers in the 11 Southern states making up the Southern Region," the AFL-CIO has resolved to develop (and implement) a southern organizing strategy. The AFL-CIO Resolution 26 provides few details on how affiliated unions will reach this goal, but does adopt as a "top priority" a "long-term commitment to organize the South."

Don't unions typically avoid organizing in "right-to-work" states? After all, employees in right-to-work states cannot be forced to join a union in order to keep their jobs. But companies in right-to-work states should not rely entirely on their "right-to-work" laws when considering the possibility of unionization. Unions will continue to seek organizing opportunities anywhere they believe they can be successful. This includes the South, despite the protections of right-to-work laws.

Shifting Gears

Clearly, unions have begun shifting their focus and priorities. What does this mean for your organization? It means that as unions find more efficient ways to reach out to your employees, your

company should carefully evaluate your labor-relations policies and communications. Have you updated your social-media policy based on evolving NLRB rules? Have you reviewed your confidentiality and off-duty access policies recently? Have your supervisors and managers been trained to respond to questions about your company's position on unions?

As our workforce continues to move towards an online community, has your organization revisited its online presence? Does your company have active Facebook, Twitter, or other social-media accounts? How do you share your successes with the world, and with your workforce? Do you monitor online forums for negative information about your organization?

Next year, unions will be using new technologies in an attempt to gain the support of a younger workforce. Now is the time to consider whether you are adequately prepared to meet the new face of organized labor.

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