
Labor

Organizing for change, changing to organize!

by Marianna Wertz

While mass strike eruptions against British-International Monetary Fund “free trade” austerity policies are already occurring across Europe and reaching into such “Asian Tiger” nations as South Korea, in the United States, the AFL-CIO is preparing for similar mass action here, by spearheading a drive to organize large sections of the unorganized. “Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize!” is the title of the campaign, announced at the federation’s winter Executive Council meeting in Los Angeles in late February. A series of 12 regional conferences will begin at the end of March and conclude in August, aimed to answer the questions, “How do we meet the challenge of organizing hundreds of thousands of new members? Where do we find the organizing talent? How can we mobilize members and community support? Where do we find the resources?”

That this campaign is preparatory to an expected eruption of mass-strike activity in the United States, is evident from the 26-page campaign pamphlet, also titled “Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize,” issued for union leaders and members by the AFL-CIO prior to the Executive Council meeting. In the section titled “Can we Turn It Around?” the pamphlet gives as a reason for “optimism,” that “overworked, underpaid and saddled with debts, American workers are anxious and angry. Economists are warning employers of a coming ‘revolution’ against low wages and lack of respect in the workplace.”

The pamphlet begins by noting that union membership is “lower than at any time since the Great Depression.” “Since the 1970s, changes in the nature of the work done in our country and the emboldened anti-union attitude of public as well as private sector employers have driven union membership to its lowest level since 1935, when it was less than 14% of the workforce.”

The pamphlet then addresses the failure of the union movement itself to challenge the decline in membership, prior to the revolution brought about by the leadership team of President John Sweeney, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, and Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson, who were elected in October 1995. “Instead of organizing,” it notes, “unions hunkered down. In the face of the changing workforce and a growing anti-union movement, the labor movement collectively chose the shortsighted strategy of try-

ing to protect current contracts of members instead of organizing new members. More and more resources poured into defensive contract battles, plant closings and crippling strikes, leaving little time and few resources for organizing.”

The federation’s current strategy—to devote at least 30% of financial resources and manpower *at every level* to organizing new members—appears to be paying off already. The March 4 edition of the AFL-CIO’s weekly *Work in Progress* reports several recent victories in organizing. Among them, the 5,200 flight attendants at TWA ousted their unaffiliated union and joined the AFL-CIO-linked Machinists, bringing to 80% the number of the airline’s employees in the union. At another airline, 500 Reno Air flight attendants recently filed for representation by the Teamsters, hoping to better a situation in which their pay is capped at \$1,000 a month, and there is no retirement or health insurance plan.

There are four keys to winning the battle for new members, states the pamphlet: 1) Devote more resources to organizing; 2) develop a strong organizing staff; 3) devise and implement a strategic plan; and 4) mobilize your members. It is clear from the detail in which these four points are spelled out, that the AFL-CIO’s leadership is committed to the drive and intends to make sure that it succeeds. It also makes clear that they are preparing for a period of mass strike.

‘Organizing is rarely simple’

For instance, in the section on “Mobilize Your Members,” the pamphlet directs union leaders to “build a mass mobilization team.” “Since organizing is rarely as simple as winning an election and getting a contract, many unions have turned to mobilizing their members in demonstrations that make issues public, pressure public officials to assist and disrupt the daily routines of targeted employers. Mobilizing the members gives your union strategic and tactical flexibility. It also allows participation by a large number of members. . . .

“As much as any other program you will institute to build your organizing, a program that moves your members into actions and mass activities against employers has the potential to redefine and energize your union.

“Well-planned and executed mass actions will build confidence and lessen fear concerning things like legal liability, police response, and bad press.

“You can introduce your membership to mass activities by tying some of your routine activities, like conventions or big meetings, to organizing activities—mass handbilling, pickets and marches, and flooding public meetings”—which is precisely how the winter Executive Council meeting was conducted.

The “Organizing for Change” one-day regional conference schedule is: Seattle, March 26; Miami, April 19; New York City, April 29; Los Angeles, May 14; Boston, May 22; Atlanta, June 7; Philadelphia, June 10; Cleveland, June 16 (tentative); Minneapolis, July 17; Chicago, Aug. 7; Austin, Aug. 8; and Denver, Aug. 14.