

A Message From the Author:

The decision whether or not to join a union organizing committee is an important one. I faced this decision when I was working in a plant years ago.

The staff organizer told me that to win we needed a committee of employees, but I wasn't sure I would be a good committee member. I was pretty shy, had just a small group of friends and didn't know very much about unions. It seemed to me that it might be better if I just signed a union card and left the committee work to others. In the end, though, I decided that if I really wanted to have a union, I needed to jump in and help out by joining the committee.

All these years later, I can say that joining the committee is one of the best decisions I ever made. It was hard, and took time, but eventually we did win. I still feel pride in having helped improve the conditions for myself and my co-workers and many others who came later. Even more, I had an experience I will always cherish.

I got to know and appreciate my fellow employees on a deeper level than ever before. I

forced myself to learn new things and develop new skills. I found ways to express what I was learning and to share my ideas with others. I met some fascinating and admirable union representatives. And I had an awful lot of fun in the process.

At first I had a hard time stating my opinions publicly, especially when my managers did not approve or agree. But I found that by speaking from the heart I earned the respect of my co-workers. Most surprising to me, my managers confided to me sometime later that my leadership in the union organizing effort actually earned me their respect as well.

The reason I am writing this book is to share with other people some of what I learned not only during my first campaign, but throughout my career as a union member, staff organizer, regional organizing director and most recently as National Organizing Director of the AFL-CIO.

I believe that since we spend so much of our lives at work, we should take all possible steps to achieve fulfillment and respect on the job. We don't have to accept things as they are. **By organizing a union we can reach higher.**

Welcome to the union!

— *Richard Bensinger*





It's Your Union

The first thing you need to understand as an organizing committee member is how important you are. **Without a committee (or leadership group by some other name), there is no organizing campaign.** Simple as that.

I learned this personally when I helped to organize my own workplace, a sporting goods factory in the West. Although I liked certain aspects of my job, such as the pay, I was concerned that management wasn't doing what it should to make our jobs safe. It seemed like our voices were not being heard. A member of my family said, "Stop complaining and call a union." Although I had some skepticism, I did call, and soon an organizer came to visit me.

My request to the organizer was simple: "Form a union at our company."

His response was equally direct: "It's your union, and you'll have to organize it. All I can do is give you support and advice."

It was news to me that the union is actually the employees joining together to create their own organization.

Of all the things I have learned since that day, this is the single most important concept. The reason the committee is so important is because *it is YOUR union*. No one can build it for you. No one can run it for you. No one can define it for you. It's your union and it's what you make it.

As your committee grows and develops and gains confidence, your union is born.





The Bigger the Better

The organizing committee is equally essential whether the workforce has 10 people or 10,000 people.

As a rule of thumb, the committee should consist of a minimum of 10 to 15 percent of the workforce. In a unit of 30, there should be at least 3-5 people on the committee. In a unit of 1,000, the committee should have at least 100 members.

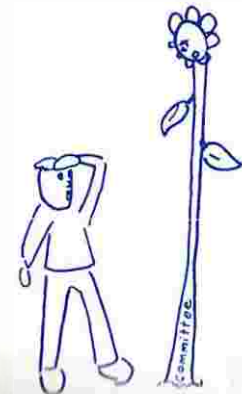
I learned this lesson the hard way when I was organizing my workplace. I got together five of my friends at work, and we decided that we would be the committee. Well, 5 out of 550, that's barely one percent. When we tried to get union cards signed, we couldn't even get 20 percent of the workforce to sign. We ended the campaign. The organizer left, and told us to call back when we could get a large enough committee together.

A few months later, a woman working near me had her hand literally torn off by a plastic extruding machine we had complained about. Outraged, we called a meeting at a nearby farmhouse, and 100 people showed up. Out

of this group, 60 joined the committee. We found volunteers in each department and work area, who each agreed to talk to 5 to 10 others. Within a week, 65 percent of the plant had signed cards and our campaign was off and running.

Although getting cards signed is only one of the many tasks of committee members, this experience showed me how important it is to have a large committee.

The size of the organizing committee also has a lot to do with how fast a campaign moves forward. If an organizing drive bogs down, more often than not, the committee is too small. On the other hand, a large committee can greatly reduce the length of time of an organizing campaign, particularly in the period leading up to either a demand to the employer for voluntary union recognition or a petition or application to a government agency for an election.

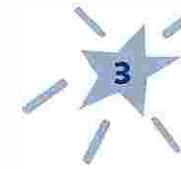


The bigger the better

Routes to Recognition

The critical role of a large, representative organizing committee remains the same whether employees are pursuing an election or non-election route to union certification, in the public or private sector.

Do not make the mistake of minimizing the importance of the committee simply because your employer has agreed to voluntary recognition or a card-check. Remember that your ultimate goal is not to get cards signed; **your goal is to build an organization of, by and for the employees.**



Create a Culture of Inclusiveness

A large committee is one key ingredient for a successful campaign. A representative committee is another.

A union is not an exclusive club. Your organizing committee should exemplify a culture of inclusiveness that welcomes all people, regardless of their job title or social grouping. Everyone should feel needed and valued, and everyone should have a voice.

The committee **should** be fully representative of the workforce, including:

- ★ work areas
- ★ departments
- ★ job titles
- ★ ethnicity
- ★ age
- ★ gender
- ★ length of service

When the committee is representative of everyone, the employees will see more

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clearly that the union is truly their own organization. If certain departments or groups are left out, your union may be weakened and appear selective in who it really wants to represent.

A recent campaign I was involved in is a good illustration of this point. The vast majority of employees were professionals working in a large office. A block away was a separate unit where people did a completely different kind of work. Since we had a big committee in the main worksite, the employees were inclined to give up on the smaller site, especially since it appeared to be unsupportive of the union effort, and it wasn't clear if these workers would be included in the unit.

The organizers persuaded the committee members to reach out to that isolated unit, and managed to recruit a couple of committee members. Although these committee members did not gain a majority as we did in other departments, they did garner substantial support. When the employer insisted on including this department in the voting unit, hoping to dilute our majority support, we agreed to include them. This proved important to our victory and to building an inclusive union. If we had ignored this group until after filing the election petition, it would have been much harder to win their support.



There are always some departments with less union support than others. If you happen to work in one of them, don't get discouraged. Just get as much support as you can, and the stronger departments will counterbalance the weakness in your area.

During an organizing campaign in the West, the company had a small number of non-English speaking people. Although this was only a small group, and they appeared to be resistant to the union, we never gave up on recruiting committee members from their ranks. When we won the election by only two votes, it became clear how important it was that our committee included everyone.

Welcome!

Bienvenue

Willkommen

Bienvenido

Welkom

Bem-vindo

Velkommen

Benvenuti