

Creating a Cyber Local: "Don't Mourn for me; Computerize!"*

By Art Shostak

As far back as the early 1970s the AFL-CIO and its international unions were early adopters of mainframe computer power to help manage membership and dues record-keeping. However, leaders have remained leary of anything but prosaic computer uses, and settle for mundane home pages weakened by boring and stale content. Quite different are a small, but growing number of far-sighted locals busy trying out promising web-based services for current and prospective members alike. Guided by remarkable self-taught union "digerati" (especially knowledgeable computer users) these pioneers are developing dynamic local union web sites that may yet help show Labor the way. (1)

As everyone understands, computer power is no magic bullet, and it cannot transform or rescue the Labor Movement. (2) However, the use of the Internet, when in combination with personal tools such as home visits and shop floor chats, would be an effective tool in day-to-day decision-making, and in meeting the long-term goals of organizing. Enthusiasts believe progress in this area can help "unionize" younger members for whom computer use is second nature, while assisting older members to catch up. Among other advantages they see the opportunity interactivity offers for improved contact between officers and members, the 24/7 circulation of labor news, the availability of non-labor resources to members, and, overall, the branding of organized labor as a 'smart' high-tech user, a player to reckon with in the Information Age.

Many locals are eager to at least get off the starting line, while more computer-savvy locals are constantly seeking ways to significantly upgrade their use of computer power. Twelve field-tested steps sketched below should be useful to both types. Naturally, they will need to be adapted to each local's special needs, as one size never fits all.

1. To begin with, a local might organize a small committee of pro-computer enthusiasts (possibly called the Creative Computer Committee, or, CCC). It should go where the local has never gone before, that is, take new creative risks and think outside the box. Made up of volunteers from every major constituency (age, craft, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual preference, etc.), the CCC should operate primarily, though not exclusively, on the Internet.
2. The CCC should scan a wide array of local union websites to see what innovations can be adapted, and to avoid reinventing the wheel. These sites are linked to the home page of AFGE, AFT, CWA, IBEW, IBT, and SEIU, etc.). They can also be found in the archives of the annual Labourstart contest for the Labor Web Site of the Year Award (ericlee@labourstart.org; <http://www.labourstart.org>); and the archives of the feisty annual contest for pro-democracy sites run by the Association for Union Democracy (AUD: <http://www.uniondemocracy.org>). Especially helpful are guidelines and offers of no-cost assistance from "digerati" advisers identified at the e-Union .org site (WWW.E-UNIONS.ORG/SUPPORT.PHP)
3. It helps next to clarify what IS the local's vision of a desirable website. For example, it could be defined as *a spirited current site visited often by many members whose high expectations of it are commonly met*. This definition expects only a plurality of visitors, not the attention of every last member, as some will never be interested. Note also the hope that visits will be often, THOUGH not daily, and satisfaction will be common, though not guaranteed. In short, this definition emphasizes attainability, rather than any defeat-inviting idealization. It holds out an achievable goal, rather than

one endlessly out-of-reach. Naturally, as the devil is in the details, refining the definition will take a bit of work. A model I offered in 1999 might be a good starting point: It recommends the use of the following four concepts: futuristics, infotech, services, and traditions, captured by the term F-I-S-T. (3)

‘Futuristics’ is a long-term approach that replaces a narrow "putting-out-fires" orientation with a view that includes the here and now, but also extends five or ten years beyond. ‘Infotech’ replaces shopworn communication tools (newsletters, mailings, etc.) with cutting-edge tools (low-cost computers and e-mail for all; list serves etc.). ‘Services’ explore BIRTH-TO-DEATH aids to the well being of members and dependents. And ‘traditions’ replaces hollow observances of union traditions with whole-hearted celebrations empowered by Internet possibilities (streaming video, iPod options, etc). For instance, personal celebrations of local's history and traditions could be supplemented by "capturing" them in a memorable oral history DVD provided to all, especially new and prospective members.

4. the CCC next needs to conduct surveys of current member access to, and use of the Internet. Given the awesome annual drop in cost, and the even more astonishing annual gain in machine power, we can expect an ever-greater use of computers at home, especially in households with children. A detailed statistical profile at the outset will enable the Committee to measure whether or not changes it makes in the local's website actually make the difference sought (as in the number of visits and visitors).

5. The Committee should agree as early as possible on a sound division of labor, as it is vital that every member feels he or she is contributing in a way they judge meaningful. (4) One possibility involves a technique known as *scanning*: each person identifies publications and websites they already like learning from, and agrees to call attention to any material in them possibly worth including in the local's website.

An additional scanning focus would have a member assume responsibility for extracting ideas from a national listserve of grassroots webmasters called cybersolidarity@yahoogroups.com. Another could collect ideas from the AUD website mentioned earlier. A third could adapt ideas from an essay entitled "Troublemaking on the Home Page," by Matt Noyes and David Oao, in the 2005 edition of *A Troublemaker's Handbook*, edited by Jane Slaughter. Similarly, a committee member could share ideas gathered from a major labor hub such as <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutunions/allies/>, from the website of the Coalition for Change, and from a new regular feature of this journal, "Caught in the Net," by Kim Phillips-Fein. (5)

6. The Committee should never stop seeking advice from the local's membership. It could run focus groups and/or conduct informal discussions with both influential members and others. Rank-and-filers should be asked to imagine the most varied services a local union home page might possibly ever offer—the more novel the better! What would meet their varied interests? What do they find hard to locate elsewhere on the Internet?

7. In this connection, the committee might consider including features of very personal relevance that would help meet the information needs of members in their roles as workers, voters, citizens, consumers, parents, TV viewers, readers of the press, union members, churchgoers, and so on. For example, as the *Wall Street Journal* does, a local's website could include a review of organizations that help keep a divorce friendly. Or a critique of weight loss companies. Or an evaluation of hunting and fishing innovations. Or a guide to creating an online memorial to a deceased loved one, and so

on and so forth.

Special attention might be paid to pro-labor sites, such as those featuring union-made products and clothing (some examples being www.unionlabel.org, www.unionjeancompany.com, and www.nosweatapparel.com). In a year or two, an average member might think first and foremost of his or her local's 'one-stop' website when seeking information about the sort of personal challenges cited above, many others with which the Internet can increasingly help. (6)

8. Separate sections of a local's website could be set aside to serve the special interests of gay members, new members, people of color, job specialists, sports fans, retirees, and so on. The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), for example, is really good about sending out e-Activist Alerts on issues of particular concern and interest to union women (www.cluw.org/links.html). (7) Hobbyists might be offered their own corner, and if volunteers can be found to do the translation, foreign language sections could be offered in appropriate languages. A site worth taking note of is www.workplacefairness.org, which explains the rights of non-unionists at work, which makes the union advantage clearer. SIMILARLY, at <http://www.ueinternational.org/shop/> members can learn what globalization can really mean. A terrific interactive online tool shows the difference in buying power between two people working the same jobs in the US and Mexico. All sub-sections, by the way, should be accessible to any member, lest an insidious sort of insularity unnecessarily undermine union solidarity.

9. Next on the CCC agenda would be hammering out an agreement on quality protection. Research has made clear the indispensability of being able to grab and hold a site visitor. Bore him or her once, and you have seen the last of them. Accordingly, a local union web site must be pitched at a sound reading level (Nielsen urges an 8th grade reading level.) (8) It must crackle with excitement. It must grab an onlooker by the shirt collar, and almost immediately impress on them the value-added quality of the site. Nothing on it should set one's eyes rolling, or make visitors wonder why they ever clicked on such vapid nonsense.

This means excluding from a local website yawn-inducing material such as a transcript of a potboiler speech of likely help only to insomniacs, or jargon-loaded documents only lawyers could pretend to understand. All of this belongs, at best, in a very obscure section of a local's improved web site, there to languish in well-deserved obscurity. A local's website must make an instant positive impact, create emotional attachment, stir discussion, and induce return visits.

10. As we are creatures of habit, the danger exists that a weak CCC may soon retreat primarily or even only to warm-and-fuzzy photos of smiling members, congratulations on happy events and upbeat accounts of the recent golf charity game. While all of this has merit, the site can succeed only if substantially supplemented by FAR more imaginative use.

Naturally, norms of decency, mutual respect, and sensitivity should invisibly govern. SUCH norms, however, in no way preclude smart edgy risk-taking. A site worth visiting in this regard is that of Purpleocean.org (www.PurpleOcean.org), an SEIU affiliate that uses exciting on-line campaigns to make real change on the ground: "We take risks. We'll try anything on-line to affect change ... we're not afraid to experiment."

While there are dozens of very good websites to link to, union members may especially appreciate the following THREE: FIRST, a weekly feature, "Sweet Victories," at www.thenation.com, "chronicles a progressive triumphÑfrom legislative and electoral victories to successful organizing

efforts, protests and boycotts, to the launching of a promising new organization or initiative." SECOND, the American Labor Education Center at www.TheWorkSite.org. has, among ITS many features, practical tips on how to conduct better meetings, organize rallies that inspire, work effectively with committees, and more. (See the "Organizing Nuts and Bolt" folder in the site's Tools section.) Third, a Health and Safety Newswire update knits together 95 trade union websites in Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago, the UK and the USA. It can keep members informed of breaking news from around the globe (<http://www.labourstart.org/hswire>).

11. Given the ease of online interactivity, encouraging inputs from the members should be a major feature of a revamped home page. A provocative new question might be posed weekly, with a guarantee that all answers (within reasonable bounds) will be used. Such a question might ask: What features of other relevant locals (in or outside of our IU) do you wish we employed? What's wrong with any of our current UNION services, and how could this be corrected? How might we best attract others into membership? Does a Labor endorsement sway your vote, and if not, why not? Should our Union Hall become a Wi-Fi Free Access location (where the first portal page that opens is the local's home page)? If not, why not?

Website contests might also be run weekly, with small cash prizes held out as an inducement. Area labor educators could be asked to provide questions drawn from labor history, controversies, personalities, and so on. Framed like the TV quiz show *Jeopardy*, or some similarly entertaining show, this consciousness-raising feature might especially appeal to old-timers, union buffs and even some pro-Labor younger members alike.

12. Finally, the CCC might join with local officers in deciding website policy concerning opponents of the incumbents. Always a tough issue, it cannot be avoided and should be tackled with integrity early on. By law, a site must comply with LMRDA Section 105 and inform members of their rights. Better still, opponents could be assured every use of the site the incumbents would want were they on the outs. A section, for example, might be set aside entirely for autonomous use by the LOYAL Opposition. While the CCC exists at the invitation of the incumbents, and must not be perceived as a "loose cannon" by them, it must remain neutral in inevitable struggles for power inside the local.

Naturally, however, name-calling, ethnic and racial slurs, ad hominid arguments, and the sleazy like would be outlawed from use by agitated members. The focus would be put instead on helping members better understand controversial issues, and taking informed positions. A local's website thus provides a space for airing differences of opinion and even challenges concerning facts in front of the entire membership, rather than by rumor. Allegations can be refuted, suggestions can be bolstered or battered, and transparency and accountability can be considerably improved.

In sum, the twelve points above only begin the process of improving a local union website, and hopefully stir a strong desire to get going on it. This creative process resembles the Internet itself— an endless mix of adventure, growth, vexation, and rewarding gains. (9) Local unions intent on adding new value for members cannot work hard enough at evolving into 'electronic communities.' Impressive uses of computer power, they will also stand out in valuing highly personal aspects of their community. With sustained effort, many can become efficient and effective Cyber Locals, thereby helping to assure Labor "computes" its way into the 21st century.

Footnotes

1) HIGHLY REGRETTABLE is the inexcusable absence of any attention to the subject in these recent books: Rick Fantasia & Kim Voss, *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2004); Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss, eds., *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2004); Stephen Henry Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement*, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2004); and, Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah M. Meltz, *The Paradox of American Unionism: Why Americans Like Unions More Than Canadians Do But Join Much Less* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2004). In sharp and welcomed contrast, see the first eight essays in the June, 2005 issue of **WorkingUSA**, 'Information Technology and Labor's Future.'

2) Kate Bronfenbrenner, as quoted in Jill A. Fraser. "You've Got Mail." *New Labor Forum*, Vol.13, Issue 1, Spring 2004. p.77.

3) On the innovation process, see Arthur B. Shostak, *Robust Unionism: Innovations in the Labor Movement*. Ithaca: ILR Press, 1984. See also Arthur B Shostak, *For Labor's Sake: Gains & Pains as Told by 28 Creative Inside Reformers*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995.

4) See Shostak, Arthur B., *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). Note especially the typology of three current union models (Cyber Naught, Cyber Drift, Cyber Gain) and the details of an improved model (CyberUnion) offered for Labor's consideration. See also 'On the State of CyberUnionism: An American Progress Report,' **WorkingUSA**, June, 2005. pp. 403-422. I owe Dan Marshall credit for helping me develop several ideas I have had since the **WorkingUSA** essay.

5) See in this connection, Arthur B. Shostak, ed., *The CyberUnion Handbook: Transforming Labor through Computer Technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 2002.

6) See also Alternative Press Center, www.altpress.org; America@work, www.aflcio.org/aboutaflcio/magazine; Campaign for Labor Rights: The Grassroots Mobilizing Department of the U.S. Anti-Sweatshop Movement, www.campaignforlaborrights.org; Common Dreams - Breaking News and Views for the Progressive Community, www.commondreams.org; Community Labor News, www.clnews.org; Cyber Picket Line, www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/union; Democracy Now!, www.democracynow.org; Global Unions News, www.global-unions.org; Independent Media Center, www.indymedia.org; Labor News Ring, n.webring.com/hub?ring=labornews; LaborNet, www.labornet.org; Labor Notes, www.labornotes.org; LabourStart, www.labourstart.org.uk; Workers Independent News Service (WINS), www.laborradio.org; ZNet Labor Watch, www.zmag

7) Valuable in this connection is the web site of the Coalition of labor Union Women (www.cluw.org) -- which features an extensive section of very personal links, e.g., www.cluw.org/links-labor.html>Women and Work; www.cluw.org/links-health.html>Women's Health; www.cluw.org/links-reproductive.html>Reproductive Rights; and www.cluw.org/links-seniors.html>Getting Older/Staying Healthy. Another good source can be found at the personal online journals of an SEIU affiliate (www.purpleocean.org/community).

8) "In general, trade union websites do not receive massive amounts of traffic. And this is still true, even though more and more union members and potential members have come online in recent

years. There are many reasons for this -- including the simple fact that many of our sites are boring. But another reason might be that for many members, the sites are simply too difficult to read. And that is something which can be fixed." Posted by Eric Lee, WRITING WEB PAGES FOR WORKERS, at August 15, 2005. He draws on the advice of Jakob Nielson, a web usability guru (<http://www.ericlee.me.uk/archive/000129.html>).

9) Eric Lee is planning an annual publication to highlight the 100 best labor web site innovations of the year - an overdue major aid to Labor's cyberspace renaissance. Lee has asked LabourStart's 26,400 email subscribers for their nominations at www.labourstart.org/innovation/index.shtml. Lee will write a long introduction summing up lessons learned from these outstanding innovations. Completed by mid-October it will be published using iUniverse (print on demand) by mid-November to coincide with the annual launch of voting for the Labour Website of the Year award.

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