

Report on Theme III: Organizing Into the Union and Organizing the Union

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Theme III was comprised of two subthemes, each of which had its own dedicated session. The first was (A) Building an Organizing Culture; the second was (B) New Workers, New Expectations, New Methods? I'll deal with each of these in turn and then draw together my impressions of what the key themes from the two sessions mean for us both in the labour movement and in academia.

Subtheme (A) Building an Organizing Culture

Three key themes emerged from this session. The first was that worker/member involvement was central to building union success on many different fronts. In organizing new members, the involvement of those being organized in organizing themselves and their co-workers was seen to be central to building a vibrant union able not only to become organized but also to eventually win a first contract. The latter is not always the case in Canada and in the U.S. a frightening number of newly organized workers are never able to secure a first contract. By building the capacities for action in the organizing process, the union is establishing those capacities to draw on during first contract negotiations. In addition, presenters pointed out that union member involvement was key to organizing the unorganized. Involving rank and file members in outreach to potential new members and making them active in organizing campaigns were both likely to increase a union's success in securing new members. Empirical evidence has indicated that worker involvement at the grass roots level results in much higher levels of union organizing success.

The second key theme to emerge from this morning's session was the importance of a union having an organizing focus. This focus can be conceptualized in two different ways. On the one hand, focus can be defined as whether or not the union has made organizing new members a priority. Unions who are focused on organizing and who have set aside the considerable resources to devote to it are seen to be more effective than those who have not. On the other hand, focus can also mean whether the union has a targeted organizing strategy or not. Does the union organize broadly amongst the unorganized regardless of occupation or industrial sector? Or does the union focus its attention only on certain sectors and workers?

The final key theme from this morning's session concerned many unions' lack of the required conditions to engage successfully in new organizing. In many cases, the union's structure is all wrong. The union remains highly centralized, bureaucratized, and inflexible rather than incorporating the vibrant and active local and workplace structures seen to be necessary for attracting and keeping new members. In other cases, unions lack the appropriate culture or values as well as the necessary networks and alliances that would help them leverage their power to organize successfully. And finally, many unions don't have representative leadership in place – that is, their current leadership is

not reflective of the membership they seek to represent. Where much of new organizing is occurring among young, female, immigrant workers of colour whose first language is not English or French, Canadian union leaders are often older, white, Canadian-born males. Yet, this is difficult, time consuming, and expensive to change. But such organizational and cultural change does not happen by sitting back and letting it happen. It takes concerted effort, will, and investment.

(B) New Workers, New Expectations, New Methods?

Again, three key themes emerged from this session. The first is that much of “new economy” employment is precarious and large portions of “old sector” employment is becoming precarious too. Workers in precarious employment are a challenge to unions. As these numbers grow, they undermine the power of traditionally employed workers. As a result, unions must lift the conditions of the precariously employed otherwise workers in more secure employment find themselves endangered. This is not a new challenge however for unions. Organizing to the extent of the market has long been necessary for unions.

This leads to the second key theme of this session. Organizing among these workers however is very difficult to do. Great numbers of (if not a majority of) these workers are excluded from coverage by our traditional labour legislation. We need to come up with alternative strategies.

The final theme to emerge from this afternoon’s session was the exploration of what some of these alternative organizing strategies might be and how they might be pitched at workers like these who have never before considered some form of collective representation. In the session we had some discussion of various alternatives including professional associations, cyber organizations like WashTech, associations of independent contractors, and other such new forms.

What Does This All Mean for Us?

In the labour movement there is a considerable amount of experimentation going on especially around worker training and education and around organizing. Are you learning from one another? We don’t hear much about people from the union movement calling each other up to ask what others are up to, asking to learn from one another, or inviting others to learn from them. Why not? The labour movement is a collective and as a whole should be seeking to strengthen its entire membership.

As well, in the labour movement we don’t hear a lot about reorganization and restructuring except for the changes brought about by merger. In many cases merger has not brought the many benefits originally hoped for. And in the meantime, unions are not getting on with the restructuring that really might make a difference: creating workplace based structures, ad hoc committees, and decentralizing decision making. All of these changes would aid in creating a vibrant workplace union presence with a higher degree of

member activism that would ensure the union was brought into focus for workers and became seen to be of central importance in people's everyday work lives.

For us in the academic community, these changes in the labour movement need to be documented. As researchers we have a mission to be out in the world describing and analysing these important changes and the range of experimentation. What do some of these alternative forms of representation and structure look like? New structures? New training and education programs? How is organizational and cultural change within unions occurring? What works? Why? Under what conditions? Only once we know what is going on can we begin to prescribe what ought to happen. Without this knowledge, unions will continue to struggle, unsure what to do.