



# **Organizing the Unorganized!**

*Building ATU Power*

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# Organizing the Unorganized

*What can Labor do for itself? The answer is not difficult. Labor can organize, it can unify; it can consolidate its forces. This done, it can demand and command.*

—Eugene V. Debs

## Why Should ATU Members be Concerned?

The transit industry is in its greatest restructuring since the 1960s when private transit companies went bankrupt *en masse*, and federal, state, provincial and local governments stepped in to create large unified systems to serve entire metropolitan areas.

Today these large transit systems are being fragmented and dismantled at a startling rate. Systems are being privatized piece by piece, and sometimes all at once in one fell swoop. Transit systems are bringing in low-wage contractors when they establish new services such as “circulators” and “community shuttles.” Small cities and suburbs which used to rely on these large unified systems are creating or expanding their own transit services. Where the systems directly operate the paratransit service, threats to contract the work out are always present. And where fixed-route and paratransit systems used to be bid out as one contract, they are now being bid out as multiple small contracts so that fly-by-night companies can get a piece of the action.

At the same time that our transit systems are being dismantled, school districts which directly operate their student transportation services are aggressively moving to contract the work out to companies that don’t provide pension plans or affordable health insurance.

We have seen this, and its devastating results before. This process began in the over-the-road industry when the United States deregulated intercity bus companies in the 1980s. The fragmentation of the industry and lack of public oversight has been a disaster for bus operators and mechanics, it is the cause of innumerable fatal bus accidents, and it has eliminated critical bus service to small communities.

Unorganized transit workers have a direct effect on our standard of living. If we don’t organize these non-union transit, school bus, and over-the-road companies, they will be anchors around our necks. When our members are responsible for only a portion of the transit service in a metropolitan area, we lose leverage with our transit systems. Our contract

standards are at risk, our demands can be ignored, and our strikes are weakened when the private companies and suburban systems continue service and step up to perform of our work.

Unorganized companies undermine our wages, hours and terms of employment. We all know what studies and statistics show: unorganized workers earn less, have fewer benefits, and no voice within their workplace. Anyone who has ever sat through negotiations, whether they are at a private or public system, has heard a boss compare wages, hours and working conditions to non-union workplaces. It is usually part of a threat to subcontract or privatize our work, or coupled with a demand for wage and benefit cuts. Our very ability to improve our standard of living is held in check by the lower standard of living that prevails at most non-union workplaces.

### **Political Clout and a Better Life**

As your local union grows, you can more effectively advocate on behalf of your members, the riding public and students. Many of our fights are political in nature, whether it is fending off privatization, ensuring high standards for school bus contractors, or insisting that over-the-road buses be regulated. Additional members and resources provide us with the political influence we need to win our battles.

Consider also these big picture factors. In the last forty years there has been a sharp decline in the overall standard of living for North American workers. If you're wondering why things are getting tougher for working people in our countries and want to do something about it, look no further than the need to organize and rebuild labor's strength. The political voice of the working men and women of Canada and the United States is limited because the growing numbers of unorganized workers are less likely to be involved in the political process. More workers organized into active, democratic unions also means more political clout in pressing for national priorities which reflect workers' needs, not corporate greed.

### **Who Do We Organize?**

The ATU organizes workers in all sectors of the transit industry: fixed-route and complementary paratransit service, student transportation, over-the-road and charter buses, shuttles, medical transportation and others.

We organize workers in segments of the transit industry which are strategically important to us. They may be strategically important because they will give us more leverage with our employer, because they are low-wage competitors which are making it difficult to maintain our high contract standards, or because they are new entrants to the market who will one day be major employers bidding on our fixed route systems.

## The Role of Locals and Members in Organizing

Organizing the unorganized is the firm mission of the labor movement. It is a key responsibility of ATU leaders and members at all levels of the union. Local union and rank-and-file involvement is also an important key to success in ATU organizing drives. Union members make the best organizers and the most believable teachers of non-union workers because they know from experience what the ATU is all about. When the ATU was founded in 1892 there were no full-time paid organizers to do the work of organizing. Although today the International Union has full-time organizers to do some of the work, within the ATU the legacy and importance of local unions and rank-and-file members organizing the unorganized remains.

### ATU Local Unions are Still Building the ATU

ATU locals continue to be involved in organizing with many ATU volunteer organizers taking up the challenge of building their union by distributing leaflets, making home visits, attending meetings and rallies, and identifying unorganized workplaces which could become ATU organizing targets. More than 120 years after the union's founding, many ATU locals are regularly fielding volunteers to assist in organizing the unorganized.

## Help Organize the Unorganized

How can each ATU local help?

First, local leaders should explain to the membership the need to organize unorganized transit workers, and recruit members who want to help in this task. Here are some of the things that a local union can work on in conjunction with the International Union.

**Identify Targets.** Make a list of unorganized transit workers in your area which are strategically important to you:

- Unorganized workers on your property such as dispatchers, mechanics or office clerical employees.
- Private contractors or subcontractors who perform work for your employer whether it's paratransit or supplemental fixed-route service.
- Competitors such as commuter services, school bus yards, or small suburban transit systems within your employer's service area.
- Unorganized transit companies providing shuttle or medical transportation services that may soon grow to bid for bigger and bigger pieces of work.

Develop basic information on the potential targets, and contact the International Union for assistance.

**Survey Your Membership.** Talk to members of your local about the workplaces you have targeted for organizing. Your members may be able to put you in touch with workers employed at workplaces on your target list, or they may want to add to your list of targets.

Use a survey to gather information from the members. Your goal is to get names, addresses, and phone numbers of workers employed in the target properties and, if possible, to enlist the aid of members in putting the union in touch with the unorganized workers and/or gathering additional information about wages and conditions in the unorganized workplaces on your target list.

**Contact Unorganized Workers.** Use the information gathered from your members to contact workers in the targeted workplaces and talk to them about organizing a union. Collect as much information as you can about the unorganized workplace, including wages and conditions, background information on the employer and its service, key issues at the workplace, and as many names and addresses of workers as possible.

When you find workers interested in organizing, ask them to gather additional information or to put you in touch with others who may also be interested in organizing their workplace. These are the first steps in an organizing campaign begun “underground,” without putting the employer on notice about ATU’s presence or interest in the workplace.

A next step would be a small, confidential meeting of workers interested in organizing the workplace. Visit interested workers one-on-one and identify issues to move workers into action.

**Recruit Volunteer Organizers.** Each local should also recruit members who are willing to volunteer to assist on organizing campaigns initiated by your local or by the International Union.

Volunteer organizers have played a vital role in many ATU campaigns, carrying responsibilities ranging from handing out a leaflet right up to leading the campaign and coordinating the work of other volunteers and staff. Here is a list of some of the tasks local organizers take on.

- Leafleting unorganized workplaces
- Speaking at organizing meetings
- Attending organizing campaign rallies
- Making home visits to unorganized workers
- Telephoning unorganized workers
- Doing research on non-union employers
- Hosting ‘Open Houses’ at their local union hall
- Organizing community support for organizing campaigns
- Providing ‘Speakout’ statements for organizing flyers

**Publicize Union Gains.** Spreading the union message is part of the organizing process, and one of the best ways to do that is by making sure the victories and advances won by your local union get noticed in the news media.

Strong contract settlements, important grievance or arbitration wins, or political or community service work are all examples of potentially newsworthy developments which might not only get the media's attention but also the attention of unorganized workers who are reading the paper or watching TV.

## **How Do you Organize a Union?**

While each workplace and each organizing campaign will be a little different from the next, the easiest way to understand what you need to do to organize an unorganized workplace is to think about it in terms of your own workplace and your own local. How do you get the members in your workplace organized to take on the boss in contract negotiations or on an important grievance? How is your local set up to make sure that workers in different parts of the workplace get information, representation and a voice in their union?

The single most important step in any organizing campaign is the recruitment of a capable and representative Organizing Committee made up of workers from the workplace you are organizing. Basically, that committee should look a lot like the steward structure in your workplace, though it should include more people because of the need to intensively educate all workers in the workplace about the union. Identify leaders by listening to what other workers say about who they respect and trust.

You must test Organizing Committee members' abilities to lead their co-workers forward in the organizing campaign. This is accomplished through asking them to mobilize their co-workers to attend meetings, signing up co-workers on cards, joining organizers on housecalls, distributing leaflets at the workplace, moving co-workers into action, signing a Vote Yes petition and appearing on talking heads literature.

The Organizing Committee should be made up of at least 10% of the workforce and distributed throughout the workplace. Each Organizing Committee member should be assigned no more than 10 people that he/she sees every workday. This gives us the ability to reach everyone in the workplace with a one-on-one conversation on a daily basis.

The Organizing Committee should reflect the workforce in composition. Factors which should be represented should include job classification, department, seniority, race, gender, and language. Every worker should be able to look at the Organizing Committee and see someone like themselves. The Organizing Committee demonstrates that the union is for everyone in the workplace.

Our success depends on our ability to recruit workplace leaders to work on the Organizing Committee. Workplace leaders are those who have the respect of their coworkers and who other workers listen to and follow.

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## **Basic Steps to Organizing a Union**

ATU organizing campaigns vary widely depending on whether they are in the private or public sector, on the size and type of the workplace, the level of employer opposition, the degree of initial interest in unionization (or “heat”), and other factors, including whether the union is using an alternative strategy to gain recognition outside the usual election process. However, most campaigns involve a government-run union election and include the following steps:

### **1. Getting Contacts and Information.**

Contacts in unorganized workplaces are found through leafleting or personal contact, and information is gathered to determine if a campaign is possible. This information includes size and make-up of the workforce, wages and conditions, history of prior unionization efforts, financial status of the employer and key issues of concern to the workers. Every effort is made to get a list of names and addresses of workers at the target site.

### **2. Building a Committee/Adopting a Program.**

Through home visits to the workers, leaders are identified and an Organizing Committee representing all major departments and all shifts and reflecting

the racial, ethnic and gender diversity in the workforce is established.

Committee members must be prepared to work hard to educate themselves and their co-workers about the union and to warn and educate co-workers about the impending management anti-union campaign. The committee must develop a program of union demands (the improvements the workers are organizing to achieve) and a strategy for the union election campaign.

### **3. Signing Union Cards.**

Workers are asked by members of the organizing committee to join ATU and support the union program by signing membership cards. The goal is signing a sizable majority. This “card campaign” should proceed quickly once begun. Home visits should continue. At this stage, get workers to go public and hold general meetings.

### **4. File a Petition for a Union Election, or for Certification.**

After a strong majority of the workers have signed cards, the cards are used to petition the state, provincial or federal labor board either to hold an election or to certify the union as the employees’ bargaining representative on the basis of a check and count of authorization cards.

Workers in the United States, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia must request that the pertinent labor relations board conduct an election. In the U.S. it will generally take the labor board at least several weeks to determine who is eligible to vote and hold the election. In Canada it will generally take the labor board one or two weeks to hold the election.

An election is not necessary in all jurisdictions. In these jurisdictions the labor relations boards will certify the union as the employees' bargaining representative if the union can demonstrate that a majority or supermajority of employees signed card authorizing the union to serve as their bargaining representative. Employees covered by these "card check" procedures include private and public sector employees in Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Islands; public sector employees in New York, New Jersey and Illinois; and interprovincial transit workers in Canada.

#### **5. Escalate the Campaign.**

If an election is required, the union campaign must continue and intensify the campaign during the wait for an election.

Utilize community, political, labor and religious allies to get involved with the campaign. If appropriate, use local media to highlight the workers' struggle for respect and dignity, get workers to show visible support of the union using pins, leaflets, talking heads literature and distribute a Vote Yes petition.

#### **6. GOTV and Election Day.**

For the final 7-10 days, focus only on union supporters, and make sure every supporter knows the day, time and location of the vote. Select and announce union ballot box observers. Identify who will be working on election day. If the union wins, the employer must recognize and bargain with the union. However, employer legal "objections" may delay recognition and bargaining even after a union election win.

#### **7. Fighting for a First Contract.**

The organizing campaign does not let up after an election victory. The real goal of the campaign, a union contract, is still to be achieved. Workers must now be mobilized to support the union's contract demands and pressure the employer to meet them.

