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RESEARCH REPORT

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LABOR AND NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN THE '80s:
A UNION OF NECESSITY,

by Fred Glass,

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INTRODUCTION

In the late '70s, as the economy continued on its sluggish course after the 1974-75 downturn, corporations began to notice something about labor. Articles started appearing in places like the Wall Street Journal, Business Week, and Fortune openly wondering when the unions were going to respond to industry's stiffer bargaining demands.^{1/} Some pointed to the steep decrease in the number of days lost to strikes since the early part of the decade. The more coy of these pieces suggested that labor had "grown up" and was finally, after all these years, acting in a mature fashion. More blunt, other authors in articles such as "Labor's Crumbling Clout" gleefully advocated moving in for the kill, avowing that the unions had become complacent and senile, and would roll over and play dead when pushed to the limit.^{2/} Anti-union consulting firms found themselves in great demand.^{3/} Unions found themselves losing a greater percentage of representation elections than at any time since the '30s.^{4/}

The American labor movement had been caught napping with the onset of the long, steep decline in America's industrial core following the Vietnam war, and once more in the late '70s when the corporate response to decline turned out to be the fundamental restructuring of the economy--undertaken without so much as a how-do to the unions, let alone their permission or participation in the decisions. As a result, the AFL-CIO, its member unions, and major independents have awakened in the '80s to discover the following new facts of life:

- * The organized sector of the workforce under 20%, down from over 25% in 1955
- * The industrial heartland of the Northeast wracked with epidemic plant closings and unemployment
- * Nearly two million industrial jobs lost forever to corporate moves overseas and automation--and the total rising
- * Entire industries and geographies unorganized including high-tech, clerical, large parts of the South and Southwest
- * An apathetic or demoralized constituency (in most locals) that more often than not fails to show a quorum at meetings^{5/}

Some unions, due to their location within the economy, have fared better, most notably those representing public employees, and those in some portions of the service sector. Without these important exceptions--i.e., if it had been left up to the large industrial unions that emerged from the CIO struggles of the '30s and World War II government-initiated peace pacts between capital and labor--organized labor's plight might well be fatal instead of merely catastrophic. SEIU (Service Employees), AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), and the two teachers' unions (AFT, affiliated with the AFL-CIO; NEA, the second-largest independent union in the U.S.) together total nearly four million members. If it were not for the rise of collective bargaining in the public sector over the past twenty-five years, labor's share of the workforce would stand abysmally low. The UAW, Steelworkers, and Machinists--just to name three of the largest industrial unions--have suffered combined losses of 1.5 million dues-paying members over the past three years, causing cutbacks in organizing and staff.

In short, big labor is in big trouble. The warning signs were on the horizon as long ago as the late '50s, when various prognosticators began claiming that advances in technology would shortly shrink the industrial workforce. Depending on their political viewpoint, this picture was painted glowingly or with dark forebodings. Daniel Bell and other "end of ideology" ideologists foresaw a time of plenty for all.^{6/} Herbert Marcuse and C. Wright Mills worried about structural unemployment, underemployment, and a working class not educated enough to know what to do with all their new-found leisure time.^{7/}

The latter view gave rise to various sophisticated cultural manipulation theories, mainly based on the work of "Frankfurt School" academics.^{8/} These authors posited a passive populace in the tight grip of advertisers and corporate media who were in chase of the almighty dollar. Wittingly or not (depending on who was doing the analyzing), the corporate advertisers and their media henchmen helped to produce a stunted, unconscious working class, incapable of moving far from the cathode ray tube's reassuring gray glow, and too preoccupied with the latest brands of detergents and cars to imagine another way of life--or even to remain aware of the cultural dreams of their parents' generation.

All these warnings--whatever their relative degree of validity--were voices in the wilderness as far as most of the labor movement was concerned. As long as the American economic pie kept expanding, and the unions got their "fair share," and the workers (organized workers, that is) got theirs, academic predictions of the imminent transformation of what was fondly imagined to be an everlasting way of life could be safely ignored. It was as if the labor movement, having accepted its role as a junior partner aspiring to the material benefits

of American capital, also accepted its own short-sightedness as well. The difference was, the corporations had the money and power to be short-sighted; the unions today are finding out that they did not.

It is not the place of this essay to examine all the causes of labor's decline, nor all the responses that have begun to take shape since--to choose a handy symbolic moment --George Meany's death. I propose to explore here one type of response that unions have turned to with increasing frequency and sophistication over the past several years: the use of new media technologies (along with more careful use of older media) to help them regain some of the ground they've lost.

Although about a dozen international unions have embarked on the high road of media, six seem to have made it a serious priority for external uses in "PR" and organizing, and for internal uses for training leadership and informing membership. These include: the ILGWU, IAM, UAW, AFSCME, CWA, and AFT. In the following pages I will survey the media activities of these unions; summarize what appear to me to be the significant common points or trends of their work; and indulge, finally, in a little speculation as to where it might be leading.

A brief perusal of the AFL-CIO's Films for Labor catalog reveals that of the 150 films listed, over 60 were made before 1970, and only 37 were produced by labor organizations themselves. This is indicative of the failure of the labor movement, over the past several decades, to recognize the importance of good communications with the general public and with their own membership, beyond the possibilities of uses in organizing new members with media's help. Some large international unions--such as the UAW--have more up-to-date and well-stocked film libraries than the AFL-CIO Department of Education. And at times films have been used effectively during organizing campaigns by individual unions. The United Farm Workers, for instance, produced Why We Boycott in the early 1970s. The union's urban boycott organization--perhaps the closest thing to a social movement spun off by the labor movement since the '30s--showed the film as a "trigger" for discussion at house meetings, churches, and various community organizations. Hundreds of prints were sold to other unions. But the UFW's film work was an exception to the general rule that unions and media remain mutually suspicious strangers until the mid-1970s.

International Ladies Garment Workers Union

In 1975, the ILGWU sank \$2.5 million into a series of prime-time broadcast TV spots. Intended to help stem the tide

of cheap foreign imports undercutting the domestic clothing market, the glossy spots featured dozens of union members energetically singing a catchy song that urged viewers to "buy the union label." The media campaign was an unprecedented effort by a major union to reach out to the general public. The New York-based ILG hired the Paula Green Advertising agency to produce the series.

They are still producing ILG spots; but with a 1983 budget only one-tenth the size. From a high of 457,000 members during the boom year 1969, the ILG rolls have fallen off to 282,000. Squeezed by the depression on one side and imports from low-wage countries on the other, the union is beating the drums hard for legislation to curb imports. Explained Meyer Miller, editor of the ILG press, Justice, "The market is flooded with foreign imports. Today it's 41%. We're getting killed. We would like to see a 25% quota. We're not saying 'dont import.' We're saying we want fair trade, not free trade."⁹ Miller also said that the TV spots were not simply American chauvinistic propaganda, but a plea to buy union-made products.

I asked him what the effects of the spots had been. He said that many people were now familiar with the union and the idea of union-made apparel who had not been so informed before. "There's a lot of people who know the union label song, too," he laughed. However Miller couldn't say what sort of impact the series has had on the public's buying habits.

Judging from the continued rise in imported clothing, it doesn't seem that the effect has been significant; or perhaps the struggle is an unequal one. In any case, the ILG, following in the steps of several other unions over the past year, switched to another media tactic in late April. On the 27th, Sol Chaikin (president of the ILG), Lane Kirkland, and Tip O'Neill spoke via satellite tele-conference to unionists and reporters in 26 cities around the country, in an effort to push a "sense of congress" resolution on import quotas.

- Despite their apparent lack of measurable success with their series of spots, the ILG's union label series is quite important in several respects for the recent history of labor and media. First, the spots did reach large numbers of people with a positive union image. Secondly, if my own empirical observation counts, I've heard several friends say that they've "looked for the union label" since seeing the spots.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is the simple fact that the ILG had the spots produced. It broke through the provincialism of labor in relation to the mass media in one clean stroke, giving other unions the knowledge that it could be done. Whatever one's feelings about the political implications of the message, or about the standard commercial

aesthetic utilized, there can be no doubt that this was the pioneering effort of the American labor movement to join the 20th century by using the mass media. The significance of this fact cannot be underestimated. For beyond the broadcasts themselves, the spots signalled the dawn of awareness by labor leaders that the public image of unions was falling toward nadir.

International Association of Machinists

The worst problem we face, by far, is our deteriorating image. Everything else, even our ability to cope with our inner problems, is directly related to our image in the community at large, and I am sorry to say that it is not a very good one at the moment. This is not necessarily our own doing. I don't think we get much help from some of the institutionalized parts of our society. I think that there is an absolute anti-union animus that is culturally ingrained in America....Today the press, TV, and radio are about equally guilty of withholding general acceptance from our institutions. We are not viewed as part of the cultural fabric. We are the interloper, the outsider, the unwanted stepchild.

-- William Winpisinger, President, IAM^{10/}

In February, 1980, 1500 members of the IAM in 43 states looked at a great deal of television. Their purpose was to determine what sort of image of American workers and unions was produced by the major networks. The union had spent several previous months training their monitors to evaluate both entertainment programming and news. Included in these sessions was intensive briefing as to how the union stood on various social issues. The monitors were instructed to compare the networks' coverage of these issues and examine how often any view resembling the union's was mentioned on the news. They were also told to observe fictional characters portrayed as "union" and "non-union," and to match them against 22 personality traits.

The IAM's Media Project survey's findings should not surprise anyone familiar with both TV and unions." The survey set out to answer the question, "What is TV doing for workers in America." After the survey had been completed the IAM rephrased the question to "What is TV doing to workers in America."

According to survey results, workers on TV fall broadly into two categories: non-existent and distorted. The occupation most depicted on TV is police; there are twelve times as many detectives portrayed as production workers, for instance;

and unions are considerably less visible than workers, even when the job shown is in a heavily unionized industry. When they do appear, unions show up as violent, corrupt, no better than gangsters, etc., on both the fictional shows and the news. As for the issues covered by the latter, the network least hostile to organized labor's positions on the selected social issues is CBS, which favored corporate positions 3-1; the others rate 5-1 (NBC) and 7-1 (ABC). Broadening union involvement with their monitoring work, the Machinists conducted a second survey with the Operating Engineers and the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers Union the next year. The findings, culled from monitoring by 2,000 members of the three unions, were basically the same.

When I spoke with the IAM's Director of Communications, Bob Kalaski, in spring of 1981, he revealed ambitious plans for the union's electronic media work. The union had just published the results of its first survey; the second was underway. It had created a flurry of interest among other unions and reform-minded media-watchers, for whom the results confirmed long-held opinions arrived at by less formal means. The project had also given the IAM a strong sense of purpose--almost a mission--for their intervention in media work.

Kalaski's office had produced We Didn't Want It To Happen This Way (1979), a half-hour documentary on plant closings and runaways focused on the shutdown of a Zenith plant in Iowa. The company had decided to move to Taiwan and Mexico, leaving 5,000 workers in Sioux City in the lurch. The film explores general economic and moral questions raised by corporate power over working people's lives, through an emotional series of interviews, and in scenes of everyday life of these workers and their distraught families. Another film made the following year starred Ed Asner (whose "Lou Grant" series was one of the few on TV approved by the survey). Asner visits workplaces, and talks with IAM members, who describe life without a union, and contrast that with the benefits of unionism. Asner emphasizes the labor movement's historic participation in various democratic struggles. At the end of the film he chats with Winpisinger.

We Didn't Want It To Happen This Way has been widely distributed to unions, community groups and colleges. But its most impressive screening took place on April 29, 1979, when it was shown as the first part of a 90 minute satellite cablecast produced by CNB-TV (Center for Non-Broadcast TV). Beamed via RCA satellite to 42 states, the show (entitled The Lost Million: Is American Labor Becoming Obsolete?) featured Winpisinger, Frank Weil (then Assistant Secretary of Commerce), Ralph Weller (Chairman of the board of Otis Elevator) and Ronald Muller (author of Global Reach). Following the discussion, panelists responded to live phone tie-ins from around the country.

This program was the first union-sponsored satellite network cablecast. Together with the films and survey it propelled the IAM to the forefront of union media work. With the assistance of Bill Young, the IAM's media consultant, Kalaski used this foundation to map out blueprints for expanding the union's electronic media staff and adding to their minimal 3/4 inch production and editing facilities.

Two years later these plans have been temporarily shelved. The IAM has lost nearly a third of its membership (now under 600,000 for the first time since the Great Depression). The Public Affairs budget has been "stripped to the bone"; Kalaski relies on one video technician to take care of the IAM's in-house needs.

Considering the union's difficulties, their media activities--while not so elaborate as Kalaski had expected or desired--remain a surprisingly high priority. Following up on the survey results, IAM staff and local officers have met with network officials in New York and in twelve other cities. Kalaski says the effects have been gratifying. Before the survey an IAM lodge would go to the news during a strike and not even get a return phone call, let alone adequate coverage of the issues. Now, union members are on "ascertainment" committees, and labor advisory boards have been set up, including members of other unions, to maintain communications with the stations. As a result, "Station managers and reporters have become sensitized to the fact that unions do things besides bargain and strike." Kalaski cited union participation in blood drives, disaster relief, and other forms of community action that have been reported by the media since the survey follow-up established contact. Union officers in these cities, he said, are now considered experts on labor and economic issues.

Another film has been produced, International Guiding Eyes, starring Cliff Robertson, about a charity run by the union. With a price tag of \$75,000, it's been shown at last count on 57 cable stations. All training simulation and organizing films are not on videotape; 102 lodges across the country have 1/2 inch and some have 3/4 inch playback decks. A 10-15 minute "Electronic Newsletter" goes out to the membership monthly. Interestingly, the flow of communication is not one-way. Kalaski says that lodge members who have gotten involved through work on the survey send him tapes on subjects ranging from talks given by Winpisinger to strike footage; a Milwaukee lodge even brought a camera into an arbitration session and taped the proceedings.

Much of the energy originally slated for their own curtailed media work has been channeled into IAM's collaboration with the AFL-CIO's fledgling Labor Institute of Public Affairs, a newly created section of the Education

Department. Kalaski says they've assisted the LIPA with advice, demographic data and contacts gleaned from their survey around the country.

I asked Kalaski what effect the IAM's work--especially the survey--has had on the rest of the labor movement. He responded that he would like to say it's had an awakening effect, and that the IAM led the way to increased media awareness. "But saying things like that can get you ostracized by other people in the labor movement," he laughed. The IAM distributed its survey results to the AFL-CIO Executive Council. "Even if they didn't agree with its advocacy method, they had to agree with the urgency of the problems."

American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees

Although the IAM survey showed that many workers' occupations were invisible on TV, public sector workers have been suffering over the past seven years from the opposite problem: a high profile pushed by the New Right, Republicans, and moderate to right Democrats eager to scapegoat public workers as the culprits responsible for high taxes and inadequate public services. California's Proposition 13 and Massachusetts' 2-1/2 were only the best-known ballot measures that resulted from and encouraged this image.

AFSCME, with a million members, is the largest public sector union in the country. It views the attacks on "big government" with a somewhat jaundiced eye, recognizing that proposals to "trim the fat" emanating from millionaires like Howard Jarvis usually end up applying the cleaver to low-paid public workers, especially women and minorities hired in affirmative action programs over the past decade. In the face of this reality, the New Right successfully created a mythic villain: the overpaid, underworked government bureaucrat, a description perhaps accurate for some government employees, but broadly smeared across the entire public sector by New Right demagoguery.

Creation of this image was a crucial link in the New Right's arguments for cutting back government sponsored social programs. AFSCME and other public sector unions have responded with increased political activity and media campaigns seeking to replace the government-employee-as-villain image with a more accurate and positive one.^{12/}

In 1977--the same year that Prop 13 showed up on the ballot in California--AFSCME hired the J. Walter Thompson agency to develop a strategy for radio and TV spots. From 1977 to 1979, the idea behind the first round of spots was to create name recognition for the union, and to build support for AFSCME-related services. But by 1980 the emphasis shifted.

"We were no longer trying just to promote the image of the union, we were also trying to defend public service," said Philip Sparks, director of Public Affairs for AFSCME.^{13/}

In 1981, under the pressure of Reagan's cuts, the union produced a new series, this time confronting the Administration's attacks directly instead of relying on image-building or defense of public services. In the spring, many stations, afraid to allow this level of criticism of a new president, refused to air the spots. But by fall, when another series was produced on Social Security, "...the political environment was different....it was OK to criticize the Reagan administration," said Sparks. In 1982 yet another round of spots was timed to assist AFSCME's contract re-negotiations, which were resolved without the massive givebacks characterizing bargaining in much of the private sector.

Comprehensive pre- and post-broadcast studies were made by the research firm Fingerhut/Granados on the effectiveness of the spots. The figures indicated success on several scores: name recognition, low in California, went from 14% to 50%; and substantially higher percentages were recorded for efforts to save AFSCME-related jobs from budget cuts.

The AFSCME Public Affairs Department currently has a budget of five million dollars, and 30 full-time staff members. Beside the spots, its efforts include installing an in-house radio and TV studio at headquarters in Washington, D.C., with two cameras, a switcher, 3/4 inch editing facilities, and remote capabilities. (It's a NABET shop.) The largest feather in their media cap, however, is clearly the fact that AFSCME is the only organization in town besides the Chamber of Commerce with its own microwave satellite uplink, thereby creating the "Labor News Network." This has been used to send out AFSCME's point of view on political and economic issues and events to local news stations, as well as to hold interviews dealing with local events, and, to answer questions from various places around the country. It has also enabled the union to hold national teleconferences, such as an AFL-CIO sponsored conference on the balanced budget amendment last year. Participants included representatives from the AFL-CIO, Letter Carriers, Teachers, and AFSCME, as well as Rep. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.) The facility has been used for similar purposes by several other unions, the Democratic national committee, and other national organizations.

Under pressure as it is, AFSCME's problems are not as serious as those of its private sector comrades, like the IAM or ILG. A relatively recent arrival on the scene, the union expanded rapidly as the economy after World War II began to shift toward services and larger public sector responsibilities. The sophistication and thoroughness of its media campaigns compared with the ILG is striking, and may be

attributable to the unions' different ages and industries. Of course AFSCME had the ILG experience to draw upon. But the Labor News Network indicates a qualitatively different attitude toward new media technologies: a willingness of the union to stick its neck out and to go beyond defensive gestures. AFSCME's uplink experience and facilities give the labor movement the potential for establishing regular labor programming for national distribution on a scale never before attempted (even though the AFL-CIO has had nationally syndicated radio programs, and local unions have produced regular local TV and radio shows). There might be a question, though, buried somewhere in all the high-tech excitement: is this an appropriate major field of activity for a union? Isn't the first order of the day for a labor union to organize? The question then becomes, will this media approach help the labor movement to organize the 80% plus of the American workforce that is unorganized in the 1980s? It's too early to tell for sure, although indications are positive. (I will return to this point in the conclusion.)

United Auto Workers

In May the UAW held its national convention in Dallas. Although usually only elected delegates attend, this year rank and file union members from a dozen cities participated. However, none of them were admitted at the convention door. Instead, thanks to Dallas' KERA (the local PSB station), and thanks also to the expertise of AFSCME's Department of Public Affairs, the convention was brought to the UAW's local union halls via satellite, complete with interactive phone tie-ins.

Although this is not the first time a union has used satellite for this purpose (the Steelworkers did it in September 1982, and their members are still talking about it), it is a first for the UAW. Because of its timing it takes on a certain symbolic significance--which may be lost beneath the hoopla of Fraser bowing out and Bieber coming on as President. The use of "new technology" to beam the convention to UAW members is ironic because nearly half a million auto industry workers are laid off. While imports undoubtedly play a role --as the UAW, like the ILG, is fond of repeating--another reason is the impact of new technology. In fact, one purpose behind the satellite, according to UAW staff member Peter Laarman, was to help convince the membership that their beleaguered union needs some modern assistance beyond the traditional tactics of American unionism.

Capital has steadily been shifting from the northeast to the southwest (and overseas), and from the old core industries --auto, steel, rubber, machine products--to high-tech and services, at least for the past decade. The few auto plants built over the past five years in the U.S. have emphasized

highly automated and even robotized assembly lines, and far fewer workers are needed than in the past.

The UAW--like AFSCME--sees the writing on the wall, and is intent on playing the high-tech game, too. As Donald Stillman, UAW Director of Public Relations said in 1981 of the union's low power TV applications, "If trade unions are going to compete in the marketplace of ideas, we're going to have to develop these new technologies."14/

In a way, such an orientation is not new for the UAW. In the 1950s the union owned a UHF TV station in Detroit, but sold it because few TV sets could receive a UHF signal then. Over the years they have maintained a relatively large public affairs staff, and their education department has provided more internal training for union officials and information for the rank and file than most unions. Their film library boasts over 300 films, twice as large as the AFL-CIO's. Since the 1950s they've produced or sponsored many films on labor history, politics, and health and safety. A three-hour program co-produced with Detroit's PBS station, WTVS, in 1980, on unemployment was shown all over Michigan and won a UPI award.

It was in 1981 that the UAW began to move toward a much more serious commitment to electroinc media work. Acting on the promise of low power TV, two dozen applications were filed for areas with large concentrations of UAW members. But time passed and the FCC stalled (it was staffed with Reaganites led by "Dr. Deregulato" Fowler). The UAW looked elsewhere for media outlet. For the past two years they've produced radio "actualities" on UAW events for the news (live coverage, which is edited and packaged). A series of spots on local content was produced and placed on prime time network TV. Filmmaker Dave Davis (co-director, Song Of The Canary) made a 43-minute color film on the union, Solidarity. Other films are in various stages of production. But now, spokesperson Peter Laarman told me on the phone, the union is taking a larger step.

With a bid recently approved, construction and installation of a fully-equipped broadcast quality TV studio is about to begin in Solidarity House, union headquarters. Meanwhile, Detroit is close to choosing a cable operator to wire the Motor City. In touch with the major contenders, the union has informal agreements to be directly wired into the system, and somewhere down the road it will perhaps be given a regular slot, or its own channel. With a microwave dish on the roof, UAW has also arranged for uplink to the Westar satellite through WTVS.

The new studio will be used in a number of ways, said Laarman. The Labor Institute for Public Affairs has suggested a video newsletter--similar to the IAM's--for distribution to large locals and districts. Through a bulk purchase deal arranged by the LIPA, video formats used by the union around

the country will be compatible (VHS). The studio will be shared by the UAW's Public Affairs Department--which will use it for teleconferencing, video actualities, news conferences, and production of roughcuts for broadcast spots--and the Education Department--which will produce health and safety and other training materials. Its interactive capacities will help the union broaden membership participation in special events such as meeting around the country at collective bargaining time.

A natural question arises. How can the UAW, with nearly a third of its members laid off since 1969, afford this system, and the satellite bounce for its convention, when the IAM, in a similar position (and with similar enthusiasm for media use) has been forced to cut back its electronic media plans? Explained Laarman: half of the interest collected on the UAW strike fund--currently 530 million dollars--is allocated to the Organizing, Educational, and Cultural Fund, which includes purchases such as these. Laarman estimates the studio will cost \$150,000.

Bearing these developments in mind, it becomes clear why the union learned to play "space satellite video" in time for the convention. Depending on one's point of view, it could be argued that UAW's high-tech TV use represents a commitment on the part of union leadership to extend information and democracy in the organization by giving the rank and file a look at its highest body in action. Others might contend that the satellite show is just a bit of razzle-dazzle calculated to throw stardust in the membership's eyes at a time when more pressing matters should be addressed.

Whether the UAW's move into the information revolution means either one or some combination of these interpretations, it's obvious that the union isn't about to let all the weight of the new technology fall on the wrong side of the assembly line. What this bodes for the UAW's future is one image that won't show up on monitor screens in the union halls. When the choice is made to "compete in the marketplace of ideas," all too often the ideas place second and the market itself gets all the priority. The new media technologies are tools, not quite like other tools. Because of their cost, most of the precedents for their use have come from the corporate drawing board. It is to be hoped that the UAW will exercise more imagination than that.

Communications Workers of America

While high-tech media work did not come naturally or easily to many unions, the same cannot be said of the Communications Workers of America. The new technologies and their effects on the American workforce and economy constitute a central issue for the CWA, largest telecommunications union in the world. Three-fourths of its membership works

for "Ma Bell," whose giant research and development department, Bell Labs, can claim credit for coming up with much of the micro-electronic applications on the market today.^{15/}

Despite its crucial position in the new technological infrastructure, CWA has been relatively slow in reaching toward electronic media for help. According to John Kulstead, CWA Public Affairs Department national staff member, until two years ago all training materials produced by the union were in print; and when visual media were used, they tended to be films from the AFL-CIO library. In the last couple of years, however, two media projects--one external, the other inside the union--have set something like a standard for organized labor's work relating to the issues raised by the "new technology revolution."

Rewiring Your World, a series of public affairs programs produced for radio and TV by Thea Marshall Communications, Inc., and sponsored by CWA, explores who will become Winners and Losers in the Information Age and The Impact of Technology on the Political Process--two of the titles in the series. The first segment of Rewiring Your World was shown over more PBS outlets than any previously produced independent special, and was also broadcast over hundreds of commercial stations, as well as a large number of cable systems.

The shows take the form of panel discussions hosted by CWA President Glenn Watts and moderated by Martin Agronsky. They are concerned with the human costs and ultimate effects of the new technologies. While remaining polite on the surface, sharp disagreements arise in Winners and Losers between Xerox Corporation vice-president Paul Strassman and author Alvin Toffler, on one side, and Karen Nussbaum of SEIU 925 and Educator Kenneth Clark, on the other. Strassman foresees "wonderful developments"--which, he goes on to reveal, consist mainly of greater worker productivity. Nussbaum and Clark contest his cheery picture, maintaining that women and minorities will become not the only victims of new technologies manipulated by big business for profit, but merely the most numerous and visible victims.

In The Impact of Technology on the Political Process, Watts teams up with Charles Ferris, former Chair of the FCC, to argue for expansion of the democratic process through new media possibilities such as low power TV and interactive cable. William Brock, member of Reagan's cabinet and former Chair of the Republican National Committee, expresses concern over the lack of discussion of real issues in presidential campaigns, broadcast TV style(!). The most interesting and to-the-point part of the discussion is unfortunately limited to the last quarter of the show, when the panelists stop kicking broadcast and actually discuss new video technologies.

If the Rewiring Your World series was relatively successful in reaching broad audiences with its thought-provoking themes, CWA's internal training series We Are The Future shows in its narrower purpose the same careful planning and awareness of sophisticated media technique. We Are The Future is a comprehensive internal communications and training program consisting of a year-long series of "cycles." It brings a package every three months to local CWA officials, distributed through CWA's 12 national district offices. Each cycle includes three components: an informational report to the membership, a guide to action, and officers' training. The cycles' components utilize written materials, lectures or workshops led by CWA staff, and audio-visual materials. The AV presentations I viewed were from the "Unions in the Community" cycle; each of these slide-tape shows (produced by the Organizing Media Project) corresponded to one of the three components. They were distributed in La Belle format, so they could be seen individually and in groups from the same projector.

The longest show, "Report to the Membership," presented the role of unions in American society during this time of transition, stating that unions stood for the common good of the majority and against the dislocations and economic disarray resulting from corporate greed. One particularly fine historical section recounted the tale of organizing CWA in the south, from the birth of the union out of the ashes of its predecessor, The National Federation of Telephone Workers, which disintegrated following the loss of a major national strike in 1947, through another important strike in 1955, which solidified CWA's presence in the face of a vicious anti-union campaign conducted by Southern Bell.

Two things are noteworthy about this slide/tape show, one technical, the other concerning content. I was once an employee of Ma Bell. During my 1977 orientation, along with other "new members of the Bell family," I had to sit through a day-long session of paternalistic talks, cardboard sandwiches, and a particularly insulting slide/tape show, featuring grammar school-level repetition of image and sound for behavioral reinforcement. (Example: at the same time as a mellifluous baritone informed us that "Phones are not to be used for conducting personal business while at work," the image held on an intertitle with exactly the same words, over a graphic consisting of a phone with a big red "X" over it.) It was numbing, humiliating, and served (phone management hoped) to put us all "in our place" at the outset of our employment.

The CWA show--while not without its own undertones of pedagogical condescension from time to time--strove to utilize the capacity of the medium to reinforce its messages without direct repetition. When intertitles appeared--for instance during a series of responses to anti-union charges popular with the corporate press--the voiceover and titles overlapped,

but did not repeat each other. A bit more respect for viewers' intelligence is evidenced by this approach.

More importantly, the history itself was excellent. Using interviews with participants in the struggles depicted, the sound track effectively mixed in narration to give the viewer a strong sense of the people involved, and an identification with their feelings and commitment to the union cause. A successful attempt was made to contextualize the union struggle within a broader picture of what was happening at the time, i.e., economic changes taking place in the south with the relocation of New England's textile industry into what has become the "sunbelt" of today; and the cultural milieu of Jim Crow under pressure of a growing civil rights movement.

Such a balanced and comprehensive historical account could not have been seen before the work of the "new labor historians" of the '60s and '70s (Brody, Green, Montgomery)^{16/} who set up the model. Their impact appears in films produced over the past decade, like Union Maids, The Wobblies, With Babies and Banners, and several others. The new approach to the film history of working people was supported by the sweat and tears of radical filmmakers working for the most part on their own, scraping for every foundation dollar they could squeeze. The history of the CWA's southern efforts in the '40s and '50s, drawing upon many of the same techniques (oral history, archival photos) utilized by the radical filmmakers, was supported and is now being used by a large union, noted more in the past as being "the phone company union" than as a trailblazer on social issues. The particular location of CWA in the American economy has pushed it beyond the boundaries of bread and butter business unionism in certain respects, and its slide-tape training presentation reflects these changes.

It is fitting that at least part of this ambitious internal program is a relatively elegant use of slide/tape. For in its corporate incarnation, the use of slide/tape (as "multi-media presentation") is an already enormous and growing field. Of course, the unions cannot hope to match the corporations dollar for dollar in audio-visual work. But drawing upon solid scripting and efficient placement of the shows within an overall media strategy--and within the larger purpose of organizing--will make those fewer union dollars travel further.

American Federation of Teachers

In terms of efficient use of limited resources, the American Federation of Teachers' work is more impressive than that of any union considered thus far. The 565,000 member teachers' union has produced a model series of half-hour videotapes entitled Inside Your Schools. Distributed through cable systems in 17 cities around the country since December of

last year (eight recently added in Florida), the series will be resumed this fall after summer vacation..

Each tape is in "newsmagazine" format divided into two sections, national and local. These are further subdivided into three five-minute segments. The national section includes "Where We Stand," devoted to national educational issues; "Excellence in Education," showcasing teachers around the country involved with innovative educational programs; and "Scrapbook," and which famous people recall public school teachers who made an important contribution to their development. Local sections contain "Teaching," featuring an outstanding local educator; "Inside Your Schools," on various topics; and "Kids in Performance,"

It is interesting to compare the situation and responses of AFT with AFSCME. Both public sector unions face inadequate funding slashed still further by Reagan and local government, and a poor public image fostered and encouraged by new right demagoguery about the evils of bureaucratic government. Both have turned to new media technology as one part of their over-all strategy for fighting back. AFSCME has opted for the "PR" approach, with its ad agency-produced campaign of prime time broadcast TV spots, and with the Labor News Network, which, in its external work thus far concentrates on news feeds. With Madison Avenue-style TV messages on the one hand, and a satellite uplink on the other, the AFSCME public affairs department needs its five million dollar budget.

The AFT has chosen a more flexible, experimental approach --one which relies less on money and "big-time" media styles and more on a unique resource available only to a union: its structure and function as an organization of workers rooted in their community.

The brainchild of John Stevens, Public Affairs Director for the AFT national office, Inside Your Schools has cost the union less than a quarter of a million dollars since planning began in fall 1981. According to Stevens, the series was conceived as a means of taking advantage of the opportunities offered by cable TV to reach relatively large audiences with a relatively low expenditure. It was Stevens' feeling that "the opportunities are going to dry up if not used. We can't give the cable operators the argument that 'we gave you these possibilities and you didn't use them'." Citing congressional battles currently underway to further deregulate cable, Stevens argues that the labor movement has to join the effort to roll back regressive legislation: "We're talking about power, and we have to be diligent and vigilant."

Stevens said he hoped to see a national labor cable channel within five years; but that for now he was enthusiastic about the effects of Inside Your Schools on union members, school district personnel and administrators, and parents

and students who participated in or just watched the programs. The union has, for the past several years, produced TV and radio PSA's and actualities. But these didn't generate the level of response called forth by Inside Your Schools.

The several purposes underlying the series include: building support for and combating misconceptions about public education; protecting specific taxpayer-supported educational programs from budget cuts; airing the union's point of view on issues of national concern; and facilitating discussion of these issues on the local level.

The union is not wedded to the rigid distribution formula. Depending on what's available locally, the program is sent out over public access or local origination channels. Both Stevens and Pam Clisham, a San Francisco teacher I talked with who is involved in producing the local segments, maintained they would like to get the show on local PBS affiliates as well. The San Francisco show is run monthly on Channel 6, the local origination channel.

I looked at the December, February and March programs. While the "Scrapbook" segment seemed a little stilted no matter who was being interviewed (Larry Kubin, linebacker for the Washington Redskins, was particularly uninspiring, and Walter Mondale almost forgot the name of the teacher he was fondly recalling), the other segments were generally well conceived and smartly executed. On occasion there were moments that were truly beautiful and moving, such as the long tracking shots, close to the floor, through the empty halls of a closed New England school, with classical music accompanying the voiceover describing the country's crisis in education; or the segment of "Kids in Performance" shot at Lafayette Elementary School, featuring interviews of children talking about Martin Luther King intercut with footage of the students in the school auditorium, holding hands and singing "We Shall Overcome," in honor of Martin Luther King's birthday.

Although the program is often quite professional and explores issues of considerable significance, its importance is due to a combination of these qualities with others into an integrated totality including national and local input into the program content; the participation of officials and rank and file union members as equals in production; alert use of both cable and closed circuit screening opportunities; and a flexible structure of production and distribution that takes advantage both of PR and of the organizing potential of video. This is an affordable model for any union, precisely because it is one which utilizes the best elements of a union's democratic structure, and integrates these into the community's life and (especially) its mind.

The San Francisco co-producer of the local segments of Inside Your Schools, Pam Clisham, has learned a lot since the

first show in December. A part-time teacher and member of SFT Local 61's Executive Board, Clisham had never done any video work before. As co-host (with another teacher) of the first show's local portion, she was nervous before shooting began. But the anxiety dissipated as she found herself trying to calm down the other teacher. "We shot the same scene twenty times," she recalled ruefully. Mistakes were made, such as the one by the overeager teacher at a high school, who scheduled shoots with teachers and students every 30 minutes all day all over the school.

But it was after the tape had been shot and during editing (by the Organizing Media Project, who helped produce the national segments) that the hard work began: publicizing it and taking it around to schools, union, PTA, faculty, and school board meetings. The union advertised the cable screening each month in its press; AFT members at the schools leafletted other teachers and various community meetings. Clisham's hard work (and the work of other union members, involved heavily in organizing for the representation election for the San Francisco Unified School District's bargaining unit of over 3,000 teachers) paid off as calls came in from teachers, parents, and others requesting screenings. In the context of the election the tapes also became an organizing tool, providing teachers with a concrete example of the AFT's concerns and its style of operation.

I asked Stevens for an assessment of the tapes' effectiveness around the country. He said that although it was too soon to draw quantitative conclusions, the response has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Parents and students have been pleased to see themselves on TV, and hear their concerns voiced in public forums. They've also become better informed as to the actual state of public education--its successes as well as its more publicized problems. (Stevens mentioned the "crisis orientation" of broadcast TV news, which only reports on public education if there's budget cuts, a strike, or a fire.) Teachers have received the programs gratefully, as an expression of their daily lives and viewpoint not available elsewhere. Even school administrators, traditionally accustomed to viewing the AFT as adversary, have been impressed--after getting over their initial surprise and suspicion--with the social responsibility taken on by the teachers' union in boosting public education in the media.

In addition to informing the public about the value and importance of public education for the nation's future--one of the chief goals of the series--the AFT was as concerned as the other unions described in this article about TV's impact on the public image of workers, union members, and public sector workers. But the AFT's choice of strategy meant that the latter concern was communicated subtly, as almost incidental to the prior concern with issues in public education. This is a brilliant stroke. Instead of telling the public that the union

services them and therefore deserves the public's support in return--as the 30-second broadcast spots do--these programs show that service, in such a way that the public is led to recognize its interest and relationship with the people appearing on the screen. They appear as workers, as concerned union members and public servants, and as the teachers of our children. They appear as responsible and important members of the community, who function at the very center of community life.

The difference between the portrayal of teachers and their work in the AFT series, and the image of indifferent public sector workers feeding at the tax trough (as conjured for us by the right wing), may be regarded as a measure of the decay of American society. If there is such a thing as a "fabric" of American social and cultural life in the 1980s, it is a concept which must be woven partly from the threads between school and community life, into a pattern of relationships between generations, a pattern of developing socialization (which still contends with contemporary alienation), and a pattern of connections between the community and its public services and the workers who deliver them. We live in a time when it often seems as if everything in the country is flying apart in an irreversible process of atomization--due in no small degree to the impact of new technologies as they are introduced, big business-style, to the country's working population. The teachers' union is to be commended for its efforts to pull the threads of community closer, drawing upon a socially responsible use of new technology to do so.

By Way of Some Conclusions

In 1979, Chris Bedford, former student anti-war activist in the '60s, helped found the Organizing Media Project, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that has worked on many of the shows produced by unions over the past several years. As Bedford describes it, the orientation of the OMP was somewhat different from the perspective that loosely represented the dominant philosophy guiding labor's media practice at that time. In contrast to labor's central concern with its public image (articulated most completely by the IAM), the OMP's goal was to do "infrastructural work" designed to empower union leadership and membership to deal with the changes they're facing today. Says Bedford, "We don't do 'image work'; the unions hire PR firms for that." He sees "image work" as an attempt by the labor movement to copy the employers' media style, and finds it less useful than producing the sort of media materials that utilize union strengths: especially the community networks that ideally make up the labor movement's informal structure, providing resiliency and depth to the union's base of support.

Bedford's argument is echoed by Gary Hubbard, head of the United Steelworkers Public Relations Department. Hubbard cited

the satellite bounce his union put together in September 1982 to beam the Steelworkers' convention out to local halls around the country. Working with the Public Service Satellite Consortium, the USW set up a connection between the 3,330 delegates in Atlantic City and 8,000 unemployed steelworkers in 18 union halls. The two-hour long teleconference featured pre-produced clips on the daily lives of unemployed steelworkers and their families, presentations by workers from different union halls, and of course the convention itself in session. Hubbard said that the teleconference was followed by an hour's press conference, with news reporters in the union hall calling their live questions to USW president Lloyd McBride over the Westar 4 satellite. Hubbard pointed out that it is the unique structure of unions that made such an event possible, not only by generating a national "show" for various local unions and TV stations around the country, but also by creating local political events which brought together employed and unemployed steelworkers, representatives of the local media, and various community members to talk about the economy and related issues. The quantity of "public relations" work accomplished in this evening was not minimal. But it was at least matched by the "infrastructural" development of the union, which solidified both its internal and external communication networks.

Developing a media infrastructure for member unions and state federations of the AFL-CIO is the reason why the Labor Institute for Public Affairs was founded last year in Washington, D.C. A division of the AFL-CIO Education Department, the Institute and its staff of ten represents an attempt to centralize and rationalize the AFL-CIO's use of new media technologies. The LIPA is distributing a "Labor Video Bulletin" to state federations and international unions bi-weekly. Associate Director Gwenn Kelly told me that the LIPA, besides engaging in surveys and other forms of research into media, plans to produce both regular programs and specials for cable and broadcast. During this year, she said, an hour's daily programming for cable will be tested in local experiments, and eventually, she expects a national labor network to emerge.

Much of the union media work previously detailed in this article was produced to inform union members and/or the public about a sector of the population traditionally ignored, distorted or otherwise given short shrift in the commercial mass media. Specious arguments aside--such as the assertion that commercials too only "inform" the public--labor's emerging use of new media technology serves quite a different function than corporate PR, and in fact rescues the notion of "public relations" from its popular equation with advertising or attempted brainwashing.

It is useful to remember that corporate public relations came into being in the wake of the Ludlow Massacre in 1913, when J.D. Rockefeller hired Ivy Lee to dampen public outrage over his private empire's abuses; PR has ever since been synonymous with need to "explain" corporate practices valuing profit over humanity.¹⁷ What began as a defensive response to public

perception of private corporate activities in the age of Robber Barons, utility trusts, and weak unions, has become transformed over the years by massive PR budgets into a powerful offensive weapon: control over the free flow of information in a corporate-dominated society. From Ludlow to Three Mile Island, this sort of public relations leaves an unmistakable historical record, revealing that "big lie" media techniques were not born and did not die in the era of fascist propagandists in the '30s and '40s.

Even when its intent and effect are not so dramatic, corporate PR is anti-realistic and anti-historical. The popular perception of PR as little different than advertising is rooted in firm ground, namely that there is only a separation of degree between selling an image or a product. An ad evaporates history through the need to attach the maximum emotional voltage to a product in the minimum span of time; thirty seconds is not long enough to teach history to anyone. However, it is a perfectly adequate amount of time to erase history. The ad image for a new car is meant to destroy the image lingering in our minds of how sexy and powerful the old new car was supposed to be. The parallel PR image is; "Ludlow? It didn't happen that way at all." In case anybody doubts that anti-labor PR is alive and well seven decades later, President Reagan's explanation for breaking PATCO--that its members were striking against the interests of public safety--should suffice to convince that PR is still fully capable of proving that up is down.

Current attempts by unions to burnish their public image bear only marginal relation to the corporate notion of public relations. It is true that in many cases the film or video products of union PR campaigns closely resemble corporate products, with glitzy sheen and catchy slogans elevated above content. But the examples that come to mind--such as the ILG spots for the union label, or some of the UAW and AFSCME productions--ape corporate design because they exist for the same purpose: to sell a product or idea, in this case an organizational image. Union media strategies taken as a whole should--and as we have seen, sometimes do--have a more complex purpose, within which such spots play only one role. The success of a union campaign for name recognition, for instance, is beside the point, if that kind of result is all that the union aims at. The 50% of the public which begins to recognize the union name could at the same time hold anti-union feelings --an attitude not measured by the 50% statistic. Such a result would meet the needs of the PR model developed by a corporation: commercial spots which improve name recognition will increase product sales. But on this basis I would argue that union media work goes wrong precisely where union efforts coincide with or overlap corporate PR practices.

For labor, use of the corporate PR approach is both defensive and reactive, because labor must respond to a negative

public image which has largely been fostered by corporate control over the media (as the IAM survey showed). At least since Ludlow, the corporations have not had to respond to an adverse or negative public image. They have provided the barrage of PR necessary to maintain the general fiction that what is good for GM is good for the USA. For the rest, their PR approach can simply ward off the public outrage which sometimes arises over their actions against the public interest (for example, the "bankruptcy" reorganization of the Manville Corporation, to avoid the asbestosis claims of workers). In short, the corporations have allocated enough resources to turn the PR corner from defense to offense. Except for short bursts of activity, that kind of money isn't available to labor.

Corporations need PR. According to a former head of Standard Oil's PR department, PR exists to help the corporation make a profit, for which the support of public opinion is necessary.^{18/} The lines between PR and advertising, and between these and various forays into political manipulation, blur under these circumstances. The role of "truth" or of "honesty" in these proceedings is cherished only to the extent that it can serve the higher purposes of profit.

Labor needs communication. Unions need to communicate a picture of the world that corresponds to the way it is, and do not need to redefine reality in the image of the dollar. Corporate PR methods are in fact antithetical to labor's media needs. Unions do not have to let the way they communicate with the public be defined by the forms of corporate dishonesty that have developed over the past 70 years, to meet corporate needs.

During the broadcast media era, from the 1920s to the mid-1970s, the means of communications were held hostage by the corporations. But today we have entered a new age. New uses of cable, small format video, and satellite access to national audiences mean that the possibilities are no longer limited to corporate terrain.

New media technologies can now help unions face the 1980s in various ways. But the amount of money labor can throw into the fray is better suited, for now, to small-scale, community-based media work. The most successful labor media practitioners are urging this approach, in order to take advantage of union structures for distribution of media materials, and in order to develop new membership power by building labor's connective and activist tissues. Also, unless labor wishes to confine itself to endless teleconferences, national satellite distribution facilities such as AFSCME's need something to show. Local work, carefully nurtured, can provide a rich programming source.

The above considerations suggest that the way for labor to counter the corporate assault on the living standards of workers in today's unstable economy is the same as it has always been: through organizing. What is new is that appropriate media use can now be integrated into this design.

For reaching broader audiences of the general public, broadcast spots can serve as a bridge between the present--when labor's voice is barely heard by the broadcast audience--and such a time when labor has its own national cable channel. But local media work and broadcast seem to serve two distinct purposes: one to encourage activism and to build ties with the local community, and the other to improve labor's image with the general population, or to lobby government. Both functions, however, appear together in the best examples of labor's recent media use, such as the AFT's, and can and should be seen as two paths to the same goal.

Public opinion is one prize to gain in the new media era. But more important is the opportunity for labor to utilize the new media as technical assistance to organizing. As the AFT's Stevens noted, "PR is 99% doing what you're supposed to be doing, and 1% talking about it." Union members and workers generally will be empowered not by clever slogans and pretty images, but by their knowledge of their history and their place in the community and in society. Empowerment will not be an easy goal to achieve. But it will prove more difficult and perhaps impossible if it is not even imagined.

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