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UNION ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTH by Stephen McHugh

**Nature of the Organizing Problem** — Several related problems face the union movement today: there is a long term decline in membership and political influence, the movement of U.S. corporations from highly unionized areas continues to erode the traditional union base, and there is an increasing management attack on unions which is seen in the large number of decertification elections and "take-away" proposals in negotiations. Any discussion of union organizing in the South must deal with all these problems. Historically the South has been and continues to be a lightly unionized area; approximately 14% of nonagricultural employment is unionized, compared with a national average of 23%. This is due in large part to what has been a low level of industrial development. But manufacturing has been moving out of the nonSouth, creating problems for the labor movement, and it has been increasing rapidly in the South. With nonagricultural employment increasing by 37.4% from 1970-80 in the ten least unionized states, which are predominantly Southern, there is great potential for reversing the decline in union membership by organizing the South.

There is widespread perception that this opportunity cannot be exploited because the South is unusually resistant to union organizing. The two most commonly cited factors explaining anti-unionism in the South are Right-To-Work (RTW) laws and a cultural hostility to unions. Of the thirteen Southern states, eleven have RTW laws which forbid requiring union membership as a condition of retaining employment—meaning that although a union may organize a Southern plant, it cannot require the workers who benefit from the union to join the union and pay dues. In 1977, at least one-tenth of workers covered by union contracts were not paying dues. This decreases the union's ability to organize by reducing necessary financial support. As sometimes claimed, the existence of RTW laws may be unimportant in determining the success or failure of a particular election; but such laws still serve to decrease the number of elections occurring, by reducing financial support for organizing campaigns. RTW laws are also regarded as essentially symbolic of a hostile political-institutional environment, and union organizing difficulties in RTW states result from the same anti-union factors which brought about the RTW laws.

Some research work has focused on possible cultural bias in the South, to determine whether or not it affects a worker's decision to join a union. But surveys of union attitudes among unorganized workers suggest that those from the South do not differ from the national norm. Related research on what motivates workers to join unions suggests that the leading reason is not attitudes or beliefs, but dissatisfaction with management, pay, and working conditions. In a 1982 poll, 51% of unorganized workers said "Yes," they would join a union. That percentage was up from about 35% in a 1977 survey—an increase that must be related more to the corresponding rise in the national rate of unemployment, than to a major shift in attitudes.

**Approaches to Organizing the South** — The anti-union history of J.P. Stevens has been a symbol of the difficulties of organizing the South. ACTWU struggled to organize Stevens for twenty years, and in 1981 won a major victory, gaining recognition from the company and organizing four Stevens' plants. In the process, labor brought considerable financial pressure to bear against Stevens through pension plans (as the United Mine Workers had previously been successful in doing at Duke Power Company). This got widespread union attention, and may become a more important part of organizing strategy in the future.

In 1981, the AFL-CIO instituted organizing efforts in Houston and Atlanta, both areas being major industrial centers but lightly unionized. The Houston Organizing Project was a coordinated effort by 29 unions with an initial budget of \$1 million. Organizers initiated 32 representation elections in the first two years, winning 41% of them, only slightly lower than the national average. AFL-CIO President Kirkland

is a strong supporter of such multi-union organizing drives; one conducted in Los Angeles from 1962-82 gained 400,000 unionized workers.

A third kind of organizing approach in the South is the neutrality pledge which the UAW negotiated with GM in 1976. GM's pledge to remain neutral while the UAW organized plants which had moved south in recent years helped the UAW gain representation in eight GM plants. UAW has negotiated similar pledges from other companies with equally good results. In 1982, GM agreed to recognize UAW unions without elections, simply on the basis of a majority of authorization cards. This agreement allowed further extension of UAW membership in the South—for example at the Decatur, Alabama plant, where the union had lost three elections since 1980.

**Is the South Really Different?** — Recent data on unionization in the South does not justify viewing the region as especially troublesome and different from the national picture. The percent unionized in the South fell over the last decade from 13.4% to 11.6%, and fell nearly the same (36.7% to 33%) in the ten most unionized states (where 75% of current union membership resides). These numbers support the following view of one union official: "I would say they're moving faster than we can organize them." But while population and employment is growing much faster in the South than in the nonSouth, the absolute change in union membership in the past decade was an increase of 2.0 million. While unions declined 4% from 1974-76 in the nonSouth, they grew .4% in the South. From 1974-78 Southern unions grew 4.9% while the nonSouth declined 1.4% in union membership. Also NLRB election results show a 43% success rate for the South and a national average of 45.7%—both effectively the same. The large growth of unionism in the South can be reconciled with their lower election success rate by noting that organizing units in the South are larger, with an average of 82 eligible employees in recently organized Southern bargaining units, compared with only 46 in the nonSouth.

Neither the changes in union membership, the certification election results, nor the attitudinal studies justify a pessimistic outlook on future union growth in the South. Public perception has lagged behind recent changes in the South. With a continuing shift in employment to the South, union organizers are hoping for continued success. The regional shift of manufacturing and population to the South should not be linked with a continuing decline in the union movement. On the contrary, it is probable that unions will grow in the South faster than the national average, thereby narrowing regional wage differences. It may finally be the growth of Southern unions which remedies the domestic runaway plant problem, by equalizing labor costs in what once was the nation's major cheap labor region.

--Stephen McMullin

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