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THE VIEW FROM THE FIELD: UNION ORGANIZERS TALK ABOUT THEIR CRAFT

Maria Elena Durazo is an organizer with Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 11. She was formerly an organizer and business agent for the ILGWU in Los Angeles. Cruz Phillips is a representative for the United Furniture Workers of America in Los Angeles. She formerly worked as an organizer for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). She directed FLOC's successful Campbell Soup Boycott Campaign. Durazo and Phillips taught a workshop on union organizing at this year's Western Regional Union Women's Summer School.

LCR: *Why have there been so few successful organizing campaigns in recent years?*

PHILLIPS: I think people got lazy. There was a time there where if you won an election, you won a contract. Now what we're finding is that you need to build an organization to win an election and to win a contract.

Sometimes people in leadership positions don't see that the way to organize is to build an organization. You've got to build it from the bottom and you've got to have worker participation. An organization has to be more than a group of people in leadership positions who send out a newsletter.

LCR: *How do you build an organization? What does a successful organizing campaign take?*

PHILLIPS: You need to train the membership. You develop an inside committee and that committee designs and carries out the organizing campaign. You teach them how to do an organizing campaign, so that if you croak in the middle of the campaign, they know how to continue.

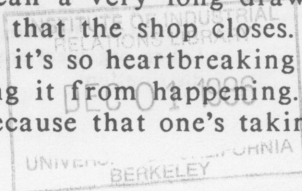
Unfortunately, what we tend to do is to go in and create a committee of people who are real pro-union and then tell them what to do. They follow all our orders, but they never learn to lead their own shop. There was no empowerment involved.

The whole role of being an organizer is being a teacher. You teach people how to be organizers. And they should know how to plan and how to keep records and how to organize and how to run an election by the time you're done. And if they can't, then you didn't do a good job. An organizer doesn't get to go back to the shops you organized. So when you leave, that shop has got to be pretty self sufficient.

DURAZO: Unions that are very determined about organizing are more successful. They'll win the election and then go to the point where either the guy breaks or he signs a contract. There's no in between. And they make that commitment from the beginning, either in the contract negotiations or in the organizing campaign.

This uses an incredible amount of the union's resources but you either do it now or in the long run you lose it through employers seeing how easy it is to get out of the union. Or you lose it through an incredible amount of revenue and staff time spent on wasted organizing campaigns. Why should you go through a whole series of unsuccessful campaigns and organized shops without contracts, rather than take one at a time and fight them?

PHILLIPS: Many workers are definitely willing to fight employers all the way. The workers do have to know from the beginning that it might mean a very long drawn-out fight or that they'll never work here again; it might even mean that the shop closes. And workers are willing to go for it. That's the incredible part. And it's so heartbreaking when the workers are willing but the union is the thing that's keeping it from happening. The union says, "Well, we want you to start on this campaign now because that one's taking too long." It's just so frustrating.



LCR: *What kinds of things do you need from the internationals to make organizer's jobs easier and to make organizing campaigns successful?*

PHILLIPS: I think internationals need to use a team approach to organizing. They need to hire groups of organizers to work as a team, with experienced directors or coordinators who are aggressive who understand the philosophy of organizing from a real empowerment, rank and file level.

Right now what happens is that internationals hire one organizer here and send him out, one organizer there and send him out. You burn out organizers and you can't do a good campaign. It's got to be done with several people working together. The creative energy of three or four people is so much better than one.

DURAZO: I think it's very important to give those teams of organizers a real vote of confidence in utilizing creative ideas. Internationals shouldn't discourage or prevent organizers from coming up with different ways of organizing. Let them experiment; let them try new things.

We've always said that we teach employers something new in each organizing campaign. As a result of that, we may not be able to use that tactic the next time because employers will catch on to it after the first or second time. We have to be the ones initiating new ideas and new ways of organizing.

LCR: *The AFL-CIO report, The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions, recommends the creation of "associate memberships" for workers who are not in established bargaining units. It also recommends the provision of services, such as job training and medical insurance, to non-union workers. What do you think of those ideas?*

PHILLIPS: I think associate membership is a good idea, but I don't like the idea of unions as mere service groups. Providing services is not an empowering method of organizing people. It's not a collectivizing thing; it doesn't bring people together.

But associate membership can be very effective. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) has associate members. The whole farm worker approach is an associate member approach. We put together gas cooperatives, food coops, all these different coops. From these kinds of organizations you can build to win contracts.

Associate membership has to be done the same way as organizing. You build an organization for empowerment. In some areas, the first thing for empowerment may not be a union contract. That's fine; do it in another way.

A lot of farmworkers work for small independent farms that we could never get contracts from. Empowerment for those workers is not going to come from a union contract. So in northwest Ohio, FLOC is as much a community organization as it is a union. We basically ran the PTA and the school boards. The important thing is to involve people so that they can begin to feel the empowerment that comes from uniting, from cooperating. That's what "union" is all about. It's much more important to involve associate members than to provide services.

LCR: *Can leaders of established bargaining units learn anything from organizers?*

PHILLIPS: Definitely. Lots of unions need to do some internal organizing. One thing that really demonstrates the problem is when you hear union leaders complaining about their membership not coming to meetings or voting Republican. People blame their membership for being inactive.

It's always easier to blame someone else. I do the same thing as an organizer. But in actuality, the problem is that you don't have an organization.

I would like to see unions do some serious internal organizing to activate the membership and create organization within a shop. Now I know that internal organizing doesn't bring in more members but it sure protects the members you've got. These days you have to worry about decertifications.

DURAZO: Well, it would actually bring in more members because if you have a solid organization and active members, it becomes easier to organize externally. Then the reputation of the union will be better, not just for that one local but for the national and the labor movement in general. When your members are more active, the word gets out. It's no longer just that you'll get medical benefits if you join the union. We want people to think of the union as more than that.

-Pam Tellew

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