

50,000 STRONGER CAMPAIGN: SOUND PRACTICES for LOCAL UNIONS



The union turned our focus to internal organizing. It is one of the principal strategic responses to the challenges confronting us. We're defining internal organizing as **strengthening the union by both sign-up and build-up**. Sign-up means recruiting members; build-up means recruiting more activists and reinforcing our structure and capacities.

Sound internal organizing practices of local unions are manifested both in a culture of campaigning and the standard operations of the local. In both cases, the crux of success is the organizing committee: members deciding to lead, working together.

These sound practices show up where internal organizing is built into the union's fights, be they contract, electoral, legislative or outsourcing fights, or the issues that arise in any workplace. Taking on these fights as campaigns entails strategy-making and focusing attention and resources, while it affords the opportunity to integrate sign-up into the campaign. Activism is lifted up and reinforced, plans that emerge from a Local Union Leadership Academy session are implemented, and a Member Action Team structure is active.

All over the country, we're engaged in fights, to a greater extent than anyone can recall. These fights can be overwhelming. Those whose agenda of greed leads them to oppose government regulation and public services and unions, particularly ours, are on the attack.

When the union's reaction is "we have our hands full, first we'll wage the fight, then we'll get around to sign-up and building up our structure," — it's understandable, but wrong. First, because a union that reinforces itself by sign-up and build-up is more likely to win its fight. Second, because it's easier to take advantage of the urgency of a campaign and accomplish sign-up and build-up while in the middle of the fight than after it's over.

And sound practices emerge in the regular operations of locals. The local president and officers take ongoing responsibility for internal organizing. The local sets goals for itself, in a way that gets broad support. It uses employee orientation to draw members to the union. Contract ratifications are sign-up occasions. To enhance internal communications, they use the VAN (Voter Activation Network) and treat the database as a tool to be constantly refreshed and perfected. They do one-on-ones, make house calls, and have an active presence on social media. It adds up to two-way communications; the union is hearing as well as speaking. They delegate responsibilities from the officers to an extensive team; their steward or MAT structure reaches all corners of the workforce.

Locals don't exist in isolation. Union staff with whom they interact can encourage every one of these practices, and assist them with implementation. Moreover, where the statewide union is committed to meeting the internal organizing challenge, locals can be accountable to one another, competing and cooperating to get stronger. The same principle of mutual accountability holds for all parts of AFSCME, councils, locals, and the whole union. We're in this together. And, stronger together, we will fight for quality public services, bringing (or restoring) safe staffing, decent compensation, public control and public regard for the vital work we do.

During the first phase of the 50,000 Stronger campaign we identified locals who were successful and dug deeper with leaders to draw out examples that would be helpful to share. The rest of this paper shares those examples as we found them in both campaign and normal environments. Convention delegates will have the opportunity to share these and other sound practices, and learn from one another through workshops, caucuses and other convention activities. This information will be incorporated into AFSCME training and Leadership Development Programs moving forward.

Campaign Mode

A contract campaign requires a local's MAT structure to stretch.

■ **Northwestern Illinois Local 448** represents approximately 600 members across multiple agencies and counties. During its 2013 contract fight, the MATs did the “ready-to-strike” assessments by going out and talking to members face-to-face, one-on-one. By doing it this way, the union's leaders considered the feedback highly reliable and felt confident they could trust the results.

■ **Will County, Illinois Local 1028's** 2013 contract campaign illustrates how an intense fight can build up a local's communications infrastructure. Before they got to a strike vote (with more than 90 percent of the members voting yes) more than one-third of their 1,200 members turned out to a membership meeting, a rally and a march. In the build-up they obtained phone numbers for 50 percent of the members and many email addresses. The strike, which ran for just more than two weeks, broke down the resistance of the County Board.

■ **Philadelphia District 1199C's** 2012 contract campaign at Temple University was also used to sign up fee payers; 105 out of 250 joined the union during the campaign. Though the list of fee payers provided by the university only showed name and home address, the union delegates reviewed the list after a bargaining session and pinpointed the work locations of the fee payers. Like many universities, Temple has many buildings, separated by as much as 30 miles; however, once work locations were identified, the delegates and staff conducted a workplace blitz, finding the fee payers as they arrived and left work and at lunch time. The worksite blitz was followed by a weekend blitz of house visits. These occurred in June, just ahead of the contract expiration on June 30.

■ **Enid Oklahoma Local 1136** campaigned for nine years to win, retain and re-win union recognition. The organizing drive was triggered by a “one last straw” incident — a 20-year worker unfairly fired. The workers looked up phone numbers on the Internet, reached us at 202-429-1000, and, with help from AFSCME Organizing

and Field Services (OFS), built a committee, campaigned for recognition and overcame resistance from the city manager and City Council by seeking community support, including defeating some incumbents to get majority support on the council.

The workers in Enid had to do it all over again after Oklahoma repealed the municipal employees collective bargaining law, this time pushing for a municipal charter amendment. Nothing short of a completely unified and deeply determined and self-reliant workforce, embedded in the community, could have done this in a region extraordinarily hostile to unions.

■ **Miami-Dade County Local 199's** 2014 contract campaign focused on an ambitious goal many initially considered unattainable: reversing a 5 percent pay cut the county imposed to cover insurance premiums. The union had to overcome self-fulfilling skepticism; if the workforce was convinced the effort was futile, it wouldn't engage in the efforts that were necessary to win.

The skepticism was overcome by maintaining solidarity among the bargaining units, which spurred the county's offer to reverse the 5 percent for some, not all. The mayor's resistance was tested by the County Board, which voted eight-to-five to restore the 5 percent and then, after an attempt to divide the county unions was rebuffed by a united front, overrode his veto nine-to-four.

A high point of the campaign was the March 27 ratification by 1,900 workers, attending all-day voting in five strategically selected sites, including 97 new members who joined at the meetings. To generate such a turnout, the union gave 12 days' notice, did two rounds of calls, a mailing, and aggressively distributed material at worksites.

Under Florida law, everyone can vote on contracts, members and non-members alike. Nearly half of the workers who came out to vote were non-members. They will now be pursued individually — the strategy is to reach out to them when the higher paychecks are issued.

Normal Mode

Motivating members to help, participate and get active is the mark of strong local leadership. **Springfield Illinois Local 2600's** current leaders reached far beyond the 10-member board to enlist activists, with 65 MAT leaders at the peak of its 2012-2013 contract battle. But engagement was not just limited to that fight; the local produces activists year-round, including VMOs who do house calls, staff tables in lobbies (where the goal is to recruit activists, not just obtain cards), and conduct lunch meetings. Fewer than half the MAT leaders are stewards; as is true everywhere, some stewards wish to only do representation, not organizing.

The president and the board have both the inclination and the skills to ask members to become active. So it's a broad team that shares the credit for, more than a four-year period, reducing fee-payers from 40 percent to 18.1 percent, and increasing MVPs from 3 percent to 33.9 percent. Every two years the board has a planning retreat, at which they decide on both group goals and individual goals. Where some locals saw a gradual rise in fee payers after the contract campaign, 2600's momentum continued.

Cuyohoga County, Ohio Job and Family Services Local 1736 tries to make the most of its right to conduct new employee orientation sessions. The presentation by the president or vice-president (sometimes both) covers the local's history, bargaining progress, and key current contract provisions, building to the explanation that as everyone is entitled to representation, everyone pays for it. At this point they hand out cards, and consistently sign up everyone in the room. After collecting the membership cards, they make a 15-minute PEOPLE presentation, signing up 20 percent on average. The union orientation session runs two-to-three hours, paid time; the employer is not in the room.

Phoenix Local 2384's current leadership is in the habit of asking for activism; any member with a question or a spark of interest gets a response that includes a pitch to get involved. Most often, the ask is to assume the responsibility of communicating between his or her co-workers and the union officers; making that two-way communication happen (face-to-face, email, or by Facebook) is job number one for stewards. The local can communicate to its entire membership in a matter of hours. Making a membership pitch fits right into the steward's job description. Holding stewards accountable

for increasing membership is a new practice in 2384, reflecting the philosophy of the current leaders.

Indianapolis Local 725 maintains nearly 100 percent membership in its 600-worker units despite the enactment of right-to-work in 2012. Stewards are part of new employee orientation, and get a card from new workers on their first day (and hold it for 90 days while they pass probation). Local 725 uses the union rights negotiated in its contracts to maintain high levels of participation, communication and visibility: Members who work on safety and equipment purchase are on city time, as are stewards' training and activities and board meetings. In effect, union business is city business. Approximately 80 members attend every membership meeting, knowing they will start at 4 p.m. (half an hour after work) and run just 30-45 minutes. And each month, in each garage, a union officer meets with all employees, on the clock.

Illinois Local 448 currently has 514 members and 76 fee payers. With more than 20 worksites, it has 45 stewards who were certified by attending two-day "Stewards in Action" training sessions. The president identifies members for activism and sends them to training. For council and International conventions, Local 448 sends the largest delegations of any Illinois local, usually their allotted delegates plus 20. It has set its dues rate at one of the highest levels of any Council 31 local, in order to be able to promote that participation. Every year, the board and the stewards go on a retreat that's real work, training occurs, it's not a junket. Out of 514 members there are 215 MVPs, more than 40 percent.

Washington Council 28 Locals 793 and 491 are top performers when it comes to the PEOPLE program, and their experiences as advocates for PEOPLE have prepared them well for fee-payer conversion. Prior to the Washington collective bargaining law, there was a system of exclusive representation, with limited bargaining but with a union shop, just like in private industry. Now under the new law, they have an agency shop and workers could, for the first time, be fee payers instead of members.

Both locals have plenty of activists, who are periodically mobilized to lobby in Olympia or to work on electoral campaigns. The locals have plenty of stewards, but the activists who are comfortable asking for contributions to PEOPLE stand out from the rest. The representational

fee payers, approximately 15 percent of the workforce, appear to be low-hanging fruit. Many were previously asked only at new-employee orientation, but with new emphasis on conversion, Local 491 cut the number of fee payers in half. Local 793 anticipates similar results.

Ball State University Local 238 took advantage of the open enrollment day on campus, using the same access as was granted to health plans to sign up members. With a combination of member volunteers and council staff, the local was able to spread out beyond the allotted tables to the non-members' workplaces, using a (mostly) accurate list from the employer, and signed up 28 members.

Brushy Mountain, Tennessee Local 2173 prides itself on bringing new hires (approximately 20 per month) into the family quickly. Even if they don't join immediately, most new employees eventually sign up. The president and vice-president see them when they rotate through their posts, or the board members on each shift, armed with a monthly list of non-members, sign them up. Local 2173's experience is that hard-core anti-union employees don't stay in their jobs very long. The local averages 90 percent membership.

LISTS AND MAPPING

Ohio Council 8's Local 2415 at the University of Toledo implemented a program to sign up fair share fee payers that emphasizes worksite mapping. They resumed involvement in new employee orientations and created a new member packet that contains a membership card, letter from the president, AFSCME Advantage information, and a PEOPLE card. Officers do the orientations and signed up many members who previously would have fallen through the cracks. Then, they expanded the focus to signing up the longer-standing fee payers – many of whom were never asked to join – as the local headed into contract negotiations. Council 8 trained 12 VMOs and they, along with the local officers, mapped out the workplace to identify who the fee payers are, what they do, what floors they work on, and what shifts they work. The VMOs and officers split the turf among them for one-on-one conversations (at the workplace and beyond) to engage fee payers and sign them up to full membership.

At the start of DC 20's current membership drive, **Board of Education Local 2921** was at 70 percent fee payers, 800 out of 1150. For the first time, the employer provided a list showing worksites; Local 2921 represents workers in every school and several other locations, a total of 166 workplaces. With site visits and 177 sign-ups at contract ratification, the local went from 30 percent to 49 percent in one month (350 to 566).

Author's note:

To produce this document, I had the privilege of interviewing dozens of AFSCME leaders who are doing great work. Their names are not to be found in the text; the whole point of this exercise is that you, like they, can implement the sound practices described. Everyone can do it. For that reason, I haven't used the phrase favored by management consultants, "best practices," because it implies a standard that most will not reach.



Paul Booth

Source Interviews:

WFSE Council 28 Rep. Dave Pardy 2/25/14
WFSE Council 28 Rep. Sean Dannen 2/26/14
AZ Local 2384 VMOs Marshall Pimentel and Ryan McClure 3/12/14
Council 31 Reg. Dir. Joe Bella 3/20/14
Will County, Illinois Local 1028 Pres. David Delrose 3/20/14
Council 31 Rep. Chuck Stout 3/20/14
District 1199C Vice Pres. Chris Woods 3/22/14
Florida IUAFFSD Andy Matdes 3/28/14
IVP Steve Quick, Pres., Indianapolis Local 725 3/31/14
Brushy Mountain, Tennessee, Local 2173 Pres. Freddie Seavers 3/31/14
IUAFFSD Matt Jordan 4/13/14