Workshop Training: Union Membership Mobilization and Collective Bargaining in an Open Shop Environment

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Notes on Organizing Faculty Unions

1. Political Action and Membership. Organizing faculty unions requires creating effective political action at both campus and state levels. Ask all members to contact legislators. Find ways to involve non-members as well.

Members become committed, more active, and take on leadership responsibilities when they discover how effective political action can be. Non-members join when they see what is at stake.

What is the best strategy for contacting legislators? Legislatures make decisions rapidly when in session. A timely response from faculty is essential.

Emails rarely work. Phone messages usually do work. This has to do with deadlines legislators have for voting on bills. Often there are only a few days advance notice before a vote.

Simply leave a phone message with the receptionist at the local legislative office. It helps when a faculty caller makes it clear that she or he lives or works inside the legislative district. Legislators will hear by the end of the day that faculty constituents do not like a bill and think it hurts higher education. Twenty or thirty calls may be enough to get the result.

Chances for success increase dramatically with two kinds of action. First, arrange a meeting when the legislator is at home. Take a delegation of no more than six faculty from different disciplines or areas. Be sure to include faculty who would be impressive to a legislator. Make sure that no one talks about a topic different from what is on a short list of issues.

Second, when the legislature is in session, ask two or three members of the same delegation to visit the legislator either in the state capitol or when the legislator is home for the weekend. Then ask the legislator for help amending or voting against a bill that has been filed. Or, ask for help in funding something important. No other topics should be discussed at these very brief meetings.

Important: Realize that in politics there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. Every vote has to be asked for every time it in comes up in the legislature. Ask for the vote of every Republican and every Democrat every time.

Rude behavior and threats never work. A history of informed and polite contacts with legislators makes a difference for future votes.

If you find legislators who will advocate for your issue, give them a data sheet they can refer to when speaking on the floor. Numbers about costs and benefits count; rhetoric does not.
2. Affiliate Relations. Faculty unions alone sometimes do have enough power to get results. Chances for success increase when support from labor affiliates is added. Affiliates can be the eyes and ears for faculty in the legislature. A daily morning phone call by a faculty leader to the right person in the affiliate state office can help alert faculty on the need for urgent political action. (For United Faculty of Florida, the affiliates are Florida Education Association, NEA, AFT, and AFL-CIO.)

Affiliates can also help defend against lawsuits. As statewide president, I always had at least one lawsuit filed against me. Legal support was provided in an agreement with the affiliates. I never had to think about it. Lawsuits against me were always dismissed; they were never settled and never went to court.

Affiliates are priceless. Think about the value they have for organizing energy. Overcome useless fights over whether the faculty union pays too much in affiliate dues.

3. Coalitions. Coalitions increase the political power of a faculty union. Some are based on a specific issue or concern for creating the coalition, e.g., no guns on campus. Some require supporting causes of others who in turn support faculty issues. Plan to show up for demonstrations supporting the organizations that support faculty.

4. A Steward System. A developed steward system is the ticket to success. Stewards are the contacts for information about faculty union plans and initiatives. An easy way to keep stewards in the loop is to have monthly socials for all union members, e.g., 5pm drinks, snacks, and conversation. During legislative sessions, the union can sponsor lunches with a brief update, plus Q&A, by a union leader from the state capitol.

Stewards attend all such functions and spread the word to union members they see in departments or buildings. They are the ones who actually read and save the union updates. They also have information on contacting a grievance officer. Most important of all, they ask people they see to join the union and ask a member to ask someone else as well.

Tom Auxter
President
United Faculty of Florida (2001-15)
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