The Principles of Union Organizing: The AFL-CIO’s Organizing Institute

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Within the School of Labor and Employment relations, there are extracurricular groups such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and Student Works at Penn State (SWAPS) that connect individuals interested in the labor movement with opportunities. These include internship positions as well as training options that enhance leadership or organizing skills. Along with two other SWAPS members, I participated in one such training through the AFL-CIO’s Organizing Institute (OI)—a program that for over 25 years has been “identifying, training and developing organizers from our membership, staff, community and college campuses across the country” (AFL-CIO, n.d.). Unlike most sessions where participants never encounter top leaders of the host organization, Leo Gerard, International President of the United Steelworkers (USW), and Jack Shea, President of the Allegheny County Labor Council, together led the opening remarks for this three day event.

At the 2013 AFL-CIO Convention, labor leaders emphasized the need for a labor movement that embraces diversity, thus including young people, women and a host of other community allies. As a young woman of color and non-union member invited to participate in the OI training program, I saw this call for inclusiveness put into practice. Approximately 45 participants gathered at the USW headquarters in Pittsburgh for the intensive 3-day training program. The vast majority of them were rank-and-file members from several unions, and only five were university students. Yet, this does not imply that young people were outnumbered. In listening to introductions in the room, it was immediately apparent that I could connect with many of the participants based on the mixed demographic characteristics represented in the room. Participants and trainers alike varied in age, gender, ethnicity, education, and place of origin. Despite these differences, we supported and encouraged one another, taking advantage of the richness of experiences, and benefitting from the energy, during both small group activities and large group discussions. We were also bound by a common purpose: to perform well in OI’s thorough and highly interactive training session.

Trainers took turns offering presentations on a myriad of topics, such as understanding the different stages of an organizing campaign, establishing critical benchmarks necessary before advancing into each stage, and familiarizing with activities that must be initiated and maintained during different phases of a campaign. Since effective one-on-one communication between organizers and workers is essential in all stages of an organizing campaign, we focused most heavily on how to conduct successful house calls. House calls help organizers connect with workers early in a campaign to identify leaders in the workforce itself, and to understand the
dynamics and real issues at the workplace. These calls also serve as an opportunity to educate workers about how collective action could help bring about changes in their workplace, and to encourage workers to band together to form a union. Role playing each component of the house call discussion alongside the trainers in small groups proved essential on the second day of the workshop. All participants were then put to the test by being assigned to real life house calls within the community. The aim was gathering signed authorization cards from several adjunct faculty members in the USW’s organizing campaign at Point Park University.

This type of training program not only helps build skills that are important for organizing but also provides a direct career path into unions. Students approaching graduation who display skill sets during the training important to unions are often considered for a 3-month paid apprenticeship—and these may lead to full-time positions with that union. As a student who has long aspired to joining the labor movement, I was offered an apprenticeship with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Thus, I am most grateful for having the opportunity to meet, befriend and train alongside people within the labor movement at OI.

References


http://www.aflcio.org/Get-Involved/Become-a-Union-Organizer/Organizing-Institute