

HOW SOCIALISTS AND TRADE UNIONISTS BUILT A NEW LABOR ORGANIZING MODEL DURING THE PANDEMIC

BY ERIC DIRNBACH

Millions of workers want a union. The Emergency Worker Organizing Committee, a project launched by socialists and the United Electrical Workers at the beginning of the pandemic, offers insights into how to organize them.



We know the US labor movement is too small. Our current union density, or membership rate, is very low, about 10 percent of the total workforce. This includes around just 6 percent of private sector workers, and it's been falling nearly every year for decades. To put this crisis in perspective, the union membership rate hasn't been this low in more than a century. Wages, benefits, and working conditions for many workers are not improving, and in some ways have gotten worse in recent decades.

Furthermore, union membership is concentrated in too few states. Nearly half of the 14 million union members live in just six states. And in ten states, the union membership rate is less than 5 percent. That means there are too many elected officials that have no fear of voting against

union and workers' interests. Politically, we won't accomplish many ambitious socialist goals with such a low level of worker organization. A socialist movement requires a strong and militant labor movement.

In the 1950s, the union membership rate was higher than 30 percent. We need to strengthen the labor movement dramatically to meet and ideally surpass this figure. A higher union membership rate will mean more worker power overall.

But unions are doing too little organizing. From the 1950s through the 1970s, an average of about 500,000 private sector workers participated in National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections every year, about 1 percent of the

workforce annually. But in recent years, there have been only around 1,000 representation elections per year in the private sector, with less than 0.1 percent of all workers participating. To increase union density by just 1 percent per year, we would need to organize over 1 million workers annually. But current campaigns are organizing only tens of thousands of workers every year. Even if we include union organizing outside the NLRB, this number is likely not much greater. Aside from unions, there are alternative organizations that help workers, such as worker centers. But they're also not organizing at a large enough scale either, although the data on that is less clear.

Why We Aren't Organizing Enough

A silver lining in this trend is that the union win rate of NLRB elections is pretty decent, at about two-thirds of elections in recent years. So unions know how to win organizing campaigns, but they aren't doing enough of them. Why is that?

Mainly, organizing campaigns that are well-run and successful are very staff-intensive and time consuming, with most campaigns having to counter outrageous union busting and multiple unfair labor practices by employers. Of course, this is because labor law isn't good enough, and passing something like the PRO Act would be very helpful. But historically, we tend to get labor law reform when the labor movement is strong and disruptive enough to win it.

We also have a major structural problem in the labor movement. Very few unions allow any interested worker to join or get trained to organize. You have to be in a workplace that the union targets for an organizing campaign. Then you have to win your campaign, usually in an election. And then you have to bargain for a contract. Only then do you become a regular dues-paying union member. That process can take years. The average amount of time just to bargain a first contract is over a year. Some workers win an election but never get a contract at all, and thus don't become union members, even after all that effort. This whole standard organizing process is slow, resource intensive, and involves too few workers.

How to Reach More Workers

Meanwhile, more workers really want to be union members! The most recent annual Gallup survey recorded a modern record union approval rating of 68 percent, the highest level since 1965. Another recent poll found strong support among workers for unions at their workplace, with the highest support from those who earn less than \$25,000 per year (58 percent), between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per year (57 percent), and among people with less than a high

school education (60 percent). More than half of lower-income workers would support a strike at their job.

A major study in 2017 found that nearly 50 percent of nonunion workers would vote to join a union. Considering just the private sector, there are about 100 million non-union workers, so let's assume that roughly 50 million workers want a union. Recent years have seen a little more than 50,000 workers vote in annual NLRB elections, so at the rate that the labor movement is organizing, it will take about one thousand years to reach all these workers! How do we connect with more workers when current union efforts only organize a very small fraction?

One way is for unions to be much more open about providing organizing training and assistance to workers who want it. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) is the only union I'm aware of that allows *any worker* to join and get training and organizing assistance. That's a great example other unions should follow. Mainstream unions don't do this because, with few exceptions, they are committed to the idea of a membership based only in workplaces with exclusive representation and a union contract. Any worker who wants to learn to organize and get some help fighting for

improvements on the job is out of luck if they can't convince a union to prioritize their workplace for an organizing campaign.

This traditional union framework is simpler, provides organizational stability, and is easier to staff, but it leaves out too many workers who want a union. So we need to find another way to get organizing assistance to the millions of workers who want it.

Organizing Training Projects Are an Answer

An important concept for us to remember is that any group of workers organizing together to improve working conditions is acting like a union. They may not have official recognition and a contract, but they are a union nonetheless, and they can organize to win things. Many workers don't realize this. But they usually need some help to start organizing, since this is a challenging and risky endeavor with many ways to fail.

That leads us to what I'll call Organizing Training Projects, which are programs available for workers to learn about union organizing. A long-running example is Labor Notes, which has organizing training schools and materials like *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*. There's also Jane McAlevey's Strike School, which is based on the organizing

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philosophy found in her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

And there is also the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a joint project of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). EWOC started in 2020 to help workers organize during the pandemic. I've been involved in EWOC since almost the beginning, and have become very interested in how it offers organizing training and campaign assistance to more workers who want and need help. It's worth discussing how EWOC functions in some detail, because it provides a model for how we can overcome the organizing problem confronting unions today.

How Does EWOC Work?

Since March 2020, EWOC has had over 1,300 volunteers, with over a hundred currently involved, and has two staff coordinators. Roles include organizing, research, media, communications, training, data administration, political education, and fundraising.

Workers contact EWOC by filling out a form on the website. An intake organizer then reaches out to them for basic information about their workplace and issues. EWOC's goal is to contact the worker within three days of getting their initial form. If the worker wants to move forward, they are assigned an advanced organizer to develop an organizing plan together for as long as they want to continue. Contact with the workers has been primarily on the phone or over Zoom during the pandemic, and this may shift to more in-person meetings when the pandemic subsides.

EWOC has also developed a six-session weekly training program that workers are encouraged to take. It has organizing materials on its website, such as videos, organizing basics, and a training manual. It also holds panel discussions where workers talk about their campaigns and the concept of "rank-and-file unionism."

There is training for organizers to learn how to assist EWOC internally. Some of the workers who contact EWOC will run their campaign, go through the training, and then become an EWOC volunteer organizer.

EWOC is also experimenting with helping workers form networks at large companies with multiple locations, like retail chains. That's an incredible challenge, since we need to coordinate organizing at many locations at the same time and build power with enough workers to move a large employer.

EWOC's Organizing Methodology

The basic EWOC organizing framework is covered in the training and in our conversations with workers. It shares common features with Labor Notes, McAlevey, IWW, and many other union trainings. But the best training is to actually organize, and workers will learn this as they do it.

The organizing follows these steps:

- Conversations among coworkers are the foundation to everything.
- The initial worker(s) should form an organizing committee, and talk with more coworkers.
- They should map the workplace, identify all the workers and leaders, know who talks with whom, and assess workers on their support for taking action.
- They should identify common and deeply felt issues.
- They should frame demands, for example in a petition, which can get majority support.
- They should do "inoculation" against the likely boss response.
- They should take majority actions, for example a march on the boss, and make their demands.
- They can assess what happened and continue. If they win something, that's great – claim the win and organize for more with an escalating campaign.
- If they don't win yet, regroup and try again.

EWOC's Results

Here's my experience as an advanced organizer to give a deeper sense of how this works out. I have taken cases with about seventy-five workers who reached out to EWOC, and I was able to talk with about half of them – the rest never got back to me. About twenty-five of the cases became campaigns in the sense that the worker engaged in some organizing activity, which means talking with coworkers and trying to form an organizing committee. Of these, a handful so far have been successful in that the workers won something, usually regarding COVID issues. Some campaigns are still ongoing.

Some of the workers will organize for wins and may stop there, while others will keep organizing over time. Some want to go further and run an election to get official union recognition and a contract. In one of those cases I worked on, the workers did a majority petition and made some gains, and I then discussed union options with them. I helped connect them to a union, and they won their election and are now in contract bargaining.

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Overall, after almost two years of operation, over three thousand workers have reached out to EWOC, and we attempted to connect with all of them. Over 800 had intake calls and were assigned to an organizer for further discussions. These workers were employed at over 600 different employers. Of these, nearly 400 campaigns launched with some organizing activity. Of these, there have been about sixty successful campaigns that have won improved conditions or stopped concessions so far, involving thousands of impacted workers.

Some of the wins include fast food, grocery, and retail workers winning better COVID protections, sick leave and raises, graduate workers getting raises and other improvements, and health care and social service workers winning safety improvements. EWOC has also connected over a dozen workplaces with a union, with many winning elections or voluntary recognition so far. There have also been several successful strikes at EWOC-supported campaigns.

On the EWOC training program, over 1,200 people have attended at least one training session, and 290 have attended the whole series. Nearly 1,500 people RSVP'd for an EWOC political education event in 2021, and 1,500 have downloaded the Organizing Guide.

The industries that EWOC has interacted with the most include food service, grocery, retail, health care, and education, sectors that largely remained open with essential workers during the pandemic.

What We've Learned

One main lesson is that we have to be honest about how hard this is. A pretty low percentage of everyone that contacts EWOC, and even of those who start real organizing, wins a campaign because some workers lose interest, organizing is really challenging, and we need to get better. However, there are enough campaign wins to show that EWOC is on to something.

A major bottleneck in these campaigns is the formation of an organizing committee. Sometimes there is one activist in a workplace who wants to do something, but they can't find anyone to work with them. A lack of faith that things can change or fear of getting fired are widespread. Admittedly, not every worker we deal with is a leader or a good enough organizer yet, and perhaps EWOC volunteers are not good enough mentors yet. I suspect that if an organizing committee can form, and eventually the workers take action, there's a really good chance of winning improve-

ments, and we're collecting the data on these campaigns to test that theory.

Also, it's difficult for many workers to imagine being able to win with collective action. Part of this project is to help them envision that possibility. Organizing together in a structured way builds the collective confidence that leads to making demands and winning improvements. It's also important to share the sense that organizing is something many people can do and get better at. There are definite skills needed, and experience is very helpful, but organizing can be taught, practiced, learned and improved.

In my conversations with workers, I try to offer advice and assistance, be honest about the risks and what can be won, and teach the organizing framework. But the

campaign timing and activity is all up to them. These campaigns continue as long as the workers want them to.

Even after wins, it's an ongoing challenge to keep the workplace organized over time with worker turnover. The gains that were won have to be defended. And there's the hope that trained workers will bring an organizing philosophy to future workplaces, training other workers and organizing there. It's likely that spreading this organizing knowledge widely will contribute to victories later on.

The overall idea is that these campaigns should be run by workers with EWOC assistance. The organizing is based on direct action in the workplace, but other campaign elements can be added as well, such as online petitions, protests outside the workplace, getting media attention, and so on. If this sounds like a syndicalist model of organizing, that's because it partly is. EWOC's methodology is similar to the traditional IWW framework of worker-led, direct action organizing to fight the boss and win improvements on the job. But EWOC also has a relationship with more mainstream unionism since some campaigns connect with unions to achieve traditional recognition and a contract. In my view, maintaining this flexibility and providing different options to workers is a strength.

This project sees itself on the political left, consistent with UE's rank-and-file "Them and Us Unionism" philosophy. Most importantly, the EWOC model suggests a way for unions to reach many more workers with organizing training and campaign assistance.

What Does This All Mean?

EWOC provides a network of experienced volunteers to do the traditional work of union organizers and other staff on

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a lot of worker-led organizing campaigns, with some success. EWOC has been able to assist thousands of workers over the last two years that might not have gotten any help otherwise. This valuable service provides a basic level of solidarity for all workers that is really needed in the labor movement – that any worker in any workplace can contact the project, get a conversation fairly quickly, and then have organizing assistance and training available to them as needed.

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However, let’s remind ourselves that ideally, we would have an organizing training infrastructure large enough to reach hundreds of thousands, even millions, of workers each year. Even if you think workplace-based organizing on that scale is madness, and that we need some sort of sectoral bargaining or to wait for the next worker upsurge, we would still need to train workers on this scale to build the power to make that kind of bargaining or upsurge successful.

This discussion raises a host of additional questions and thoughts:

Organizing Effectiveness: We need to learn more lessons about the most effective ways to organize and win over time. This raises issues about continuously improving the organizing training and mentoring process, as well as campaign support. Moreover, we should continue to improve our campaign data collection and analysis.

Scalability: If this is an effective program, how can we scale it up dramatically? If we want to have thousands of volunteers involved, how do we find, train, and retain them? We also want to find effective ways to reach out to more workers. This is obviously a massive training and coordination challenge for that scale of effort.

Structure: Do we need more paid staff? How much funding do we need, and where do we get it? Should workers in the EWOC ecosystem be encouraged to pay dues? EWOC is not a union and doesn’t intend to be. But it could become a kind of worker solidarity association, where workers in various campaigns provide assistance to each other. The governance of the program will likely have to evolve as well, to incorporate a more formal role for workers.

Relationship to Unions: Should the labor movement as a whole create a huge volunteer labor organizing training and campaign assistance program like EWOC? We can imagine a system where workers start their organizing campaigns there, and then for those interested, get connected with unions later on.

Organizing Is Critical

Let me reemphasize an important point. If 50 million workers say they’d vote for a union, this likely means that most of them want the better wages, benefits, and working conditions that come with a union job, but they may not have an understanding of the organizing it takes to get

that. So, if unions open the door to everyone, perhaps hundreds of thousands or even millions of pro-union workers might want to join immediately. Sounds great, right? But it does them or unions little good to have a few unorganized workers scattered here and there in a million different workplaces.

If workers don’t build power and eventually get the improvements from union membership in the form of better wages, benefits and working conditions, many will become frustrated and quit, and who could blame them? That’s why it matters that there’s a commitment from the workers to organize and from unions to provide training and campaign support. Real working-class power comes from organized workers fighting the boss for better conditions. This program has to facilitate that, and not just enable more workers to become union members and pay dues.

I think the main question the labor movement has to grapple with, if it’s serious about growing and meeting the desperate need for worker organizing, is how it can provide good organizing training and campaign assistance to the millions of workers who need it, and in the near term, not on some distant horizon. Some of the ideas I have suggested here have been raised before over the years. But as a large-scale volunteer organizing network, EWOC provides a real-world working model for how this could be achieved.