

THE JUSTICE @ QUEBECOR CAMPAIGN: LESSONS FOR CANADIAN UNIONS

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A successful campaign to organize printing industry workers in the U.S. used innovative strategies that may be useful and instructive for Canadian unions. The campaign was initiated in 2002 by the Graphic Communications International Union (GCIU)¹ at Quebecor World, a Canadian company, and one of the world's largest commercial printing companies. Quebecor, which began as a small Quebec-based newspaper publisher, operates 150 commercial printing facilities in 16 counties and has revenues of over \$6 billion.

The Graphic Communications International Union has since merged with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) in the United States and the Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) in Canada. At the time of the campaign, GCIU had approximately 80,000 members in the US and Canada, almost all of them in the printing, publishing or packaging industries.

GCIU used a comprehensive campaign strategy of rank and file organizing, membership mobilization, corporate leverage and global solidarity to win a neutrality and fair election process agreement with Quebecor World and brought union representation to hundreds of printing industry workers.

BACKGROUND - THE U.S. LABOUR MOVEMENT

Since the 1970's U.S. unions have suffered a precipitous decline in membership. The reasons for this decline have been extensively debated, dissected and documented elsewhere (Chaison and Rose 1991; Riddell and Riddell 2001). While political and economic factors, such as weak labour laws, globalization, the decline of manufacturing, the rise of a contingent workforce and the increasing anti-union behaviour of U.S. corporations have played a major part in the decline, many observers, including many union activists began, in the late 1980's, to argue that unions themselves have been responsible, at least partially, for the decline in union density.

Most U.S. unions had become merely service organizations - business unions - by the 1960's, content with bargaining wages and benefits for their existing members. As union density fell, so did union bargaining power and unions found themselves spending increasing amounts of their time and resources desperately trying to defend their dwindling membership from increasingly belligerent employers intent on extracting massive concessions.

Organizing new workers became increasingly difficult, with workers subject to threats, harassment, discipline, discrimination and dismissal as employers in the U.S. were able to act with almost complete impunity under the weak enforcement provisions of the National Labor Relations Board. The pre-eminent human rights organization, Human Rights Watch, has even suggested that the long delays and weak enforcement of violations by the NLRB has led to a situation in the United States where organizing rights for workers have been severely curtailed.

A number of U.S. union leaders began to realize that if U.S. labour were to survive they would have to devote far greater resources to organizing and learn how to organize in this increasingly hostile climate.

The election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO (the first competitive election at the AFL-CIO in 30 years) heralded a new emphasis on organizing. Richard Bensinger, the founder of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute, which trained thousands of young workers and students as organizers, argued that unions needed to spend at least 30 percent of their budgets on organizing. The pioneering work of Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich, which detailed the tactics used in successful organizing campaigns, showed that workers could be organized in the U.S. only if unions used new and creative "rank and file intensive" tactics.²

THE CANADIAN SITUATION

Unlike the U.S. movement, the Canadian labour movement has grown since the 1980's (Jackson and Schetagne 2003). Canadian unions, however, should not be complacent. Union density has also been on the decline in Canada - from a high of over 40 percent in 1984 to 30 percent today (Jackson and Schetagne 2003; Statistics Canada 2005). While labour laws, and their enforcement, have been stronger in Canada, they have become weaker in the last decade with many provinces now requiring a vote rather than granting automatic certification based on a card majority. Employers in Canada, while still under greater legal constraints than U.S. employers, have become increasingly aggressive, borrowing many tactics from the U.S., such as hiring union busting consultants and lawyers and violating the law when they determine the penalties are worth the risk to remain "union free" (Bentham 1999; Yates 2000).

THE GCIU CAMPAIGN

The GCIU, like many other U.S.-based unions had witnessed a profound membership loss, almost 50 percent since the 1980's. In 2000, a new leadership was elected with a mandate to revitalize and rebuild the union. Under the leadership of newly elected Canadian Vice President, Duncan Brown and newly appointed Organizing Director Bert Haft, both long time GCIU organizers, a new organizing program was developed.

Brown and Haft presented a strategic plan for organizing to the GCIU Convention in 2000 and the union raised its *per capita* and earmarked a substantial increase in funds for organizing. The union moved away from its old model of organizing based on plant gate leafleting and mass meetings to a model based on using rank and file organizers, house-calling, and building active and representative inside committees. Former AFL-CIO Director of Organizing Richard Bensinger was hired as a consultant and developed a GCIU Organizing Institute (OI) which trained hundreds of GCIU members as rank and file organizers. An intern program took the best of the OI graduates and gave them six months training in the field.

The new organizing program met with some success. The GCIU was able to move campaigns faster and in almost all campaigns, signed up a majority of workers. Unfortunately, the union was still losing a majority of elections. Particularly disappointing was a loss in 2001 at a 650-worker Quebecor World plant in Corinth, Mississippi. It was the GCIU's fourth attempt at organizing this plant. A team of newly trained rank and file organizers signed 60 percent of the plant within three weeks but, after a virulent anti-union campaign by the company, the union lost the election by a two to one margin.

Focus groups conducted after the election pointed to two main reasons why workers had voted against the union. First, while workers liked the house-callers, they did not like the inside committee, who they felt were cliquish and hotheaded. GCIU had relied on activists from previous campaigns to form the inside committee and had failed to recruit new committee members or provide adequate training to the committee. Second, the company had threatened that the plant might close if workers voted for the union. This scared people into voting against the union.

The GCIU was still convinced that they were on the right track. More effort would need to be put into recruiting and training committee members and a plan for countering the anti-union campaigns needed to be developed. A new Research Director, Alan Tate, who had been an International Representative for the union in Canada for 15 years, was hired, with a mandate to build the union's capacity for strategic research and corporate campaigns.

Early in 2002, the GCIU, convinced that the new organizing program could be successful with some additional resources, met with the AFL- CIO to

request an organizing grant. This led to a series of meetings with AFL-CIO staff to develop a project that would move GCIU's organizing program to a new level.

Working closely with the AFL-CIO's Center for Strategic Research, GCIU put together an ambitious plan to organize Quebecor World, the world's largest commercial printer and the largest employer of GCIU members in both the United States and Canada. GCIU wanted to take on a large-scale campaign that would transform its relationship with the company by increasing the union's density and bargaining power.

For almost six months a small group of research and organizing staff from the AFL-CIO and the GCIU put together a plan that would be both ambitious and achievable. A key architect of this plan was Davis Chu, the Director of the AFL-CIO's Center for Strategic Research, an experienced corporate campaigner who had come from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with Sweeney.

The experience at Corinth convinced the GCIU and the AFL-CIO that they must get the company to "back off" from its anti-union stance, particularly the constant threats of plant closure. A major component of the campaign would, therefore, need to be a leverage (or corporate) campaign to convince Quebecor World to allow workers to join the union without company interference. A decision was made to not subject workers to the long delays and weak remedies of a National Labour Relations Board election but instead demand a fair process, preferably a simple card check, from the company.

In addition, the union decided to mobilize its existing Quebecor members to support the organizing campaigns. GCIU had about 8000 members who worked for Quebecor in the U.S. and Canada. At a meeting of the union's Quebecor Bargaining Council in 2002, delegates agreed that the number one priority, in terms of increasing their bargaining strength, was to organize more plants and build more density in the company.

So, a campaign was developed with three major components: organizing, leverage and membership mobilization.

INNOVATIVE ORGANIZING TACTICS

The organizing strategy was to target ten plants in the two major divisions of the company. Success at these plants, it was estimated, would give GCIU an 80 percent density in the two most important and profitable divisions of the company. As it happened, most of the unorganized plants in these divisions were located in the mid-South region of the U.S. - Tennessee, Northern Mississippi and Kentucky - so the union was able to concentrate its organizing efforts geographically. In addition, there were a number of GCIU Quebecor plants within close proximity, which would allow the campaign to bring together organized and unorganized workers. After six-weeks of making contact with key

leaders in the targeted plants and assessing the level of support, the union decided to focus on seven plants where it felt viable campaigns were possible, two on the U.S. West Coast and five in the Mid-South Region.

Since this was a campaign that would not rely on a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election, GCIU had to use innovative organizing tactics to build strong committees and sustain the campaign while the union focused on getting the company to the table to negotiate a fair process for organizing.

The campaign went public when workers from the organizing committees in the targeted plants simultaneously “marched on the boss”, demanding from their local management the right to organize free from intimidation and harassment.

While no cards were signed during this phase of the campaigns, the inside committees circulated a number of surveys and petitions focused on specific issues such as health care costs and health and safety issues. Workers held parking lot rallies, t-shirt days and other mass actions to keep up constant activity at the plants.

GCIU had between three and five organizers at each of the seven target plants, most of them inexperienced interns and graduates of the GCIU's Organizing Institute. Organizers worked ten day rotations with four days off and were expected to work ten to twelve hour days. GCIU's Organizing Director, Bert Haft, and an experienced lead organizer from the AFL-CIO, Jennifer Hill, coordinated the campaigns. Dozens of GCIU members participated as house-callers throughout this period.

THE LEVERAGE STRATEGY

The leverage strategy was designed to pressure the company to negotiate a neutrality agreement. Major Quebecor customers were targeted and asked to support the right of Quebecor workers to organize. Quebecor printed catalogues and flyers for a number of major retailers. The union leafleted many of these retailers, urging them tell Quebecor that they must respect workers rights to organize if they wanted to continue to do business with them. Many did, including IKEA and Victoria's Secret, where the union had conducted large scale leafleting directed at customers inside the stores. Hundreds of GCIU members from dozens of locals in the U.S. and Canada were involved in these and other “street actions”. Trade shows, where Quebecor World was a sponsor or presenter, were leafleted and disrupted by GCIU activists. GCIU members and workers from the unorganized plants attended Quebecor World shareholders meetings. They forced the Chairman of the Board, former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, to spend much of the meeting dealing with workers rights. U.S. Presidential candidate John Kerry publicly supported the campaign, as did dozens of religious leaders and leading authors including Canadian

authors Margaret Atwood, Judy Rebick and Linda McQuaig. A state senator and a religious leader from Kentucky went to Montreal to meet with company executives to tell them what they had heard from workers at the Versailles plant in Kentucky and to urge the company to negotiate a neutrality agreement with the GCIU.

MOBILIZING THE MEMBERSHIP

Mobilizing began by assessing the ability and willingness of existing GCIU Quebecor locals to engage in escalating activity in support of the organizing and leverage campaigns. "Solidarity committees" were organized in each plant. Organizing Director Bert Haft remarked, "It makes no sense to ask the most vulnerable workers - those in the unrepresented plants, to bear the brunt of this campaign. Our members, who are protected by a union contract, have to be on the front lines".

This was, perhaps, the most difficult organizing task since the GCIU did not have a culture of this type of mobilization. GCIU assigned organizers to work on membership mobilization and, in the end, the union managed to move many of these locals to action. Ultimately, hundreds of GCIU activists became engaged in some form or another in the campaign. Many GCIU Quebecor workers who came out as member organizers on the campaign were excited and energized by the experience. They went back into their plants to build the solidarity committee and urge support for the workers trying to form unions. The solidarity committees got petitions signed and presented them to their local managements, demanding that Quebecor World respect workers rights. Locals who were in bargaining with Quebecor World in Toronto and Halifax brought workers from the unorganized plants in Tennessee and Mississippi to the bargaining table and forced the company to discuss organizing rights during bargaining. GCIU plants held solidarity days; members wore t-shirts or stickers demanding "Justice @ Quebecor".

THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN

A fourth component of the campaign also developed as the union took the campaign global and engaged unions that dealt with Quebecor World in Europe and Latin America. GCIU had a relationship with these unions through Union Network International (UNI). In 2001, UNI had established a Quebecor Working Group whose mandate was to campaign for a global labour standards agreement. The GCIU's Duncan Brown, fortuitously, chaired this working group.

In December 2003, a Global Quebecor Solidarity Conference in Memphis, Tennessee brought together these two campaigns - the campaign for organizing rights in the U.S. and the global campaign for a labour standards agreement.

Over 120 delegates from 14 countries, including Quebecor workers from France, Spain, Brazil, the UK, Chile, Peru, Argentina, Canada, Belgium, Mexico and the United States attended this historic conference. Delegates discussed the problems they faced in their Quebecor World plants and heard from the workers in Tennessee, Nevada and Mississippi who were attempting to organize. A strategy was developed to put pressure on the company worldwide and the Justice @ Quebecor campaign was officially launched.

In addition to attending the conference, delegates spent two days visiting workers at their homes in Tennessee and Mississippi and attempted to meet with management at their plants. On the final day, a large rally was held in Memphis commemorating International Human Rights Day with the theme: Workers Rights are Human Rights!

The conference was followed by a series of "global solidarity days" where workers from Quebecor plants all over the world wore "Justice @ Quebecor" stickers, signed petitions supporting global labour rights and, in some cases, staged rallies at their own plants.

Global unions also played a role in pressuring Quebecor's customers. The Swedish printing union put pressure on Ikea, a Swedish furniture retailer and major customer of Quebecor World. The Spanish union urged Telefonica, the Spanish telephone company and another major customer, to insist that Quebecor World respect workers rights to organize.

Finally, after almost two years, Quebecor responded. A series of meetings between company officials and GCIU and AFL-CIO officials began. At the same time the company also agreed to meet with a committee from UNI to discuss a global labour rights agreement.

In May 2005, the company signed an agreement with the Graphic Communications Conference of the Teamsters (GCC/IBT) - by this time the GCIU had merged with the Teamsters in the U.S. - stipulating that it would remain neutral and not interfere or oppose its employees' efforts to unionize. The 24-page memorandum of Agreement contained the following language:

The Employer shall make no statement or action showing opposition to unionization. The Employer shall make no disparaging remarks about the Union or its representative. The Employer will not state or advocate that its employees should not support a union to represent them. Any Union employees of the employer shall not be characterized as a "third party" or an "outsider".

The agreement also provided for an election process run by a mutually agreed upon arbitrator rather than the NLRB.

Within months of signing the agreement the GCC/IBT organized over 200 workers at a Quebecor plant in Fernley, Nevada and a month later almost

250 workers in the Quebecor plant in Versailles, Kentucky also voted to join the GCC/IBT.

CONCLUSIONS

Unions in Canada are not faced with the same crisis that faces unions in the U.S. or the same intensity of employer hostility. Nevertheless, union density has declined in Canada and is likely to decline further unless Canadian unions devote more energy and resources to organizing. New strategies and tactics will be necessary to counter the increasing employer offensive and to make sure the Canadian labour movement continues to grow. It is clear that union strategies have a significant impact on organizing success (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Nissen 1999; Fantasia & Ross 2004; Yates 2000).

While all campaigns are different and different campaigns require different strategies, many of the strategies used in the Quebecor World campaign may prove useful for Canadian unions looking to increase density and bargaining power. These strategies include:

- **Strategic Targeting:** Targets plants were chosen for their strategic importance not because they were “hot shops”. In fact, although GCIU had held campaigns at many of these plants in the past, the experience was that support for the union was not necessarily stronger in plants where workers had approached the union than in plants where there had been no previous contact.
- **Rank & File Organizers:** Almost all the organizers used in the campaign were rank and file GCIU members, recruited through the Organizing Institute training program. While the GCIU would have preferred to have had more experienced lead organizers to coordinate the campaigns, a conscious decision was made not to use the GCIU’s “professional” organizing staff, all of whom had been schooled in old methods.
- **Building Large and Representative Committees:** In the targeted plants between 8 percent and 15 percent of the workers in the plant were active on the committee. Committee members were vocal and public in their support for the union. Extensive and ongoing education was done with the committees. In particular, much time was spent educating and “inoculating” members about the company’s anti-union tactics.
- **Extensive Housecalling:** One-on-one communication was the major method used reach workers. No literature was handed out except by the inside committees themselves in the plants. More than 70 percent of the plant was house-called at least once.
- **Mobilizing the Membership:** A strategic decision was made to mobilize the GCIU Quebecor World membership in support of the organizing

campaigns. Extensive education was done with local leadership on the relationship between their bargaining power and organizing so they understood that supporting the organizing campaigns was in their own interest. The fact that so many rank and file GCIU members were involved in and energized by the campaign also sustained the campaign politically in the union and began to create an activist culture within the union.

- Using Leverage: Going on the offensive against the company and talking directly to customers, shareholders and community leaders forced the company to agree to neutrality and a fair election process.
- Going Global: The global campaign allowed GCIU to use the influence of the European and Latin American unions to pressure the company. By integrating the UNI campaign for global labour standards with the GCIU campaign for organizing rights, the global campaign became more than a solidarity campaign but a true global campaign.

POST SCRIPT

In October 2005, the GCC/IBT failed to win a majority in the Quebecor plant in Covington, Tennessee. The union claims that the company violated the neutrality agreement by sending anti-union letters to worker's homes and holding one-on-one and captive audience meetings with workers. The union has filed 49 complaints with the arbitrator and is also filing a civil law suit alleging a breach of contract by the company.

At the same time, while the company agreed to language for a global labour rights protocol with UNI in September 2005, it has since refused to sign the agreement. UNI has written a letter to Pierre Karl Peladeau, the CEO of Quebecor World demanding that the company sign the agreed to language.

The struggle continues.

NOTES

¹ In 2005 the GCIU merged with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in the United States. Most Canadian GCIU locals rejected the merger with the Teamsters and instead elected to merge with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP)

² The recent split between the AFL-CIO and the "Change to Win Coalition" was essentially the result of the ongoing debate over how to rebuild the U.S. labour movement.

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