STEWARD'S corner

Where Do Good Organizers Come From?

by Ellen David Friedman

We know good organizers when we meet them.

They're accessible. They listen and show respect. They react calmly to all kinds of people, take their time to size up a situation, and engage people on their own terms. They know how to help others lose their fear.

But few people are born organizers.

An experiment in Ithaca, New York, over the last two years has shown surprising results in helping workers become organizers, with a method easy to adapt and reproduce anywhere.

Here's how it developed. For 15 years the Tompkins County Workers' Center has run a range of programs, from mobilizing community support for union campaigns to lobbying for pro-worker policies.

But we kept finding that workers were terrified to take action in their own workplaces—whether to challenge labor law violations, to organize a union, or even to file a grievance if they already had a union.

It became clear what was needed: a method to help workers overcome their fear and learn to take collective action.

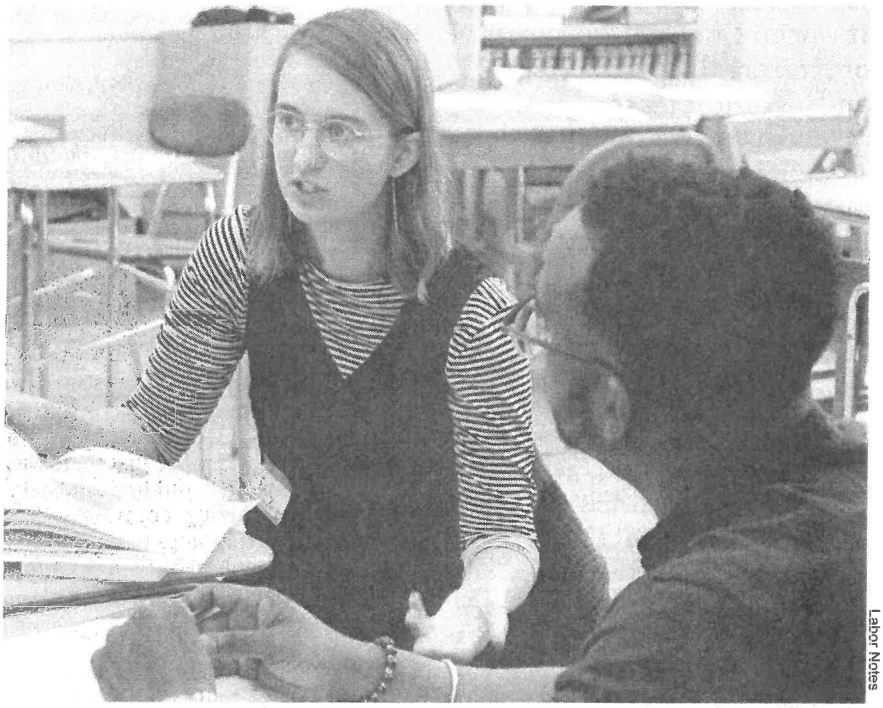
SAME TIME, SAME PLACE

Getting past fear doesn't happen all at once. It needs steady doses of support from organizers who offer information, encouragement, and examples of what's been done elsewhere. It needs organizers who don't give up easily.

These workers are teaching one another how to become solid rank-and-file organizers.

The best organizers are fellow workers you know and trust. So finding these nascent organizers and accelerating their development became goals of our worker center.

To do this we developed what we call Community Union Organizers. It's a peer coaching group—no staff, no budget.



Labor Notes

Every week, workers from a range of jobs—primarily retail, hospitality, health care, and education, the dominant industries in our area—get together at the same time, in the same place. Some have unions, some don't.

The opening question is always the same: what's happening in your workplace that you want to address as a rank-and-file organizer?

From there the questions go in different directions. We may explore how workers in a specific shop are experiencing disrespect and precarious conditions. We often try to analyze a boss's strategy to keep control. And we focus a lot on possible strategies to bring workers together and fight back.

IDEAS PERCOLATE

One night a barista arrives devastated by a critical performance evaluation. She is mystified and demoralized.

"I'm the most senior employee. All my evaluations up to now have been exemplary," she says, looking around at us, in pain.

A pizza delivery guy says, "Well what do you expect? You just organized a union in your coffee shop. You think the boss isn't going to pay you back?"

Discussion turns to filing a grievance, and how fortunate it is that the union held out for "just cause" language in its first contract, settled just months earlier.

But the barista still looks miserable. "Everyone will be scared now," she says. "If they can do this to me, they can do it to anyone."

That's when the talk turns to organizing. Someone asks, what would happen if she openly shared her performance evaluation with all the other workers?

Shocked silence. People begin to talk about the shame of being evaluated and exposed to criticism. Workplaces can be gossipy and cliquish. Reputation feels important.

But the people around the table—some retail clerks, a registered nurse, a teaching assistant, some grad students, a commercial baker—are looking at the barista with fondness, confidence, and patience.

You can almost see the pivot in her brain. From these monthly discussions she knows that nothing will change unless she changes. She steps past her own fear. "Okay, I'll copy my evaluation and pass it out to all the union members," she tells us. An organizing process has begun.

It's useful to have seasoned organizers to offer context and historical lessons.

Fast forward one year: Every week this barista is bringing new problems to the CUOs, and as a result introducing new ideas to her co-workers. The members of her union are now pushing back directly whenever the employer pushes them.

They didn't like how scheduling was being done, so they collected preferences from all the workers and started posting their own schedules. When new hires get harassed by management, their co-workers sign group letters of support and descend on the boss to demand respect.

CO-OP UNMASKED

Here's another story: A retail worker in a consumer co-op was stumped. Her co-workers were so dazzled by the idea of a "shared mission" with management that they weren't sure whether or how to assert their own voice.

Week by week, the Community Union Organizers puzzled through this challenge. Because management had always used the "co-op" philosophy to lull workers into being cooperative, it was necessary to find ways to expose its hypocrisy.

After management imposed a new evaluation system without consulting workers, the CUO member helped a group of co-workers to see that there was no "shared mission," and to push back.

Now an organizing committee has formed and is taking steps to unionize… an idea that drew nervous laughs a few months earlier.

LEARNING BY REFLECTING

These regular workers are teaching one another how to become really good rank-and-file organizers.

They are building caucuses inside their less-than-democratic unions, or "salting" (getting jobs with the undercover goal of helping organize a union) into notoriously toxic workplaces, or finding ways to stand up for their co-workers even without a union.

What makes the process work? The most basic rule is that members show respect and curiosity for one another's experiences. There is a lot of non-judgmental listening, offering questions, trying out ideas, providing encouragement.

It's a warm environment, but also sharp and purposeful. We return constantly to the principles of rank-and-file unionism, as outlined in *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, our "organizing bible."

We always ask, how are you bringing in more people? How are you promoting discussion and shared decision-making? How are you helping your co-workers act collectively to challenge the boss? We never let up on that focus.

It's also useful to have seasoned organizers in the group to offer context and historical lessons, to anticipate problems that may crop up, and to push members to be practical as well as courageous.

Finally, we commit to following through with members by asking each week how things are developing, what steps did they try, what were the results, what are they facing now.

Over time we witness—and are inspired by—their growth. Caught as we are in a moment of sharp inequalities, we need sharp organizers. This is how we're nurturing them. ❑

[To find out more, contact Ellen David Friedman at *ellendavidfriedman@hotmail.com* or Sam Mason at *samcobam@gmail.com*.]

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Tompkins County Workers' Center

Gimme! Coffee baristas union are among the participants in Community Union Organizers.