Cross-border organizing in the apparel industry: lessons from Central America and the Caribbean.

by Henry Frundt

Successful cross-border organizing in developing nations demands that transnational corporate campaigns operate in tandem with local drives for a union contract. On-site organizing drives are most effective via quiet leadership development and house visits, which prepare sufficient participants to request negotiations. Only at this point are widespread in-plant publicity and international attention beneficial. In the export apparel sector's historical context, specific organizing drives in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras validate such an approach. They also verify the primacy of local participation and close union communication with outside monitors in the functioning of transnational campaigns.

In the 1990s, as U.S. unions rediscovered the importance of corporate campaigns and organizing, they also began to question protectionism and to grapple with the complexities of organizing abroad. Moving beyond the approaches of organizations such as the AFL-CIO's Department of International Affairs and American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD), they cultivated linkages with newer labor force entrants (Armstrong et al., 1987; Cantor and Schor, 1987; Sims, 1992; Spalding, 1993). They achieved some success at unionizing women who assembled garments in Caribbean Basin free zones. Victories involved a focused combination of on-the-ground organizing efforts and campaign appeals to labor and consumer "transnational activists" (Anner, 1998; Ross, 1997). Evoking social movement theory, Anner demonstrates how effective campaigns have exploited "opportunity structures," i.e., the name-brand vulnerability of multinational apparel enterprises in their home countries. This article emphasizes the other primary element required for successful organizing, namely the ingredients of an effective on-the-ground unionization drive. It challenges the assumption that organizing best begins with a dramatic blitz of publicity accompanied by the on-site immersion of many short-term organizers. Instead, in What is sometimes called the "fishbowl" approach, it urges a slower, broader process that builds local participation via clandestine core-member education until sufficient members sign up to demand a contract (the fish rise to the surface). Steps include:

* Quiet identification and recruitment of leaders.

* Serious training of a leadership committee over several weeks, hopefully to constitute a notable percentage of the workforce.

* Rapid campaign inauguration (over a weekend) to recruit a broad base of support through extensive home visits, followed by plant-gate meetings.

* In-plant actions to demonstrate major support and strengthen appeal.

* Completion of requisites for a legal strike. (This is often difficult, but all the more likely to surprise.)

* Continued flexible use of militant tactics, demonstrations, and short strikes.

At this point, coordination with international labor, consumer, and human rights supporters can be especially powerful. Properly used, local outside monitoring can also help enforce any agreements reached.

Three case studies from the apparel industries of the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras will be used to test the on-the-ground model. (See Anner and Fitzsimmons, 1997, and Frundt, 1998, regarding organizing efforts in El Salvador and Nicaragua.)

Why the Apparel Sector?

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For U.S. unionists seeking to reinvigorate labor, cross-border efforts in apparel organizing are imperative. From Caribbean Basin nations alone, textile and apparel exports to the U.S. rose from $512 million in 1984 to $3.6 billion in 1993 (USITC, 1994), while U.S. employment in the sector simultaneously dropped by more than 25 percent. Investment in free zone export platforms had accelerated after the U.S. Caribbean Basin Initiative's Special Access Program for Apparel went into effect in 1987. As sweatshops proliferate, both U.S. and Caribbean workers lose out further. A New York UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees) leader stressed to Caribbean union leaders, "We can't organize our workers if you are unable to organize your workers" (Anner, 1998, 12).

Unions face notorious barriers that prevent organizing in apparel assembly plants (maquila). Arevalo and Arriola (1996), Piore (1990), and others describe the sector's stringent competitiveness, decentralized investment requirements, low value added, and vulnerability to fashion whim. Due to its lack of a consistent mass market, the sector runs chronic oversupplies. Its marginal profits and labor-intensive structure translate into a sweatshop approach that pays only subsistence wages. Corporate contractors win acquiescence from cash-needy states to disregard labor laws and dissuade unions. Their potential to quickly shift operations further intimidates unsophisticated workers (Flamm and Grunwald, 1985; Kammel, 1990; Petersen, 1992; Sklair, 1993). Should this threat prove insufficient, they terrify protesters with henchmen from shadow military governments. And in the 1990s, they could force labor activists into line by simply threatening their livelihoods with permanent blackball status.

In the Caribbean Basin, as elsewhere, apparel workers have been primarily female, young (i.e., between 18 and 21 years old), and unmarried, in an industrial work force that traditionally was 75 percent male. According to Fernandez-Kelly (1983) and Tiano (1990), women originally sought jobs in the apparel industry out of economic necessity. In Gonzalez's survey of sixty Guatemalan maquila factories (1989, 57), 70 percent of the workers were women, 65 percent of these were unmarried. Turnover rate reached 10 to 30 percent a month (Petersen, 1992, 210). During the 1990s, as jobs elsewhere declined, maquilas hired a greater percentage of male workers, but they still prefer more impressionable ("educable") young women who are understandably frightened by the military personnel that routinely patrol free zone plants.

On the other hand, women assembly workers have also proven to be excellent leaders in organizing. One trumpeted example is La Mujer Obrera, a network along the U.S.-Mexican border which has assisted women maquila operators. By identifying and publicizing company and government policies, they have helped stabilize work conditions and have prevented arbitrary employer actions (Kammel, 1990; Palmer, 1991). The demands for corporate code compliance by striking women workers at Marissa, a Gap contractor in El Salvador, became the straw that broke company resistance to outside monitoring (Anner and Fitzsimmons, 1997).

Under conditions of severe repression, Caribbean Basin organizers have inhibited worker dismissals by employing a highly visible approach, such as an in-plant hunger strike or a broad coalitional march, coupled with court actions and wide publicity (Frundt, 1987). Some local employers have been forced to recognize unions. However, they have retaliated by isolating union members and virtually eliminating any chance for contract negotiations.

Still, the apparel sector has a crucial vulnerability that can assist organizers, namely brand label recognition. Women apparel workers struggling to organize easily comprehend this concept. When cross-border publicity can publicly link the abusive conditions they face with contract practices of notable transnational firms, they create a solid context for effective unionization. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, organizations associated with U.S. and European unions, such as the Coalition for Justice in the Maquilas, the National Labor Committee, and the Clean Clothes Campaign, mounted campaigns that brought widespread attention to sweatshop abuses in the Caribbean Basin and elsewhere. However, while these campaigns brought about some improvements in labor rights, they did not in and of themselves accelerate cross-border labor organizing. Because they did not coordinate their efforts with sustained local participation, few maquila plants achieved unions and, of these, the number gaining contracts remained minuscule.

Nevertheless, in the last several years, the International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLW) and UNITE have implemented an organizing approach in cooperation with local unions to achieve not only union recognition but contracts as well. Organizing efforts in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Guatemala illustrate this story. After tracing the remarkable growth that each country has experienced in apparel manufacture and employment, the cases will examine the specific steps toward achieving a contract.

The Dominican Case

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The Dominican apparel sector is the oldest and largest among Caribbean Basin clothing exporters. The country first established a Free Trade Zone in 1966 after invading U.S. troops replaced the elected government of Juan Bosch with strongman Joaquin Balaguer, who encouraged foreign investment. Between 1984 and 1994, the number of Dominican free trade zones grew to 23, hosting 300 companies. Exports to the U.S. climbed from $218 million to $1.6 billion, and workers increased from 10,000 to 130,000, many in apparel and footwear.

Balaguer dictated a largely repressive policy toward unions until nearly the end of the century (Ramirez et al., 1988). However, he did allow the Central Nacional de Trabajadores Dominicanos (CNTD), an AIFLD affiliate, to establish free zone unions in the early years. During subsequent decades, Dominican unions became enmeshed in economic protests and divisive politics and gave less attention to organizing (Cassa, 1995; Espinal, 1995). Stronger free zone unions found themselves increasingly challenged. The U.S. Department of Labor (1990) reported pervasive anti-union discrimination: virtually all zone workers had been fired and no current pacts were in operation. The free zone employer association, the Asociacion Dominicana de Zonas Francas de Exportacion (ADOZONA), had the legal obligation to assure fair labor practices, but remained aloof (CTCA, 1997; Kaplinsky, 1993). Employers fired and blacklisted workers when they detected any union activity, although this did not deter 70 percent of interviewed workers from persistently favoring unionization (Safa, 1995, 109). Even after 1992, when a new labor code promised greater access and openness, virtually all of 99 new free zone unions had held no elections and had no officers to conduct activities. Managers fired workers with impunity (AFL-CIO, 1993a).

Bibong and Bonahan Apparel

Some of the mistreatment came from U.S. name-brand contractors that shifted operations to the Caribbean to take advantage of "Special Access" incentives after Korea lost quota preferences. The persistent abuse of employees and vocal protests of women affiliates at the Korean-owned Bibong plant motivated the CNTD to action. Via the Federacion Nacional de Trabajadores de Zonas (FENATRAZONAS), the CNTD requested organizing assistance from the ITGLW and UNITE. Together they developed an approach at Bibong which they later pursued at the Bonahan plant. This approach demonstrated the following elements:

* The key role played by the workers themselves.

* The simultaneous use of legal tactics and clandestine leadership training.

* The benefit of carrying out the first legal strike and forcing the courts to cooperate.

* The employment of various international strategies, including industry pressure, U.S. trade pressure, and local government pressure.

For several years, Bibong workers experienced flagrant labor violations as they formed a union and gained an agreement. For example, in July 1992 the company fired seven union leaders for complaining that it had reneged on its commitment. The Labor Ministry ordered the company to rehire the workers and pay compensation, but the company resisted and ADOZONA made no attempt to intervene. Unions could be formed with twenty workers, but a majority of all workers in a plant must vote to negotiate a contract. The Bibong workers had achieved a written, but non-official, agreement. The Labor Secretary ruled against the firings, but this still required an implementing court order (AFL-CIO, 1993b). Workers took the matter to court. As the case dragged on, employers tried to bribe union officials. Yet management’s belief that it controlled the situation gave UNITE organizers space to work quietly. The international helped FENATRAZONAS train additional leaders and then aided their canvass of participants. The situation became public when the local judge, at the behest of FENATRAZONAS organizers, issued a surprising injunction prohibiting Bibong from closing down the plant or shipping out equipment.

Largely because it was threatened with possible loss of trade privileges for labor rights violations under the U.S. General System of Preferences, or GSP (Frundt, 1998), the government also became involved in the case. In April 1994, after one of Bibong’s managers was charged with sexual harassment, ADOZONA suspended the company’s export license. Conditions improved as Bibong rehired four top union officials. After ten days, the Labor Minister lifted the suspension and the company began negotiations with the union.

Nevertheless, in late June, Bibong backtracked, claiming 435 of its workers didn’t want the union. On the other hand, the workers produced a list of 342 that opted for a union, which met the required majority. Jeff Hermanson, formerly UNITE’s organizing director, convinced Labor Secretary Alburquerque to inspect the Bibong facility. The Secretary determined that an election in an environment so hostile to unions would not be a fair one. The worker’s notarized lists sufficiently demonstrated majority desire to negotiate. Alburquerque then enlisted the Korean

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Ambassador to pressure an acceptable contract from Bibong's owner. The result provided the FENATRAZONAS and UNITE with an important beginning in their free-zone organizing efforts.

Bonahan

The Bibong contract inspired contracts in a number of other free zone plants and led the AFL-CIO to withdraw its GSP petition. The AFL-CIO had filed the petition in June 1993 to request a review of Dominican labor practices. However, a year after the Bibong success, most free zone unions were still not functioning and ADOZONA's enforcement mechanism remained virtually inoperative. It took the Bonahan case to help cement organizing accomplishments. Bonahan was owned by Hanchang, a Korean conglomerate (chaebol) that also had four other factories in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador. "If we can organize this company, we can organize anybody," expressed Jeff Hermanson. The Bonahan workers first sought aid through court action. When this proved ineffective, they took the complex step of declaring the first legal strike in the free zones by holding an open vote in front of a notary. As yes votes mounted, the company acquiesced to talks, but "all they did was ask us to give up the strike." After a day of this, the workers said, "Enough."

The strike began November 1, 1995, and lasted nearly five days, short by U.S. standards but excruciating for the poor, young, and inexperienced women and men who fearfully risked taking the action. At 10:00 a.m., the workers simply stopped working. Management notified the police that the leaders were sabotaging operations and insisted that they be moved out. The police dutifully tear-gassed the workers, forcing many who fled back into the plant. Nevertheless, more than half of those who remained stopped working.

The following day, when union leaders attempted to re-enter the plant, management prevented them from doing so. Other workers inside then came out to join their leaders. In the nearby Bibong plant, the employees held a brief sympathy strike.

Meanwhile, UNITE mounted international pressure. "We combined the threat of GSP with pressure on the industry," explained Hermanson. "We got the sourcing Vice President from Jones New York, their most important client, to inform Bonahan, 'We are going to get this settled or we are out of the country.' This would have cost Bonahan dearly. We also took advantage of private sector ADOZONA's desire for trade parity with Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). FENATRAZONAS said they would only sign off on parity if ADOZONA solved the labor rights question."

As support grew all around, by the weekend the company saw that most workers backed the strike and it capitulated. UNITE urged that the workers approve an immediate pay settlement, "Because we knew that when the four-hundred workers received checks that day for the days they missed, they would know that they had proved their point. It would send a victory message throughout the zone" (Hermanson, 1996).

Within the month, workers won a contract. Bonahan rehired terminated workers and agreed to key benefits: free transportation, a subsidized lunch (gratis when working past 7:00 p.m.), and a 35 percent increase in overtime pay.

In UNITE's view, the first agreement provided a solid base for direct on-the-ground organizing in other plants. The second accord, achieved against one of the Republic's most significant employers, provided an opening to win other agreements. It also strengthened the application of the labor code throughout the Dominican Republic. Coordination with international pressure added an important dimension. However, "No matter how much power you have with these other techniques, if you don't have solid organization at the base, you can't realize the gains," stressed Hermanson.

Guatemala

Textile production, always embedded in Guatemalan culture, has been transformed by the new export orientation. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) started promoting non-traditional export production soon after the U.S. replaced Guatemala's democratically elected government in 1954 (Jonas, 1991). However, the country's maquila sector did not take off until the late 1980s, following a nominal reversion to civilian rule by the nation's generals. The maquila sector grew by 75 percent each year, as Petersen's study (1992) demonstrates. Between 1985 and 1990, the number of maquila factories jumped from 41 to 220, with a workforce of 50,000. By 1994, apparel plants reached 480, employing more than 100,000 workers. Shipments to the U.S. over the ten-year period jumped from $15 million to $608 million, bearing such labels as Calvin Klein, Liz Claiborne, Perry Ellis, Levi Strauss, Guess, London Fog, Wrangler, Van Heusen, etc. (Armbruster, 1997; Ramirez, 1994). Apparel became the third most valuable export after coffee and sugar.

Although unions had thrived in the pre-1954 democratic period, systematic military violence severely limited their

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effectiveness afterward. Even by the mid-1980s, they faced substantial repression as they struggled against the exploitation of young women in the maquila sector (Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1994; MacLeod, 1994; Petersen, 1992; Ramirez, 1994). Paramilitary forces routinely countered labor organizing and court complaints with kidnappings and death threats.

The 1996 peace accords brought some reduction in overt violence, but appeared to sanction a rico-liberal rampage. "They say employees have to modernize," lamented Sergio Guzman, leader of the independent Union Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala (UNSITRAGUA). "But what is the cost? Many workers are being fired to improve competition. Companies reorganize work from eight-hour to twelve-hour shifts, which workers must honor if they wish to keep their jobs. Many companies seek to destroy any union" (Guzman, 1996).

The U.S.-Guatemala Labor Education Project (U.S./GLEP) publicized maquila conditions and owner resistance (Frundt, 1996; Hogness, 1989). In 1989, UNSITRAGUA took on InExport, owned by a U.S. national vehemently opposed to unions. The Christian Democratic-based Confederacion General de Trabajadores de Guatemala penetrated several Korean-owned maquilas. But employers remained so resistant and the legal system so ineffective at preventing threats and firings that the U.S. placed Guatemala under GSP review in 1992.

The Phillips Van Heusen Case

In 1991, workers at Camisas Modernas, a plant owned by the world's largest shirtmaker, Phillips Van Heusen (PVH), approached U.S./GLEP representatives for ideas on organizing a union. The AIFLD-related Confederacion Unidad de Sindicatos de Guatemala (CUSG) agreed to sponsor the effort. GSP pressure and an international educational campaign coordinated by U.S./GLEP helped workers at the PVH plant gain the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Camisas Modernas, one of the first maquila unions in the isthmus (Coats, 1991, 1993; Petersen, 1992). However, to demand negotiations, organizers had to enroll 25 percent of the workforce, and management employed various strategies to prevent this (Coats, 1993, 1996). This was typical for Guatemala, where by the end of 1993 only six out of more than 300 maquila factories had managed to form a union, and only one had managed to negotiate a limited contract (ILRF/GLEP, November 15, 1993).

The PVH union struggled along without a contract, as management found it convenient to isolate members and leaders. Aware of the company's importance, in late 1995 the ITGLWU, with advice from UNITE, committed resources to the PVH campaign. Collaboration between UNITE, ITGLWU, and the local Guatemalan union validates key lessons from the Dominican cases:

* The benefits of cross-border labor cooperation.

* The validity of carefully conceptualizing and implementing local organizing strategies that will gain direct negotiations.

* The advantages of clandestine leadership identification and training, followed by rapid recruitment, in-plant agitation, and legal filings.

* The importance of international solidarity, in this instance the campaign coordination assistance from U.S./GLEP.

* The usefulness of trade policy labor rules in GSP.

* The crucial contribution of an on-the-ground worker straggle in conjunction with. any international action.

The ITGLW's first task was to convince local unionists to adopt a low-profile approach. As noted, leaders during the period of heavy repression had come to rely on visibility as protection, fearing that a more clandestine action would engender an army response. During the 1980s, increased publicity and international attention had buffered paramilitary attacks and sometimes won the rehiring of fired workers and/or the improvements of wages (Frundt, 1987; Goldston, 1989; Levenson-Estrada, 1995; National Labor Committee, 1991). Unions also made use of the emplazamiento, a legal complaint that prevented petitioning workers from being fired. However, as overt repression declined in the 1990s, employers eschewed union negotiation requirements by subdividing production units, bribing leaders, and separating out those who achieved union affiliation. Most of all, they cultivated the fear of unemployment.

ITGLW had to convince CUSG and the PVH union to move gradually via more covert forms of organizing. General Secretary Monica Felipe Alvarez coached her organizers to unobtrusively visit worker homes. Clandestinely, they created small groups within the plant that would ascertain loyalties and bolster employee strength. Reflecting experiences in the Dominican Republic, they gradually evolved a carefully-structured organizing plan. During the spring and summer of 1996, activists quietly identified leaders and prepared them for a rapid-fire campaign that would broaden membership to the 25 percent required for negotiations. After months of groundwork, an intense series of house visits over the

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(U.S.) Labor Day weekend, and chants by workers in the plant for a contract, the union signed a third of the workforce. As the local gathered its final signatures, U.S./GLEP coordinated a leafletting at PVH outlets in the U.S.

Nevertheless, Camisas management claimed that the numbers were insufficient. Even though the Labor Inspectorate ultimately verified the list, the minister refused to issue a ruling (Armbruster, 1997). He referred the matter to the courts where it could be lost forever. His failure to resolve the issue meant an extension of Guatemala's probationary status under GSP. This upset the private sector and the minister was soon replaced. Yet PVH still refused to acknowledge calls for intervention.

Ironically, PVH Chief Executive Officer Bruce Klatsky served on the board of Human Rights Watch. With GSP review still promoting trade conditions compliance and U.S./GLEP planning a demonstration at a Human Rights Watch fundraising event in New York, the human rights organization agreed to investigate. PVH was persuaded to comply with the findings. Human Rights Watch then appropriately validated worker lists, and also cited intimidation by local company officials. In March 1997, Klatsky "agreed to begin negotiations, taking the union's proposed contract as a starting point" (Bounds, 1997; U.S./GLEP, 1997a). By August, after four months of difficult negotiations, PVH gained a 23.5 percent wage increase over two years, with a clear calculation formula, current employment levels linked to productivity, a grievance procedure, increased subsidies for transportation, lunch, and children, and visible recognition of the union and its use of facilities (U.S./GLEP, 1997b).

The PVH agreement has had an impact. In 1998, Liz Claiborne agreed to carry out independent monitoring of its contractors in conjunction with the local Commission for the Verification of Codes of Conduct. Unions felt themselves part of the process.

Worker mobilization was essential for success at PVH. The example also reveals the importance of coordinating international action with local organizing for achieving best results. Even when the workers achieved sufficient participation to demand contract negotiations, the Labor Ministry would not have accepted their demands were it not for the international attention directed against the company. But without the painstaking work of the PVH union, UNITE, and the ITGLW, the international effort would have been wasted. On December 11, 1998, amidst local and international protest, PVH closed the plant but maintained contract production.

Honduras

Maquilas arrived later in Honduras, but they grew quickly. In 1978, the government opened the first free trade zone in Puerto Cortes and permitted private zones soon thereafter. To counter unemployment in the late 1980s, the Callejas administration encouraged foreign apparel investment for export. Between 1987 and 1989, shipments to the U.S. doubled to $88 million, enabling Honduras to compete with Guatemala. A new trade zone decree likened maquilas to public services, protecting them from possible strikes! Over the next three years, the country quadrupled export shipments. By early 1994, it established six trade zones holding 41 companies that employed 15,070 workers, and another eleven industrial processing zones with 134 plants hiring 34,407 workers. By mid-1995, 89 factories operated in 12 private zones; another 14 in Puerto Cortes; and 90 more outside the zones, employing 45,000 workers (Moncada Valladares, 1995). Honduras shipped $653 million worth of textile and apparel products to the U.S.

At first, Honduran trade unions were able to organize in the free zones. Ever since a lengthy banana strike by United Fruit Co. banana workers in 1954 (Posas, 1980), Honduras had developed a reputation as "the best unionized country in Central America," with a reported density of 40 percent of the urban and 20 percent of the rural workforce (FLT, 1989, 28; Pearson, 1987). Labor leaders did not face the same level of repression that they experienced in Guatemala or even the Dominican Republic. In Puerto Cortes, workers successfully negotiated contracts with seven multinational clothing companies that secured "stable labor-management relations."

Nevertheless, repression increased with a growing U.S. military presence in the late 1980s (Peckenham and Street, 1985; Ruhl, 1999). Together, major union confederations proclaimed a "Platform of Struggle" to demand wage increases and end large-scale firings. Yet while several companies recognized unions, none except those in Puerto Cortes negotiated contracts. In fact, as the maquila sector proliferated, resistant employers erected barriers to prevent further collective bargaining. Despite Callejas' promised intervention, the government imposed no fines and closed no factories. As companies successfully destroyed unionization efforts, most activists permanently lost their jobs. To protest firings, thousands of workers occupied the zone industrial parks, barricaded factories, and blocked highways. In an unusual statement, the U.S. Embassy blamed employers for clearly violating the labor code (FLT, 1995-1997, 5). But the Labor Minister refused to take a clear stand (El Tiempo, October 1, 1993).

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In late 1993, disgusted labor affiliates helped elect liberal party presidential candidate Carlos Roberto Reina, but despite fresh commitments, the Reina government did not enforce labor protections until 1995. A threatened GSP petition brought an agreement between the U.S. trade representative and the Honduran government that slightly improved union access to the free trade zones.

The Kimi Case

The ITGLW began its organizing in Honduras in 1994, hoping to perfect lessons it had learned in the Dominican Republic and Guatemala. Its efforts at Kimi in the Honduras verified:

* The primary role of local struggle in sustaining a unionization effort despite setbacks.

* The validity of quiet organizing and leader training.

* The persistent importance of international/local union cooperation to improve local conditions.

* The benefits of international trade and solidarity pressure, but only when done in conjunction with specific struggles.

* The need to carefully plan an outside monitoring program, which could easily be turned into a company tool, even in well-intentioned hands.

UNITE worked cooperatively with local leaders at the Korean-owned Kimi facility to build an organization among the 700-member workforce. It encountered difficulties in developing a leadership committee, so it adopted a neighborhood cell approach. Those identified as pro-union contacted middle-of-the-road types via house visits. After union members had trained 10 percent of the workers as leaders, they began in-plant actions, such as short work stoppages, which they employed flexibly to demonstrate majority status and solidify worker support. At last, Kimi management agreed to recognize the union if the workers would wait six months before beginning negotiations.

However, the company did something unanticipated. It used the intervening time to set up a company-based solidarity association to weaken the union. Kimi management also isolated union leaders, assigning them to fewer hours or the worst jobs and then threatening them. Kimi was a Gap contractor, but when UNITE urged Gap to enforce its own standards, Kimi severed its relationship with Gap and brought in J.C. Penney and other clients. Gap was also let off the hook in part because no major international campaign had been in place to force its accountability.

It took a circuitous route to bring Kimi back to the table. First, three hundred Kimi workers went out on strike. With international pressure, other Kimi clients threatened to pull out. Kimi management then solicited the National Labor Committee to intervene "to save jobs." In turn, it would agree to outside monitoring. The National Labor Committee attempted to set up a model independent monitoring program acceptable to the unions and in line with an agreement by major apparel producers.(1) But it was difficult to find the right people. The Honduran Human Rights Organization (CODEH) was the only significant independent voice. However, the CODEH staff included some individuals who appeared to have both ideological and practical problems with unions. With some justification, unionists believed that the monitoring group did not consult with them and did not really understand labor contract issues. At one point, a CODEH member publicly stated that the "union doesn’t represent the workers." Certain CODEH members believed that UNITE organizers directed negotiations and were insensitive to local customs. But CODEH also held meetings with management without the union being present. They made decisions about when and how to go forward in contacting name-brand firms when such decisions should have been made by the local union. They took it upon themselves to circulate grievance procedures and a newsletter independent of participation from Kimi workers.

Through all of this, the union of young women stalwartly persisted. At one point, they contacted the National Labor Committee and asked that independent monitoring be terminated. When Hurricane Mitch devastated the country in October 1998, the women feared the company would use it as an excuse to withdraw. But the J.C. Penney orders remained, the plant reopened, and negotiations with KIMI were completed in early 1999.

Cross-border organizing efforts in Honduras benefited from a strong labor tradition and specific local union efforts. International labor collaboration brought additional union drives to the apparel sector and improved conditions in the zones. Intervention via the National Labor Committee and GSP pressure brought an additional openness, but as coordination dwindled at times, such pressure became ineffective. The touted model of independent monitoring risked becoming counterproductive. It took strong local labor action to put things on track, suggesting that on-site unions must retain a voice in all monitoring activities (Coats, 1998).

Conclusion

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Successful cross-border unionization requires the combination of effective local organizing and "transnational activists." Via three case studies in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras, this article has elucidated the ingredients of successful organizing which must be in place before any coordinated international campaign will work. In contrast to past approaches that relied on heavy publicity and an organizing blitz, each case shows how union development and contract achievement depend on careful, clandestine leadership training and home visits prior to any declared campaign. Successful adoption of this method will require increased sensitivity to community approaches and cultural traditions. Local monitors, while necessarily independent, can be helpful to the effort only if they stay in close contact with the local union.

The apparel examples also demonstrate elements familiar to cross-border organizers in other sectors (e.g., UE, UAW, the Teamsters, CWA, and other unions, as reported in Labor Notes and elsewhere). One element is the combination of on-the-ground work with legal action. Given the lack of labor law enforcement in Latin America (and other places), overt reliance on legal mechanisms can be problematic. In addition to their threat of relocation, corporations have become adept at manipulating court regulations (e.g., the emplazamiento) to undermine traditional union protections. Nevertheless, as the cases and other approaches indicate (Cook et al., 1997; Griego, 1998), unions must pursue legal strategies in combination with on-the-ground action.

The coordination of organizing with pressure directed at company buyers, an international consumer campaign, and threatened trade sanctions against a country, also requires substantial involvement of community groups that have indirect ties to labor. Success usually necessitates coalition work locally and within the U.S. to enhance appreciation of cross-border organizing among union members. Each campaign will require varying combinations of these elements, depending on specific circumstances.

Global trends demand that unions pursue more effective cross-border strategies. The three cases clarify the crucial importance of international union assistance for a strong on-the-ground organizing effort. Efficacious assistance emphasizes a local group's ability not only to win elections but also to achieve a contract and sustain future attacks.

1. After the Marissa Workers victory with Gap in 1995, the White House Apparel Industry Partnership, which included major producers, human rights groups, and unions, accepted the principle of independent monitoring of contractors, and the inclusion of local human rights, community, and labor groups. In November 1998, the agreement on work hours, wages, and monitoring was significantly diluted by the companies (Greenhouse, 1998). In the aftermath UNITE, the AFL-CIO, RWDSU, and the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility withdrew from the partnership.

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