

Unionizing Silicon Valley, Part II: Promising Victories and Cultural Strategies

In a previous Intelligent Agent, we examined some organizing efforts among engineers a generation ago. Let us now consider some organizing victories in our decade, as well as risks that might derail organizing work. Finally there's the issue that might drive organizing, which I call the Big Screw: the expansion of the work week to an unconscionable Dickensian duration.

I. Onward to Victory

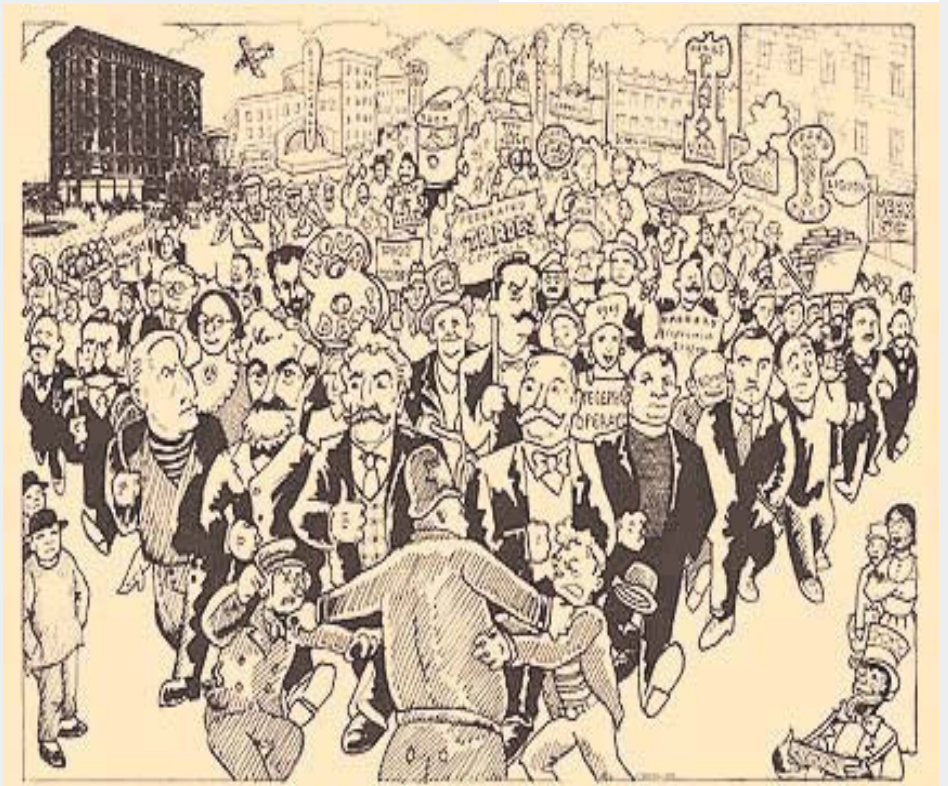
In 2001, unions represented about 14% of U.S. workforce, about 17 million workers. In the last thirty years, success of government employees, the Service Workers International Union among government employees, and teachers' unions like the National Education Association and the California Teachers Union show that 'symbolic thinkers' (a once-prevalent management buzzphrase) realize the need to protect themselves through organization.

There have been some organizing victories in the past three years. The 113,000 International Union of Electrical Workers and the 630,000 Communications Workers of America merged in September, 2000, to form a union of 743,000 workers. The Electrical Workers had also been courted by the United Auto Workers and United Mine Workers unions, powerful national unions with political muscle as well.

Communication Workers of America (CWA) telephone unions worked to organize the wireless telcom industry at Verizon and Cingular around the issue of retraining analog workers for digital hardware. In August, 2000, they held a walkout of 85,000 CWA and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers members (that

This author believes that past efforts organizing engineers and recent efforts in technical trades deserve study as models for organizing 'no-collar workers', the decidedly exploited programmers, writers and graphic designers of the contemporary computer and Web industries. If 'Silicon Valley' is shorthand for this demographic sector in any region, many of its characteristics are most pronounced in that Northern California hyper-wired oasis.

By
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lasted 17 days) to support Verizon's organizing effort. Over 2000 workers won representation by IBEW, bringing the total it represented in New England to 14,000. By mid-2001, 10,000 of 30,000 Cingular workers were represented by CWA.

The CWA scheduled an election at the now-defunct ETown.com in January 2001 to which the company immediately responded with layoffs. They obtained organizing help from the Northern California Media Workers Guild who filed National Labor Relations Board complaints. That year, the CWA and the AFL-CIO worked to rally institutional pension-fund investors against AT&T management's planned breakup of the conglomerate's long-distance, cable, and wireless service, which was intended to boost stock price and shareholder value.

One very real issue is the continuous exporting of programming jobs to Bangalore, India. Cisco Systems, IBM, Intel, Microsoft, Oracle, Sun Microsystems, American Express have all taken advantage of workforces of highly-trained English-speaking computer science graduates. Starting programmers' salaries run from \$550 to \$650 (U.S. dollars) per year

There was some organizing effort directed at computer manufacturers or system assemblers. Whereas 'Intel Inside!' stickers still predominate on the faces of computers -- where a union bug should have been -- the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers organized two small computer providers in the midwest. There was an effort to organize overworked and underpaid warehouse and customer service workers at Amazon.com just before the December 2000 Christmas rush. Management responded by distributing anti-union literature and special coaching of managers to fight the union drive.

In 2000, a \$97 million settlement was reached between Microsoft and its

'permanent temps' who brought suit. To organize Microsoft and Amazon would be great inspirational, symbolic victories.

The organization of online content providers has one model in the 2001 negotiation between the Writers' Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers: rewriting dated pay formulas for compensation for reused work that appears on the Web, and payment of residuals for Web content reused on TV. While there has long been the organization Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility <www.cpsr.org> -- based in Silicon Valley's intellectual capital, Palo Alto, California -- what might be necessary is an 'information workers' union.

II. Risky Business

One very real issue is the continuous exporting of programming jobs to Bangalore, India. Cisco Systems, IBM, Intel, Microsoft, Oracle, Sun Microsystems, American Express have all taken advantage of workforces of highly-trained English-speaking computer science graduates. Starting programmers' salaries run from \$550 to \$650 (U.S. dollars) per year, while some local industrialists gripe that they're overpaid in comparison to programmers in the U.S. Though the Bay Area Labor Council had a 'Plant Closings Project' in California in the early 1980s, which investigated, publicized, and organized around the issue of work moved offshore, the destruction of communi-

ties when a factory of any kind moves overseas must induce anger that can be harvested for community organizing and political change.

Concomitant with these exports is the profligate issuance of H-1B visas. 195,000 H-1B visas were issued in 2001, about half of them to Indian citizens. In the year 2000, about 250,000 Indians worked in the U.S. on H-1B visas. These programmers were supposed to go home if they were laid off, but the INS admitted in mid-2001 that it had not given pursuing them priority, though it probably has after 9/11/01.

The visas also stirred much grumbling among older workers, who felt they were being passed over for younger, lower-paid Indians and Taiwanese. Yet to raise anger against these foreign workers is a delicate issue. How could there be organizing free from the stink of racism, which so hobbled unionization efforts in the United States in the past? One solution might be for the union to employ high-profile organizers whose ethnic origin is India (a subcontinent containing numerous ethnicities, religions, and castes of its own). The expensive but most honorable option is to unionize the H-1B workers as well, with some sort of inventive protection provided them, such as a guarantee that if they are laid off by the company they would be given jobs by the union as organizers (under their visas).

III. Unscrewing the Big Screw

The average American workweek has expanded in the past two decades, and in Silicon Valley there was a perverse pride at workweeks extending up to 100 hours. I call the disappearance of the office standard of the 8-hour-day the Big Screw, the issue around which anger at exploitation should crystallize into organization. When I worked for one notable computer company, my elderly aunt,

employed from highschool to retirement, stayed with us. One evening when I came home at seven, she nervously asked "You get time and a half for overtime, right?" My subsequent explanation about good salary, a fridge full of fruit juices, and t-shirts when new products were shipped, sounded awfully hollow. She was not a union member, but had worked in a unionized steel factory. It was her generation that fought for what was the standard workday for about fifty years. The tech industries have some

for these companies are often founded by engineers. The supporting tech writers, instructional designers, graphic artists, interface designers feel part of the culture that the engineers drive. The tech industry, with its flattened hierarchies and informality, makes it easier for the programmer or Web designer to identify with the fate of the support staff. The marketing staff might be the most conservative and resistant; the support staff of administrative assistants, network technicians and loading dock

in various neighborhoods that beautifully illuminate the issues, working conditions, and potential for a better life. It could organize frequent benefit rock, hip-hop, and dance concerts, events that are long on fun and short on speeches. When will each union sponsor annual 'labor song' contests in each genre, the winning results to be spread at no cost via MP3?

Unionization needs marketing with the creation of interactive screen documents and popular websites. I hope to see groovy VRML worlds showing union workplace (created in a similar way as the virtual Japanese relocation camp by Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, <http://missionbase.com/tamiko>), linked to case histories and organizing tools and model documents. There could also be college organizing efforts among tech support workers (the underpaid drones who keep university computer labs running), for an organized cohort would then move into industry with heightened labor consciousness, organizing skills, and that special fresh energy students can bring.

In the geographic Silicon Valley, the South Bay Labor Council AFL-CIO (www.atwork.org/atwork/clc/index.html) includes a hundred thousand workers in 110 affiliated unions. The challenge before us, organizing Silicon Valley and all North American cyberproles and workstation jocks, would not be an easy one. Management will respond to any organizing efforts with the counter-tactics of relocations, layoffs (as if they need provocation for those), individual firings and lawsuits. Labor must employ traditional methods like strikes, slowdowns and counter-suits, as well as creative new ones. The new strategies and tactics would need to make the fullest use of the liberating potential of the technologies we labor to create.

The tech industries have some organizing problems and challenges not shared with rustbelt, smokestack America. There is the cyclical nature of the industry, where the fat times that spring from the spread of tech innovations like personal computers, multimedia CD-ROMs and the dot-com boom are followed by times of contraction

organizing problems and challenges not shared with rustbelt, smokestack America. There is the cyclical nature of the industry, where the fat times that spring from the spread of tech innovations like personal computers, multimedia CD-ROMs and the dot-com boom are followed by times of contraction (usually occurring when the President is named George Bush). There is also the cultural mindset that prevents smart, skilled (often twentysomething) workers in t-shirts from seeing themselves as the labor proletariat. The tech industry pays well, often offering flexible scheduling, liberal vacations, and (of riskier value) stock option packages. Until the dot-com bust, there was plenty of work. This boasts a perception of worker control of the work environment, whose contradictory reality is summed up in the phrase "You can work any eighty hours a week you like!" Engineers set the culture of the tech industry,

workers the most realistic and progressive. Since the first step is to change the cultural landscape, I want to see the fight take place on an accelerated scale in the realm of culture. There exists much imagery from a century ago (some collected in the 1998 book *Images of American Radicalism* by Paul Buhle and Edmund B. Sullivan) that, besides looking cool, could raise consciousness. 'Fight for the 8-Hour Day' is again a resonant rallying cry suitable for t-shirts, posters, mugs, bumper stickers. Tattoos, anyone? Let's see if the goal is globally achieved before the tat fades. The rich archive of century-old organizing graphics waits to be repurposed, updated, and reimagined. And artists in all fields should be invited, hosted, and commissioned to generate new works -- to sharpen political understanding, freshen the spirit, and stir the soul. The union could sponsor community murals