



INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is a companion for workplace organizers. It's a guide to help you get started, help you keep going, and help you get unstuck when you feel mired in the mud or things aren't going the way you envisioned them.

Maybe your situation feels impossible to you right now. Maybe it feels like with all the obstacles in your particular workplace, there's no way to bring people together, no demand you can win. But my experience tells me that's not true. There's always something you can do, even if you have to start with something very small. This book will help you figure out what that something is.

Organizing is full of challenges and dilemmas. How do you decide who to talk to, if your co-workers all seem scared or just apathetic? What if you invite

people to a meeting and no one comes? What should you do when your organizing committee is splitting apart? This book will help you to evaluate each situation and find a way forward.

When you set out to organize, you're fighting on a terrain that the boss controls. Up against their power and resources, and a culture that they have shaped, what do we workers have? We have the ability to form relationships with each other—to respect each other, which the boss doesn't—and to think for ourselves. Collectively, we have tremendous potential power: the power to withhold our labor, which makes the world go round. As the song says, “Without our brains and muscles not a single wheel can turn.” But without building relationships with our co-workers, we can't access this power.

Organizing is ongoing. It's a way of being and a set of attitudes and values you carry with you every day. The more you bring organizing values into everything you do, the stronger your group will get. The more democratic your approach, the better you and your co-workers can navigate around obstacles, keep going when you're demoralized or overwhelmed, and even learn from defeats.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK, AND WHAT ISN'T

This book does not primarily focus on the mechanics of organizing (“get an employee list, map the departments, find the natural leaders”). These methods are essential—and you can read about them in another Labor Notes book, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*—though you’ll have to adapt them to your own situation.

Instead, this book is meant to help you and your fellow organizers develop a rock-solid foundation—an analysis and a set of values you can rely on as you navigate a way forward. Here’s how it’s structured:

Part I: Four Principles for Organizers

The first part of the book describes some essential principles for organizers to live by, with a chapter for each:

- Cultivate respect.
- Organize democratically.
- Stay grounded in reality.
- Stay steady.

Part II: Ingredients of Successful Organizing

In my experience, organizing boils down to a few recognizable ingredients—whether you're trying to organize a new union, improve one that isn't functioning very well, or organize a contract campaign, strike, or election. Part II has one chapter for each ingredient:

- Help your co-workers understand power in the workplace.
- Overcome division and come together around common concerns.
- Overcome fear and take collective action.
- Reflect on the changing balance of power and keep going.

The order is flexible—you might apply two of these steps at once, or backtrack to repeat them. Use them to orient yourself: *Where am I now, and what am I doing as an organizer?* Also use them to communicate with others around you: *What are we trying to achieve?*

Part III: Getting Unstuck

As soon as you start trying to organize, you start running into roadblocks. Now what?

Part III provides guidance on how you might apply the principles and ingredients of organizing in common situations: *How to get unstuck in case of...* If you're coming to this book with a certain

problem on your mind, feel free to browse the table of contents and flip straight to the topic that speaks to you.

You'll start to see how you can use these ideas to get yourself unstuck, no matter what situation you're in.

Part IV: Think Again...

Part IV covers some common organizing practices you may have learned, and proposes that you rethink them.

Are you "selling" the union, but finding that your co-workers aren't buying? Do you notice that your passion and indignation aren't lighting a fire under others? What if you ran for office expecting to transform your union, but you've been disappointed in the results?

If you've asked yourself *Why isn't this working?* you might find answers here.

WHEN YOUR UNION BREAKS YOUR HEART

Perhaps you've found your way to this book because your own union leaders have broken your heart. You tried to get active in the union, but leaders didn't welcome you. Or you brought up a serious issue and were told "there's nothing we can do." Or you and your co-workers worked long and hard on a big campaign, only to be undercut or straight-up sold out.

When this happens, it can feel pretty harsh. But disappointments can be the spur to build a better union.

When Chicago teachers realized their union leaders wouldn't fight school closures, and when auto workers learned their national officers were accepting bribes from the bosses, some members didn't give up. Instead, they transformed their unions from the bottom up and turned them into two of the most powerful and inspiring unions in the U.S.

There's one surefire way to heal your broken heart: Help your co-workers to become organizers too.

MORE TALK, MORE ACTION

Throughout this book, you'll find that conversations are the building block of organizing. That's how you get more people involved over time. And it's how you and your co-workers figure out how to handle any particular situation—by talking it through. Your main insights will come from listening to each other and helping each other to interpret your experiences.

So one of the first things any organizer needs to do is find some buddies. Organizing is not a solo pursuit. Maybe at first it's just one or two other people in your workplace who are interested in making a change. (Maybe you can read this book together!) You'll know your organizing is making headway as the group of people you're talking with starts to grow, and the circle widens.

On nearly every page, you'll be encouraged to have more conversations. Bring people together to talk; fan out and talk to others about what you discussed; come back together to talk about how that went; and so on.

But make no mistake—the goal of all these conversations is *action*. We're not just out to make new friends or generate good vibes at work, though those are pleasant side effects. The point is to shift power.

MAKE MORE ORGANIZERS

In the long run, helping other people become organizers has a lot more impact than just getting them to do something, no matter how urgent that “something” may be.

Multiplying the number of organizers is the best way to sustain yourself in the movement, build power, and improve the culture in a broken union. You don't need permission from anyone, you don't need a budget or union resources, you don't need to be “in the know” or a labor expert... you can simply decide that this is your priority.

Nurturing your co-workers to become organizers is not beyond the capacity of anyone reading this book. (And by actively applying the principles and strategies offered here, you can also become a more confident and effective organizer yourself.)

Bring others with you. Talk about what you see, how you understand the situation, what you are trying to accomplish—and ask what they see, how they understand the situation, what they're trying to accomplish.

The job is to do this work together with co-workers, without too much ego or need to be in charge. Treat people as equals and invite them in.

FIND THE SMALL VICTORIES

How do you know your organizing is bearing fruit? Major victories like contract gains, powerful strikes, or election wins may be few and far between. They're usually the culmination of years-long campaigns made up of a great many small successes (and setbacks) along the way.

So one goal of this book is to help you identify the day-to-day victories that show you're on the right track. Each chapter begins with a success story, and those successes run the gamut from big to small. Inevitably these wins were followed by more twists and turns. Rarely is any victory—or any defeat—the true end of the story.

That's why, as you go along, you have to take satisfaction in every little sign of progress, and avoid overreacting to every loss or misstep. Take notice when you see a lightbulb go on for one person, or when more people sign this petition than the last one, or when your group takes a new risk together. Even if the outcome isn't what you had hoped for, it all adds up. Keep going.