

# Organizing for Quality of Working Life

*Norman Eiger*

Addressed primarily to union organizers, this paper focuses on the use of employee involvement programs as part of a union avoidance strategy. It singles out employee involvement from other systems comprising "positive labor relations" in non-union work settings because of its effectiveness in defeating union organizing campaigns. After examining the vulnerabilities of non-union employee involvement programs, the paper suggests a number of counter strategies, including: a union "judo" and a participatory education/research strategy. The paper concludes that organizers need not be intimidated by companies that use psychologically based participation programs. Organizers need to provide leadership which offers workers a collective vision of how they can become empowered to authentically improve the quality of their working life.

Organizing a union has rarely been an easy assignment although there have been periods, such as the 1930s and 1940s, when organizing was a far less formidable task than it is today. Recent interviews with organizers provide anecdotal evidence of the increased intensity of employer hostility and commitment to union avoidance strategies that is, in part, a major reason for the decline in the organizing success rate in the 1980s as compared with the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Organizers' bleak stories dramatize the sharp difference of the current decade from even the gloomy period of the 1970s and, of course, the even more marked difference with the post-war period when this writer paid his dues as an organizer.

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1. From interviews conducted by the author with more than 35 organizers representing a cross-section of unions. Also refer to Thomas A. Kochan, Robert B. McKersie and John Chalykoff, "The Effects of Corporate Strategy and Workplace Innovations on Union Representation," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 39 (July 1986): 481.

Various studies have extensively examined the diverse factors that make today's organizing particularly hostile.<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on one of the impediments to organizing success: the use of employee involvement programs that are a component of a larger system of non-traditional human resource management and control of work force. The reason for singling out the employee involvement system from the other systems making up what is called the "new industrial relations" or "positive labor relations" is that it is a particularly effective tool in the union avoidance arsenal.<sup>3</sup>

The article is addressed primarily to organizers, with the objective of examining the vulnerabilities of non-union employee involvement systems and ways organizers can make use of these weaknesses in developing counter strategies.

I started thinking about the challenge to organizing presented by worker participation type programs almost ten years ago when I was invited by Martin Gerber, the director of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) Organizing Department, to meet with the union's organizing staff at Solidarity House in Detroit. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the problems of organizing auto plants that had installed quality of work life (QWL) programs.<sup>4</sup> As each organizer reported on the difficulties in organizing these plants, it became clear that operations with programs of employee involvement presented a serious problem. "These QWL programs are nothing but company unions," one of the organizers bitterly exclaimed. Another organizer with a sense of history compared them with the employee representation committees of the 1920s and suggested that "we need to expose them as a sham like we did before." Most of his colleagues agreed. "QWL committees, as company-dominated labor groups, are violations of Section 8(a) (2) and should be forced to terminate by our filing charges with the NLRB" was another widely held sentiment in the group.

The organizers were asked how non-union workers perceived QWL programs. There was general agreement that such programs had appeal: for the first time workers felt listened to, their ideas were seen as important, it was nice getting off the job for problem solving meetings, and the

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2. William Cooke, "The Failure to Negotiate First Contracts: Determinants and Policy Implications," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 38 (January 1985): 163-178; Richard B. Freeman, "Why Are Unions Faring Poorly in NLRB Representation Elections?" pp. 45-65 in Thomas A. Kochan (ed.), *Challenges and Choices Facing American Labor* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985); Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

3. Jack Fiorito, Christopher Lowman and Forrest D. Nelson, "The Impact of Human Resource Policies on Union Organizing," *Industrial Relations*, 26 (Spring 1987): 113-126.

4. This was prior to the agreement between the UAW and General Motors which led to the unionization of GM's southern plants.

training was a plus. If the workers saw the program as a benefit, organizers recognized that it would be a mistake building the organizing campaign around opposition to it. A wiser strategy was to stress a positive program of how unions develop and deepen real quality of working life. With regard to the legal strategy, most QWL programs are structured to conform with employers' rights to confer with employees and avoid dealing with employees as representatives. Organizers must consider how a legal attack on the program by the union would be perceived by employees who see QWL as valuable.

The discussion then turned to alternative strategies which started my thinking about the guidelines for organizers offered in this article. Worker participation programs are widespread. A Conference Board report claims that two-thirds of its member companies have some sections of their non-union work forces meeting in "small work groups that discuss production or quality problems . . ." Seventy-two percent of all companies encourage managers to develop quality circles or QWL groups among non-union workers.<sup>5</sup>

Although its accuracy is difficult to verify, the survey finds support in other studies which claim that management is increasingly making use of small group problem-solving processes—particularly quality circles (QC)<sup>6</sup>—and, as Mike Parker pointed out, a new emphasis on "team" approaches to the work process.<sup>7</sup>

"Employee involvement" systems, such as QWL teams, are found in both union and non-union settings. Although they are usually initiated by top management, ideally the union attempts to make the program joint by negotiating such aspects as the goals, who the consultants are, the nature of the training, and joint participation in all levels of the policy making and monitoring structure. While some critics do not distinguish between QWL in unionized and non-union firms,<sup>8</sup> in the latter they are controlled completely by management and play a major role in union avoidance.<sup>9</sup>

In some partially organized companies, participatory programs are sometimes found in both union and non-union plants of the enterprise.

5. The Conference Board, *The New Look in Wage Policy and Employee Relations*, Report No. 865, 1985, p. 18.

6. About 36 percent of American Management Association members reported using quality circles, according to *The Changing Workplace, Work Alternatives in the '80s—an AMA Survey Report* (New York: American Management Association), p. 32.

7. Michael Parker and Jane Slaughter, "Choosing Sides, Unions and the Team Concept," *Labor Notes*, Boston, 1988.

8. Michael Parker, *Inside the Circle*, (Boston: South End Press, 1985).

9. Guillermo Grenier, *Inhuman Relations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 74.

Probably the most interesting example from the organizer's viewpoint is Johnson and Johnson's Ethicon division. In order to defeat a union organizing campaign at a new plant in Albuquerque, N.M., the company used the range of tactics drawn from positive labor relations along with more traditional forms of pressure. A scholarly expose of the company's campaign was written by Guillermo Grenier, who worked for seven months from 1982 to 1983 as an assistant researcher under the social psychologist responsible for the employee involvement program. Disturbed by what he observed, Grenier blew the whistle on the tactics used to manipulate workers in order to prevent their unionization. Grenier quoted the social psychologist who designed the company's participatory system as informing him that the company was seeking a "person-environment fit. Here we have to cull out those people that might have a negative impact on the environment of the plant. One of these impacts is unionization. . . . They have to fit the team environment and keep out the union environment. . . . We have to catch them at the door."<sup>10</sup> It soon became clear to Grenier that employee participation was being used to create a "homogeneous plant culture" that was used to apply pressure on individuals to conform. The effectiveness of management's total campaign can be seen in the results. Although 50 percent of the work force signed union representation cards, by the time the election was held only 33 percent of the workers voted for union representation. Company and team pressures had isolated pro-union employees; 21 others who had signed a pro-union leaflet were discharged under various pretexts.

On the other hand, within the same division of Johnson and Johnson in Somerset, N.J., a completely different story emerged from the introduction of an employee involvement program.<sup>11</sup> In the New Jersey Ethicon plant, which had been organized by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union since the 1940s, the same union that tried to organize the Albuquerque plant, a mature and reasonably constructive labor-management relationship had been established. A major difference between the two plants is that the company in New Jersey did not intend to undermine an existing union. Consequently, it hired a consultant who was committed to bringing the union fully into the participatory process.

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10. Grenier, *Inhuman Relations*, p. 72.

11. Barbara Lee, *The Ethicon-ACTWU Involvement Process A Case Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor-Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, 1987).

The jointly developed program proceeded from a union-company agreement that the problem of growing competition had to be addressed cooperatively in order to maintain employment security.

For at least two years, the program worked to the mutual satisfaction of Ethicon and the union. As a result, ACTWU Local 630 and the company were selected by Sen. William Bradley (D-N.J.) to receive the 1987 annual U.S. Senate Productivity Award. But, as is true with many participatory programs, it almost "came a-cropper" because the program's promise of job security conflicted with the strategic plans of the company. Seven months after Senator Bradley's award presentation, the company informed the union that over the next couple of years, it was moving several hundred manufacturing jobs from the Bridgewater plant to other facilities outside of New Jersey—with most of the jobs going to Puerto Rico.<sup>12</sup> Ostensibly, the move was occasioned by the lack of space at the New Jersey plant and tax advantages available at other locations.

Understandably, the employees were not in a very cooperative mood when they heard the news. They viewed the company's reason for the decision as an excuse because they knew of a nearby vacant plant in Skillman, N.J., owned by the company, as well as ample underdeveloped acreage at the Bridgewater site.

At the 1989 ceremony presenting the annual Senate Productivity Award to another labor-management unit, Senator Bradley publicly stated that his staff was looking into the relocation decision of the 1987 award winner.<sup>13</sup> Currently negotiations are under way to salvage the QWL program by using it as an instrument for preserving jobs at the Bridgewater plant.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the troubled history of employee involvement in this union plant, the program still stands in marked contrast to its "look-a-like" in the same company's non-union plant. Since organizers will frequently find such schizoid programs in partially unionized companies committed to preventing the spread of unionization, consideration should be given to how to make use of the unionized QWL programs in the organizing campaign. If the union succeeds in making the participatory program truly a joint program that expands employee influence over decisions, it can be a model with which the non-union program can be compared.

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12. Dave Presseisen, president of ACTWU Local 630, to U.S. Sen. William Bradley (D-N.J.), January 24, 1989.

13. *Newark Star-Ledger*, February 14, 1989, p. 4.

14. Telephone interviews with Sid Rubinstein, consultant to Ethicon, Inc., and ACTWU Local 630 on worker participation, and David Presseisen, president of ACTWU Local 630.

An important lesson for trade unionists, both in researching organizing targets and in negotiating workplace innovations in bargaining units, is the necessity of thoroughly examining the background of the consultants used, the types of programs they have set up, their ideologies and values. In each of these areas there is an enormous difference between the joint partnership orientation of consultants such as Sidney Rubinstein, and the "preventive maintenance" strategies of Charles Hughes, Alfred T. DeMaria, and Herbert G. Melnick.

Whatever one's view of employee involvement systems, when they are used to persuade workers that their voice is heard and a union is unnecessary, they have been extremely effective. Unions win only 16 percent of representation elections where quality of work programs exist as compared with the 45 percent success rate during the early 1980s for all NLRB representation elections. "The one major company benefit that drastically affected union organizing drives," according to Charles McDonald, formerly director of organization for the AFL-CIO, "was the quality of work life plan, particularly in manufacturing establishments."<sup>15</sup>

Union organizers have two choices in approaching firms that use QWL: they can leave, saving their resources for easier campaigns and moving on to firms that do not present this challenge, or they can develop counter strategies. The following discussion examines the second approach, exploring weaknesses and contradictions in the worker participation system that organizers can take advantage of in empowering workers through unionization.

### **Background on the Contradictions of QWL Groups**

At the heart of QC and QWL "participatory" programs is the small work group. Union organizers need to study the dynamics of work group processes in order to cope with both the strengths and the limitations of these groups.

Management has recognized since the turn of the century the significance and uses of the work group. Frederick Winslow Taylor saw informal and formal work groups as antithetical to management control of the work process for they acted as constraints on achieving management's production goals. Consequently, Taylor and such industrialist followers as Ford tried to isolate and deskill the worker through the fragmentation of work tasks. On the other hand, Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne

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15. American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, *Statistical and Technical Information Report* (Washington, D.C.: AFL-CIO, 1984).

experimenters believed that the work group could be used for management ends. Behaviorist management consultants today often build on both of these approaches to develop a system of controlled work groups.

The work group possesses a dual character that presents both the union organizer and management with the problem of wielding a dangerous double-edged sword. At one end of the spectrum of approaches to the work group is the managerial view that was clearly articulated by social psychologist James A. L. Brown:<sup>16</sup>

It is most important that the manager should realize that the informal working group is the main source of social control, that he should endeavor to exercise legitimate control through such groups, and that he should avoid breaking them up.

With roots in Elton Mayo's human relationism, this view sees the isolated, fragmented and thus more alienated work force as an open invitation to organization. Thus, one edge of the sword suggests how management can use work groups to avoid the development of collective voice.

The other edge of the sword is more problematic from management's view, for it sees the work group as the seed bed of future organization. Management learned the lesson from experience with company representation plans in the 1920s that were transformed in a number of instances into authentic union locals in the 1930s. Consultants such as Charles L. Hughes help companies to prevent such an evolution while still maintaining the programs to satisfy fundamental human needs and to serve management's interest in employee ideas and cooperation. Union organizers, on the other hand, naturally try to help these groups become independent and empowered through concerted action and awareness. In the Scandinavian countries, the strengthening of work group involvement through the union's organizational structure is one of the instruments of the labor movement's efforts to democratize the workplace.

### **Use of Groups for Control and Manipulation**

Participation in work group problem solving and ad hoc employee task forces can be effective devices for individual and group manipulation in certain contexts. Every group establishes a set of norms to regulate the behavior of the group. These norms can create powerful pressures on the

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16. J. A. C. Brown, *The Social Psychology of Industry* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1907), p. 127.

individual to conform. Participants in such groups need to raise several questions, centering on, Who sets up the norms, goals and boundaries of the problem-solving work group? Ever since the human relationists discovered the importance of the work group, their behaviorist descendants became increasingly adept at using principles of behavior modification to change attitudes and to engineer a form of pseudo-group participation.

The power of groups to obtain conformity and to isolate individual dissenters can be seen in two classic sets of experiments. One set of experiments conducted by Solomon Asch, a social psychologist, demonstrated that when confronted with a clear, unambiguous situation or stimuli, it was relatively easy for a group to convince an individual that what his/her own senses told him/her was a fact, was not so. Seventy-five percent of the subjects in the experiment caved in under the pressure of a group made up of "stooges." Follow-up experiments showed that if the individual has an ally or outside independent support for his views (e.g., a union?), the individual is more likely to hold to the correct interpretation of the facts he/she has experienced.<sup>17</sup> Earlier research by Muzafir Sherif demonstrated that individuals in groups are easily persuaded by others who have no more expertise than themselves.<sup>18</sup>

### **Trust, Openness and Making Oneself Vulnerable**

Another threat to the autonomy and the integrity of the individual is in the training process that prepares participants for these group experiences. A number of consultants have distorted the work of the humanist psychologists—Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor, and Rollo May—in pursuing behavior control. Tens of thousands of supervisors and other employees are sent to seminars in organizational development to improve interpersonal relationships and communications. Held in expensive and intimate surroundings, many of the seminars are ostensibly aimed at helping employees become more "open, honest and authentic" in their relationships. A number of exercises are drawn from T-group laboratory training to achieve this goal. All too frequently the participants find themselves revealing personal feelings and disclosing attitudes towards supervisors and co-workers that they otherwise would never have disclosed publicly. While many participants return feeling good about their experience, many return to their work feeling exposed and vulnerable. The norms of this training show up in the participatory work groups

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17. S. E. Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure," *Scientific American* 193 (1955): 31-35.

18. M. Sherif, *Archives of Psychology* 27 (87).

which pressure individuals to be open and trusting. Ordinarily these are good values. However, in the context of unequal employer/employee power relations, workers find themselves revealing things to their supervisors that make them or their co-workers vulnerable and anxious without any protection against future repercussions. Moreover, their revelations and recommendations may have a negative impact on the jobs of their co-workers and result in conflict and guilt.

Quick fixes for motivating employees by changing their attitudes and behavior are eagerly sought by some employers. Unsurprisingly, a number of consulting firms have been formed to respond to the need. With influences that can be traced to the encounter groups of the 1960s, some gurus of the 1980s promise a new consciousness by combining Eastern mysticism with Norman Vincent Peale's power of positive thinking. *The New York Times* reported on some corporate training programs that even had corporate executives "walk on burning embers as proof that they could do anything."<sup>19</sup> This example of corporate training is as extreme as the infamous training of Japanese managers who wear badges of shame while screaming their confessions. Nonetheless, rank and file employees are being involved in "new age" training programs that produce resentment among those who perceive them to be a form of "brainwashing."<sup>20</sup> In response to employee protests, the California Public Utilities Commission has investigated Pacific Bell Telephone's use of management consultant Charles Krone's training program for employees. Participants who experienced "Kroning" were taken through a series of psychological exercises which they complained constituted mind control based on the teachings of Georges Gurdjieff, a controversial Armenian mystic and philosopher.<sup>21</sup> Krone is used by a number of companies to defeat organizing drives and has been particularly successful in frustrating organizing campaigns in the paper industry.

Organizers need to be aware that these training programs are a mixed bag. Distinctions should be made between the useful problem-solving skills participants receive and the employment of powerful psychological techniques directed at changing employee attitudes, perceptions of management and self-concepts. When made aware of these efforts to pry into

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19. Robert Lindsey, "Raising Fears of Mind Control," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1987, p. A-10.

20. Interviews during 1987 and 1988 with employees at DuPont's Deepwater (N.J.) Plant who had participated in a training program based on Charles Krone's design and materials.

21. A. Miller and P. Abramson, "Corporate Mind Control, New Age Gurus Want to Change Employee Thinking," *Newsweek*, May 4, 1987.

their minds to change behavior in ways that are more accommodating to company interests, employees are justifiably enraged. Some consciousness raising by organizers is necessary to demonstrate how programs that speak in warm humanistic terms of meeting the higher order needs of people for participation and self-fulfillment may actually serve to frustrate fundamental human needs for privacy, dignity, self-esteem, empowerment, participation and self-fulfillment.

In taking a more positive approach, organizers should demonstrate the union's support of nonmanipulative training and educational development programs. At the same time, organizers need to emphasize the importance of creating safeguards through joint participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of training programs to achieve the wide range of educational benefits union members receive from such collectively bargained education funds as the CWA-AT&T Alliance Program and the UAW-auto company funds.<sup>22</sup>

### **Vulnerabilities of Participation Programs**

QC and QWL programs seem to lack staying power. Although often popular at the outset, many are short-lived. Various pressures expose their weaknesses and they tend to decline. Ronald Friend, a social psychologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, concludes that quality circles are "not true work groups but discussion groups parallel to the work process. Few evolve into genuine participation schemes or semi-autonomous work groups."<sup>23</sup>

QWL programs have difficulty surviving the traumatic changes in the business environment. Layoffs, management shakeups, down sizing, and mergers are poisonous environments for participatory programs. If workers see the QWL program as a desirable benefit, organizers can point out the many cases of such programs that were unilaterally installed by management and then just as arbitrarily removed. A union should be able to demonstrate how a jointly negotiated, contractually based QWL program can help protect its continuity as well as its integrity.

### **Participation without Representation**

In researching the particular system introduced in a company, the organizer should find out how the QWL teams, task forces and other

22. "Learning through the Union," *Solidarity*, December 1988, pp. 8-11; Morton Bahr, presentation to the Alliance Operators Conference, Washington, D.C., Nov. 1, 1988.

23. *Work in America Report* 13 (January 1988): 8. (This view is confirmed by such other observers as Edward E. Lawler III.)

participatory groups were selected. The consultants who sell "union avoidance" generally oppose any form of representation of employee interests on participatory structures. Thus, they often oppose the selection and recall of participants by their co-workers. Carefully controlled recruitment of volunteers is the usual method of staffing the teams. Some consultants advocate the rotation of QWL team volunteers to avoid their becoming representatives of their department. Others see such rotation as introducing new blood and new ideas in the group, which serves to refresh and maintain them and also broadens participation.

Organizers can point out the difference between democratic participation through union representation and the type of rotating participation selected or controlled by management. Democratic participation involves constituent control over who is selected through election and recall rights. Workers should indeed be angry about having their opinions on work life issues represented by people whom they did not select, who are not accountable, and, hence, who do not represent them.

Finally, organizers may find that non-participants in the QWL groups, generally the majority of workers, may resent the time off and the status accorded the participants. As Lawler and Mohrman observed, "almost always an insider-outsider culture arises" between participants and non-participants.<sup>24</sup>

### Whipsawing QWL Groups

In addition to tensions between the in-group and out-group, tensions and rivalries tend to crop up between QWL groups. Management is often tempted to use the program to foster competition among groups to recommend cost-saving, productivity-raising ideas.<sup>25</sup> For example, auto companies encourage their plants and local unions to compete with each other through QWL programs in order to obtain work. Participatory programs also can be a means to exacerbate competition between departments within the same plant, with each team striving to outdo the others in their cost-cutting recommendations. Such competitive games create conflict in union and non-union plants. Organizers, therefore, should look for the natural irritations and tensions workers feel at being made adversaries and counterpose a union program based on the values of solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid among workers.

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24. Edward E. Lawler III and Susan A. Mohrman, "Quality Circles—After the Fad," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1983): 66.

25. Some of the most insightful examples of this practice are described by Mike Parker in *Inside the Circle* (op. cit.).

Another source of resentment and tension is the work group recommendation that, once implemented, has unanticipated injurious consequences for employees. For example, suggested solutions to productivity problems demand that a job impact and work environment analysis accompany changes recommended by QWL teams and implemented by management.

Evaluation procedures in certain participatory processes are another source of conflict. A number of programs use peer evaluations of individuals performance in the work group. Grenier observed that the weakest part of the participatory system in the Albuquerque Ethicon plant was peer group evaluations because of the "discomfort" it caused workers.<sup>26</sup> Not only are some of the employees negatively affected by peer group decisions, but the participants themselves may feel guilty over what they have done to co-workers.

### High Hopes

The initial stages of the participatory program often are characterized by high expectations. Employees are often eager to contribute and, if properly trained, contribute important ideas and ingenuity. However, these expectations are often dashed in subsequent phases of the program. Frequently, recommendations of QWL teams are rejected by middle management, or accepted but never implemented. As Lawler and Mohrman point out, the people "in charge of putting the circle's ideas into action are not involved in the group's initial activities and therefore have little investment in them. . . . Unless they are willing to put their regular duties aside, these organization members will never implement the ideas."<sup>27</sup> Observers see the problem of resistance to follow-up as a major source of the loss of program credibility and the beginning of the end of employee commitment.

### Middle Management Sabotage

As a consequence of QWL programs, middle managers, supervisors, and technicians often feel they are losing power and status, and have great difficulty in changing traditional authoritarian or technocratic styles. Middle management levels have problems in sharing decisions or accepting ideas from their subordinates because they are unaccustomed to such practice. Further, while theoretically accepting high involvement styles of

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26. Grenier, *Inhuman Relations*.

27. Lawler and Mohrman, "Quality Circles—After the Fad."

leadership, top management also may continue to act autocratically out of habit and the very nature of the unchecked position of authority. All too frequently the rhetoric of participatory, democratic leadership is a manipulative style or, at best, a sincerely held illusion that serves to mystify the reality of unilateral decision making. The gulf between management rhetoric and actual behavior is an obvious target for organizers. As the saying goes, "What you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say."

### **Work Smarter but Poorer**

Another weakness that springs from rising expectations is related to that nightmare of management—rising costs in an increasingly competitive environment which encourages management to obtain the worker's ideas and cooperation on the cheap. "Work smarter" is management's current slogan; most workers understand that a smart worker gets reimbursed for the additional responsibilities and skills that go into problem solving, and certainly reimbursed for cost-saving ideas. If there is reimbursement, it is rarely commensurate with the gains arising from the workers' contribution.

Of course, smart management is adapting participatory programs so that they are accompanied by gain sharing and pay-for-knowledge schemes. In such cases organizers should inquire into the adequacy and fairness of these systems. Management likes to boast of the millions in savings its participatory program have yielded. Workers may not feel they have shared adequately in these gains. For example, one reason for the instability of GM's labor-management cooperation and QWL programs arises from rank-and-file rage over the high bonuses management had received in the past and the nominal sums (\$254 per worker in 1988) allocated to workers under the negotiated profit-sharing plan. The GM case notwithstanding, collectively bargained ways of distributing the fruits can be persuasive where workers feel they have not been fairly treated; the 1987 Ford profit-sharing distribution of \$3,700 per employee and the 1988 payment of \$2,800 is an example that could be cited.<sup>28</sup>

### **What Do You Do for an Encore?**

Many participation groups go out of business because their agenda of problems is too narrow. The obvious departmental and work process problems are disposed of in the first two years of the program and there

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28. *The New York Times*, February 18, 1989, p. 39.

is little to do for an encore. Fearful of its prerogatives, management refuses to expand the scope of issues or the level of decision making that the involvement program can undertake. Consequently, organizers may witness another source of disillusionment among participants. Just when workers are developing expectations of growing influence, they find that the door is closed. The resulting dissatisfaction can be turned into an organizing issue by alert organizers. The union can point to jointly designed participatory models where the union is succeeding in expanding the scope of issues over which workers have influence. For example, although the "New Directions" faction in the UAW has raised important critical questions about the UAW-GM Saturn project agreement, outside observers close to the project consider it a landmark in expanding union and worker involvement in strategic company decisions. Abe Raskin believes it is an extraordinary agreement that represents the "longest step yet taken by [management] toward full participation with labor in every phase of planning and production." Barry Bluestone characterized Saturn as a model of joint power sharing that points the way to GM's revival in the auto market.<sup>29</sup>

### **Something New, Something Old—The Judo and Educational Strategies**

In targeting plants that use positive labor relations, many traditional organizing tactics still are valid. The AFL-CIO survey found that an active organizing committee, personal contact with workers, and organizing around grievances were among the most effective tactics. And as we have seen, many workers have genuine grievances that arise from the new participatory system itself.

Nevertheless, fresh, imaginative approaches are required to deal with some aspects of positive management relations. An approach that Saul Alinsky, the community organizer, derived from judo could be creatively employed; like the Japanese system of self-defense, it is based on taking advantage of the opponent's weight to throw him. Judo is translatable as "the gentle way" because it does not confront another's superior power but uses that power to one's own advantage. To quote the late Bruce Lee, the famous Hollywood practitioner of the art: "You co-exist with your opponent and become his complement, absorbing his attack and using his force to overcome him." Applied to organizing QWL

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29. A. Raskin, "A Sour Note in Industry's New Harmony," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1986; Barry Bluestone, Remarks at PEL Conference, Palm Coast, Fla., February 17, 1989.

plants, organizers throw anti-union employers off balance by putting their professed openness to employee participation and new ideas to the test by encouraging employees to recommend a series of substantial reforms to improve the working environment.

Starting with the vital principle of determining employee concerns, the organizer surveys employees to identify changes that would improve the quality of their work life. Survey results should help to formulate demands on such issues as employment security, supervision, control of technology, contracting out, and health and safety. This involvement process must go beyond measuring skin temperatures on issues, and must be followed by a program that clearly articulates the employees' collective aspirations for authentic participation and improved quality of work life.

Employer-controlled participation systems, understandably, have great difficulty in accepting substantive employee ideas for change presented in a concerted fashion. The employer's unwillingness to accept these initiatives not only should help to expose the shallowness of the participation program and the narrow range of issues employees are permitted to discuss, but also should provide an opportunity for the union to demonstrate how it would identify employee concerns and fight for them through a collectively bargained participatory system. In terms of Judo, you do not oppose the employer's power, but assume a positive approach that complements it and throws it off balance.

### **Counterposing a Union Participatory Education/ Research Strategy**

Complete implementation of the judo strategy requires an educational/research effort. The organizing campaign is challenged to counterpose management's participatory program with a union program for organizing workers into investigative groups trained in evaluating their working environment and the company organization. Generally, organizers have followed the union tradition of avoiding involvement in issues of job content or new forms of work organization. These are missed opportunities. Organizers should respond to shifts in values among the newer and younger sections of the work force and thus address their greater interest in self-development, decision-making power over work, and the climate at work. The organizer should help non-union workers to examine critically all areas and issues in their workplace, e.g., the content and quality of their work, job stress, immediate and long-term threats to their health and safety, working time arrangements, training and promotional opportunities, and

problems with mismanagement. A variety of small group study formats from Swedish study and research circles to action research and problem-solving groups can be utilized to involve workers in this process.<sup>30</sup>

There is growing awareness and interest among non-union and union workers in the issue of job stress. The media has referred to job stress as "the disease of the decade," and hundreds of consultants are selling eager firms expensive, slick stress management packages for employees. Companies offer such programs to their employees in order to reduce absenteeism and health care costs. Non-union companies also see such programs as contributing to union avoidance. Many programs are of the instant cure, magical variety designed by "suspect practitioners."<sup>31</sup> Even the more seriously based packages deal mainly with symptoms and tend to make the employees feel responsible for them rather than see the working environment as the cause.

As a community service and as a serious benefit for workers, the union should enroll non-members and unionized workers in work stress study and counseling classes in the community where it is organizing. Instead of simply prescribing relaxation techniques or ways of adapting workers to an unhealthy working environment, such classes can examine the work conditions that lead to stress and involve workers in developing a collective approach to change. A number of studies have found the high demands of the job and the reality of low control by the worker as major causes of work stress and burnout. These are issues that collective action through the union can address. In other words, union-sponsored work stress study groups are used to turn a union avoidance strategy into a union consciousness-raising tool.

### **Research and Preparation**

It is vital that the union learn how employee involvement programs are introduced, their objectives, scope, structure, and the background of of the consultants who are used. Careful research may reveal contradictions that call for exposure. Although there is a generic similarity in the variety of employee participation programs, they differ greatly in the size of the program, the number of participants, and how extensively they pervade the company. Organizers may find the program in the target plant big in rhetoric but very small in scale. More often they will find little

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30. Norman Eiger, "Economic Democracy and the Democratization of Research," *Labor Studies Journal* 7 (Fall 1982): 131-135.

31. *Newsweek*, October 12, 1987, p. 65.

relation between pretentious program titles, such as Quality of Work Life, and the matters that employees are involved in discussing: productivity, product quality, cost savings and relations with management. While these matters affect quality of work life, they do not reflect the QWL priorities of employees. Finally, without exhausting the contradictions to be discovered, these programs have a built-in contradiction from their inception: although described as worker participation, they are never set up with the input, participation or agreement of the work force. Rather, QWL is an idea sold to top management by consultants and dictated by the CEO as a policy down the chain of command.

In contrast, the union's communication system and organizing strategy must be authentically participatory from the research stage to final phase. Workers' experiences and attitudes toward the "positive labor relations program" must be surveyed and made the priorities around which the campaign is organized.

In probing the employee involvement system's vulnerabilities, organizers need to examine a number of other matters, such as the difference between management rhetoric and reality:

Which ideas and proposals put forward by employee participation teams were rejected by management?

Which were accepted but never implemented?

What specific requests for information by the teams were refused?

Who feels frustrated by the rebuffs?<sup>32</sup>

Some of the sources of dissatisfaction that I have mentioned, both inside and outside participation teams, suggest the following questions:

Who initiates the group's agenda?

What issues are not permitted to be taken up? To what extent are issues that are relevant to quality of work life excluded?

Are supervisors dominating or manipulating the discussion?

How are dissenters from management's view and from the majority view of one's peers treated?

What kinds of pressures are brought to bear on individuals to bring them into conformity with a consensus?

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32. Grenier observed in the Albuquerque case that the quality circle system set up by management promised to handle participant grievances. The team facilitators, however, gave answers that frustrated team members.

Have participants reached the stage of getting bored now that the easy, minor issues have been resolved? Is there frustration because the scope of the issues employees can influence are too limited and there is nothing to do for an encore?

Are participants beginning to feel uncomfortable because they are being asked to make recommendations that injure the interests of co-workers in their department or other departments?

Are any of the desirable changes recommended being implemented too narrowly in one department? Should the organizing committee raise the demand that it benefit all workers in the plant?

Are there tensions between the participants and those outside the system? Are non-participants adequately informed on what is happening? Are they suspicious of developments in the participatory program?

Organizing for union quality of work life requires a positive approach that provides union alternatives to meeting the "higher order," enabling needs of workers. With this in mind, the following guidelines may be helpful:

In all organizing campaigns, organizers should recognize the vital importance of identifying credible leaders within the informal work groups—the opinion setters—and the need to win them over to the union's positive program. Since effective QWL programs are built around natural leaders and seek to develop their potential, it is important to find out who they are and win their commitment to the more authentic workplace democracy program that the union represents. The organizer should help these potential union leaders understand the roles and influence they would have in a unionized quality of work life program.

As we have seen, participation and cooperation are popular buzz words in positive labor relations. The union organizing campaign has to clearly understand what management means by participation and its scope as much as what the workers want in terms of participation and what it means to them.

The union must be clear on what it means by participation. The union's position must offer an alternative to management's program that is more authentic and secure. To begin to make the union's definition credible, the organizing campaign itself should be a model of worker participation and democratic practice. Volunteer rank-and-file organizing committees should be used more extensively; union activists and the workers to be organized should be involved in all stages of the campaign's development.

Second, the union must articulate concerns that go beyond traditional collective bargaining issues to the expanded scope of vital matters about which workers want a real voice. Therefore, organizers should start the union's empowering participation process by establishing cohesive, supportive organizing groups based on an educational strategy that analyzes the work processes of the plant or office and comes up with a program of reforms aimed at increasing worker autonomy, skills, social support and empowerment. Such studies should identify examples of mismanagement and poor supervision, and deal with proposals for workloads that are not stressful (e.g., flexible schedules and more time off). Bread-and-butter fairness issues must not be overlooked. A cost savings estimate needs to be worked out which demonstrates how collective bargaining can be used to negotiate a fair sharing of the savings arising from worker ingenuity, skill, experience and cooperation.

Third, the educational process should provide awareness of the long-term interests of workers that transcend local workplace narcissism and are based on protecting the industry, national, and global interests of workers. Although the values of solidarity are difficult to convey in a period that focuses on individualistic greed, it is vital that insight into the larger interests of workers be provided. Non-union participative management deals with employees atomistically, as individuals or in competitive groups, whereas the union provides a unified voice. Only a collective organization of workers organized at the industry level with strong linkages to other unions abroad can begin to address this prerequisite for a fair and truly empowering system.

Finally, without exhausting the many educational points to be made, workers need greater awareness of the potential power they have in a competitive period when their employer needs their ideas to increase productivity and cannot long tolerate the withholding of their cooperation.<sup>33</sup> As individuals, they cannot negotiate the trade offs that can result in advancing their long-run interests. But a union, with its independent resources and the collective approach it takes to making demands, can negotiate trade offs that advance mutual worker and employer interests. A great deal can be learned about genuine power sharing from the decade-long struggle of Polish workers which seems to be on the verge of major breakthroughs.

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33. A point made by Andy Banks and Jack Metzger in a presentation at the UCLEA Conference on the Future of Worker Participation, Ohio State University, Columbus, January 5, 1989.

## Conclusion

Management's union avoidance strategy is a juggernaut bristling with many weapons. This article focused on one of these weapons, the use of worker participation programs. It suggests that organizers need not be intimidated by companies that use such psychologically based programs. There is no need to surrender before the battle is joined by moving to easier targets (Their number, in any event, is diminishing rapidly as employers grow in sophistication and unions are perceived by workers as increasingly powerless). Rather, unions must adopt more proactive and creative roles in the workplace, and discard their largely reactive strategy to employer initiatives. Democratizing the workplace should not be abandoned to employer rhetoric—it is central to labor's historic struggle to circumscribe the authority of management over work-life decisions. Organizers can provide the leadership which offers workers a program and a vision of how they can become genuinely empowered to improve the quality of work.

Finally, a patient, long-term organizing strategy is needed. Regrettably, it may take some time for workers to realize that they are being asked to offer their creativity and ingenuity in a management-controlled environment for objectives that either are not relevant to or are opposed to their interests. If organizers could only wait for the long run, they might find additional evidence for the hypothesis that limited forms of participation where there is little worker involvement in substantive decisions and little genuine power sharing creates greater dissatisfaction than no participation. As indignation grows out of this experience, organizers have an opportunity to crystallize awareness of the need for a collective voice in order to achieve genuine empowerment and participation in decision making; it does not come easily and certainly not as a paternalistic gift from above. Further, the process may take on a life of its own, if encouraged and guided by well-thought-through union perspective, that may even lead to the radical democratic view among workers that true economic freedom requires in R.H. Tawney's phrase "that men should not be ruled by an authority they cannot control."<sup>34</sup>

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34. R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1948), pp. 6-7.