

“Deep Organizing, Communist Organizing: An Introduction”

This transcript of the WWP presentation has been slightly edited.

Presentation by Ed Childs
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PRESENTATION, Part 1

Some history

I'll give some history of organizing in the U.S. from 1950s to today, communist organizing and base organizing, and then more in Part 2 on how to build a base.

Most important is to understand the history of communist organizing in the U.S., like that done by William Z. Foster, a great Communist Party USA organizer.

Pre-1950, we know through labor history that the union movement grew. After 1950, there was little growth because of McCarthyism, the push to get communists out of the labor movement, and the impact of that on other organizing—on the lasting kind of “long organizing” or “deep organizing.”

Since 1950, there has been both anti-communism in union movement and in community movement. This was fostered by the right wing in both. In the community this was led by Saul Alinsky, who was against deep organizing as linked to a basis for communism. Today most community organizing is based on Alinsky.

In Chapter 3 of “What Is To Be Done,” Lenin talked about “short organizing”—agitation, leaflets, riling up workers but then nothing being done with that. Lenin said there is the need to take that organizing and bring it forward, which of course he did—in what we could call “deep organizing.”

But after 1950, communist organizing reverted to “short organizing”--

You can see this in movements today. A tremendous struggle may break out, including many trained community organizers who go there. But then these do mostly agitational work, and then leave. MLK talked of this at end of his life as a mistake of the civil rights movement. Some leaders were trained in deep organizing from the Communist Party-USA, and MLK found their well-organized communities. But other leaders did mostly

short or agitational organizing, when if you take out the leaders by, for instance, assassination—nothing is left.

Sam Marcy discusses this in “High Tech, Low Pay,” especially in Chapter 9—a great labor book. He was trained in deep organizing—the communist way. That is how millions can still come out these days in France, Italy, Spain—the workers there have still had deep organizing training, and this was not taken away from them by McCarthyism.

Deep Organizing, Mapping & Leaders

Deep Organizing involves Mapping a specific organizing situation—working out a plan, tactics, leaders, task performers, and base members. The latter are whoever would benefit materially from the struggle. For example, for a union, the base are those covered by contract. For police brutality, the base are those impacted by cops. For rent control—those living in rentals, etc.

The union movement traditionally has used the AEIOU process: agitation, education, inoculation, organizing, unionizing.

But nowadays organizing is mostly Agitational—call for a rally, make a superficial demand, then done—but no Education, Inoculation or Organizing.

Inoculate—that’s informing your base about what’s going to happen in retaliation for action: the possibilities of arrest, you could lose your job, have financial losses, etc. It’s very important to Inoculate since the opponent/boss does fight back and then there are casualties, there is punishment. Inoculation gets a more serious base.

As Lenin said, social democrats and liberals do Agitation and Education—which is short organizing. Communists do developing internal Leaders, Base building, etc.—which is deep organizing.

Building Leaders

At my job there are 15 different job sites. Each site has 4 leaders. This structure is all internal to our Deep Organizing, and not set up by union bureaucratic management.

ONE leaders are the key leaders to call and who will pull out workers if the call goes out, who would convey the situation to the base.

TWO leaders are respected, have a large following within work units at the site, and who have lots of conversations, “one-on-one’s,” with the base members.

Also, because we had 50 languages in our membership, we needed a THREE leader for each language—both site and sub-work units.

FOUR leaders are people with no following, but they want to work, they come to meetings, make phone calls, etc.

We had 200 workers, and 70 leaders.

Deep Organizing is sustained only by itself, not at all by union bureaucracy. At Harvard we pre-organized for two years before the strike to build on our Deep Organizing. The international union help came only about 2 months before the strike.

With Deep Organizing, the result is that everyone is notified, talked to, and comes out for meetings and rallies. If something happened one morning that we needed a response to, the next morning if we called a rally, everyone came.

You can't do this with superficial top-down "staff organizing" by labor bureaucrats, who don't know people, who come in and have to learn even the basics of the situation.

What you are seeing recently—like the teachers' strikes in right-to-work states—these were all organized by Deep Organizing. The rank and file know what's going on, they are informed, involved. The Chicago Teachers Union started 12 years ago to do Deep Organizing in order to do what they are doing now in striking—and winning.

DISCUSSION, Part 1

Organizing beyond unions

Participant question: In a union setting, there is a contract, demand, bosses, and potential base in workplace. How do we translate that into non-union work in organizing—with an infinite base of workers, how do you build the 1, 2, 3, 4 leaders over time, etc.

Ed C: This is a question that always has to be dealt with—as in police brutality, rent control, other struggles. Deep Organizing was done by communists in the 1930s, 40s, 50s—and it's still being done globally.

Your constituency/Base is identified through Agitation--leafleting, street meetings, city council protests, etc. There you get names of who is interested.

Then you call Educational meetings, using the names, where people can indicate deeper interest.

Next you ask those you've met to take a commitment to do something--build for the next meeting, the next rally, etc. And this is a "test" for their level of interest and also their leadership. Are they ready to take action, and can they bring in people in their circle/workplace/community? You can also meet workers who are great, but have no community following, so they can also be asked to do organizational tasks to bring people. Those who bring people are Leaders, those who don't are helpers.

In building Leaders, there is a big difference between Deep Organizing and the kind of mobilizing where there is little time and you just grab who comes in short term, to get short-term tasks done.

In terms of leadership, the ranks will show you who they follow, they will reveal the leaders. “If X comes, I’ll come”—so you go after X as a leader, find out if X feels this is an issue, and try to convince X to come and bring others.

Mapping

One technique in doing Deep Organizing is Mapping. When you Map a struggle in relation to the Base and Leaders, you break it down by who comes to meetings, who doesn’t; who is the person who can bring a lot of people also; and you spend time convincing and winning this person. That’s how to build leaders.

Unions do organizing before a contract—to get wages, benefits--and the organizing is just to hold onto benefits, conditions, etc., or to try to get a bit more.

Deep Organizing gets guarantees beyond wages and health care—protecting immigrants, trans rights, etc.-- and also exercises the strike power effectively, eliminating/minimizing line crossing. In our negotiations, the union leadership doubted some of these “extra” guarantees, and didn’t think we would win. But the rank-and-file membership said they were not going back without guarantees for all these “social” benefits, not just “wage” benefits.

Mapping also includes identifying goals, tactics, supporters, allies, constituencies and their leaders. Even election campaigns like Sanders—they map with issues to reveal constituencies—and do superficial organizing [to get out the vote].

Participant comment: A suggestion for reading about the difference between union organizing and Deep Organizing could be “Them and Us” about the UE [by UE’s first Director of Organization] James J. Matles and James Higgins. One quote from that is: “Business unionism fails to recognize that the manner by which workers obtain results is as important as the results themselves.”

Ed C: UE has survived through deep organizing. This approach to organizing is now being debated again within the union movement. Another book to read is “No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power” by Jane McAlevey.

Participant question: I’m interested in the exchanges 1 & 2 leaders would be having with other people--any tips, talking points, how to assess people on bringing people into the work.

PRESENTATION, Part 2

One-on-one's

Ed C: That leads to the next phase: You can't identify Leaders or build a Base without the "one-on-one's." This is a tactic that was driven out in the 50s, by driving out the communist leaders. This tactic should be on every serious organizer's mind. Unlike short-term mobilizing, in this tactic you aren't thinking so much of tasks for individual worker, who might leaflet, rally, etc. You are looking for leaders, through Deep Organizing, using one-on-one.

First, you identify the constituency relating to the issue at hand, and go out to talk to them. At Harvard, we had 750 workers, and 750 one-on-one's. We went to their homes, knocked on their doors, over and over, to find them at home. This was union organizing, so at home, because they would be fired if they met you at work.

There can be different levels of one-on-one's. I did a year of knocking on doors of people who had no idea of who I was or me of them. Like a salesperson, knocking on doors. Not just you "selling" them something, but them giving you their ideas, values about the issue you are organizing on, their motivation, themselves.

It's a skill to sit down and figure out how to start a conversation with them. About the struggle you are in, whatever it is—the job, their rent, etc. It can be awkward, but with training, you get better.

To get to one-on-one's, you've done the agitation, gone into the community, rallied, leafleted, done street meetings. Then you need to go to having coffee, visiting after a meeting, visiting at home, etc. It could be you or a couple of people to meet with people. You want to provoke a discussion with questions, and listen to their answers. This is the only reason you are meeting with them. If you are organizing on an issue, and it's not an issue to them—that's important to know! You are trying to see where they are at, and write it down later. Don't take notes at the time!

During these conversations people in the U.S. often drift on issues—be friendly but bring discussion back to the main issue to encourage them to reveal their values and their motivations about why they think the way they do. If it's an issue at work, why do they think it is an issue?

The main questions: What is your issue? How is it going? What can be done about that? How can that happen?

If they give you an issue, keep going with questions. You want to know why—if you don't ask why, you aren't doing your one-on-one.

There should be an 80 /20 ratio in the conversation. They should be talking 80 percent of the time, and you for 20. As you do more sessions, you get better at getting them to talk.

You get their concerns and their leadership potential, and you judge them by what is major, moderate, low-level concern. You are also gathering information about other people who might be interested, finding out their skills related to issues, the groups they are affiliated with. Most information on leaders comes from other people—they are leaders only because others identify them.

For example: At lunchtime, when all the Haitian workers sit at a table, who leads that? They tell you the person—you remember (and make notes after). They are picking the leaders, the issues, the communities to be involved.

Discretion is necessary. Usually you go to someone because someone else referenced them. If it's a beginning union, you do NOT mention names, because people can get fired. So even in a solidarity campaign for a new union you have to be careful not to mention names, because people will get fired.

Retaliation could happen in a community campaign for different reasons—retaliation if it is a police brutality campaign, etc.

So—in the one-on-one's for developing leaders, you get their ideas, motivation, and ask them: How should the problem be dealt with? How would you be part of that?

Everything is you, you, you. Don't propose a "we" solution—they can easily say it's great, but then they are off the hook of committing, being in on the solution, on taking some responsibilities.

Getting people to commit

Deep Organizing is getting people to commit: What can you do? When can you do it? That's the difference from mobilizing.

After all the discussion, where they are leading you into their concerns, then there should be the shift to what could be done, to what they could do to help. Then you say "what can you do about this" and "when."

If their answer is vague, then propose a specific time, ask them who they can bring, who would be good to come, could you call that person, etc., in order to get a commitment.

This approach builds both the base and the leadership. Later you are tabulating this with others gathering information, and then discussing who gets referenced by followers and who is good at tasks. That helps sort out who needs to be brought forward, based on the one-on-ones.

Depending on what level of one-on-ones, at some point you have to start the Inoculations. Not just for a rally. But if you go on strike, you have to tell them the consequences. It's one thing to commit with no consequences, but in reality there is a push back in labor struggles by managements/owners. The risk is real, and the Inoculation phase reveals the depth of their commitment, and whether they are a real Leader.

All of this gathers the leadership and you start assessing who goes into 1,2, 3, 4s. For instance, the developed workers who have volunteered, but maybe don't bring a following, can start doing calls.

If you don't do one-on-one's, you aren't doing Deep Organizing. The 1930s sit-in's—they did years of one-on-ones beforehand. At the end of MLK's life, he saw and talked about the mistake of not having a process like deep Organizing, and how when he left a city, the structure fell apart.

After this stage, you have your Leaders of the Base. In our organizing, a lot of our Leaders had experience from other countries, some had shop steward experience, some had community experience; some didn't want to be leaders but others wanted them! So then you have to go after them. Having the Leaders that people identify as leaders can be the difference between 500 and 700 people at a rally.

Community organizing

In community organizing, you have to define the structure/situation/issue you are mapping—does it involve a part of town, a neighborhood, a church, a group of people, etc.—and the overlapping Constituencies.

Once you have identified the Base and the Leaders, what are you going to do with them? At this point, the constituency knows who you are, and they understand through the one-on-one's what is their issue. When you've developed Leaders, if you leave, they will carry it on their own. So now you train them how to do carry out the work.

Next step (using one-on-one information) is to identify targets, goals, tactics, and then supporters/allies. The latter are people who relate on a material basis to what you are doing. For instance, at Harvard, some supporters were other unions who could use our contract win to bargain their contract in a stronger way.

Successful campaigns

Once you have a Base you can build on that—look at the Chicago teachers' struggle for wages, health care and also community issues—the students' needs, like demands for homeless students, etc. An example of how to develop allies: One year we put in our contract a demand for ecologically safe food for health—and this made a material basis for students to back our contract.

There are always a lot of options for developing connections. We had the base read “High Tech, Low Pay”—our workers read and loved Chapter 9.

The issue of trans rights for us was taken up through the ranks—all the way to the 4’s—and it flew positively. People were saying yes, let’s get more supporters. So then we identified Leaders for that issue. The employer fought back, and said there was no give for them on this issue. But with the membership backing, we pushed back—and won. The same process happened for pushing for immigration rights.

In terms of identifying issues and tactics: The Panthers were great at this, they were Deep Organizers. Their breakfast program was them and the community. The Panthers were sponsoring the breakfast program, but they identified, developed and worked with community leadership, who did the breakfasts.

Workers World Party did Deep Organizing in a Food Is A Right campaign. We went to welfare and unemployment centers in the 1970s to identify the Base—and we got farmers involved. The campaign took food from supermarkets or forced them to give it up, and got government policies changed.

Deep Organizing means you can take on bigger projects, but also it means you can recruit—into the campaign, into the Party. So you need different education and higher-level one-on-ones for that coming into the Party. More communists were in the community in the past—and leading more struggles on the ground. Thirty-five percent of the workforce was organized into unions before McCarthyism.

Writing history with Deep Organizing

The “Deep Organizing” tactic has always been led by communists—and maybe tolerated by vicious anti-communists in the past because it was effective.

With Deep Organizing, you can write history, you can make history, you can sustain organizing over decades, and also during when there are arrests and losses.

In the U.S., the Congress of International Organizations was a movement that went after non-American Federation of Labor unorganized workforce, the non-skilled work force in textile mills, etc., and was successful over decades with Deep Organizing.

But the International Workers of the World had a different tactic—mobilizations with a ton of organizers—when they left, the workers were vulnerable, and the IWW couldn’t sustain itself.

The short organizing can look fantastic and absolutely be fantastic—but it doesn’t last.

With deep organizing, you generate layers of Leaders. Though this was wiped out in U.S. during McCarthyism, the U.S. now is getting training from workers from other countries that still have the tradition. In our [Harvard] campaign, many of our Leaders were from El Salvador, other Central American countries. They were already trained there and came to the forefront here and are now training others. In the Chicago teachers strike, the British Columbia Federation of Teachers sent organizers and taught CTU deep organizing.

To bring WWP tradition up, the party founders had been trained in Deep Organizing—Sam Marcy, Vince Copeland, Dorothy Ballan, etc. In the past a number of WWP comrades went into other unions and became leaders, like in the telephone workers, etc. WWP also had the experience working in the American Servicemen’s Union during the U.S. war on Vietnam. The ASU used Deep Organizing in intense one-on-one’s that had to be secret to develop because they were organizing within the U.S. Army.

The ruling class created McCarthy anti-communism and attacked Deep Organizing as tainted by communism. Now there is a movement to undo that demonization of Deep Organizing.

DISCUSSION, Part 2

GM strike lessons

Participant question: How do the points you made relate to the recent General Motors strike and the weak contract that was won?

Ed C: I don’t know that much about GM, but I could see that they didn’t have deep organizing, but there were fractions within that were deep organizing, that went for a “no” vote. The bureaucrats had lost touch with the rank and file, through corruption, etc. At the hotel strike in Boston, you could see by the picket lines where there was deep organizing we did, and where others had not.

Participant question: I feel like my organization does a lot of mobilizing—campaigns, specific struggles. It’s a challenge when members aren’t based in a workplace or community. We build e-lists, mobilize rallies, meetings, protests, but we are not doing one-on-ones. How do we develop a strategy to shift to Deep Organizing? I totally agree with your approach, and that a bigger revolutionary movement has to have deeper roots. How do we build a community organization that has these roots?

Participant comment: I recommend “Labor’s Untold Story” by Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, and also books by William Z. Foster like “American Trade Unionism: Principles, Organization, Tactics, Strategy and Tactics,” for further reading.

Ed C: This raises a very important question. This is a problem with the Left as a whole: What do we do now? I think we have to train ourselves in Deep Organizing, even with a

mobilization approach—use mapping, assessing and building leaders, etc., and train cadre in Deep Organizing in every struggle on how to assess goals, choose tactic and targets, define the constituency, etc.

Even if the action is not a long-term struggle, people can still learn how to do this kind of organizing. If we bring this to the newer members through the short-term mobilizations, they can shift to one-on-ones during street meetings, and practice the one-on-ones. Then if a specific short-term struggle continues to be long-term, we can build on that. We can practice, those conversations can be awkward, with long pauses, and difficult, but we can learn how to build on that, improve, get the technique.

If the economic downturn intensifies, I suspect there will be more opportunities.

Participant comment: To add to GM strike comments: the conclusion of the strike was really a failure of “business unionism”—a model based on assumption that workers and capital have a “common interest” and if a company is profitable and “competitive,” then that’s good for labor. That approach by the United Auto Workers is a thorough-going *rejection* of the Marxist premise that proletariat and ruling class are in a fundamentally antagonistic relationship.

There was not even short-term organizing and mobilization by the UAW. There should have been a mass rally of workers from throughout the U.S. in front of GM headquarters in Detroit to mobilize the membership. That would have been a step toward a more effective organizing model, to have even some short-term mobilization. The UAW bureaucratic approach was not a good model of any kind of organizing. Whatever action there was came from rank-and-file leadership emerging on its own. There was a just bit more preparation before the strike than in past years by UAW, but it was just practical and limited—how to do strike kitchen set-up, picket line tasks, etc. There was nothing about keeping up morale, evidently.

The situation with the UAW really reveals the impact of what happened after communist leadership was purged, and the despicable Walter Reuther came in as anti-communist UAW president during Cold War. A section of 1947 Taft-Hartley Act made it illegal for a communist to hold a union leadership position. That clause was overturned in 1973 by courts, but the damage had already been long done.

Where do we go from here?

Participant comment: There has been Deep Organizing across the South—through the Southern Workers Assembly, and in North Carolina through the Durham Workers Assembly (DWA). In the Raleigh-Durham area there were 12 Latinx cleaners on a construction site, who lost \$12,000 through wage theft. The local immigrant rights group was just going to do litigation. DWA did Deep Organizing and confronted the boss, and got a win. The DWA has been built through long, slow, one-on-ones. We can apply this [to other local campaigns].

Ed C: Great questions on GM, that's what I hoped this class would provoke. For instance, in the GM strike, how even a mobilization would have been great! We have only mobilizing [going on in the Left movement] because that's the tactic that's been going on since the 1950s, since the purge of communist who were Deep Organizing. That's all we've seen.

How do we do go on from here? I think we have to train the comrades to do one-on-ones. Start with the solidarity campaigns—and teach people how to map, what are the targets, tactics, who do we have as the base, discuss at beginning and through the campaigns what do the people of the Base want, what do people know, etc.? For instance for the ICE Off Greyhound campaign, I think the drivers were allies with a material basis for solidarity, but the immigration struggle was key—so there needed to be reach-out based on the immigration solidarity to groups and individuals who would be attracted through rallies and street meetings, then a start to identifying who came in, and then start the one-on-ones.

Mobilizing is so much easier than Deep Organizing. But we have to do the nitty-gritty. We are about to be at a period of time where anti-organizing anti-worker rulings are coming down in the U.S.

As for the Party, we have a Base, even if a small base, in the branches. Nitty-gritty door-knocking builds branches—like the Rosa Parks campaign we did in Boston. I think that is the answer. The left and the union movement were attacked through McCarthyism, gutting Deep Organizing, and we have to fight back now as communists.

How communists win

An example: The trans rights won in the dining hall contract happened because there was a communist organizer involved—me. But I was not getting up and saying at a meeting: “Oh, let's do this trans rights thing.” Instead, I talked about an earlier struggle in the 1980s, when we won ‘gay rights protection’ in the dining hall workers’ contract. At that time I got together with the 1s, 2s, 3s Leaders and talked that demand over. They all knew gay workers, and they also wanted to mess with Harvard University, who had said “Gay rights, never!” So that demand became a strike issue along with wages. We had a one-day strike, and they gave us wages, but no gay rights. We took the issue back to the workers who said, “We stay out until we win the gay rights clause.” Then [management] gave us gay rights! The 1988 contract actually said “only the dining hall workers” at Harvard would have “sexual orientation rights”—nobody else—no students, faculty, community at large. But in the next contract that got changed to [university-wide] sexual orientation rights all could have.

So in the last Harvard dining hall strike in 2016, we put trans rights in our demands. We struck for 3 weeks, got health care and wages. But the workers said: “We won't go back without winning the other social demands”—trans right, immigration rights, Indigenous

Peoples Day, etc. They were going to keep picketing. The mediator took that back to the table. The union leadership said [internally]: “We can’t win it.” But the membership said, “Yes, we can.” The mediator said management’s response to the social demands was “You are shitting me!” But within an hour they gave us trans rights, immigration rights Indigenous issues that we are demanding! And the demands we won and that contract language was picked up and spread to the 2018 Boston hotel strike contract demands. The International picked up our language on social demands and put those into the hotel strike contract. From our Deep Organizing in the dining hall workers [over many years], the wider social demands went into the Marriott hotel strike [victory].

Lessons of the victorious Harvard dining hall strike in Workers World/Mundo Obrero:

Part 1: <https://www.workers.org/2017/02/29519/>

Part 2: <https://www.workers.org/2017/02/29643/>

Part 3: <https://www.workers.org/2017/02/29696/>

Part 4: <https://www.workers.org/2017/03/30078/>

Further Study in Workers World/Mundo Obrero:

Seventy years ago workers won Flint sit-down strike— 10 parts

<https://www.workers.org/2007/us/flint-0308/>

Women and the Flint sit-down strike of 1937

<https://www.workers.org/2015/03/18723/>

Then and Now: The UAW vs. the bosses

<https://www.workers.org/2015/06/20309/>