

ORGANIZING AMERICA'S
YOUNGEST
WORKERS

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When AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Elizabeth Shuler speaks at conventions throughout the country, she asks those in attendance to stand. Slowly, she asks attendees to sit down based on age, with only the younger people standing at the end. By the time everyone over 35 years old is seated, only a handful of people usually remain standing. Shuler doesn't sugarcoat things when she says, "We haven't done a good job attracting younger workers and getting them involved." But now, unions are working to increase the membership and involvement of younger workers - and for good reason.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Currently, less than seven percent of private sector workers belong to unions. That's in sharp contrast to the 1950's, when 35 percent of workers were unionized, and even a sharp drop from the 1980's, when around 20 percent of workers paid union dues.

But since the 1950's, America has experienced dramatic changes in workplace demographics. The traditional image of a union worker is that of someone older, male, and in blue collar industries. Today our workforce has become younger, more diverse, and less likely to be in manufacturing - labor's bread and butter for decades.

So while organized labor may be a little late to the party, they are shifting their energies and focus to take advantage of these new demographics. In fact, labor sees this group of workers as an untapped market; one whose sense of security has been adversely impacted by the current economic crisis, making them much more open to what union organizers have to say.

AN UNTAPPED MARKET

Unions today have good reason to see opportunity: only 8.2 percent of workers aged 16-34 belong to unions (versus 11.9 percent of all workers). In fact, shortly before assuming the group's top job just a few years ago, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said pointedly, "We are reaching out to young workers."

WHAT UNIONS ARE DOING

Unions have created a three-pronged strategic approach in order to reach young workers in largely white-collar and service-based industries. They are exploiting the power and influence that come with social media and viral campaigns, and they are looking at unconventional industries and smaller employee groups that had been previously ignored. Finally, they

are connecting with younger workers, and in fact hiring and recruiting new organizers that match the demographics of those they'd like to sign up as new union members. Let's take a closer look at this three-pronged approach to see exactly how this strategy has taken shape:

1 UTILIZING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Without question, social networking has very recently and very explosively transformed many aspects of day-to-day life, providing a platform to connect, communicate, and receive an instant response.

"HABITUAL" SOCIAL NETWORKERS

Much of the recent news regarding social media focused on usage among adults over 35 years old (and that's a subject for another study), but the fact is, younger users are still far more numerous. Among 18-24 year olds, 80% have a Facebook profile, as do 67 percent of those who are between the ages of 25 and 34. Of those who would be considered "habitual" social networkers (those who check in several times a day), 68 percent are under 35 years old.

Younger users are also more likely to be connected on the move. While almost every social network user has a cell phone, a whopping 85 percent have smartphones, making sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and SnapChat their constant companions.

NOT ABOUT KNOWING, BUT KNOWING WHERE TO FIND IT

For Millennials, it's no longer about having the knowledge, but more about simply knowing where to find the information. This generation is skeptical, and verifying information or going more in-depth online is truly second-nature. Unions took advantage of this instinct with basic informational websites early on, and are now regularly reinforcing their presence on social media sites, seen as relatable – and credible – by younger workers.

Just a few years ago, the Electrical Workers (IBEW) set up an anonymous blog for workers at a Budwiser can manufacturer in New York. The site was used as an underground platform as the IBEW won the right to represent the workers. As far back as 2008, Barack Obama's success with younger voters was greatly attributed to his campaign's usage of social media. Historically, younger people have been more ready and willing to devote their energy to causes they believe in, and social media has simply made this easier. Unions have noticed this with virtually every major union now setting up virtual shop.

A detailed whitepaper, [“New Approached to Organizing Women and Young Workers,”](#) released by a coalition of groups affiliated with the labor movement including Labor Project for Working Families, Cornell ILR Labor Programs, and the UC Berkeley Labor Center chronicled the increasing use of social media among unions, and found several new benefits including:

- An online presence allowing workers to learn about the union at their own pace and on their own terms
- Unions employing social media are seen as relatable by younger workers
- Facebook and blogs help organizing committees communicate
- YouTube videos and text messages help create a “buzz” around campaign events
- Information is available at all time for all people in all locations

TARGETING UNCONVENTIONAL INDUSTRIES

Unions may be known for representing workers in industries such as manufacturing, construction, automotive, and healthcare, but they are now looking for workers in fields they once ignored.

This includes, most notably, the fast-food industry. Previously written off by unions because of high turnover and the prevalence of high-school aged and seasonal workers, labor now sees this as a viable industry for organizing. In fact, a very rare (and very visible) election was held in Minneapolis among Jimmy John’s sandwich shop workers.

The Jimmy Johns union drive was spearheaded by the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, often referred to as the Wobblies. This is the same union that has spent years trying to organize Starbucks baristas throughout the country.

They weren’t the only union interested, however. Just prior to the Jimmy Johns’ organizing drive, an [internal whitepaper](#) from the Service Employees International Union, one of the most powerful unions in the country, stated that they plan to “transform the low-wage economy by making the SEIU the dominant union... seeking organizing breakthroughs in the fast food sector.”

On a similar note, unions have also made efforts to organize workers in labor-friendly locations such as major cities

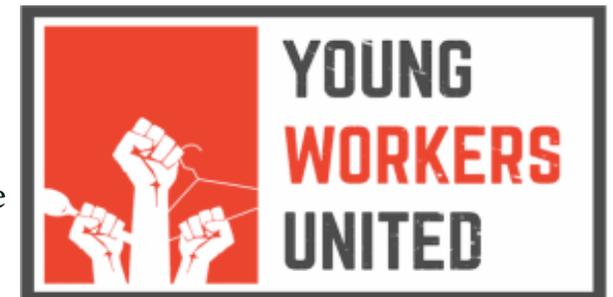
or areas with a large minority community. Unions have said they will go wherever young workers may be. Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, recently said this about organizing: “Whatever the job, whatever the problem, this we know: There is no better way to face it; there is no better way to solve it, than together, with a collective voice.”

3 OUTREACH TO YOUNG WORKERS

Labor unions have also begun implementing outreach groups designed to target younger workers specifically. Now held on an annual basis, the AFL-CIO hosts [Union Summer](#), in which participants take part in “hands-on, movement-building workshops on organizing, young worker activism, social media, and leadership development.” The sessions also include “discussions with expert speakers on policy and legislative issues affecting young workers.”

In addition, there are organizations targeted exclusively for younger workers. In San Francisco, [Young Workers United](#) was formed to “improve the quality of jobs for young and immigrant workers” who are “concentrated in industries, such as retail and restaurants, that have received very little attention from unions and advocacy groups.”

Similarly, the [AFL-CIO’s “NextUp” Program](#), aimed at creating younger activist workers was formed in the Washington, D.C. area and is now active in 5 regions across the country. They meet on a regular basis to “fight to rewrite the rules of the economy” and focus on “the lack of education that young union members and the public have in reference to the labor movement.”



Education is one of the areas that unions believe will make the biggest difference in their ability to recruit new, younger workers. At a recent Young Workers Summit, attendees selected “access to better education on the role of the union movement” as their top area of interest. Utah AFL-CIO President Jim Judd shared that sentiment when he said this about messaging and education, “I’ve been in classrooms where I had the opportunity to ask students why they are in school rather than out working. A lot of them didn’t know that they were in school because labor unions fought for child labor laws. I had to explain to them that they were able to go on vacations with their families because the labor movement fought for paid vacations and that the reasons their parents weren’t working 10 hours a day seven days a week is because we fought for 40-hour work-weeks.”

ORGANIZING AMERICA'S YOUNGEST WORKERS

HOW YOU CAN
RESPOND
AND STAY
UNION-FREE

HOW EMPLOYERS CAN RESPOND - AND REMAIN UNION-FREE

Despite organized labor's laser-focus on winning the minds of those young workers most susceptible to their message, there are positive steps that employers can take to stay ahead of union organizers and keep their organization union free.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO JUMP IN AND MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA.

Social media is different than a website. It's an interactive conversation, and everything that unions make available online in the interest of recruiting new members (and the responses they receive) is available to employers if they are willing to look. Because there is a great deal of information currently online, this task may be tedious and seem time-consuming, but it should be viewed as an important part of any union awareness and prevention strategy.

Twitter and Facebook both provide easy and excellent resources to gather information that unions publish concerning their latest organizing targets. This often includes the strategies and types of materials the unions may use to aid in their efforts. As an ongoing proactive, educational measure, an anonymous Twitter account can follow most major unions. Many union locals - something that may be even more useful to you - are also on board in many cases. On Facebook, an employer wouldn't necessarily want to monitor a pro-union account, but they can certainly check any non-private pages or groups. (NOTE: A labor attorney should be consulted in the event of an active organizing drive, in order to avoid any appearance of surveillance.)

Another option that both these sites offer is a "search" function, allowing users to type in a word - such as a company name - and see the latest tweets and status

Social Media Use By The Numbers Among Millennials

(born late 1980's to early 2000's)

41% Use Facebook Daily
35% Are on YouTube Daily
29% Use Instagram Daily
25% Use SnapChat Daily

Over 60% Say

"Social media is an important source of news and current affairs."

A quarter say they check social media first thing when they wake up

YouTube reaches more adults 18-34 than any single cable TV network.

62%

of Twitter users are under 34 years old

71% of those with Internet access have a Facebook profile

46 million Americans check social networking sites several times a day

updates. The larger the company, the greater number of results, but having information on what's trending in an industry, or local area can provide great insight.

Two Google options that help with social media monitoring include Google Alerts and Google Reader. Google Alerts will complete a recurring inquiry, based on selected keywords. Results can then be provided on a daily or weekly basis. Keyword suggestions include company name, competitor's names, and any relevant unions. With Google Reader, users can monitor RSS feeds in one easy-to-follow place. Many national unions - plus their allies - have set up blogs that provide insight into their latest strategies – of vital importance for employers.

One caveat: social media can take up a tremendous amount of time. It's best to set aside a certain amount of time each day (or week) to focus on the gathered information and respond or report as necessary.

FOCUS ON ISSUES THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOUNGER WORKERS.

There is truly no one-size-fits-all list of worker concerns, and that is especially true when a workforce consists of different generations. Beyond the traditional concerns of wages and benefits, younger job-seekers and workers tend to pay special attention to more non-traditional issues, such as:

- Work/ life balance: flexible hours and schedules, telecommuting options.
- Positive corporate culture: feeling connected with strong relationships
- Reputation & Global focus: working for a company that has a strong reputation in the world
- Challenging work: ready to contribute in a challenging environment
- Advancement opportunities: want to be able to “work up the corporate ladder.”

When evaluating their likelihood of success in organizing a company, one of the core issues that unions consider is employee concerns. But the key thing to remember is that “perception is reality.” It is important to younger workers that they can view their company as an employer of choice.

Anonymous employee surveys are a good initial gauge of this perception; along with open and frank ongoing dialogue between

employees and direct supervisors. Whenever an issue is raised, the company should review it and respond appropriately, particularly with younger workers who expect to be heard.

LET OBSTACLES BECOME ALLIES.

Finally, employers today have the ability to communicate with employees like never before. With so many options to reach workers, particularly younger workers, there are no excuses for not communicating.

In addition to communicating a union-free philosophy via traditional approaches such as videos, posters, flyers and meetings, there are a number of steps employers can take to reach younger workers in ways that feel familiar and credible to them.

By combining social media tools with an employee-centric website, such as a UnionFree.com site from the Union Proof team at Projections, companies can craft an excellent proactive resource for positive information on the company and counter future messages from union organizers.

These social media tools can be used to drive both employees and their families to the UnionFree.com website. Opt-in text messages or Tweets can send update notifications. Updated Facebook status messages can provide teaser information. Chances are, workers won't keep coming back to the same static website, but they will be very likely to click on a text or tweet from an employer that cares enough to keep them informed.

"BUT THE KEY THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT PERCEPTION IS REALITY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUNGER WORKERS THAT THEY CAN VIEW THEIR COMPANY AS AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE."

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