

Building the Union Through Internal Organizing

Internal organizing can be defined in different ways, but what it really comes down to is creating a good communication process for members throughout a bargaining unit.

For example, the Communication Action Network or a “CAN” is a great way to achieve active, two-way communication—an essential organizing tool. The “CAN” can work for organizing non-union members or for implementing a contract campaign. Either way, good communication is critical.

A good example of where a “CAN” recently worked well was during the “Battle for Seattle” contract campaign with the City of Seattle. Local 17 is the largest union at the City. However, it joined forces with all represented employees who were working in coalition to add more power.

By creating a network, the unions organized communication to share negotiation status reports and strategies for the members’ participation. For example, they used the CAN to communicate about coordinated actions such as emailing the City Council, wearing buttons and stickers, wearing red on payday and joining other members for a rally. Their diligence, through communication and involvement, made the difference for winning a fair contract, as opposed to settling for less.

Whether a formal CAN or a more informal structure is used, effective communication means each member receives information. The vehicle for communication can be through: surveys, newsletters, web pages, emails, phone calls, one-on-one conversations or meetings. The ultimate goal for internal organizing is one-on-one communication with each member.

How a CAN Works:

- It starts with a key group that works with the representative to build a network of communication based on the structure of the work site and the goals of the bargaining unit.
- While building the network, keep in mind that no one person should be overburdened. Therefore, no member should have the responsibility to talk to more than five members.
- The information goes both up and down the network. Communication gets passed down and feedback comes back up. That way, the bargaining team gets information back from the members of the bargaining unit to ensure that they are meeting the unit’s goals.

One critical detail of a CAN is to be aware of your workplace union communication rights. Every employer has different policies, procedures and rules. Be sure to check with your union representative and your contract to find out what the rights are at your particular work site are.

It is through the solidarity of the bargaining unit and each individual member, that can make the difference in what kind of contract you achieve. The real power of the union is you joining with your brothers and sisters—there is power in numbers. — *By Roberta Burnett, Local 17 Union Representative*



City of Seattle union members wore red on paydays and carried red balloons to show their solidarity.

please post and distribute at your workplace