

Real world impact



Philip
Dine

We've often addressed how to get our message out through the media to the public and its elected representatives. And we've frequently taken note of those of you who've done so.

We've also provided the rationale about why this is critical to our future. Today I'd like to offer some actual examples of the difference that effective communications—or the lack thereof—can make for labor unions.

Exhibit A is the failure a decade ago to pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) which—by penalizing employers who violate the law—would have made it harder for companies to discipline or fire workers seeking to form a union.

The measure was needed to protect rights often honored in the breach. Preventing retaliation against workers exercising their right to organize also would have brought millions of workers into a struggling labor movement—which is why union leaders regarded it as a matter of survival.

And it had significant political support. In fact, a promising young senator named Barack Obama (D-IL) had co-sponsored it in the Senate and then, as a presidential candidate, promised to sign it into law.

But nothing happened: no presidential effort to push it along, no congressional action, no improvement to labor law, no help for workers needing a union—and no infusion of new members into the labor movement.

Why? Largely because labor lacked a coherent communications strategy. Its TV ads, for example, were sporadic, belated and unpersuasive. Business groups seized the initiative, running spots early on that made it seem like union “bosses” wanted to tilt the scales in their favor—when in fact labor just wanted to level the playing field so the *actual* bosses could no longer coerce workers.

With labor unable to generate public interest, politicians faced no constituent pressure—hardly anyone even knew what EFCA stood for—and so lawmakers focused attention elsewhere.

Sometimes it's as simple as missing golden opportunities. In St. Louis, for example, defense aerospace workers saved millions in tax dollars, while improving safety for our troops, by using their shop-floor experience—and the input they had thanks to their union—to propose reconfiguring the assembly process for fighter jets in a more coherent and cost-effective manner.

Relief for taxpayers, protection for servicemen and women—a pretty powerful message about the value of unions. Or it could have been, had anyone bothered to tell people.

In those all-too-infrequent instances when labor does develop and deliver a compelling message, the results can be powerful.

Consider the Mississippi Delta and a case that perhaps reflected necessity being the mother of invention. In this labor-unfriendly setting, 1,200 black women went on strike against the world's biggest catfish cooperative, run by 180 wealthy white farmers.

The farmers held all the cards. The \$2 billion pond-raised catfish industry was rapidly replacing cotton as a top employer in the state, and some of the farmers sat on the boards of banks that held the women's mortgages. The company's attorney doubled as the town's mayor.

Faced with daunting odds, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union put together a communications strategy both highly imaginative and attentive to detail. The UFCW made this a saga not of pay scales but of human dignity. Union leaders left the spotlight to the women, who spoke of “the plantation mentality brought into the building,” including being limited to six restroom visits a week.

Rather than seeking high-profile but passing national media coverage, the plan focused on regional reporters in a few cities with large minority populations, locally owned supermarkets sensitive to public sentiment, strong UFCW locals and high catfish consumption so the story would resonate locally and also so, when the union—aware that the company's perishable product was a vulnerability—eventually called for a catfish boycott, the effect would be devastating.

The public's imagination was captured, the owners were put on the defensive, and within a few months the women overwhelmingly approved a contract that raised their pay by 20 percent, rehired all strikers, set up a joint labor-management safety committee and removed the dehumanizing work rules.

Crafting and communicating a message that resonates with the public and shows labor's continuing relevance and value is, I would argue, labor's biggest challenge. The case is there to be made, especially at a time when the middle class is shrinking.

If labor wants some guidelines, it need look no further than the nation's letter carriers, who not only deliver the mail but also deliver an inspiring message that has changed the national conversation on topics that matter to us.

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Donna Peremes

The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

© 2018 by the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS? Contact the Membership Department.

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube by going to NALC.org.

