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Breaking the Information Blockade: Labor, the Internet, Social Media and Communication Technology

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Breaking the Information Blockade: Labor, the Internet, Social Media and Communication Technology

Abstract

Labor's lack of engagement with media, and particularly its failure to create its own media to get its' message out, to support workers in their struggles, and to educate working people on various issues affecting them have been a major impediment to people's struggles in this country and elsewhere. Examples are been provided to illustrate some of the things that could be done if aggressively pursued, with a special look at the 2010 lockout of USW workers in Metropolis, Illinois, and these workers' skillful use of the media.

Keywords

Social Media, Labor, Organized Labor, Media Strategy

Cover Page Footnote

Steve Zeltzer is a member of the Pacific Media Workers Guild, CWA, in San Francisco. He also produces Work Week Radio on KPFA, Pacifica Radio. Zeltzer is a founder of Labortech.net, Labornet.org and Laborfest.net, the latter of which produces an annual labor culture arts festival commemorating the 1934 San Francisco General Strike. He also produces labor videos, such as "Halfway to Hell, the Workers and Unions that Built the Golden Gate Bridge," narrated by Danny Glover.

In the midst of the biggest attack on labor in the post-World War II period, the national unions of the United States spent over \$200 million dollars in the last election cycle.¹ Despite the massive investment, their candidate, Hillary Clinton, was defeated.

They now face an aggressive corporate ideological attack with the Republicans in charge of both houses and the Executive Branch, and with a conservative-leaning Supreme Court.

While spending somewhere around a quarter of a billion dollars on politicians, the unions have refused to develop an assertive media program that is designed to win the allegiance and support of working people, both here in the United States and around the world, to win, fight-back, educate and/or generally advance the interests of unions and working people, even in light of the failures of politicians or unfavorable court decisions. Among other things, this would involve committing significant sources to set up a national labor channel on the internet or labor streaming channels linked to their websites, and utilizing their local websites to provide regular programming on working class and labor issues and history. It involves empowering their members, encouraging them to use their skills and talents to spread labor's values and ideas, while defending our organizations and our peoples.

The need to counter the corporate attack on labor today is obviously an important issue.

The likely decision in the Janus case that is before the Supreme Court threatens public worker unions by likely eliminating the agency shop, and possibly requiring re-recognition after the expiration of every contract. These legal attacks are particularly aimed to break the back of public unions nationally. These public unions represent the majority of unionized workers in the United States and the corporations will see the defeat of these unions as a major body blow, and will encourage the development of open shop campaigns in every state, including New York and California.

Already with 28 states now "right to work," the anti-labor tide is growing. In Wisconsin, for example, since Governor Scott Walker's 2011 attack on the labor movement (see Buhle and Buhle, eds., 2012; Nichols, 2012; Scipes, 2017; Yates, ed., 2012), AFSCME has lost more than 70% of their members in the state. The capitalists hope for the same results nationally with the upcoming Supreme Court decision.

The need for labor to get its act together today could not be any more important; and a key arena of struggle is the ideological struggle in and around the media.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND LABOR

One technological development in communications has been the internet and the use of social media and the internet by working people to make and produce their own media that is helpful in organizing and educating millions of people in the United States. Facebook and You Tube have become the communication vehicle of choice for the majority of youth in the United States, and have been actively used by social movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter. The Occupy Wall Street movement used live streaming at its many sites around the country to get the issues out about the working class and capitalism.

The growth of mass movements also provides powerful media platforms.

The use of video on social media has had an explosive effect on the role of police in black communities, as the racist targeting and murdering of African Americans by the police has been in some cases streamed live to millions. During the Eric Garner protest march in New York City, over two million people watched on line as the protesters marched through the city, protesting the police murder of Garner.

Despite having very few resources, unlike labor, these movements have used new media to get their issues and stories out.

The unions are still behind the ball.

Labor has failed to educate working people.

One example is the failure to educate working people about what “right to work” is and how harmful it is to all working people and the public at large. In fact, the only video documentary that has been produced about “right to work” was not done by an American union, but was done by the Ontario Public Service Employee Union (OPSEU), which faced the danger of a former Walmart manager becoming the premier of Ontario, with a program that included turning Ontario into a “right to work” province (see OPSEU SEF, 2013).

Media and Education Lacking

With unions, and particularly public worker unions, facing a major loss of membership, the AFL-CIO has not re-opened its’ closed Education Department, yet the issue of labor education is crucial if the unions are to go on the offensive politically.

The critical necessity of labor history documentaries and labor programs on health and safety, worker rights, immigrant rights and all the issues facing working people need to be addressed and available for free on a national labor channel. This is especially important due to the lack of information on the role of the labor movement historically in this country, as well as to help immigrants understand better the country to which they’ve migrated.

Making NAFTA Better Under Trump

Is it any surprise, again, that the labor movement has not had one video documentary on the cost of NAFTA for workers in the US, Mexico and Canada, and are even calling on Trump to make NAFTA better under his regime?

The failure to use social media in English and Spanish to expose NAFTA and who it benefits is striking. The Trump regime is now pushing to make NAFTA more like the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership). At the same time, the AFL-CIO, the Teamsters, IAM (International Association of Machinists) and the CWA (Communication Workers of America), along with many of the unions, are building a campaign of electronic emails to the Trump government to make NAFTA better.

Failure to Share Viewpoints with Members

Although the AFL-CIO has regular labor events and press conferences at their national office, they also have no media channel and do not regularly record even their own events at their offices in Washington D.C. The reliance on the capitalist media to cover the voices of labor is, of course, a serious problem in the US and internationally, and a failure of organized labor. Even labor press conferences can be video-taped and streamed live, yet most unions fail to do either.

Some unions like the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) streamed their last national union convention, yet most national unions, including the CWA, do not stream their conventions even to their own members, even though their members are paying for these conventions with their dues. The AFL-CIO as well does not stream its’ national convention, which will be held at the end of October in St. Louis.

Labor has not generally used the media for organizing.

This is not to say that social media and the internet have not been used at all for organizing, but this has been a marginal focus of most of the AFL-CIO unions, as well as those that left the AFL-CIO and who created the Change to Win labor center, including the SEIU (Service Employees International Union), IBT (International Brotherhood of Teamsters), UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) and UFWA (United Farm Workers of America).

Today, as unions struggle at organization drives at Delta Airlines or the most recent union fight at Nissan, there was no national campaign using the media to go on the offensive.

During the campaign of the CWA at virulently anti-labor Delta Airlines, no widespread mobilization was ever made at Delta sales offices throughout the country, nor was there any media campaign to explain developments. Instead, the campaign focused on the Delta workers alone.

At the Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi, there was no national campaign by the UAW at all to target Nissan dealerships, opposing the attack on democratic labor rights by Nissan. While the UAW put out a few videos with interviews with the workers there, was no broad campaign to link up the struggle with organizing throughout the country.

Union supporter and actor, Danny Glover, who was interviewed by independent labor reporter Mike Elk, called for a national campaign to support the unionization fight: “Nissan spent millions of dollars on lawyers, radio, TV, and social media to create this campaign of fear and intimidation,” says Glover. “In an exclusive podcast interview with Payday Report, Glover lays out his plans for leading a global campaign to put consumer and governmental pressure on Nissan” (see Elk, 2017). The question again is why the UAW refused to do this from the beginning of the campaign?

The same was also the case in the UAW fight at union recognition fight at Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Again, the UAW bureaucracy refused to mobilize its’ members nationally, nor did it engage the AFL-CIO to organize actions throughout the country. At a presentation on February 24, 2014 at the University of California at Berkeley’s Boalt Law School, former UAW president Bob King admitted that he was surprised that there would be a massive media political campaign of intimidation and propaganda against the union in the election. In fact, Tennessee Republican Senator Bob Corker even threatened to illegally withhold state funding to VW if the workers voted for the union. The UAW, of course, refused to launch any political campaign demanding legal prosecution for threatening to use state money in an election.²

In the last auto contract negotiations with Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, the UAW was seeking to push a weak concession contract, and this led to a major social media controversy as workers went to Facebook and other websites to speak out about the effort to push the contract. The UAW officials hired a PR firm, Berlin Rosen, to sell the contract in social media, and this firm has been hired as well to organize and publicize the campaign to organize at Tesla in Fremont, California (Snively, 2015).

SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET

There are some important lessons of organizing using the media, and especially today, with using social media and the internet.

One of the most important and successful union media campaigns even before the web was the 1997 strike of UPS (United Parcel Service) by the IBT during the presidency of Ron Carey. The Teamsters organized internally at UPS but also ran a massive publicity campaign fighting part time work and for the right to a full time job. The campaign was so successful that the *New York Times* lamented after the strike that Carey had convinced the public that they union was leading the fight for full time work (Allen, 2017).

A more recent and interesting case of using social media was the effort to expose UBER when the company used the attacks on Muslim immigrants by Trump to do a price surge to JFK airport in New York. Many of the drivers are themselves Muslims, and they protested UBER making profit off the attacks on immigrants. It also led to a major social media movement with the twitter hashtag “#DeleteUber.” This national action was so successful that it created a major crisis for the company and resulted in significant loss of market share to competitor Lyft (see [here](#)). This massive electronic protest against UBER is an example of the potential of using social media by labor to target and mobilize against these anti-labor corporations.

The use of social media played a critical factor in linking up Wal-Mart workers though out the United States. Barbara Gertz, a Walmart worker in Colorado, has said that their website and social media use were critical in bringing together not only Walmart workers in general but injured Walmart workers throughout the country. She is a leader of the Health and Safety Campaign of Our Walmart (Gertz, 2015).

Their website helped tell the stories of injured Walmart workers and the flagrant violations of their health and safety rights by Walmart, and also the criminal fraud to prevent insured Walmart workers from getting workers compensation. W.E. Stand Together, Our Walmart and Making Change At

Walmart organizing vehicles would not have been possible without the excellent use of social media by Walmart union organizers (see also [here](#) and [here](#)).

The SEIU has supported the national campaign of Fight for \$15. This is another national campaign that has extensively used Facebook and You Tube to get their messaging and stories out, including the conditions of McDonald's for fast food workers and service workers throughout the country. This campaign has brought tens of thousands of low paid service workers around the country onto the street with demands for a living wage (see [here](#)).³ However, the SEIU also has no national labor channel that could have live programming and link up all members of the union and their struggles throughout the country.

One of the most important strikes in the last six years was the CWA national strike against Verizon in 2011. The CWA organized successful protests throughout the country at many Verizon stores, yet the union refused to have a national live streaming channel that could have linked up these workers and actions and helped build solidarity (see video [here](#)).

And at their recent, short-lived strike against AT&T, there was no national channel and the use of social media and twitter by the CWA to go on the offensive against AT&T, while linking up all AT&T workers throughout the country

Lessons from the 2010 Metropolis USW Honeywell Lockout

The critical necessity of a labor media strategy with many platforms and tools was illustrated at Honeywell, which locked out 228 United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7-699 members in Metropolis, Illinois in 2010. The workers were isolated and badly needed national and international support if they were to be successful. Linking this local struggle nationally and internationally with other Honeywell workers and the labor movement was critical in successfully fighting Honeywell, which processed nuclear fuel at the plant. They were invited to and attended the 2010 LaborTech conference, and helped established a streaming channel to build support for their struggle in the US and internationally. Stephen Lech, a leader of the local, spoke on their struggle and that was streamed live at the LaborTech conference (see [here](#)).

This was vital part in building support for the workers and exposing the criminal violations of health and safety issues by Honeywell. They ended up having international solidarity meetings with Honeywell workers from throughout the world streamed on line, and were obviously becoming a serious problem for Honeywell. (For an account of the workers' victory, see Elk, 2011.)

Taking advantage of this global communications technology

This concrete example of using communication technology to take up the fight needs to be replicated by workers throughout the country and internationally.⁴

Labornet.org and other labor media workers and unions internationally are also supporting the development of an international labor channel. The need of unions to directly link up with workers in every country of the world is a key component in fighting the multinational corporations that run the world economy. A channel <http://ilmlivestream.com> has been set up to help this project and the obvious need to directly link up workers in every country of the world is part of defending workers in every country.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

With over 12 million members, unions could start to use this power to target anti-labor companies with a national electronic actions and with collective action using social media and other communication technology. However, to make this happen, workers must be trained on how to use the media and build a labor media movement: officials at the top do not have the time nor the space to do this and do it well, despite its obvious necessity, but it carries some risk to these officials.

The idea that workers themselves could be trained on how to use media and build a labor media movement is not only not only alien to these officials but dangerous since these workers might use these same tools to challenge these officials.

This also exposes the real political problem, not just with the UAW but many other unions in the United States. These unions publicly support the capitalists' right to rule, and many are in labor-management partnerships with many of these same union-busting companies that are pushing for a union-free environment nationally.

Internal labor media

One union that has taken a lead on using media and streaming technology is the NNU (National Nurses Union). They have streamed their rallies and national actions throughout the country. With the massive cutback of journalists throughout the newspaper industry, a union having their own broadcast vehicle is critical to get their stories out uncensored, but NNU's recognition of this is an exception (see <https://vimeo.com/nationalnursesunited>).

Other efforts

There have been other efforts to "spread the word."

The Union Producers and Programmers Network (UPPNET) was an organization of labor union media activists and producers throughout the country that operated from the early 1990s to 2006. UPPNET sought to support such streaming and the development of a national labor tv channel, but most union leaderships were not interested or even fearful of having such a channel on the internet and on cable (see [here](#)).

Despite these major weaknesses there is a growing movement of labor media activists who are using the media to link up their struggles. Amazon workers have even organized a website to build support for their struggle (see [here](#)).

The power of social media and streaming to tell workers stories and break the information blockade is vital if labor is to defend itself. The ideological struggle against capitalism—from privatization and outsourcing to union busting and global capital—cannot be challenged without using these tools.

In 1990, an organization called LaborTech.net was formed and had regular national and international conferences where workers and union have been trained on how to use these technologies. Building an education and training campaign that can be used as a powerful weapon to fight these companies and allow the use of new communication technology to strengthen labor.

At the recent CWA 2017 national convention, a resolution again was submitted to develop a national labor channel and even a CWA national channel, yet no action was taken by the union. Remember, this union represents videographers, camera persons and thousands of journalists from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and recently new digital services like VICE and the Real News Network.

One project that came out of LaborTech conferences was the establishment of the labor news headline service, Workers Independent News Service (see [here](#)). This is the only regular daily labor news headlines service that is picked up both by unions and other non-commercial and commercial radio broadcasters. It operates on a very low budget but provides regular labor programming nationally.

CONCLUSION

In this article, attention has been focused on labor's lack of engagement with media, and particularly its failure to create its own media to get its' message out, to support workers in their struggles, and to educate working people on various issues affecting them. This is a major impediment to people's struggles in this country and elsewhere. Examples have been provided to illustrate some of the things that could be done if aggressively pursued, with a special look at the 2010 lockout of USW workers in Metropolis, Illinois, and these workers' skillful use of the media. It has also been suggested that training

union members and getting them involved will enhance the visibility, viability, and chances of success for most unions.

The escalating attacks on labor demand unions start thinking largely, and engaging their members to do so. They don't have to roll over and play dead; they can fight. But that means mobilizing, training and organizing their members to do so—and labor media is one tool that begs for further development.

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- 1 Totals calculated from amounts listed for federal candidates reported by [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org), a project sponsored by the Center for Responsive Politics. Data on-line at <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/list.php?cycle=2016>.
 - 2 It also did not help that in the midst of the recent Nissan UAW vote, the wife of the former UAW Vice President General Hollielfield and other officials were indicted for illegally getting millions of dollars of money from a joint UAW-Chrysler Training fund in order to push concessions on the workers. Also, the same Bob King was personally aware of the financial irregularities by UAW Vice President Holiefield according to court documents.
 - 3 Unfortunately, the SEIU, which was backing this effort, had also contracted out the organizers of this campaign and refused to even pay them \$15 an hour for their work (see Moberg, 2016).
 - 4 There are a number of efforts around the world to increase communication within and between labor organizations, whose work might be of interest. One is Labour Start, out of the UK (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LabourStart>), which communicates news and information about labor globally. Another is the Australian-Asian Worker Links, which covers Asia and Australia. For more information, and put into a theoretical context, see Scipes, 2016.