

## Tomorrow's CyberUnions: Labor's BEST Bet!

Arthur B. Shostak

*Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA 19104*

To think usefully about Organized Labor today is to think immediately about tomorrow, so fast and thoroughgoing are the changes with which Labor must deal. In particular, expectations concerning Labor's current and prospective use of computers are very exciting: Little wonder certain academics now contend "employee organizations will prosper in cyberspace because the Internet is the bridging technology between an increasingly heterogeneous work force and individualistic workers and the collective activity and solidarity that lie at the heart of trade unionism." (Freeman and Thomas, in Taylor)

As for computer use tomorrow, Organized Labor should be busy preparing for mind-boggling changes: Internet cognoscenti, for example, "are betting they will soon rekindle the mega-innovation of the Web's early days [a mere ten years ago] S~ a world of pervasive computing that lets people communicate more efficiently than ever." (Ante)

For example, by the end of 2002 there may be more mobile devices than PCs accessing the Internet, so powerful appears the next "killer ap," the "teleputer" (otherwise known as an advanced wireless mobile phone). Keen competition in 2002, however, is expected from Microsoft's Tablet PC, a portable book-sized three pound wireless "wonder." Proponents hail it as "a revolutionary device that actually replaces the laptop in your briefcase and the PC on your desk." (Levy; April 30, 2001) By 2007 as many as 59% of all Americans (up from two percent today) are expected to own a device that can access mobile data. (Gunther)

Where stationary PCs are concerned, knowledgeable forecasters expect household penetration to plateau at about 73 percent by 2005, up from 57 percent in 2000, an expansion that underlines the increasing number of unionists able to use Labor Web sites and access Labor e-mail from their living room. (Baker).

Union households already outdistance all households in possession of at least one PC (some 60% in January, 2000), and this gap is likely to persist, if not widen. (Lazarovici)

By 2007, then, a significant number of union influentials (officers and members) may carry a compact picture-phone and computer and dictate to it by voice and listen to it in turn. They may use it to access any type of information, anywhere, at anytime. To stay in touch with significant others all the time. To send and receive messages in all languages, as if their own. To surf the Internet and Web with the stress-less help of "smart" software that provides useful information even before they ask for it.

As if these hardware advances are not exciting enough, Organized Labor should be studying group collaborative software now touted as "the next great turn of the wheel." (Ellis) Known as peer-to-peer (p-to-p) programming, it circumvents centralized computer infrastructure and allows PCs to talk directly with one another. Its creator, Ray Ozzie, believes it offers the "directness and spontaneity of a phone call, the visual immediacy of a fax, the asynchrony of e-mail, and the privacy of a closed-door meeting." (Ozzie, in Green) Proponents expect p-to-p to enable users (such as far-flung union activists) to work easier and more creatively with one another than ever before possible. Skeptics agree it will be used very broadly, but dismiss it as "only" another technology. (Gomes).

If only half of these glittering possibilities are soon realized, the rest are likely to be very close behind. The impact is likely to continue to change reality dramatically, as it has since we entered the Information Age. S~ especially for social movements like Organized Labor, and for every one and every thing else.

I. *Labor's Challenge*. The central question for Labor in the early years of the 21st century asks - What is Labor to do - about its computer use challenge? Plainly, on-going efforts by the AFL-CIO and its 64 affiliates to use computer power may help slow, stem, and possibly even reverse Labor's long term on-going decline. The harder question asks if Labor has the will and "smarts" to go beyond conventional uses and dare to employ a fresh model, one with computer use at its core, rather than its

periphery, one I call the F-I-S-T model (more on this later).

While emphatically not a "magic bullet," computerization makes possible wide scale communications of dazzling speed and enormous outreach (national and international). It enables unprecedented access by members to office-holders, and timely exchanges of views among them, as well as among the members themselves (via electronic bulletin boards and chat rooms, including some valuable ones run unofficially by the "Loyal Opposition"). It bolsters mobilization for political action and strike support. And it facilitates corporate campaigns that would otherwise overwhelm with complexity and data.

Where locals are concerned, computerization enables International Representatives and Business Agents to download reams of relevant material (grievance and arbitration records, previous contracts, etc.). This enables them to use their laptop on the spot to do a high quality job directly on the shop or office floor. As well, locals can create electronic list serves to link together an entire membership, appeal to prospective members, address sub-cultures differently, and in other overdue ways, build a new form of "electronic community," a 21st-century adaptation of solidarity.

Where labor militancy is concerned, intriguing new tools are under consideration: Unions might encourage members to shut down or in other ways impede the use of their computers at work. Or they could create "picket lines" in cyberspace. Or urge boycotts of the products or services of targeted employers, and do this faster and with far wider coverage via the Internet than was ever possible relying on old-fashioned mailings.

Contrariwise, concerning a rare, if desirable possibility, a local's effort to co-create a high-performance workplace in partnership with a cooperative employer, a Labor computer system (like Groove, discussed above) could facilitate employee dialogue about overdue workplace boosts to productivity - complete with a union imprimatur.

Accordingly, although unable alone to "rescue" Labor, gains from computer use in efficiency and effectiveness might help attract many new members. Computer use could also help bolster support of existing members (always Labor's best organizers). And, in 101 other significant ways, it could rapidly aid Labor's urgent efforts at recovery. (See, in this connection, <http://workingfamilies.ibelong.com/> and <http://afscme.org/publications/puttc.htm>).

I. *Background.* When, over 30 years ago, Labor first got involved with mainframe computers, they were used to meet awesome needs in record keeping posed by dues and fringe benefit matters. Word-processing desktop PCs followed, and in due course, certain especially progressive unions and locals began to employ laptops and the e-mail power of the Internet and the World Wide Web, albeit in an uneven and hesitant manner.

Were this all there was to the computer use-by-Labor story it would reduce only to a minor tale of bureaucratic modernization, a necessary, but insufficient explanation for Labor's (precarious) persistence. However, while commonly overlooked, aspects of this tale of technology adoption are, in fact, much richer matters.

Of late, computerization has begun to challenge the status quo in many critical aspects of modern unionism (and modern life alike). Components of trade unionism all the way from A (accountability) to Z (Zeitgeist) are being substantially altered, especially where decisive matters of internal administration are concerned. (Lee)

Symbolic here is the conversion of the AFL-CIO News, a bland, prosaic, mind-dulling house organ that John Sweeney inherited in 1996 on assuming the presidency of the AFL-CIO. Much to his credit, his aides quickly turned it into a bright, brassy, and "hip" publication now called America @ Work. Nearly every issue has a page devoted to Internet sites and cyberspace tools worth union attention.

If Labor is to make more of the possibilities here, much will hinge on still open answers to these five questions: 1) What are unions and locals really getting out their current use of computers? 2) What are the major causes of concern? 3) What are the relevant types of unions and locals? 4) What sets a CyberUnion (a term I coined; much more on this later) apart from existing types? And, 5) So what? What is at really at stake?

Given an inexcusable neglect by scholars of this subject (this pioneering issue of Working USA is the first to pay the topic warranted attention), and, given the related paucity of available data, only very tentative answers can be shared at this time, answers that hopefully will earn further testing and refinement. (1)

II. *Areas of Advancement.* Four key aspects of internal affairs appear significantly improved by Labor's use of computer power. Just about every aspect of unionism has been impacted, but the four - alliance-building, communications, organizing, and staff development efforts - are at the forefront in demonstrating whether any of this is really making a valued difference.

1. Alliance-building has always been a priority, with unions and locals alike seeking strategic ties to other bodies within Labor and to various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) outside the Labor Movement.

In the past, however, this has generally meant burdensome file drawers stuffed to overflow with clippings and correspondence, etc. Union officers confronted a mountain of "must call!" pink phone slips on a desktop spindle. Business cards piled up from contacts only vaguely remembered. Much of the information quickly grew stale and useless.

Results disappointed everyone, and the priority of alliances fell, even if rhetoric urging gains here did not diminish in volume and ceremonial frequency.

Today, reliance on computers means electronic files that can save space, are timely, and can with reasonable effort be kept current - thanks to e-mail exchanges designed to update information. Phone calls give way to real-time e-mail exchanges (complete with a "paper trail"). As well, a

union or a local can discretely assess the Web site of a prospective allied organization. It can determine privately whether to seek a new alliance in a coordinated boycott, educational venture, lobbying effort, picket line, or the like. And it can determine - in discrete dialogue with other labor bodies - whether to offer assistance.

2. Communications has historically involved a staid house organ, poorly attended meetings, and many (commonly ignored) mailings. The "message" generally came from the top down, and was commonly innocuous or deafening (and was just as commonly under-valued by many recipients, staff and rank-and-filers alike).

Today, millions of members of the 61 AFL-CIO's affiliates (out of 64) with a Web site can at a click of a mouse have access to facts, figures, documents, archives, rules, regulations, photos, videos, etc. They can re-sort this material to suit their own purposes, and they can request additional material - including streaming video subject matter and other fascinating forms of communications they are coming to expect from their locals and International Unions

Shop Stewards, for example, can access revealing profiles of active mediators and arbitrators (their biases, idiosyncrasies, standards, etc.).

They can access data on labor law cases and precedents. And they can secure field-proven clues as to how best handle a grievance, arbitration, etc., in light of yesterday's major decisions, clues the computer can format as an electronic tutorial or rulebook.

Members can be briefed immediately about fast-breaking developments, and kept abreast almost in a real-time mode. E-mails can now go out in a 24/7 (day-long; every day) format as part of a remarkable new "web" of timely communications never possible before with mail, phone, or fax.

Especially novel is the opportunity computer-based communication has made possible for a vast upgrade in a very old effort to forge strong bonds among unions around the world (an effort Marx and Gompers alike aided). With an estimated 2,700 Labor Union Web sites on-line now, and more being added weekly, the opportunities for networking are enormous.

(Freeman and Thomas, in Taylor)

Although not well known by most unionists here, various federations overseas have tried to promote international solidarity for decades (such as the ICEM, with its 403 union affiliates in 113 countries). But making phone connections and/or airmail use has always been a hindrance. Today, e-mails flash back and forth almost in real time, aiding the conduct of far-flung port boycotts, intricate corporate campaigns, and other coordinated international activities.

Perhaps the most far-reaching change in Labor's communications involves the newfound ability of members to reach one another... independent of officialdom. Until recently, a member could do so only through the union's newspaper or magazine, and then only if the editors agreed. Today, grass-roots activists are busy on a 24/7 basis exchanging uncensored advice, views, and visions. Caucuses of like-minded members can link together in an e-mail list serve or through a shared Web site. Solidarity is built, and the cause of union democracy can receive a very strong boost. (More on this, known as Transactional Computing, later).

3. Organizing has previously been a neglected step-child, receiving only about five percent of the annual budget and little respect from many stand-patters (often waiting out their retirement, or disinclined to assume the heartaches that came with having to service a lot of new members with unreasonable and untutored expectations).

Today, however, in response to the crisis posed by Labor's steady numerical decline, and the unrelenting pressure from the Sweeney Administration, many unions and locals are spending more money and effort than ever before - with computers strategic in the process. Many leads are coming in cyberspace to union Web sites specifically designed to attract non-members reaching out for help. Organizers are immediately advised by Web Masters via e-mail whom they are to rush to contact. The computer also draws a roadmap to the home of a prospective member, and provides an analysis of the company, industry, and labor market history involved in this specific case.

Especially intriguing is the possibility that unions might soon use the Internet to organize "minority" locals inside a workplace as yet unorganized. Incubators for unionism, these computer-based "locals" could collaborate via list serves with one another around the country, trading field-proven advice and lending precious morale support. These unofficial "locals" could make a case for formal unionization by proving useful to their surreptitious members and promoting solidarity - even as participants wait until the times are propitious for seeking an open card count or NLRB election (Freeman and Diamond, in Taylor).

Another less-heralded aspect of this matter, organizing the organized, can also receive a major boost from Labor's use of computer power. Local unions in particular can use their Web site as a 24/7 "newspaper," rich in very current coverage of the activities of members. Photos of participants in a rally, a picket line, a union picnic, or a meeting can appear within a few hours of the event (or sooner!). Immediate news of births, deaths, retirements, etc., can be proudly carried, the sort of homey material that used to grow stale in a once-a-month prosaic union paper, but now can excite and please members who appreciate a bit of positive recognition.

Especially creative Web masters can use their site to offer members a swap service. Or for a garage sale outlet. Or for a recipe-exchange page. Or for other "down home" services valued by a membership that comes thereby to think first of the local's Web site when seeking valuable information. In this way new bonds can be forged between local officialdom and dues-payers, bonds that may yet help secure the highly rewarding volunteer services of rank-and-file organizers.

4. Staff development efforts, while not as poorly treated as was organizing, have also suffered from neglect and low priority. They were commonly under-funded, sporadic, uneven, and poorly assessed. Inadequate backing meant meager results, with ensuing inefficiencies, uneven effectiveness, high staff turnover or burnout, low morale, and other costly consequences.

Today, however, Labor knows it can and must do better. Staff obsolescence threatens unacceptable chaos, especially where getting the staff up to speed in computer use capabilities is concerned. Accordingly, tutorials on line or through computer workshops are increasingly common, and are budgeted for as a necessity.

As if this wasn't enough, a new type of staffer has been added to the lineup: a Labor Union computer specialist. These talented (and often expensive) individuals help assure the adequacy of the union's computer system, offer staff training, prop up the computer work of key officers, prepare power point presentations, and in general, keep the organization "on line." (Katz)

In all, then, four key aspects of internal administration - building alliances, getting the word out (and back), recruiting new members (and re-organizing old ones), and upgrading the human capital of the union's or local's staff - would seem to benefit considerably from computer use.

III. *Areas of Concern.* Five sources of anxiety stand out, and restrain Labor's use of computer power. While some of this can be traced to the newness of applications, it is still unclear how much will respond to gains in experience and the passage of time.

1. Many in Labor worry about a potential erosion in face-to-face contact, arguably Labor's greatest asset in earning and holding onto members. Dues-payers like to feel recognized (and valued) by union officialdom, a feeling that impersonal e-mails may not convey. "Pressing the flesh" and "showing your face" are practices many in labor think indispensable, regardless of the time-and-energy saving (cyberspace) alternatives championed by Labor's digerati.

2. Many in Labor worry about loudmouths and troublemakers monopolizing dialogue in non-moderated chat rooms and bulletin boards.

They fear that "crazy talk" will drive others away, and undermine the entire medium. They also worry that thin-skinned officers will be hurt by outrageous posted criticism, and insist on either strong censorship or a shutdown.

3. Many in Labor worry about a Generation Gap that separates older leaders from young "hot shop" types. The younger leaders are often impatient to get on with it, to rush the computerization process faster than the older (pre-computer) leaders are comfortable with - a rift that exacerbates the natural divide between the generations - and undermines solidarity.

4. Many in Labor worry about loss of confidentiality. They fear that hackers and others possibly in the pay of government RICO "snoops," union busters, union-hating employers, or the dangerous like, will break into union data banks and files, much to the union's dismay.

As well, when a Federal Court in April of 2000 ordered seizure and search of the home computers of 21 flight attendants suspected of coordinating via e-mail an illegal sick out, a chill went through Organized Labor that has left its mark. Never before had a court given an employer the right to tap the equivalent of a home phone, search for incriminating data on 43 people (many more than the 21 attendants), and "invaded" private homes. Although fought by Ralph Nader's Public Citizen's litigation group and other like organizations, the story stays alive in Labor's oral culture - and scares many computer users (Wieffering and Kennedy).

5. Finally, many in Labor worry about the overload that e-mails entail in work lives already stretched to the limit. Union staffers complain of their inability to keep up with electronic messages rushing in, and earmarked for rapid response, almost regardless of the situation of the receiver. Many staffers resent heightened expectations on them to respond almost immediately via e-mail to scores of daily e-mail queries, even while their previous workload weighs heavy. As well, top officers often shift their e-mail response load to staffers with blithe indifference.

Some staffers grumble about an unreasonable speedup, made all the less bearable by the absence of any commensurate increase in salary. Paltry utterly fail to assuage the pain. And rumors of high salaries required to hire and retain computer specialists only rub salt in the wound.

All five current anxieties - possible erosion in face-to-face relations, loss of control over the medium, Generation rift, loss of confidentiality, and (unappreciated) work overload - can serve as a valuable call for overdue reforms: None need prove a paralyzing self-fulfilling prophecy.

Remedies are available, such as special schooling (private, discrete, and exceedingly sensitive) for older union leaders in how to use computers. Password protection schemes (as used now by the AFL-CIO and various unions) would help. (Levy) And, redistributed workloads, the hiring of additional aides, and overdue salary increases for those genuinely overloaded by computer inputs would go a long way in remedying problems.

IV. *Three Patterns of Computer Use: A Division of the House.* Given the pattern above of gains and pains associated with current computer use by Labor, three models seem to dominate the scene. Arranged below in an original typology boldly designed to cover 64 International Unions and 35,000 or so local unions, the typology obviously cannot exhaust all the variations extant. However, it does highlight major variations, and, in the absence of any alternative scheme, should help advance study of the subject. Better yet, it invites attention to a fourth model (the F-I-S-T variation) , one without an earthly counterpart to date, an ideal type of union and local that beckons from the horizon.

The first contemporary model, which I call Cyber Naught, involves minimum employ of computer potentialities. Cyber Naught unions and locals generally hesitate to go beyond staid reliance on computer-based bookkeeping. They pretend little has changed around them, deny being under pressure to modernize their use of computers, and essentially sleepwalk through time. Their members, although grievously under-

served by the absence of progressive computer uses, seem only to shrug and focus their attention elsewhere, a dereliction of responsibility that serves no one well.

The second model, Cyber Drift, has labor organizations move spasmodically first in this direction where computer uses are concerned, and then that, unable to maturely guide their own efforts. Crippled by unthinking adaptation of incompatible, if glitzy and trendy equipment and software, Cyber Drift unions and locals disappoint unionists eager to believe Labor has much to gain from computer use. They remind one of the drunk found searching under a lamp post for his keys because of its light overhead, and not because that is where he thinks he may have dropped them.

The third model, Cyber Gain, wins accolades for its state-of-the-art accomplishments where computers are concerned. Ironically, however, its lasting significance may be to set the stage for the emergence soon of its necessary successor, the CyberUnion, today only an alluring distant possibility. Unless and until Cyber Gain organizations are succeeded by the CyberUnion variety, Organized labor will continue to sub-optimize its possibilities here, and remain far more vulnerable than is necessary or tenable.

1. *Ostrich Approach*. Where the internal operations of a union are concerned, Cyber Naught labor organizations seek to preserve and persist, rather than to update or innovate. They employ computers primarily to satisfy traditional business needs, as in accounting and bookkeeping (payroll data; etc.).

Put starkly, Cyber Naught unions and locals use computers to get through the day, and do so in a flat and uninspired way. Labor officials and members settle for inertia and quietism so much as if Toffler's 1970 classic, Future Shock, had not been written, complete with its urgings that the Labor Movement pioneer in the use of information technology breakthroughs. (Toffler)

The problem here appears especially rooted in conceptual inertia: Out-

dated habits of mind have far too many Cyber Naught labor leaders preferring form to function, protocol to results, and rhetoric to risk-taking. They want a future like the past, only more so. They treat unionism as a passive and reactive institution, and they act as a deadening hand on change. Intent primarily on keeping things (deceptively) calm, Cyber Naught leaders patch over organizational ills with cosmetic "band-aids," and leave in their wake fatally wounded unions and locals.

2. *Gallop off in All Directions.* Cyber Drift unions or locals move aimlessly, like a cork bobbing on a turbulent sea, though with far less likelihood than a cork of staying afloat. Lacking an Information Technology officer, and available for "seduction" by a never-ending series of slick-talking vendors, these organizations are crippled by incompatible software, hardware, and infrastructure components. Hardly anything works together, and frustration runs rampant.

The problem here appears especially rooted in gullibility: Susceptibility to the siren song of scruple-less vendors has far too many Cyber Drift labor leaders preferring flattery to function, promises to results, and glossy brochures to demonstrated rewards. They want a future like that one vendors rapturously portray, and immediately, regardless of what hardware or software infrastructure they have previously invested in. They treat unionism as their playground, and act as costly mis-managers of trust. Intent primarily on keeping things hoping, Cyber Drift leaders substitute dust raising for ground breaking, and leave in their wake one heck of a mess.

3. *Labor's Best Hope - for the Moment.* In contrast with Cyber Naught and Cyber Drift types, Cyber Gain unions and locals make much today of computer possibilities. Their use of computers can be creative (though as I shall argue later, it still does not go nearly far enough). Officers, staffers, and activists alike appreciate how much can be done, and enjoy adapting gains made elsewhere in and outside of Labor.

However, before too glowing an impression is given, it should be noted

that Cyber Gain unions and locals have many telling weaknesses. These unions and locals commonly remain frozen in the first generation of Internet use. They are preoccupied with meeting only straightforward informational needs. Their Web site typically offers their logo and basic facts, a static display critics dismiss as "brochure ware" or "billboards." Their messages are characteristically uni-directional, going only from top to bottom. They guard the e-mail addresses of leaders lest members attempt to finesse the hierarchy and go directly to the top. They frown on un-moderated chatrooms and bulletin boards, lest matters get "out of control" (read - the officers come under attack).

Cyber Gain Unions fail to understand, or decline to value the fact that Second Generation applications are quite different: Known as transactional, they emphasize the dynamic participation of all of the parties, rather than only of some, rather than promote passivity. Transactional computer approaches would take American Labor back many decades to its heady and turbulent origins in open debate forums, when the likes of Gompers, Green, Murray, Carey, Reuther, and other now legendary pioneers in democratic unionism gave as good as they got on the convention floor in illuminating debate with the Loyal Opposition. Unionism as a supportive host for bold new ideas, for the give-and-take of alternative plans, values, and visions - this gets to the heart of the transactional approach to computer-aided communications.

While the Cyber Gain model is clearly superior to Cyber Naught and Cyber Drift options, it will not suffice. While it rebuilds, it does not adequately renew. By failing to take the potential of transactional computerization into account, Cyber Gain organizations do not so much deal with the future as they streamline the past. Only a far more ambitious use of computers will enable Labor to do the job necessary if the Movement is to survive and thrive.

*V. Getting to a Third Wave CyberUnion F-I-S-T Model* . If Labor is to reinvent itself as rapidly, as thoroughly, and as meaningfully as appears necessary, a new model appears necessary. Specifically, early 21st century unions might well experiment with an ambitious and creative alternative that incorporates four matters newly enhanced by computer

uses - namely, futuristics, innovations, services, and labor traditions (F-I-S-T).

Futuristics would have CyberUnions employ all of the tools of forecasting to help get clues to where relevant industries are heading, why, and what Labor might do about it. Forecasts would scrutinize demographic changes in the labor force the union and/or local draws on, and help develop plans that get out ahead of shifts. Forecasts would enable Labor to test the warring claims of antagonists in public debates that beckon for Labor's taking of sides, as in the Global Warming or Energy embroilment.

Above all, forecasts would enable unions and locals to better anticipate training upgrades for members, and continue thereby to distinguish dues-payers from less well-prepared competitors.

Innovations would have CyberUnions trying this, that, and the other thing in a responsible and earnestly assessed pursuit of ever better processes, things, services, and so on. The union or local would gain a proud reputation for early adoption of cutting edge items, and members would look to the organization for assessments and advice when considering testing a novel option themselves.

Above all, innovations would mark the CyberUnion as forward-looking, self-confident, and thereby worth the membership of all intent on making, rather than inheriting a future.

Services refers to the ability of CyberUnions to use computer power to vastly enhance 101 old, and another 101 new services of keen value to the membership. Typical would be arranging for the sale of computers and software at great discount, thanks to the volume buying Labor can arrange (as demonstrated already in Sweden, Norway, and elsewhere). Another service might have a local facilitate car-pooling, using a listserve of members sorted by zip code. Or arrange for swap meets in cyberspace, as managed (and policed) by a local.

Traditions refer to the dedication of CyberUnions to honoring the culture and lore of a union and/or local. Every effort might be made to create an oral and video record of the reminiscences of older members, complete with archival storage. The history of the organization might be recreated by actors and actresses, videotaped, and placed permanently on the Web site. Many relevant labor songs, anecdotes, and historic speeches might be added to the site, along with streaming video celebrations of special days and events in the organization's past,

Labor urgently needs the computer-aided rewards possible from reliable

forecasting. From innovations, such as computer data mining. From computer-based services, such as p-to-p software dedicated to meeting Labor's group ware needs. And from the computer-aided celebration of traditions, as in the production of inter-active software or CDs rich with labor history material. Together, these four items (F-I-S-T) just might help provide Labor go beyond its necessary, but insufficient Cyber Gain strengths. (Shostak: 1999)

VI. *Agents of Change: Labor's Digerati*. Pivotal here is the possible rise to power soon of Labor's own self-schooled computer enthusiasts, or, by their jargon title, Labor's digerati. Made up of rank-and-filers of all ages (though commonly under 40), both genders (with far more women than might be expected), all races (though with far fewer people of color than desirable), and found everywhere (including isolated rural areas), the digerati are Labor's secret weapon. Although weakened today by a lack of consciousness of kind, effective networking, and charismatic leadership, this cadre could soon prove the critical ingredient in assuring Labor's revival.

Many of the digerati envision using computers that will provide unprecedented access of everyone in Labor to everyone else ... officers to members, members to officers. unionists to non-unionists, and vice versa. Aware of the likely arrival soon of computer "wearables," empowering unionists as never before, some of the digerati are busy even now planning to make the most of this. They salute the potential of transactional computer use, and judge it mutually beneficial and empowering to all the parties.

On the digerati agenda is promotion of the rapid polling of the membership. Spotlighting computer-use models worth emulating, in or outside of Labor's world. Putting electronic libraries at a unionist's beck and call, along with valuable arbitration, grievance, and mediation material. Offering open chat rooms and bulletin boards, and nurturing the creation of a High Tech electronic (virtual) "community" to bolster High Touch solidarity.

As if this was not enough, the vision of many of Labor's digerati includes a quantum increase soon in the collective intelligence and cooperation among "global village" unionists. They would pursue unprecedented cooperation across national borders, and expect to mount effective counters to transnational corporate crimes.

Forward thinking and visionary, these techno-savvy men and women have a hefty dose of indefatigable assurance and optimism. Unlike many of their peers, their expectations concerning the renewing of Organized Labor are almost without limits. Believing that what they do matters, and graced by a strong sense of purpose, their influence may soon soar ... and, for Labor's sake, one can only hope it does.

Guided by this growing cadre, Labor can soon learn more about the F-I-S-T model and make it its own. This should enable Labor to invigorate the membership. Draw in new members. Intimidate opponents. Intrigue vote-seekers. And in 101 other valuable ways, meet the very high aspirations union "netizens" increasingly have for the Labor Movement.

*Brief Cautionary Note.* With her characteristic revealing sarcasm, Columnist Maureen Dowd zings our breathless insistence on getting trivial matters from computers. She links this silliness to America's hubris, a disease which arguably more than any other threatens to bring our nation down: "We will guarantee broadband and fast connections to the Internet. We will not permit anybody, anywhere, at any time to threaten the delivery of all the necessities to computers, Palm Pilots and BlackBerrys: stock quotes, sports scores, real estate listings, epicurean.com recipes, porn. (O.K., so we didn't invent porn.)" (Dowd)

Taking Dowd's sharp jibe to heart, the lesson for Labor would seem to be this: None of the advances possible in hardware and software will suffice unless there are commensurate advances in "thoughtware." That is, unless the quality of thinking and imagining in Labor circles soars alongside of market-driven advances in machines and computer code, Organized Labor will not profit as it should - and must. Computers only deliver messages, and at present, do not create them or vouch for their

merit: The quality of Labor's messages remains far more important than the message infrastructure ... although proponents like this writer believe that when the F-I-S-T model is employed, the quality of thought and vision necessarily soars.

*Summary: Labor Union Prospects?* American Labor Unions five years from now are likely to be very different from their 2001 counterparts: Their hallmark will either be irrelevance, or they will draw handsomely on CyberUnion attributes (F-I-S-T). While computerization cannot "rescue" Labor, unless Organized Labor soon makes the most creative possible use of it, Labor probably cannot be rescued.

At least where four areas of advancement are concerned - alliance-building, communications, organizing (external/internal), and staff development - Labor would seem well on its way. Provided, that is, that Labor remembers "high tech" computerization works best when aiding such "high touch" efforts as "one-on-one" organizing, "shoe leather" vote-getting, "button hole" lobbying for labor law reform, and so on the humanizing dimensions of unionism that constitute its unique "value added" dimension.

Where five major anxieties are concerned - losing its personal touch, being battered by internal criticism, hurting its older leaders, suffering breaches of confidentiality, and work overload and speedup - Labor has several available remedies to employ, and other reforms it can readily create and apply. Alert to advances that other similarly challenged organizations - businesses, NGOs, schools, etc. - are busy making in their use of computer power, Labor can adapt reforms pioneered elsewhere (as explained, for example, in current issues of *Business 2.0*, *FAST COMPANY*, etc.).

Building on this foundation, early in the 21st century a new model of computer-based unionism - one celebrating the F-I-S-T model - may help Labor finally make of computer use all that has always been possible in this revolutionary communications mode. At that time, and not until then, Organized Labor will once again be a player of significance, and its power and

Vision will have all respectfully acknowledge that - in the richest possible sense of the term - Labor "computes."

*Methodology.* Drawing on 47 years of formal study of unionism here and abroad, and especially on my last 26 years of adjunct teaching at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies (Silver Springs, MD.), I have long tracked the complex pattern of union uses of computer power (Shostak; 1991). Most recently, I attended LaborTech Conventions held in 1998 (San Francisco), 1999 (New York), and 2000 (Madison, WIS.), as these three-day events highlight progress and problems in an invaluable (and unofficial) way. (They are self-sponsored by grass-roots activists, and only in 2000 did the AFL-CIO send several representatives). I have often interviewed key AFL-CIO and International Union computer specialists (Web Masters, etc.), and I have attended several workshops given for unionists eager to gain computer skills. I was an invited guest at the inauguration in 2000 of the new Teamster Union Web site, and I have guided teams of my students in close studies of the 61 Web sites of the 64 AFL-CIO union affiliates (along with hundreds of local union sites and several overseas sites).

In 1999 I authored CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology, and I am busy now preparing a successor (Manual-like) volume for publication in 2001 (Shostak; 1999). In 2000 I co-produced a 30-minute VHS film, "Labor Computes: Union People, Computer Power," made up of pithy interviews with Labor digerati types (copies available on request). Naturally, I participate in various Labor-oriented list serves, maintain one of my own ([www.cyberunions.net](http://www.cyberunions.net)), and avidly "surf" both the literature and the Internet (with its estimated six billion pages) for relevant material. (2)

### Notes

1. Typical of academic neglect here is the fact that only one page of the 127 pages in nine articles commissioned for the Journal of Labor Studies' Spring, 2001, two-part exploration of the future of private sector unionism even touched on this significant possibility. (Townsend, Demarie, Hendrickson; p.285). The literature of the democratic left (Dissent, Mother Jones, The Nation, Z, etc.) is similarly bereft of attention to what is arguably the most far-reaching change in Labor in many decades.

2. I plan now to devote a sabbatical year (2002) to tracking in the field new uses unionists are making of IT in general, and computer power in particular. In this connection, I welcome leads to sites I should visit and people I should interview ([shostaka@drexel.edu](mailto:shostaka@drexel.edu)).

### References

- Ante, Spencer E. "In Search of the Net's Next Big Thing." *Business Week* (March 26, 2001)140-141.
- Baker, Stephen. "A Net Not made in America." *Business Week* (March 26, 2001)124.
- Dowd, Maureen. "Drill, Grill, and Chill." *New York Times*, May 20, 2001. p.WK-17.
- Ellis, John. "Grove makes It Possible to Light Up the Edge." *FAST COMPANY*, May, 2001. p. 101.
- Fiorito, Jack, Paul Jarley, John Thomas Delaney, and Robert W. Kolodinsky. "Unions and Information technology: from Luddites to CyberUnions?" *Labor Studies Journal*, 24 (Winter 2000) 3-34.
- Freeman, Richard and Wayne Diamond, as quoted in Robert Taylor, "Trade Unions: Workers Unite on the Internet," *Financial Times*, May 11, 2001.
- Gomes, Lee. "P-to-P, B-to-B -- R.I.P.?" *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2001. pp.B-1, B-4.
- Gunther, Marc. "Wireless E-mail." *FORTUNE* (March 19, 2001): p.76.
- Katz, Jon. *Geeks*. New York: Villard, 2000.
- Lazarovici, Laureen. "Cyber Drives: Organizing, Bargaining, and Mobilizing." *America@Work*, March, 2001. p. 9.
- Lee, Eric. *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism*. Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997.
- Levy, Steven. "Bill Gates Says, Take this Tablet." *Newsweek*, April 30, 2001. p. 67.
- Levy, Steven. *How the Code Rebels Beat the Government - Saving Privacy in the Digital Age*. New York: Viking, 2000.
- Ozzie, Ray, as quoted in Bill Green, "Jazzed about Work," *FAST COMPANY*, May, 2001. p.194.
- Shostak, Arthur B. *Robust Unionism: Innovations in the Labor Movement*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1991.
- Shostak, Arthur B. *CyberUnion: Empowering Labor Through Computer Technology*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1999.
- Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam,1970: p.452, 480-483.
- Townsend, Anthony, Samuel M. Demarie, and Anthony R. Hendrickson. "Information Technology, Unions, and New Organization: Challenges and

Opportunities for Union Survival." *Journal of Labor Research* XXII (Spring 2001): 275-286.

Wieffering, Eric and Tony Kennedy. "Search Raises Privacy Issues." *Star Tribune*, (Minn., MN), February 8, 2000. Pp.1, 3.