

The first act of a drama casts a long shadow, especially when the number of ensuing acts and the play's conclusion cannot be known. Similarly, the act of preparing to strike can actually be of great significance to what follows, strike or otherwise.

The preparatory phase sends messages minutely read for clues by many concerned parties: Management, for example, looks for evidence bearing on the local's unity and firmness, the popularity of pro- and anti-strike factions, and the seeming resolve of the rank-and-file to "stay out one day longer."

Ambivalent members do the same, as do the family dependents of the potential strikers. And hovering in the shadows, the media searches for leads with which to slant the news, while local politicians put a finger in the air to suggest what should be their public position today.

Advice about gearing up for battle is a feature of the essay below. It explains how a union met the challenge posed by a hard-boiled management that scrutinized the union's Internet messages, controlled e-mail access to the union's members (which it threatened to immediately cut off should a strike occur), and was thought thoroughly frightening by many in the rank-and-file.

You will find answers to questions that ask - What are now regarded as flaws in the union's response strategy and its execution? How useful were chat rooms, and why? In what ways did messages outshine messengers? How was the rumor mill effected? And, what does it mean to struggle to keep e-mail in perspective?

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Using Cyber Space to Enhance the Cyber Union

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Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked, "This time, like all times, is a very good one if we but know what to do with it." Those of us who have been intimately involved with job actions, whether it be management or union, know too well that those times can turn into disasters "if we but (don't) know what to do with it."

The lack of action is action, which will too often spell organizational chaos, failure, and eventual demise.

We also know that "getting our heads together" for collective planning, evaluation, and implementation is at times damn near impossible. Even if we can agree on committing ourselves to a time and place to meet, it is not uncommon for ego's and attitudes to come in the way of sound planning and unified action. The strategy and tactics of a successful job action go far beyond textbook planning.

My essay offers some tips on mobilization, especially during periods of crisis when time is more than money and a collective job action is imminent. It involves the use of cyberspace, and the added bonus many of us share at work called "e-mail."

The value of communicating through e-mail became quite apparent during our last negotiation for a new contract. My union, the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF) represents over 4,500 faculty members working in the State System of Higher Education (SSHE). The SSHE is composed of 14 state-funded universities serving over 95,000 students.

Our contract with the SSHE was due to expire on July 1, 1999, and the initial feelers from Harrisburg, the state capital, were most discouraging. The proposed new contract had more than the usual increased workload with frozen salaries. Also included were salary cuts, a decrease in benefits, and surcharges for any item published while being an employee of the state university system. This was nasty. There was even a rumor circulating that Governor Tom Ridge would try to break APSCUF if we did not accept the state's offer.

But, we were surely doomed as a faculty union if we did accept. The State's "last best offer" had a polarizing effect, and it sent a message to the rank and file that this negotiation was the most serious any of us had experienced since joining the state university system. We knew this would be a hard fought battle.

Our union's initial efforts at mobilization were fairly successful. Our first meeting, in the summer prior to the beginning of classes, had a fairly good turnout. Members were recruited by the union leadership to act as a "steering committee" to coordinate major efforts, such as communications, press liaison, pickets and signs, relocation of offices, and so on.

At that meeting we agreed to use our e-mail system as much as possible to communicate with one another to share ideas, progress reports, and bulletins. We all had e-mail accounts on the job, and most members of this steering committee had e-mail at home on a separate system. Little did we realize then how valuable a tool was this electronic wonder of the new millennium.

The global address list on the university system made it easy to establish a serve list. But this would be effective only as long as we stayed on the job. If there was a job action (AKA: strike), access to e-mail via any university facility would probably vaporize. Obviously, we would be denied access to our offices as well as other university locations with computer access, including the library, student union, and computer center. In addition, using e-mail at any time posed a security risk. Not only could management deny us use of this service, it could also eavesdrop and monitor staff transmissions.

To counter each of these disadvantages, a separate serve list was established using members' personal Internet addresses at home. For members who did not have Internet service at home, a telephone call list was established with respective individuals assigned to make calls to the non-internet members when needed.

This system, even with its flaws and cautions, yielded many great benefits. Among them were the following: - each of which can serve as a lesson for any union facing a conflict situation:

1) No need to copy, fold, and address notices. With e-mail, once the serve list is established there is no need to copy, fold, address, lick, and mail notices. Just identify the address list, type the message, and hit the send command. There is no need to type a new distribution list ever again. Changes can be quickly made to the list to add or delete names as needed.

To read the rest of the article, purchase the CyberUnion Handbook. Look for it at www.cyberunions.net