Introduction to “Is There a Winning Formula for Union Organizing?”

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Followers of the U.S. trade union movement are aware that labor has been in crisis for a long time. Union density has plummeted from a peak of nearly 35 % in the mid-1950s to 11.3 % in 2013, which is the lowest rate since 1916. A number of reasons have been proffered for U.S. labor's continuing weakness, one of which is the difficulty in obtaining new union members through organizing. Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, an acknowledged expert in the field, conducted a number of studies from 1995 through 2004 contending that union organizing would be more successful if specific tactics were adopted during organizing drives. Although Bronfenbrenner's research results were popular among, and influenced, union officials, the victory rates obtained in organizing drives did not increase in the subsequent years.

In this interesting, well-written and stimulating “Perspectives” Section article, Jonathan Lepie challenges Bronfenbrenner's views on what it takes to be successful in union organizing drives. Working as a union organizer, business agent and negotiator for a number of unions including the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 535, the Union of American Physicians and Dentists, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 800 for 33 years, Lepie retired as SEIU Local 535's organizing director in 2005. Surveying union organizers, Lepie argues in his article that “a certain recipe” should not be followed during union organizing drives but that it is necessary that organizers gain the workers' trust before a particular strategy can be developed for a given situation. Lepie concludes that if both relationship-building skills and creativity are necessary for achieving union organizing success, then hiring organizers with these requisite skills would be more advantageous than trying to find the right formula that would lead to union victory in every organizing campaign.

If any of the journal's readers are interested in responding to any essays published in the “Perspectives” Section or would like to write articles on any topics in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles written from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. I hope that you enjoy this article and find it most illuminating.

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