

An excerpt from "Dial-1-800-MY-UNION?"

Thirty years ago, only 150 customer service reps out of three thousand were unionized at the phone company in New England. In 1980, residence reps were victorious in an NLRB election victory covering just three phone company offices in New Hampshire. As a result of successful strike action by CWA and IBEW over the next two decades—and much membership mobilization in support of “bargaining to organize”—CSRs in Vermont, Maine, and Massachusetts got organized in another Labor Board vote involving 1,500 employees of NYNEX in 1994. By 2003, their company had become Verizon and CWA Local 1400 had about eighteen hundred dues payers spread out over four states in a dozen call centers ranging in size from fifty to five hundred workers.[i]

Unfortunately, under an increasingly domineering and undemocratic local president, 1400’s steward system became badly atrophied. Critical information was hoarded among the four full-time officers who worked out of union headquarters in New Hampshire, where all grievance handling was centralized and tightly controlled. The top leadership no longer recruited, trained, or maintained a network of stewards and chief stewards. Rank-and-filers were not involved, to the degree they should have been, in the presentation of grievances to the company. As a result, some stewards quit in frustration or disgust, while others felt poorly equipped to answer questions about the contract or handle day-to-day issues in their offices.

As CWA’s shop floor presence diminished, more members with a question or problem began to think of “the union” as just the four full-time officers, tucked away in New Hampshire. Being customer service reps who worked all day on the phone, they began to pick up the phone themselves and call the local’s 800 number on their breaks and lunch hours. Throughout Local 1400, the habit of dealing directly with the union office—or, more often, just the president

herself—began to spread. As the volume of member calls increased, more and more requests for help or information didn't get answered in timely fashion, or at all. As the CWA staffer assigned to Local 1400, I began to get more of what (in phone company jargon) is called "overflow calls." Members would contact the national union to determine the status of backlogged grievances, arbitration appeals, hardship transfer requests, missing FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) paperwork, or other matters the local was supposed to handle or keep them better informed about. Few callers were happy about the amount of time they had already spent "in queue," during previous phone contact with the local.

This membership dissatisfaction reached the boiling point in late 2002. It became the deciding factor in a hotly contested election for Local 1400 officers. The twenty-year incumbent president, a founder of the local, was ousted, along with her most of her executive board allies. The new president was Don Trementozzi, a service rep from Rhode Island who had two decades of prior union experience in the Machinists and AFSCME. The first thing his slate did, after getting sworn in, was reestablish and strengthen the local's workplace steward network. This required recruiting and training new stewards, making sure they knew the contract, and giving them the chance to enhance their skills and self-confidence by participating in worksite meetings with management.

Mobilizing for Power with Stewards

The local's rank-and-file executive board—previously underutilized in the grievance procedure—was redeployed to do more contract enforcement work alongside the stewards and elected chief stewards. A new system was developed to keep members better informed about the status of their grievances at each step of the process. For the first time in the local's history,

workers who filed a grievance were invited to participate in all three pre-arbitration steps of the grievance procedure (a change in practice that Verizon labor relations reps particularly disliked). Workplace activists began to get a steady flow of information about their legal and contract rights. For the first time, CWA's internal organizing manual—*Mobilizing for Power*—was put in the hands of any member who wanted a copy. This sixty-page guide includes the following self-criticism of the “servicing model” of unionism, as it evolved over time. It makes the case for doing things differently, with a much bigger dose of direct action on the job:

"CWA, like most unions, was organized on the basis of member involvement. Fundamentally, a union's power at any point in time is nothing more than the total energy and support of its members who can be mobilized. The basic premise of “mobilization” is that we must return to our roots and commit to a strategy that rests on increasing our power through membership education and involvement. We have become too reliant on the crafty union negotiator, the clever chief steward, and the experienced local president to solve our problems. We can no longer solely rely on grievances, arbitrations or labor laws to achieve workplace justice.”^[ii]

Trementozzi didn't hunker down in the Local 1400 office, like his predecessor during the waning days of her old regime. Instead, he and other officers remained highly visible and accessible (just as they had been while campaigning for office, on their own time and at their own expense^[DT1]).^[iii]

They made frequent worksite visits to help lay the groundwork for the local's participation in a 2003 contract campaign at Verizon that involved seventy-five thousand IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) and CWA members from Maine to Virginia.

One building block of that campaign was an improved union communications network, utilizing members' home email addresses; these were collected, one by one, in each workplace as stewards talked to their coworkers about the importance of receiving regular mobilization and bargaining updates via an electronic newsletter called *Unity@Verizon*. Union sticker-wearing, group grievance-filing, informational picketing, and other displays of workplace solidarity (like wearing red to work every Thursday) also became the order of the day. During local negotiations with Verizon, the Local 1400 bargaining committee was expanded to include board members, as well as officers. For the first time in the union's twenty-three-year history, working members were also invited to attend as observers, on their own time.

During this rebuilding process, Trementozzi delivered the same message in every office he visited: "If you have a problem, don't call the local—go to your steward first." The local's four elected full-timers (plus their experienced office manager) continued to get plenty of calls, of course, but not as many from members directly. Far more of their phone conversations were now with stewards, chief stewards, and elected vice presidents calling on behalf of a coworker in their own office, but seeking information or advice about how they themselves should handle the problem on the scene. For contract enforcement and membership mobilization purposes in 2003, Local 1400 ended up with nearly one hundred newly empowered workplace activists, many of whom had previously been sidelined by the union.

Gradually, the old dysfunctional division of labor was replaced by a new and more effective one. Local 1400 utilized members for all kinds of union-building work—either as volunteers or on a "lost-time" basis, in which case they were paid by the company (where possible under the contract) or, more frequently, by the local or national union. During Trementozzi's second term in office, 1400 was able to expand its external organizing activity,

using the same member-based approach. A rank-and-file committee recruited several hundred new members at customer service centers or mobile phone retail stores. In these new bargaining units, the local went through the same process of promoting rank-and-file participation in first contract bargaining and/or labor-management meetings. Patient steward recruitment and training enabled these newly organized workers to become familiar with their contracts and, with backing from the local, develop confidence in their collective ability to deal with management at the worksite level.

With members in three different telecom bargaining units, covering four states, Local 1400 now conducts regular conference calls involving up to 120 stewards. They are encouraged to schedule an after-work party at someone's home, MoveOn.org-style, and participate in the call together, as part of a local group. Local 1400 also has a Facebook page for its activists and the highest level of CWA COPE (Committee on Political Education) participation in its history. (20 percent of the membership now donates to COPE, as opposed to only five workers in 2002.) By 2009, the new leadership had restored sufficient confidence in the union to get a dues increase passed (from 1.3 to 1.6 percent of base pay); now it can fully participate in multiple central labor councils and local Jobs with Justice coalitions.

The challenges facing Verizon workers today are daunting. They include a long-term corporate de-unionization strategy that has reduced union density within the company to about 30 percent. Local 1400 has been in the forefront of resistance to one form of Verizon's downsizing—its dumping of rural landlines. Along with the IBEW, it waged a vigorous campaign to block the sale of Verizon operations in northern New England. The deal was approved by state utility regulators anyway. As predicted by both unions, the successor employer, FairPoint Communications, soon went bankrupt.^[iv] After difficult bargaining, Local

1400 was able to keep most of its old Verizon contract intact, while the company reorganized under Chapter 11.^[v]

When reformers first took over 1400, they could easily have continued the de facto call center servicing model inherited from their predecessors. As trained, experienced, energetic young CSRs, they were well equipped to upgrade the union's own "customer service." All they had to do was keep their Verizon headsets on, sit in a new office all day long, and handle Local 1400 "call volumes" more efficiently than their jaded predecessors. But they chose not to. "I don't see how a call center for members could ever be effective because that's not what having a real union is all about," Trementozzi said. "There's no personal interaction or relationships of trust—it's like calling Verizon about your phone bill. What gets management's attention is people doing things together at work and building an organization, from the bottom up."^[vi]

[i] For more on Local 1400's membership recruitment at Verizon, see Steve Early, "Membership-Based Organizing," in *A New Labor Movement*, Mantsios, 82–103.

[ii] Communications Workers of America Education and Mobilization Department, *Mobilizing for Power*, 2006.

[iii] For a *Labor Notes* published account of how Trementozzi and his slate got elected originally, see Aaron Brenner, "Reformers Take Over CWA Local 1400," under the section "Reform Caucuses & Running for Office," Troublemaker's Website.

[iv] Steve Early, "Broadband Redlining Targets Rural America," *Nation*, [REDACTED], May 14, 2007, and "Fair Point Mess Puts Three States in Jeopardy," *Rutland Herald*, April 9, 2009.

[v] Kate Davidson, "Unions, FairPoint Reach Deal," *Concord Monitor*, March 25, 2008.

[vi] Interview with the author, August 2, 2008.

[DTI]Really? This makes it sounds like they weren't paid at all for their union work

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