

'Don't let yourself end up where we are!'

Keir Snow met Wade Rathke, founder of ACORN, the USA based Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

ACORN boasted over 175,000 member families at its peak, and won better housing, schools, neighbourhood safety, healthcare, and job conditions. Wade, what's your role and what's the situation now?

I'm chief organiser of the ACORN international community organisation and formerly chief organiser of local 100 of the Service Employees International Union. Still chief organiser of Local 100 United Labor Unions, which is now independent and started that way, though we were affiliated with SEIU for 25 years.

How did local 100 get started?

Well we actually came out of the experience of ACORN members. ACORN started in the 1970s. It was low and moderate-income families, and after some success at neighbourhood, consumer and housing issues it wasn't surprising that people started bringing up issues in their jobs. So when we'd hear these issues we would refer them to whoever seemed to be the right union.

That was when the servicing model of unionism was predominant in the United States and you'd come back to the next monthly meeting and say, "hey I tried to call that number, nobody'll call back". Finally the ACORN board said, "Let's try to help people organise." So we stumbled into new job classifications, particularly home healthcare workers, home daycare workers, people that were on workfare kind of programs that were informally employed. The largest single area of growth in the labour movement over the last 30 years in the US is in fact those very job classifications so we had a huge impact all over the country.

What is servicing? How does your approach differ?

In the servicing model all the resources, staffing etc are based on doing the best you can for those members you have. Education departments, health and safety, many of these kinds of things were normal in unions in the late '70s when density was still moderately high.

As the unions became weaker and weaker in the US that old business union/servicing model needed to change to an organising model. Many unions, SEIU was one, believed that you had to spend as much as 50% of your dues income on organising pure and simple. So education departments were slimmed down or eliminated, health and safety requirements that were funded by grants were eliminated.

What do you think of recent attempts to organise Walmart?

In 2004 I directed a multi-union campaign with SEIU, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the AFL-CIO and ACORN to see if in fact Walmart workers wanted a union. The experience of going through the normal labour law channels of elections, unions had never been able to win. They won an election in Quebec once and Walmart closed the store, they're a brutal company.

We developed a pilot of a non-traditional union which wasn't going to seek certification or collective bargaining. We were

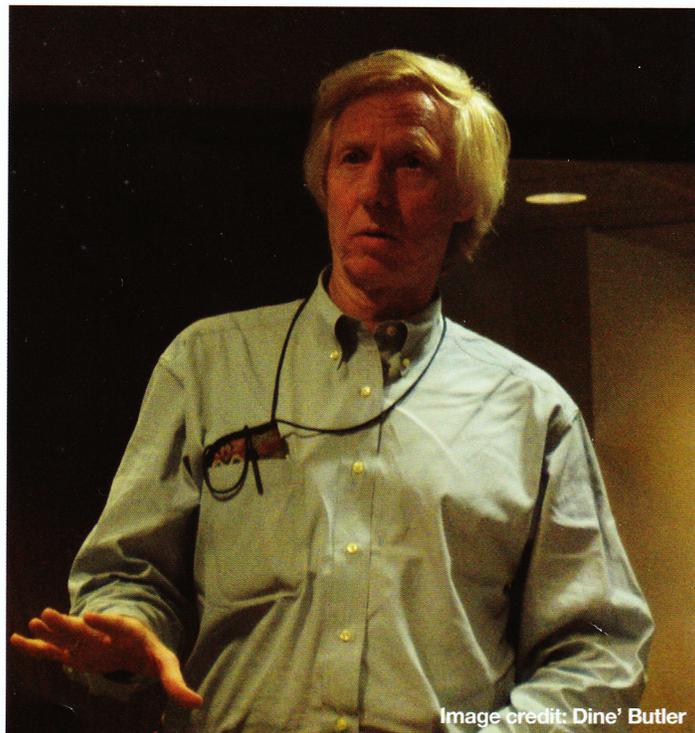


Image credit: Dine' Butler

going to actually give workers a chance to decide if they wanted to be in the union instead of the US system where the employer essentially decides whether or not he's willing to have the workers in a union. From the very first time we hit people on the doors, asked them if they wanted to join an association of Walmart workers to fight for better wages and terms. We would sign up as dues-paying members more than half of the people we visited; we signed up 1000 people in six months.

Unfortunately though the pilot was successful, when we took the results to the UFCW who had the jurisdiction, they weren't ready at that time to blow it up and expand it. Now they're trying to revive it with a different kind of tactical model where they're trying to enlist people in very small numbers to strike and bring attention to the wages, pulling out about a 100 people here and 200 people there. It's unclear what the long term strategy right now is.

What lessons does US labour have for UK unions?

I think the biggest lesson we have is don't let yourself end up where we are, please learn, study what we've done and the mistakes we've made. Don't make the same mistakes over and over again. Think the government can save you? With the same old organising model and the same old tired leadership? You have to figure out a way to organise more workers and if you can't do that you're going to end up like we are. Unfortunately the labour movement's shrinking all around the world so we need to do something better and we aren't doing it yet.