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Labor's Front Lines as Unions Fight for New Members, These Five are in the Trenches

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The spirit was clearly rising.

With each chant, each angry, arm-waving speech, their wide-eyed fearfulness slipped away. They smiled. They blew on their white whistles. They clapped and shouted. They tapped their hands by their sides in rhythm with a small drum someone was beating in the back of the crowd, a rhythm that seemed primitively powerful and evocative and must have echoed through hundreds of places and hundreds of times like this.

"Si, se puede--Yes, it can be done," chanted the young, mostly female strikers. There were no more than 30 of them, bunched closely together and squinting up toward a baking June sun at the speakers, who were perched just above them on a pickup truck's narrow rear step. Groups of police stood warily on West Division Street behind them and in the parking lot between them and their employer, Five Star Hotel Laundry.

Maybe it was the force of all of the words hurled at them that moved the strikers. State Sen. Miguel del Valle--sport coat off, tie undone, arms askew--was a maestro at it. Bellowing into a microphone in alternating Spanish and English, he told them that in this great American economy and this bustling city they are truly needed for their miserable \$7-an-hour jobs cleaning hotel laundry. And they have a right to seek a union contract with the company and one, he hollered, with justice--justicia!--for themselves and their families. "Si, se puede. El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido-A city united can never be conquered."

Or maybe it was the succession of speakers that picked them up and carried them onward. There was someone from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, the Jewish Workers Committee, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice and the DePaul University Students Against Sweatshops. Speakers also showed up from the steelworkers, the hotel workers, the service workers unions and other labor groups. And there was Stuart Acuff, the AFL-CIO's new coordinator in Chicago, a union hotshot dispatched from Atlanta to help breathe life back into the third-biggest union town in the nation.

Even though the turnout that day by union and community groups was puny considering their vast numbers in the Chicago area, such a showing had been rare until recently.

Margarita Klein certainly felt the spirit. She is a worker for UNITE, the Union of Needle and Textile Employees, which has struggled to replace its lost garment-industry jobs with ones like those at the Five Star Hotel Laundry. A short, intense woman with dark, wavy hair, she took turns translating the speakers' words into Spanish and moving through the crowd, exhorting the strikers. Decades ago her father, a politician in Chile, had fled a right-wing dictatorship, settling his family in Panama and then the U.S. Klein, 40, started working with Latino community groups in Chicago in the early 1980s, then joined the union a few years ago as it sought to link up with the latest round of immigrants claiming the low-paying jobs in Chicago's garment and other factories. She brought with her a passion for the concerns of Latino workers and a cool sophistication about what it takes to motivate them.

Only half of the 120 workers at the laundry had joined the strike, but she was sure the rest would follow because "they can feel their problems in their bodies." But like many of the union's battles, this one looked tough. After the workers had signed more than enough cards to show their support for the union, the company had abruptly announced that the workers were no longer its employees. Instead they worked for a temporary agency that has a deal with an independent union, the National Production Workers Union, a scrappy Chicago organization with a reputation for raiding other unions.

Company officials insisted that they were just trying to save money by leasing their workers, and were not thwarting UNITE's organizing. The garment workers union was incensed. It smelled a rotten deal. But would UNITE's supporters prevail?

They would, Klein said, because they were in step with organized labor, and labor was on the rebound, partly because of the growing strength of Latino workers within unions and partly because of the desperation of workers trapped in low-paying jobs. Her hope, she said, was that unions will become as "strong as in the beginning, just like the time when they were powerful in this country."

"I don't know how many people make \$15 an hour. Not our people. Many of them have had their jobs taken away, sent to other countries, and because of that, they need a union. We are growing because of immigrants. They know we don't treat them like second-class citizens."

Such is the mood among union activists this Labor Day. American unions' ranks grew by 265,000 new members in 1999 to 13.1 million, their best showing in two decades. These numbers have bestowed on labor a sense of hope it can barely recall. But it is a fragile hope, shadowed by the realization of how far labor has fallen from its heyday. American unions account for just 9.4 percent of the nation's private work force; in the 1950s, they claimed more than a third. Annually, there are half as many government-run elections for workers to join unions as 20 years ago, and unions win about half of these, a far cry from the 1950s when they won two out of three elections. Just to increase their share of the work force by 1 percent, American unions would have to sign up 1 million new members this year, a number clearly beyond their reach.

Despite their recent victories, the unions still struggle to shed their image as losers, and one key place they are trying to do this is Chicago. The reasoning is simple. If we cannot rebound in an old-time labor town like Chicago, labor leaders say, a place with more than half a million union members, where can we? If we cannot shake off our doldrums in Chicago, cannot get rid of our corrupt or mob-linked leaders, cannot open up to minorities, immigrants and women and cannot convince them and others that their fate is bound up with ours, then how are we going to sell our dream elsewhere?

People like Margarita Klein are exactly who unions say they need to turn around the movement. Here are a few of the others working on labor's front lines.

The face of reform

Joe Romano's buoyant voice ricochets in the narrow, cramped office of Laborers Union Local 2. He is talking on his cell phone with a union member baffled by all the new faces at the local's office. "We've been trying to straighten things out," explains Romano, a muscular, wiry man who looks far younger than his 66 years. "And when I have trouble with people, I get rid of them," he tells the caller. After a pause, he says briskly, "Oh him, he's not here anymore."

Romano is a straight shooter, a believer in squeaky-clean locals and democracy for the rank and file, and a veteran of insurgent politics within his own union, the United Steelworkers of America. Appointed to help clean up the Laborers Local 2 on the Southwest Side, a union relic with a yellowed charter from 1903 signed by American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers on the wall, Romano is the face of reform.

And a target for criticism. Bosses in the Laborers union privately say he is too dogmatic, too stuck in the daily mud of running his local to realize the gains made in cleaning up one of the nation's most corrupt unions: two dozen locals and district councils put under union control, more than 200 people ousted from union jobs.

Labor lawyer Tom Geoghegan, a longtime acquaintance and admirer of Romano's labor savvy, doesn't agree with the criticism. "He is not a hard-liner," Geoghegan said. "He is just honest. And even when he is outlining the most depressing scenario, you don't feel let down, because there is something uplifting about him."

If ever a union needed reform and uplift, it is the Laborers- especially in Chicago. Six years ago, the U.S. Justice Department confronted the union's leaders with evidence that the Laborers had been the handmaidens of Chicago-based mobsters since 1926, and that the union was riddled with corrupt leaders. Investigators had found out that mob members, their families and friends were given jobs with the union's district council even though they were not qualified. They discovered that there had not been a single contested election at the district council or six union locals in more than two decades.

The union and the government worked out a deal: The union would be allowed to clean itself up, but the government could step in if the effort faltered. That deal is set to expire in 2001. Union-appointed officials in charge of the cleanup soon ousted the heads of Locals 2, 5, 225 and the district council. That's where Romano came in. He had been

president of United Steelworkers Local 15271 and was about to retire when he was asked to supervise the cleanup of the Laborers Local 5 in Chicago Heights.

Not long after taking over, he named a woman as a business agent, something that had never been done at Local 5. Then he put two African-Americans on the board, another first. Last June, the local held its first election with opposing candidates in 40 years. Romano laid down the rule that the old ways no longer applied. Workers no longer had to pay to get hired for a union job. No under-the-table deals would be cut for union contracts.

He later moved to Local 2, whose members mostly work in Chicago- area sewer and tunnel projects. Once again he lost no time in shaking things up. He named the first black and Latino business agents for the 1,200-member local to reflect the sizable number of those minorities in the ranks.

Reflecting on these changes after a few months at his new post, Romano said he believed he had brought some order and openness to the local, but wondered how deep and long-lasting the reforms would be. He said he wasn't sure the union was committed to ending corruption, noting that wrongdoers had not been criminally charged and that some of the Old Guard still held union jobs. "There's not always prosecutions here, that's the sad thing," he said. "So, I question all of this cleaning up. I don't think we really are allowed to clean up."

Top Laborers union officials in Chicago have shunned him. "I'm not considered a reformer," he said. "I'm considered an intruder." That didn't mean he was giving up, he quickly added, only that he knew the realities of union life.

"All of this," he said with a sweep of his hand, indicating his work with the local, "can be gone in a heartbeat."

Building diversity

The class was going well. Kina McAfee watched her students work, strolling among them and climbing up on a scaffold whenever someone needed a hand. "You want to do it around the opening," she hollered over to one of her students, who nodded back at her and followed her instructions.

Tall and thin, with her hair tucked under a construction hard hat and an earring over one eyebrow, McAfee wandered the training area with a confident stride and a no-nonsense tone in her voice. As an instructor in the apprentice and training program run by the Chicago and Northeast Illinois District Council of Carpenters, McAfee, 39, represents the kind of future that unions point to when they talk about opening their doors to women and minorities.

Her presence is especially significant for the building trades unions, longtime citadels of exclusion operated by white men. She is one of only a few female instructors in the nearly three dozen apprentice training programs operated by Chicago-area building trades unions. Out of 28 instructors at the warehouse-like training center operated by the carpenters union in Elk Grove Village, she is one of only two blacks. When she tours

high schools or job fairs, she usually is the only woman and the only person of color pitching the promise of a career in the building trades.

A single parent, she preaches the gospel of landing the good, steady wage that her union work has provided. "Women are frequently underpaid and underemployed," she said. "But if you are in a union, they can't underpay you. A lot of the women that come through here are on their second or third careers. They haven't had it easy before. This is a big jump in pay for them, especially when they are coming from secretary work."

Julie Cruse, acting head of Chicago Women in Trades, one of the oldest groups that encourage women in the building trades, heaps praise on McAfee for helping others find their footing in such a difficult industry for females. "She is incredibly self-confident. You have to have a strong sense of yourself," Cruse said. Chicago's Federation of Labor shares Cruse's high opinion of McAfee, naming her its Tradeswoman of the Year 2000.

But she was once neither self-confident nor pleased by the trade she had wandered into by chance. After graduating from Northwestern University with a degree in political science, McAfee had worked as a research assistant in African-American studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Around the same time, her work with a community group that rehabbed houses in Chicago got her thinking that she could succeed at construction, and a training program for low-income women put her into the business. But male workers harassed her on the job or ignored her. The union did not reach out a welcoming hand, and she stopped going to meetings after being told she could not bring her infant son.

Still, she liked the work and the money. Much to her surprise, she also savored working outside, summer and winter. Eight years ago she was offered the job of teaching at the carpenters apprentice program.

But as the years have passed, the diversity of students has not increased as she had hoped. Female apprentices have accounted for no more than 5 percent of the students, officials at the school say, despite the good pay, job security and benefits a union construction job offers. McAfee believed that if the union truly wanted to change, it would make some bold gestures to recruit more women. But she didn't see any such gestures until this summer, when school officials asked for her advice on how to boost the number of women and minorities among the apprentices. Nobody had ever done that before, and she wasn't sure what was behind it.

"Because it is late in coming, I'm not sure if it is from the heart," she said one day as she watched over a class. They were doing well. As everyone around her agreed, they were in qualified hands.

A true believer

Everywhere Joe Isobaker turned, he knew someone. Hi, Tracey. Hi, Tawana. He knew their names, knew who had lunch when, knew who sat on what floor of the labyrinthine hospital, who escorted patients here and there, and who cleaned up. It's his job to know, as a chief steward for Local 73 of the Service Employees International Union at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and he seemed at ease doing it. He is the kind of

member labor leaders dream about: a true- believing activist, someone who finds more meaning in his union than a dues slip.

Only a few years ago, Isobaker, a secretary at the medical school, cared little about the union. A skimpy pay raise negotiated in 1991 had really ticked him off, and he swore he would have nothing to do with such a union. But two years later, a new leadership at the local convinced him that things would change. He volunteered his help and wound up on the union's bargaining committee. Contract negotiations in 1993 and 1997 produced decent pay increases, and he was a believer: The union could make a difference.

Though his union was accessible to its rank and file, he observed that others weren't. "A lot of people get sold out by their own union," he learned, and members sometimes have to take on their union bureaucracy as well as the company. To make sure his own union didn't develop such a problem, he pushed for more meetings and good attendance at them.

Talk late last year of a partial merger between UIC Medical School and the Rush College of Medicine set off alarms in the union about possible job losses and Isobaker, along with others in the union, threw himself into mounting an anti-merger campaign. They picketed. They appealed to state officials and politicians. The merger was called off not long ago, and though officials at the hospitals might strongly disagree, Isobaker credits the union with a major role in killing the plan. "We sunk it," he said.

"The union provides a tool for working people to stand up to the injustices that are happening," he says, but it can happen only if workers get involved. "We have to take matters into our own hands."

With no contract talks going on or any other issues to worry about, attendance at the union's meetings has been skimpy lately. That didn't dissuade Isobaker, however, as he made his union rounds on his lunch hour. An easy-smiling man with thinning blond hair, he seemed more like a middle-age salesman, pushing his products and keeping up with his customers. Instead of catalogs, however, he was pushing newspaper articles or pamphlets about issues that affect the workers.

"Here, read this," he said, handing a worker a copy of the UIC weekly newspaper. "It says the medical center's finances are improving. We have to keep that in mind when contract time comes around."

A father's legacy

Javier Ramirez had showed up at the factory at 3 in the morning, unsure of when the employees began work. Now, it was 3 in the afternoon and he was still standing outside the gate, handing out union sign-up cards as workers slowly trickled out of the factory at the end of their shift.

"Enough is enough," said a pamphlet politely handed them by the thin, young man in steel-rimmed glasses and a blue and gray union cap. "Ya basta," it read in Spanish.

Ramirez, 30, is the director of organizing for Local 100A of the United Food and Commercial Workers union and heads a staff of one: himself. Soft-spoken and polite, he goes about his work with a studied seriousness, partly because of the burdens of the job, and partly because he is forever shadowed by the image of his father, Ruben, the local's president.

Ramirez speaks of his father with awe: how he came to Chicago as a teenager nearly four decades ago from a town near Guanajuato, Mexico, to work in the meatpacking houses. How he suffered on the job, losing half of one finger and the tip of another, and breaking a third that never quite healed. How he rose up as a union man, attending night classes to improve his English. And how his persistence paid off when he became president of the local six years ago, the first Latino ever in the position.

Despite his education--more than three years of college--Javier was sure he would never be the same kind of leader as his father. He would never be able to move the members the way his father does when he talks to them, nor provide that extra personal touch. But he was sure he could make up for that with his diligence and his college training.

In his nine years with the local, he had learned the art of organizing and why organizing is a life-or-death proposition for the union. With its members' jobs disappearing, the local has had to constantly reinvent itself, sometimes signing up workers who have no connection whatsoever to the food industry. Local 100A was once mostly packing-house workers. But now only 300 of its 7,000 members earn their living in Chicago's few remaining packing houses. The local also once had hundreds of workers who made luggage, but their jobs fled to Mexico and other low-wage countries. As they disappeared, so did hundreds of other low-skill positions held by the local's members. The job drain drove the local down to 4,500 workers in the 1980s. And though its membership has rebounded, its finances have never really recovered, so spending is always kept down. The limit on resources is something Ramirez said he keeps in mind whenever he feels tired and wishes he had at least two more people to help him. And those times, he admitted, are not infrequent.

From one organizing campaign to another, the lessons grew. He learned that it is always best to reach the workers before the company knows he's there, because if it does, it will often sit them down and paint a terrifying portrait of the union. He learned that what drives workers more toward the union is not the dream of higher wages, but their frustration with their jobs and the way they are treated by supervisors. "They yell at them. They degrade them. There's always a boss who abuses them and they want to get back at them, at the boss," he explained.

Yet he also knows they ultimately want better lives and better jobs. "I see the families and how they live, and I can see the hope in them when I talk to them," he said.

He learned that workers will not reach out for the union if they are afraid of losing their jobs. Considering that nearly half the factories he visits have undocumented workers--often they account for three-fourths of the payroll--this is not a minor issue. All the company has to do is suggest that it might contact federal immigration officials, or talk about checking workers' papers, to trigger such fears. Not long ago, he said, one of his

organizing efforts failed at a company where most of the workers are undocumented and a boss threatened to contact the Immigration and Naturalization Service if they voted for the union.

He figured he would wait and come back to the company in a year. Maybe the workers would be more frustrated, less fearful. It is the drip-drip method of union organizing. Slow, steady, persistent.

Everything has to turn around, he reasons, including the bad luck that has haunted organized labor. "I see that we are coming back up and that is what gives me hope. We are at the bottom of a cycle."

At the moment, though, he didn't have high hopes for a breakthrough with the workers at the factory where he was handing out union cards, the Kronos Food Co. facility on the Southwest Side. Twice before in the last decade, they had voted down the union in government-run elections. But they had called the union recently, saying there were problems on the job, and people were talking union again.

Whatever happened, he said, he had to show that the union was ready for them, and so he staked out of the parking lot, union cards in hand. Several drivers zipped by him. "Hey, amigo," he said, approaching one car that had stopped at the edge of the parking lot, giving him a minute to make his spiel. "Oh, you guys are back," grumbled the driver, who grabbed the papers offered him by Ramirez and hurriedly drove off.

Ramirez went back to his spot on the edge of the parking lot and resumed his wait.

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