

BLOGGING

Against Adversity

DAVID C. JACOBS

Jordan Barab's "Confined Space" (<http://spewingforth.blogspot.com>) and other labor-oriented Internet "blogs" have brought workers' concerns, perspectives, and strategic debates to the public square. In doing so, they fill an enormous need no longer met by other media. Labor news currently receives short shrift in major U.S. newspapers, the business press, and broadcast news. The "labor beat" was at one time a prestigious assignment for journalists, but few now claim it.

It would appear that opportunities for the diffusion of labor perspectives have diminished greatly in recent decades. In the early post-World War II era, labor leader Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers commanded a substantial public following. In addition, AFL-CIO head George Meany was regularly asked by reporters to provide a labor view on the major issues of the day. Now, though, Reuther has no contemporary equal, and the broadcast media are no longer bound by the fairness doctrine, which used to guarantee equal time to alternative views.

Despite these developments, countervailing forces of both argument and power remain critical for the protection of workers' interests. Indeed, the need for worker voices today is at least as great as it was a generation ago. Decades

of corporate consolidation, declining employment in manufacturing, falling union density, and a generally hostile federal government have combined to render the position of workers and unions especially weak. Labor blogs can contribute to worker movements and perhaps even to a revitalization of organized labor.

Blogs and the Big Picture

The blog is a contemporary means to redress media shortcomings. It may be the modern version of the muckraking periodicals of the progressive era (including *LaFollette's Weekly*, now *The Progressive*), the mail-order newsletters exemplified in the postwar years by *I. F. Stone's Weekly* (incisive commentary by a political dissident), and other inexpensively printed and distributed "outsider" publications.

Since 2001, an underlying theme of the Bush administration has been its coordinated campaign to eliminate constraints on management authority. This is revealed in numerous steps to deny whole categories of workers the protection of labor law (for example, disabled workers and graduate student employees). The details of administration decisions are reported in the mainstream media, but the whole is far more significant than the sum of its parts.

Labor blogs can contribute to worker movements.

Labor blogs illuminate today's realities of work life and public policy in a way that traditional, "objective" news reporting does not. For example, "Labor Blog" (www.laborblog.org), created by labor lawyer and author Nathan Newman and his colleagues, places today's labor concerns in the context of the historic struggles against slavery and servitude. Barab's "Confined Space," meanwhile, has reported on the continuing Republican campaign to derail ergonomics standards and has highlighted the work of the employer front group misnamed the "National Coalition for Ergonomics."¹

Strategic Debates

Another important contribution of the labor blogs is that they have created a public forum for debates about labor strategy. Global Labor Strategies is a nonprofit organization that consults with unions, but it also sponsors a blog that provides commentary on national and international labor questions (www.laborstrategies.org). A distinctive contribution of this site is its analysis of "new" forms of worker organizations, particularly associations for mutual aid that resemble earlier labor movements. The blog draws attention, for instance, to the Self-Employed Women's Association in India.²

Jonathan Tasini's "Working Life" (www.workinglife.org) is another example. It catalogs proposals from individual locals, unions, and the competing U.S. labor federations (the AFL-CIO and Change to Win coalition).³ Such blogs may help widen the circle of discussions about strategy and connect organizers, union officers, and activists on the street.

Liberal and labor bloggers have recently been debating another strategic question: whether laws requiring powerful low-wage retailers like Wal-Mart to

provide funds for health insurance is a sensible short-term approach to extending health care. Ezra Klein, blogging at *The American Prospect* online, argues that progressives "might view a slightly better menu of options for Wal-Mart employees as delaying the ultimate, more important" goal of universal health insurance. Nathan Newman counters that unions must use employer-based remedies, given today's federal budget deficits. Yet Newman also notes unions' historical role advocating national health insurance. Internet links intertwine comments by Klein and Newman and help generate the framework of debate.⁴

Labor blogs can connect activists, organizers, and union officers.

One of the most pressing labor questions today is the status of the immigrant worker. The security concerns of the post-September 11 era have only increased immigrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation. Newman's blog has focused on the recent decision by labor leaders to adopt the cause of the undocumented worker rather than to campaign for immigration restrictions



as organized labor did in the past. The Global Labor Strategies blog stresses the significance of the AFL-CIO's pledge of cooperation with the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), a coalition of advocacy centers for largely immigrant day laborer populations.⁵

Since immigrant workers often lack personal computers, labor blogs are not likely to be a major source of information for such workers. The major walkouts of May 1, 2006 ("A Day without Latinos"), received a boost from an older technology: Spanish-language radio. However, labor bloggers have explained and defended organized labor's policy of engagement with immigrants before the activist community. This is in itself a significant role for blogs.

Argument, Action and Institution-Building

The blog is ordinarily a vehicle for interested argument. While there is no necessary vetting process embedded in the blog, hypertext links permit further investigation and facilitate a comparison of arguments. Readers' posts extend the debate. Readers need not be passive. Participation of this kind may well enhance the educational function of the blogs and even stimulate activism. Educators often stress the value of interaction in sustaining student interest and advancing understanding. At its best, a blog contributes to such a process.

Activists are the primary readers of blogs. Critical messages may be copied and distributed by e-mail, instant messaging, and "texting" (sending short text messages via cell phone). Bloggers at "Communicate or Die" have been exploring the role of texting as an instrument of rank-and-file mobilization. In theory,

text messaging can guide demonstrations and other public actions, but preliminary results are mixed. On the other hand, Mary Jordan has described the effective use of protest texting in the Philippines, helping activists evade the authorities and maximize their impact.⁶

Blogs have demonstrated their value in protest politics and fostering debate. They have contributed to public discussions about union strategy. It remains to be seen whether they can directly promote the development of stable and effective membership organizations. Organizing ultimately requires strong social bonds and direct human contact. If organizing is to occur, labor bloggers must put additional effort into bringing

their readers together in living rooms, cafes, and other public spaces. Still, marrying technology and old-fashioned organizing is possible, especially if bloggers learn from successful immigrant walkouts, Filipino texters, and recent web-inspired political gatherings

convened by those at sites such as *www.dailykos.com* and *www.moveon.org*.

Labor bloggers have defended organized labor's engagement with immigrants.

Marrying technology and old-fashioned organizing is possible.

NOTES

1. J. Barab, "National Coalition on Ergonomics: Still Crazy after All These Years," <http://spewingforth.blogspot.com/2005/08/national-coalition-on-ergonomics-still.html>.
2. Global Labor Strategies, "Alternative Worker Organizations: Taking the Alliance Global," http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/2006/08/building_bridge.html.
3. J. Tasini, "The Future of Labor: The Debate," <http://www.workinglife.org/FOL/proposals.html>.
4. See E. Klein, "Tapped: Unions and Politics," http://www.prospect.org/weblog/2006/08/post_1165.html#005865; and N. Newman,

"Health Care: The Worse the Better," August 18, 2006, <http://www.nathannewman.org/laborblog>. See also "Health Care: Why Employer Responsibility Is Needed," <http://www.progressivestates.org/blog/380/health-care-why-employer-responsibility-is-needed>.

5. N. Newman, "Immigrant Rights Help U.S. Workers," <http://nathannewman.org/log/archives001179.shtml#001179>; and Global Labor Strategies, "Alternative Worker Organizations: Taking the Alliance Global," August 11, 2006, <http://laborstrategies.blogs.com>. NDLON's own website emphasizes news of the AFL-CIO alliance; see <http://www.ndlon.org>.
6. Communicate or Die, "Text Messaging 2," August 5, 2006, www.communicateordie.com; and M. Jordan, "Going Mobile: Text Messages Guide Filipino Protesters," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2006, sec. A, p. 1.



David C. Jacobs

David C. Jacobs is associate professor of business administration at Morgan State University. He can be reached via e-mail at labor-democracy@earthlink.net.