

Labor Goes Online to Organize, Communicate, and Strike. Workers On The Net, Unite!

By Montieth M. Illingworth
Information Week

Organized labor is going online. Don't believe it? Just ask Marc Belanger, who runs SoliNet, the only nationwide computer network owned and operated by a labor union.

SoliNet (Solidarity Computer Conferencing Network) is the computer conferencing network of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canada's largest union. The network has 1,500 users drawn from the ranks of CUPE and 20 other unions. But Belanger, CUPE's technology coordinator, dreams of someday giving a password to every union member in the country, or 14 million people. "To benefit from the information highway, we have to build some of it," says Belanger from his office in Ottawa. "Otherwise, we'll be left behind."

Belanger suddenly has lots of company. In both the U.S. and Canada, several unions are reaching similar conclusions about the Networked Age. In the past, many unions viewed information technology (IT) mainly as a threat to their members' jobs. While that mind-set persists, unions also see power in computer networks, and they're determined to gain their share. Some labor leaders also believe technologies could stop, or at least slow, the loss of union membership.

Labor's embrace of IT is taking several forms. The AFL-CIO operates a private online conference on the CompuServe network that lets its members communicate electronically. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) uses a computer network to plan a possible strike. And the United Food and Commercial Workers Union is raising tough questions about the rights of workers who use company computers at home.

Also, as labor moves online, white-collar workers join it. Historically, unions have represented electricians, factory hands, and other blue-collar workers, while white-collar employees were typically considered management.

Times have changed. Today, some white-collar employees at troubled computer makers, IBM and Digital Equipment Corp., use labor-sponsored networks to share information. "When hard times hit, it all comes down to information--who has it, and when you get it," says Rand Wilson, a labor organizer working with Digital employees.

Belanger started building SoliNet in 1986, originally for the 450,000 teachers and hospital, municipal, and university workers who make up CUPE's membership. He is unique in that he, not a telephone or telecommunications company, created the first national computer communications network in Canada.

Belanger believed a lot was riding on who would be first. "If we didn't do it," he says, "management would have, and that could put labor at a disadvantage. It's important for labor to have the power of technology."

SoliNet took time to build, mostly because Belanger had to raise enough money to buy a central Digital VAX minicomputer, but also because networking hundreds of union locals all over Canada is a complex job. SoliNet has proved its value, Belanger says, many times over.

In 1989, for instance, when a caretaker local at the Hope, British Columbia, school system went on strike, SoliNet helped win the day. CUPE officials, learning that the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang was coming to Hope for a meeting, invited the notorious bikers to picket with the caretakers. When the gang accepted the invitation, the news went out over SoliNet. The word spread fast and soon leaked to the other side in the strike talks. The result? "They settled," says Belanger.

Sense Of Solidarity

SoliNet also creates a sense of community among CUPE locals by providing them with news, information, and support. The net--which now connects with the Internet-- has more than 100 online conferences covering topics of interest to its member unions. Special month-long conferences deal with hot-button issues such as free trade and work-force diversity. Local union officers also download stories from the newslines and incorporate them into newsletters. SoliNet will even be used as an online classroom, linking teachers and students in a labor-degree program offered by the University of Athabasca in Alberta.

Belanger hopes SoliNet will link unionized employees of Pizza Pizza Ltd., a Canadian fast-food delivery company that last year was embroiled in a strike after it wanted to replace union members with non-union workers. The union members won the right to keep their jobs--except that they had to work at home (see story, p. 34). "If you take people out of a social work setting, then you should have a cyberspace setting so they can interact," says Belanger. But more than that, he adds, it's about empowerment, or what he calls "Learning." That is, learning more enables workers to earn more.

Budding Network

Online bulletin boards, popularized by computer hobbyists in the '80s and now the playthings of the Internet, are also proving to be useful tools for organized labor. While a handful of U.S. union locals have quietly operated bulletin board services for at least eight years, now one of the most powerful union federations in the country--the AFL-CIO, with 14 million members--has a budding national computer conferencing network on CompuServe called LaborNet.

The number of LaborNet users is small--only 360 people-- and the AFL-CIO has decided for now to limit use to union leaders. But that may soon change. In late July, the CWA, a 700,000-member union that's affiliated with the AFL-CIO, held a private conference for 60 locals in the South involved in a contract dispute with communications and manufacturing giant GTE Corp. That's also a test-run for much bigger plans. The CWA intends to link up 500 other locals next year, either on LaborNet or on an independent network--when negotiations begin with AT&T and the seven regional Bell companies. "We want to share information with the rank and file," says Marcia Devaney, a public relations coordinator with the CWA. "That's the point."

There are other labor nets, too. The Institute for Global Communications (IGC), a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco, has since May 1992 operated a network that's also called

LaborNet (the name isn't copyrighted). It has about 300 users representing 150 unions, including the Service Employees Industrial Union and the United Farm Workers, plus labor lawyers, educators, and labor activists. This LaborNet comprises 32 online conferences, such as the one conducted by the 2,000-member National Employment Lawyers' Association to discuss labor law and litigation.

LaborNet also has current and archived labor news from around the world and full Internet access, which includes a link-up with SoliNet. Users pay \$15 to sign up, a \$10 monthly fee (it includes an hour of online time), and up to \$7 for each additional hour of online connection.

The Colorado Cougar, based in Thornton, Colo., is a network of labor-oriented computer bulletin boards geared for rank-and-file workers. Like the IGC's LaborNet, it is part of the Internet and has ties with similar networks that are cropping up around the world. These include Glasnet in Russia, WorkNet in South Africa, Geonet in Germany, and Poptel in the United Kingdom.

Some U.S. labor organizers believe computer conferencing networks may help rejuvenate their cause. The unions have been losing members steadily since 1970, when membership peaked at more than 19 million people, or more than a quarter of the work force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Today, union members account for less than 16% of the work force (though membership in Canada is close to 40%). "Uniting has never been more feasible or more necessary," says organizer Wilson.

Wilson got his first taste of the power of networking during the CWA's 1989 strike against Nynex Corp. He helped the union organize the strike and to use AT&T's EasyLink electronic-mail system to distribute strike news and negotiation updates to 60,000 members in 30 locals in New York and New England.

"Information is everything during a strike," says Wilson. "The greatest value of E-mail was damage control. Rumors about the negotiations could be laid to rest almost instantly." The strike ended with the CWA victorious in most of its demands.

Since then, Wilson has become director of Massachusetts Jobs With Justice, a community/labor coalition for workers' rights. Soon after he found out about the IGC's LaborNet, he joined.

Democratic Medium

Just as E-mail networks have enabled workers in the private sector to communicate more freely, so have these services enhanced communications among union members.

"It's an inherently democratic medium," says Michael Stein, a LaborNet coordinator. "We want union leadership to join, but we also encourage workers to sign up individually and exchange ideas with other workers in different industries. That kind of cross-sector link isn't supported by union leadership." Adds Wilson: "I can see the networks eliminating a lot of middle-layer functions among the union bosses, and that must be freaking them out."

The AFL-CIO, for one, has decided not to let technology get too far ahead of leadership. In 1992, it established LaborNet on CompuServe Information Services. Today, users pay CompuServe's \$8.95 monthly fee plus an extra \$5 per month for unlimited access to LaborNet. While the AFL-CIO is a

federation of 86 national unions representing autoworkers, actors, miners, truckers, steelworkers, communications employees, and others, only a handful of those unions have signed on.

More significantly, the AFL-CIO service is targeted at stewards and above from the 600 city central and 51 state labor federations, says Blair Calton, LaborNet's coordinator. It's primarily a means for union bosses to talk to other bosses.

That has limited LaborNet's value to the rank and file, argues SoliNet's Belanger, who has written to AFL-CIO leaders to encourage them to develop the network further-- and to do it independently. "There is power in knowing how the networks work," he says. Organizer Wilson agrees, but says he knows why the AFL-CIO took its approach. "They want to control the information just like everybody else," he says.

Online services are encouraging some white-collar workers to organize, too. After Digital announced in July that it would eliminate 20,000 jobs worldwide, company employees in the U.S. and Germany contacted organizer Wilson via IGC's LaborNet. They sought his advice on how they could get together to discuss their options. As a result, a Digital workers' meeting is being planned.

White-collared IBMers may be joining them. Big Blue plans to lay off more than 70,000 employees this year, and Lee Conrad, head of IBM Workers United, an employee association, is also experiencing the "solidarity effect" of the labor networks.

Conrad, an assembler/tester in IBM's Endicott, N.Y., plant, started the group in the mid-1970s. Though all he has to show for his efforts today is a 150-subscriber newsletter called The Resistor, both the reach of that newsletter and the power of his group are poised to expand.

Conrad says many IBM employees are already commiserating on Prodigy, an online service jointly run by Sears, Roebuck & Co. and--ironically--IBM. Conrad is also on the Delphi commercial online service. From there he exchanges E-mail with a handful of IBM managers around the U.S., plus labor activists on IGC's LaborNet (including some Europe-based Digital workers). Conrad intends to join LaborNet, and he hopes to put The Resistor online as an electronic magazine. "A year ago, IBM management would announce plant closings and layoffs nationally. They stopped doing that. Now we don't find out about it until it's too late," Conrad says. "Online, we can get that information ourselves directly from the people affected."

But will white-collar workers actually want to organize around specific issues with their blue-collar brethren? Online chat and story swapping is one thing, but taking action is quite another. All that can be measured now is a temperament. There are signs that a growing number of people--both blue- and white-collar--are open to the possibility of joint action. "What's needed are pioneer efforts by volunteers," says one Digital worker in an E-mail posting on the LaborNet. "I'd be proud to work with them."