

CyberActivists Are Getting Organized

By Jerry Harris

In June and July two conferences took place which reflect the growing movement of progressive cyberactivists. From June 13-15 the Community Technology Centers' Network (CTCNET) had their 6th annual meeting in Pittsburgh, PA. The next month in San Francisco, over the July 12-13 weekend, the 7th meeting of LaborTech was held, attended mainly by union organizers.

Both national conferences attracted participants whose political activity centers on using computers to organize a movement which empowers a working class and minority community social base. The issues of access, the spread of information as an essential element of democracy, and the fight for social and economic justice were on the agenda and in the discussions at both meetings

CTCNET originally grew out of Harlem's community computer center, Playing to Win, organized by Antonia Stone. CTCNET now has more than two hundred affiliated groups, mostly consisting of community based organizations and non-profit institutions. About 300 people attended the conference with a good proportion from African American and working-class communities.

CTCNET's mission statement says that it "envisions a society in which all people are equitable empowered by technology". Their special focus is bringing computers, media equipment and the skills to us them into low-income communities, thus enabling each community to voice their own social and political goals with greater impact.

The CTCNET activists came from all over the country to share experiences, discuss policy issues, and learn from each other. Workshops were divided into four areas: collaborations; program content; technology-centered workshops; and center development. Carl Davidson, cy.Rev managing editor, helped lead a workshop on recycling old computers. A lot of focus was on how to run effective centers, reaching people, developing meaningful programs, and building an expanded network of relationships with schools, libraries, city officials, and community organizers.

On the West Coast, the LaborTech Conference was mainly put together by a core of trade unionists who maintain LaborNet at the Institute for Global Communications. It attracted about 150 labor activists who use computer technology to organize unions, strikes, labor solidarity, and to expand internal union democracy

There were a number of exciting examples of labor organizing with the Internet. In England, LaborNet UK was key to helping striking dockers in Liverpool to spark global solidarity activities. The result was a one-day shutdown of 105 ports in Japan, Brazil, the U.S. West Coast, Europe, and other countries. Another example was given by Myoung Joon Kim from KCTU in South Korea. Activists there have developed global ties and given detailed news of the wave of general strikes which have swept their country. Workers from around the world have rallied to their support adding pressure on the government to make important concessions.

There were also plenty of fine U. S. examples. Ken Hamidi has organized a Web site for disgruntled Intel workers that has established contacts at every Intel corporate location, Those using the site have sponsored pickets, and are now organizing a cyberspace demonstration. Detroit Free Press strikers explained how they established a net page when union leadership was slow to act, prompting an

official page to be posted. Meanwhile they maintained their page as a direct and militant voice for striking members.

While the AFL-CIO and numerous unions have put up web sites, many at the conference pointed out that these are mainly a one-way means of communication, from the officials to the membership. It was the general consensus that the net was best used as a two-way, many-to-many means on communication, to listen to and connect the rank and file as a way of expanding union democracy. While most union members still have no access at home, large numbers have access at work. Downloaded copies of union-related information often find their way to the job. It was also pointed out that unions need to fight for access to corporate internal networks, just as they have access to company bulletin boards.

One Detroit striker said he had recently read Lenin's "What Is To Be Done", and compared the idea of establishing the All-Russian paper Iskra as the scaffolding of the Soviet revolution, to using the net today as the scaffolding of a new movement linking activists together.

Many workshops focused on globalization as a process which has deeply effected labor, its' ability to bargain and fight. Most participants felt workers now are facing multinational corporations and must build an international movement as part of any national struggle.

Attention was also focused on the workplace and how computers have changed industrial, service and professional jobs. The idea that we have passed from an industrial to an information economy was an idea many agreed with. The real question being discussed was how to build an effective labor movement in face of these changes.

Both of these conferences show that cyberactivists are well on their way to using the new technologies to organize, educate, and build a new movement. Participants not only understood how to use computers, but the key issues, politics and analysis necessary to put progressives squarely in the coming battles for social justice.

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