

# BEATING APATHY

## LESSON 1: HOW TO GET UNSTUCK



 TROUBLEMAKERS TRAINING SERIES



# HOW TO USE THIS COURSE

**Work together.** Organizing isn't a solitary activity. You could read this on your own, but you'll learn more if you talk over each lesson with a buddy—or better yet, a group of co-workers. Along the way, try out the exercises to help you apply the lessons in your own workplace.

**Graduate to the book.** If you like this free course, you'll love the book it's adapted from, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, a step-by-step guide to inspiring your co-workers to action and building power at work. The 47 secrets are distilled from the insights and knowhow of generations of organizers, and illustrated with hundreds of real-life examples and practical tips. This course includes 29 of the 47 numbered secrets—if you want to read the ones you're missing, buy your copy today at [labornotes.org/secrets](http://labornotes.org/secrets).



**Organizing is for everyone.** Though this course was written with union members in mind, many of its lessons apply in non-union workplaces, too. But be careful, especially about acting alone. You'll find more safety—and strength—in numbers. Consider contacting a union for help, and check out pages 26-30 of the book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* for more on your legal rights—or download the free handouts at [labornotes.org/secrets](http://labornotes.org/secrets).

**Follow along.** You'll get the most out of the course if you go lesson by lesson. Here is the full list, all available at [labornotes.org/beatingsapathy](http://labornotes.org/beatingsapathy).

- Lesson 1: How to Get Unstuck
- Lesson 2: How an Organizer Talks... and Listens
- Lesson 3: Assemble Your Dream Team
- Lesson 4: Choose Your Battles
- Lesson 5: Swing into Action
- Lesson 6: Expect the Unexpected
- Lesson 7: Always Be Organizing
- Lesson 8: Putting It All Together

## Look for These Symbols



**SECRETS**



**REAL-LIFE  
EXAMPLES**



**EXERCISES**



**TIPS**

# LESSON 1: HOW TO GET UNSTUCK

You're reading this. That means you're interested in organizing where you work. You want to fix problems you see around you. Maybe something unfair has happened to you, or to someone you work with, and you want to *do something* about it.

For us, that's organizing. For the boss, that's trouble. People who try to *do something*—especially when they bring others together to *do something* collectively—are often labeled “troublemakers.”

Organizing is a lot like cooking: there are time-tested recipes that anyone can learn, methods that work and some that don't. Your results may not be perfect every time—since we're dealing with human beings here—but you will do better if you learn from the successes and mistakes of the organizers who've gone before you.

This lesson will teach you:

- How to diagnose the real problem (It's not “apathy,” we promise)
- Four ways the boss keeps us disorganized—and how to outsmart them
- What is the organizing attitude?
- The bullseye approach to getting your co-workers involved



Jim West/jimwestphoto.com



## HOW MEATPACKERS BEAT HARASSMENT

In a meatpacking plant in Pasco, Washington, management had had its way for years. Conditions were dangerous, floors were slippery, and harassment was a constant. The union was weak; very few members were involved.

But that all began to change when a few workers decided to organize their co-workers to make their work life more tolerable.

One of their first steps was to hold meetings in the cafeteria for people who worked on each production line. Anyone willing to attend could help make plans to deal with their worst shop floor problems.

“The company wasn’t happy about the meetings,” said Maria Martínez, the chief steward. “They started sending supervisors to listen to us. They said we weren’t allowed to hold union meetings in their cafeteria. I told them that the National Labor Relations Act gives us the right to organize and to hold meetings in non-work areas at non-work times.

“Management told me to put it in writing. So I did. I wrote a grievance and had 100 people sign it. That was the last I heard from management about that. And we kept on meeting in the cafeteria.”

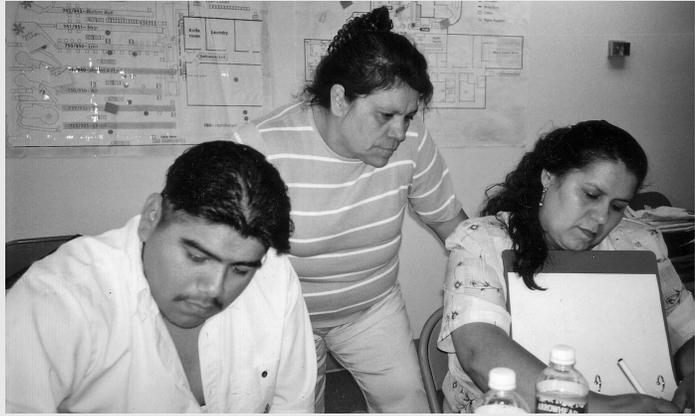
A common topic at the meetings was harassment. So volunteers on each production line began training their co-workers to document the harassment and encouraging them to stand up to it. Martínez said, “If a supervisor said something, we’d say real loud to other people on the line, ‘Did you hear what he just said?’”

When incidents piled up, members would go as a group to higher-level managers. They prepared in advance to tell their stories, so that one person wouldn’t be stuck doing all the talking.

The actions worked. Supervisors—perhaps to avoid friction with their own bosses—started to back off.

To keep supervisors in check, another tactic the workers used was grievance forms, modeled after disciplinary tickets. Workers could “write up” their supervisors by checking off violations. Usually all the people from one line would sit down and document the harassment together. One copy went to the offending supervisor, one to the union, and one to management.

In this course you’ll read dozens of stories like this, from workers who noticed something wrong and started organizing to fix it.



Tony Perstein

It all started when a few workers decided to organize to make their work life more tolerable.



# ORGANIZING IS AN ATTITUDE



United Teachers Los Angeles

Organizing is first of all an attitude. It's the attitude that you and your co-workers together can *do something* to make things better. It's the attitude that action is better than complaining. It's the attitude that problems are just waiting for a solution, and that strength in numbers is part of that solution.

Organizing is the attitude that action is better than complaining.

It's the refusal to be discouraged—at least not for long. It's the willingness to listen to others with respect, so that the plan you come up with reflects the good ideas of many people.

If you have the organizing attitude, you feel it is *necessary* to respond to unfairness. You are committed to building power with your co-workers, not just talking about it. You believe in collective action and want to get better at putting others in motion.

## THE ORGANIZING ATTITUDE

- Action is better than complaining.
- Problems are waiting for solutions.
- Solutions are collective, not individual.
- People can be brought together to make things better.



## APATHY ISN'T REAL



UFCW Local 400 (CC BY 2.0) bit.ly/1QSm397

Everyone cares about something at work.

The first attitude adjustment an organizer needs is to get over the idea that co-workers don't care—that your workplace is bogged down in “apathy.”

It's a common gripe. In Labor Notes workshops we often ask union members to make a list of the reasons why people don't get involved where they work. Typical answers include:

- Lack of time.
- Don't know how to do it.
- The union is not open; there's no easy way in.
- Conflicts between groups.
- Conflicts between individuals.
- My co-workers feel that nothing will change.
- They think everyone *else* is apathetic.
- They're looking for individual solutions.
- And the big one: fear.

Sound familiar? It might feel like your co-workers don't care. But push a little bit, and that's never really true.

Everyone cares about something at work. Just about everyone cares about their wages, for instance. Everyone wants respect. No one's indifferent to whether their shift is miserable. It's impossible not to care.

Could it be that your workplace is the one in a million where everything's fine? Maybe your co-workers are completely secure about their jobs, love their supervisors, make excellent money with terrific benefits, have no worries about downsizing or layoffs, face no health hazards, and are confident about their retirement. If so—you can stop reading this and get another hobby!

But it's more likely that people are scared to say anything, or feel powerless.

They might say everything is fine because they don't believe it can change, or they can't imagine it being different, or they assume the problem they care about isn't a "union issue." Organizing is the antidote.

Remember Maria Martínez's co-workers at the meatpacking plant? Most had never been to a union meeting—but they did care that their supervisors were harassing them. They just didn't think they could do anything about it. Once they saw people organizing to tackle the problem, they wanted to get involved.

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to diagnose  
the problem  
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prescription.



# HOW THE BOSS KEEPS US DISORGANIZED

What holds people back from confronting the boss about workplace issues? Instead of blaming “apathy,” it’s important to find out the actual reasons. You have to diagnose the problem before you can write the prescription.

This chart shows four common obstacles the boss relies on to keep us from getting organized—and how you can help your co-workers get past them:

The boss relies on...	The organizer...	Co-workers find...
... <b>fear</b> of conflict and retaliation.	...taps into <b>righteous anger</b> about workplace injustices.	...the <b>courage</b> and determination to act.
... <b>hopelessness</b> , the feeling that things can’t change and we have no power.	...helps develop a <b>plan to win</b> , and shares examples of victories elsewhere.	... <b>hope</b> that change is possible and worth fighting for.
... <b>division</b> , pitting workers against each other.	...identifies <b>common ground</b> and builds relationships.	... <b>unity</b> to act together.
... <b>confusion</b> , passing around messages that will alarm or distract us.	... <b>interprets</b> and shares information, fitting it into a bigger picture.	... <b>clarity</b> to see through the boss’s plan.



# WHAT'S THE REAL PROBLEM?

Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board so far.



Dan Lutz

Your workplace may feel like it's bogged down in "apathy," but under the surface, there's always something else going on. Here are some ways to understand what looks like apathy and respond to it.

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p><b>"No one seems to care."</b></p>	<p>Everyone cares about <i>something</i>—but the something might not be what you expect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The issue you're focused on might not be a priority for your co-worker.</li> <li>• She might feel strongly about other issues that haven't caught your attention.</li> <li>• She might assume her problem isn't <i>your</i> issue, or isn't a <i>union</i> issue.</li> </ul>	<p>Listen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick a few co-workers you'd like to know better. Make a point of talking with them to find out what's on their minds.</li> <li>• Show respect and understanding for the issues your co-workers care about, and they'll be more likely to do the same for you.</li> </ul>

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p><b>"It's hard to see how things could change."</b></p>	<p>Your co-workers don't believe that they have power—yet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most people have always felt powerless and disorganized at work. They've never felt strength in numbers.</li> <li>• Problems seem too big to tackle.</li> <li>• The boss has cemented the idea that his decisions are final.</li> </ul>	<p>Show your co-workers that change is possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring people together.</li> <li>• Start small. Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board so far.</li> <li>• Develop a credible plan to win. Ask, "What's our solution?" "Who has the authority to say yes?" "What could we do together to get that person to say yes?"</li> <li>• Share stories of tactics that have worked elsewhere.</li> </ul>

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p><b>"No one comes to meetings."</b></p>	<p>People won't be motivated to come unless they feel their participation matters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If a meeting is just to "get information," it's easy to skip it.</li> <li>• An email or a notice on the bulletin board usually won't inspire people to attend.</li> </ul>	<p>Give your co-workers meaningful roles. Let them know how their presence or absence will affect issues they care about.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the meeting pleasant and productive. Prepare a clear agenda, a time limit, and a reason to attend, such as a hot issue.</li> <li>• Face-to-face invitations are best. Divide up your workplace and find several other people to share the work of inviting people individually.</li> <li>• Consider ways to make meetings more accessible: scheduling, location, childcare, translation, transportation.</li> <li>• Be flexible. Sometimes people simply can't make it to meetings, but they can still play crucial roles while they're at work.</li> </ul>

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p><b>"No one's willing to do anything."</b></p>	<p>Many people won't initiate activity, but they might respond if asked directly by someone they trust.</p>	<p>Figure out small, specific requests. Approach co-workers personally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect the time constraints in your co-workers' lives.</li> <li>• Show lots of appreciation for anything they're willing to do.</li> <li>• Make it clear that any victories were won by the whole team.</li> </ul>



## DIAGNOSE YOUR WORKPLACE

Does any of this sound familiar? What obstacles to organizing are you hearing from your co-workers, and what do you think is the real problem?

What are you hearing?

What might be the real problem?

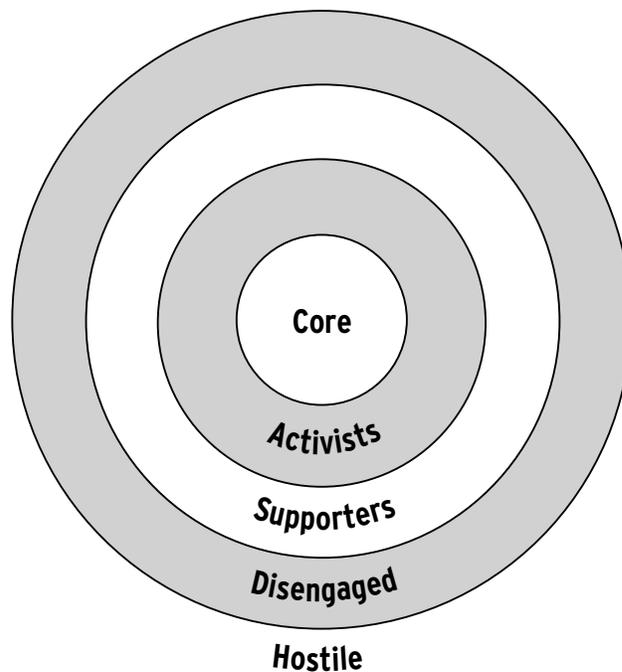
What can you try?



## AIM FOR THE BULLSEYE

If you ask union members to draw their union structure, most will draw a pyramid: officers at the top, rank and file at the bottom. Some might get clever and draw an inverted pyramid with the rank and file at the top.

But a better way to think about your fellow members, from the organizer's point of view, is like a dartboard with concentric circles.



In the center is your **core group**: the people (maybe you?) who are always thinking about organizing and how to get others involved, even on their time off. They might be elected leaders or shop stewards, or not.

In the first ring are the **activists** who can be counted on to help when an issue heats up. They will take responsibility to get the word out and will ask other people to take action, too.

In the second ring are **supporters**: people who will wear a button or sign a petition, but don't take responsibility for getting anyone else involved.

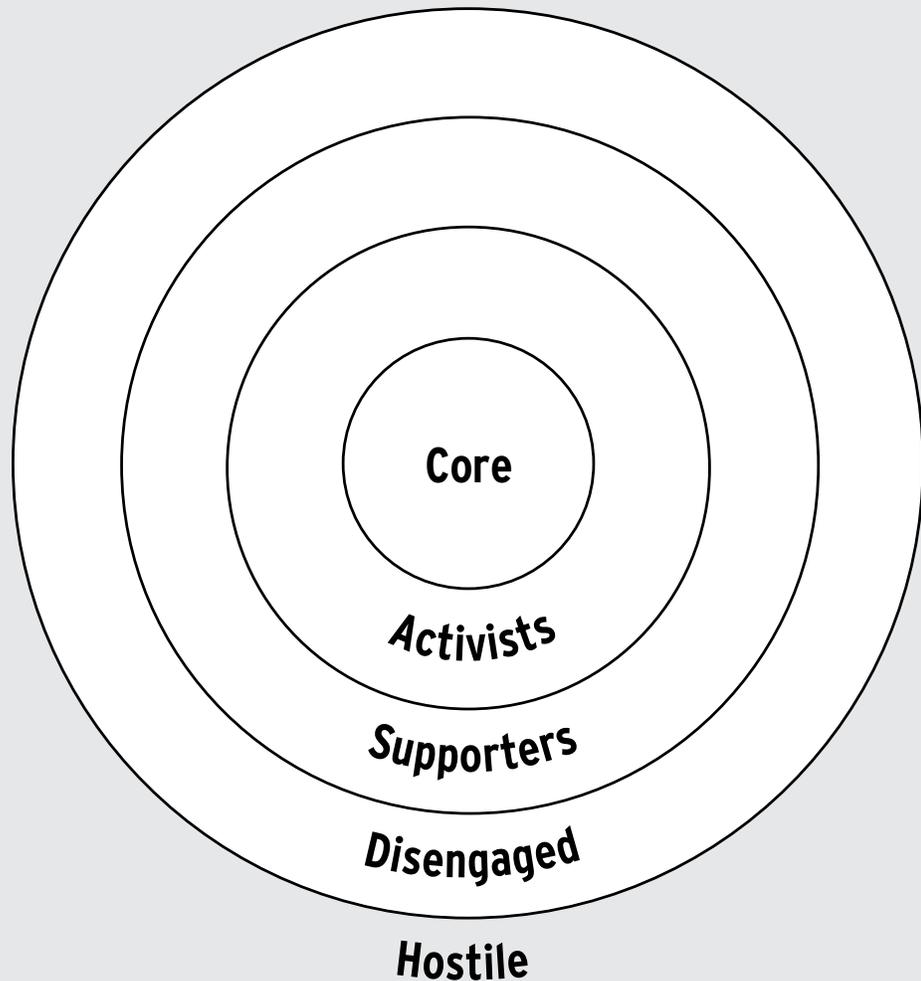
In the third ring are the people who appear most **disengaged**. They don't see the union as a factor in their lives, so they don't participate.

There are also people outside the circle who aren't just uninvolved—they're **hostile** to the union. Don't waste your time arguing with the haters. Maybe one day something will open their eyes, but it'll probably be an experience, not a debate, that does it.



## FILL IN YOUR OWN BULLSEYE

Stop and think about where people in your workplace fit into the circles. Can you think of one or two examples of co-workers in each position—the core group, activists, supporters, disengaged, and hostile? Write a few names in each circle.



What are some steps you might take to move your co-workers closer to the center of the bullseye?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.



## YOU'RE DIFFERENT, AND THAT'S OKAY



Jim West, jimwestphoto.com

A good goal is one activist or steward for every 10 workers.

It's crucial for the organizer to understand that the concentration of co-workers in the outer rings isn't a sign of failure. Most of your co-workers won't ever become dedicated union volunteers, day in and day out.

Even in winning campaigns, the planning, the strategizing, and a fair share of the grunt work are typically carried out by a handful of members: the core group. The activists and supporters join in as needed, and a lot of the people who are usually disengaged play a part when the stakes get highest—for example, during a strike.

Don't set the bar too high. You can't send a message that to be involved in the union, people have to be like you. They'll shy away. Making a meaningful contribution shouldn't require devoting all their days and nights. Instead, help everyone to find their own levels of involvement. And as you take on different fights, don't be surprised when people move between roles—sometimes acting as leaders, other times hanging back.

But you probably do need more people to join you in the core group, and more supporters to step up as activists. "More hands on the plow," as master

organizer and Auto Workers rabblrouser Jerry Tucker used to say. Union veterans will tell you that a good goal is one activist or steward for every 10 workers, including at least one on every shift and in every department or work area.

Your organizing task is, how are you going to move more people toward the center of the bullseye? Help them take one step at a time, moving from being disengaged to supportive, or from support to activism, or from activism to taking on core responsibilities. Never make your core group an exclusive club.

## READ MORE:



This free course is adapted from the book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, a step-by-step guide to inspiring your co-workers to action and building power at work. The 47 secrets are distilled from the insights and knowhow of generations of organizers, and illustrated with hundreds of real-life examples and practical tips.

Check out Lesson 1 in the book for much more on How to Get Unstuck, including:

- Secret #5: Don't be a hero
- Secret #6: There are no shortcuts
- Secret #7: It's all about power
- Real-life story: Know your rights
- Your legal rights to organize
- What if I work in the public sector?

Visit [labornotes.org/secrets](http://labornotes.org/secrets) to buy your copy today.



## YOUR VOICE:

How are you getting your workplace organizing unstuck? Let us know at [editor@labornotes.org](mailto:editor@labornotes.org)

## LESSON 2 PREVIEW: HOW AN ORGANIZER TALKS... AND LISTENS.



It's the very foundation of organizing, an activity that might come naturally to you, or might make your knees quake—one-on-one conversations. Whether you're a "people person" or not, it's the personal touch that makes all the difference. In Lesson 2, we'll explore:

- How good a listener are you? Common pitfalls
- The seven steps of a great organizing conversation
- How Chicago teachers got their co-workers ready to strike
- Can you organize and drink beer at the same time?

...and much more.