

recognizing that the decision to get involved is theirs alone. New organizers are sometimes shy about using these techniques because they mistake organizing as something *done to* coworkers. Rather, like a dance, AEIOU done well is about *moving with* coworkers at every step, discovering what you both want and how you're going to act together to get it.

In follow-up posts on this topic (at tinyurl.com/moreAEIOU) I dive into more depth, discussing common challenges people run up against and how to overcome them. The version of AEIOU synthesized above is a mixture of ideas borrowed from a range of union sources, new and old, which has then been filtered through thousands of hours of conversation experiences and many further hours of discussion and reflection between the community of organizers I work closely with.

Be gentle with yourself as you start using these techniques. Each conversation with each coworker can, especially at the beginning, feel slow and halting. But with practice and reflection you'll start to discover what works and feels good, you'll get comfortable integrating organizing conversation techniques with your own conversational style and flow. Remember that the quantity and quality of the political change you make will be determined by the integrity and solidarity you create in your relationships with others. With intention and care over the long haul, there's no demand too ambitious or action too grand that can't be built through 1-on-1 conversations.

The 1-on-1 organizing conversation between coworkers is at the heart of grassroots union organizing. Because capitalist society in general and capitalist workplaces especially are conditioned so that people don't feel empowered to stand up to the status quo and make demands around their needs and wants, workers often feel helpless in the face of serious grievances at work. Union organizing techniques exist precisely to bridge this gap between widespread passive worker agitation and the need for collective action. 1-on-1 organizing conversations are the main tool that unionists have to pierce through the fear of authority and learned helplessness imposed by capitalism.

How 1-on-1s are done varies somewhat across different organizing traditions, but the core elements of 1-on-1s in each tradition are largely the same. Most of these ideas also apply directly to student and tenant organizing, but the presentation here will be framed around labor organizing. As a basic definition, a 1-on-1 organizing conversation is a **talk you have with a fellow worker to 1) build a relationship of trust, 2) identify common grievances and shared interests, and 3) move together from a place of inaction to one of action.**

My First Organizing Campaign

Every version of the 1-on-1 framework is composed of a series of steps in a conversation. As a member of the United Students Against Sweatshops in college I learned a nine-step version:

1. Introduce yourself and the problem
2. Get their story of who they are
3. Agitate about how the problem makes them feel
4. Educate by discussing solutions

5. Pop the question of if they're going to get involved or not

6. Inoculate against counter-arguments to getting involved

7. Set the task they can do to help address the issue

8. Get contact info

9. Follow-up later about the task and further involvement

After I learned this I started seeing it everywhere. The day after I attended a training where I learned these steps a canvasser walked up to me on the street to try to get a donation for some cause, and they used this framework exactly as I had just learned it. I felt as if I had gained a new super-power and was now able to decode the way political engagement was done.

I started using it in my conversations with other students on campus as we built a campaign to remove sweatshop labor from university-branded clothing. It worked. Over the course of a few years myself and two others started out from scratch and built a group that had dozens of members, hosted educational events, carried out disruptive actions with hundreds of participants, and won our demands.

From the outside, this kind of campaign may appear to consist solely of large public events and direct actions. Those who run a campaign from beginning to end know it's all built upon solid relationships between a group of people who care about the core issues. Those relationships are built through repeated 1-on-1 conversations.

Setting Up a 1-on-1

A good organizer is always building relationships with the people around them. They talk with people, listen to people, and try to build a culture of care and trust among workers in the workplace.

and we all got upset, we trusted each other enough to talk through everything and take action together.

For the 95% of the time at work when my coworkers have not been unified around an obvious and singular grievance, I've found it helpful to take a more fluid approach with AEIOU. The top priority is always building healthy and multi-dimensional relationships with coworkers. When conversations naturally veer into issues about work, I weave in AEIOU to structure the conversation. But in less urgent circumstances, AEIOU is often applied in a more ad hoc fashion. Instead of moving towards an action to be taken tomorrow, it's more like a months- or years-long process of discussing issues to gradually form deeper understandings with coworkers about who has power in the workplace, how workers and bosses have opposing interests, and what workers can do to get what they want. This greases the gears for the moment when collective action does become practical and immediate.

Conclusion

AEIOU has its most direct and pure application in 1-on-1 conversations with coworkers about daily workplace grievances. However, with minor tweaks the basic framework also applies to facilitating group conversations, to organizing as part of a traditional unionization or contract campaign, and to fighting around issues outside of the workplace. AEIOU exhibits a universal logic for processing emotions and ideas with others to move towards collective action.

Notice how there's no part of AEIOU where you run out in front of people and start barking orders. The easiest way to break trust is to tell people what they have to do. An organizer can bring ideas and questions to the conversation, but always as propositions, inviting coworkers to agree or disagree, encouraging them to contribute, but

Now that you've taken collective action, don't let things revert back to a mindset of workplace individualism where everyone only looks after themselves. Debriefing how you all acted together helps form a collective identity. No one is a union by themselves. You only become a union together with others.

How to Use AEIOU

AEIOU in its literal and linear form is most useful when a group of coworkers are all agitated together, motivated to do something about it, and have a clear target and demand. Once when there was a major shared grievance at my workplace, I had many individual and group conversations with coworkers in my department over the course of a few days, we went through AEIOU almost exactly like how it's presented above, we settled on an action plan, and we carried it out. Then we won. I was surprised that AEIOU worked *exactly* as I had learned it.

If you are newer to workplace organizing and want to be prepared to execute AEIOU when such an opportunity arises, I'd suggest re-reading the AEIOU sections above before heading into any meeting or 1-on-1 where you think people are already agitated and prepared to take action. Think about how each step of the conversation might go. The purpose of this is less to have a rigid blueprint for the conversation but rather to prime yourself for how to fluidly move within and between different parts of AEIOU as the situation dictates.

However, in my years of organizing at that workplace, opportunities for such an immediate, literal, and linear application of AEIOU had only arisen a few times. While AEIOU was indispensable in those situations, it's also important to remember that what made the actions possible were the strong relationships my coworkers and I had built with each other over those years. When a grievance got hot

One thing I've become increasingly resolved on is the importance of building relationships with coworkers before jumping into organizing conversations with them. There are times when going straight into organizing conversations is necessary, like when intense grievances pop up early on in your organizing or when you have to reach out to coworkers you don't often interact with. However, most of the time it is better to meet up with a coworker outside of work just get to know them first.

This has many benefits. First, newer organizers shouldn't have to stress out about applying all of the conversation steps the first time you meet up to talk with someone, and thus you can build your comfort level and trust with someone more naturally. Second, coworkers are unlikely to engage you on a lot of these questions if they don't know you very well, so spending time building the relationship is plainly more effective in the long-term anyway.

Once you have established some rapport with a coworker, there are many ways to get to a 1-on-1 organizing conversation. One way is when they bring up a grievance at work you can affirm what they're saying and ask them more about it. If they respond further and are open to talking about it, you can transition into asking them for a 1-on-1, "The scheduling sounds like it is really troubling you. I've been hearing a lot of people talk about that lately, and it didn't used to be like this. Would you want to talk more about it after our shift tomorrow at the cafe down the street?"

Being specific about the time and place increases the chances of people following through. While it's worthwhile to build a culture of good communication among coworkers on the job, it's also important to create space for deeper conversations outside of work to avoid bosses overhearing you and to allow sufficient time to discuss the issues.

AEIOU

I later learned a shorter, four-step organizing conversation model called AHUY (Anger, Hope, Union, You), which Labor Notes uses in its popular Secrets of a Successful Organizer booklet and trainings. The steps that organizer Jane McAlevey uses in her trainings are 1) introductions, 2) issues and agitation, 3) vision and education, 4) call the question, 5) inoculation, 6) work assignment.

In noting all these different frameworks, I hope to impress how universal these methods are for those who do grassroots organizing. The Industrial Workers of the World is an anti-capitalist labor union whose mnemonic, borrowed initially from other labor union trainings, is **AEIOU (Agitate, Educate, Inoculate, Organize, Uplift)**. While I think all the different frameworks offer essentially the same thing, I personally favor AEIOU because it's succinct and easy to remember.

AEIOU has a wide range of circumstances it can be applied to. But my reference point in this post is in the context of a conversation you have with a coworker in the process of getting to know them, talking about issues at work, and exploring what to do about them. For ease of presentation, AEIOU is assumed here to take place over the course of a single conversation, but in practice it's often spread out over multiple conversations.

Before getting to the main attraction, there's one more crucial preliminary point: **the 70/30 rule**. In organizing conversations, you, the organizer, should be talking 30% of the time and listening and asking questions 70% of the time. The most common and yet damaging mistake organizers make is talking too much. It communicates to the person you're talking with that your own thoughts are more important than their experiences, concerns, and ideas. Organizing isn't about telling people what to do but rather

conversations, the Organize question might be, “When we walk into the boss’s office tomorrow morning, would you be willing to present the petition?”

Uplift

The Uplift step of AEIOU is about following up with people. Even though you can have a great conversation with someone and go through AEIO without a hitch, sometimes people’s motivation can wane in the days after. There are a million possible reasons for this, including people getting cold feet if they dwell on the possible backlash or questioning their commitment after hearing negative feedback from friends or family about their new organizing aspirations.

One aspect of following up is checking in with people about tasks. As always, organizers need to treat people’s concerns with care and try to get to the root of the problem by asking open-ended questions. Whatever the obstacle is, try to work with them to find a way around it. For example, if a worker says they didn’t complete the task of talking with their coworker you could respond with: “Yea, I know it’s a busy time of year. Would it be easier if we waited til the holiday break to try to talk to our coworkers?” Or: “I know talking with coworkers about these issues can be intimidating. Would it be helpful if I joined you in a conversation with Sally about this and we talked it through with her together?” The key is to be helpful but never pushy, discerning when to offer more encouragement and support and when to give space.

Sometimes you get through AEIOU with a group of coworkers, you take action, and following-up means debriefing with coworkers afterwards. Whether the action wins a demand or not there will be lots to process, and your organizing will be stronger going forward if you can think through together how it went and what you learned.

Sometimes coworkers can talk through different actions or levels of participation that entail differing degrees of risk so that everyone can participate in a way that is both effective and reasonably safe. Sometimes when a coworker is dependent on wages to feed a family they may decide to stay on the sidelines for the present. That's actually okay, and people will be much more willing to stay in relationship with you and possibly get involved later if they know you are willing to respect the things that they worry about. Sometimes when people go through inoculate they conclude that the boss is the cause of their problem, that workers are safer when they take action as a group, and that the dignity and potential gains that come with asserting worker power far outweigh the risks.

Organize

In AEIOU, the Organize step is about finding ways for people to participate by taking on tasks that are right for them. How this part of the conversation unfolds depends on how close you and your coworkers are to taking action and how involved someone is. If someone is brand new to organizing, the appropriate task can be as simple as coming to a union meeting or them asking another coworker what they think about the scheduling.

Like all parts of 1-on-1s, this part of the conversation is best done as a series of questions and exploring possibilities. “What do you think we’d have to do before we can successfully do [the thing talked about in the educate section]?” “Do you think other coworkers have problems with the scheduling too?” “Who else should we talk to about this?” “Would you be willing to talk to Tom?” And so on.

In contrast, if you’re talking with a coworker in the midst of deep unrest at the workplace and you’re all about to take an action together after having extensive agitate-educate-inoculate

about processing our experiences and moving towards practical solutions together using collective action. For our campaigns to be welcoming and democratic, this process must sincerely involve everyone’s contributions. This requires organizers to be able and willing listeners.

Agitate

The Agitate step of the organizing conversation is made up of two parts: 1. identifying the main issues, and 2. bringing to the surface how these issues affect workers.

Sometimes when you go into a 1-on-1 conversation with someone, they’ve told you before what their main grievance is, like in the scheduling example above. In such cases you can go directly into exploring the effects of the problem.

Sometimes, however, a coworker seems agitated about something at work but you don’t know what it is, or you think you know but you’re actually mistaken. If you get into a 1-on-1 and it’s not clear what the grievance is, it’s best to get to the agitation part of a conversation naturally by just talking with them about work in general. This entails asking questions like how long they’ve worked there, what’s changed over the years, how they got into this work, what they like about the job, what about the job is hardest, etc...

When they have identified a grievance, the next task is to process how that grievance is affecting them. The essential tension here is: 1) Under capitalism, most of us have jobs that negatively affect us in various ways. 2) Under capitalism, we have to keep going to work in order to keep getting paychecks to afford what we need. 3) Most workers cope with this tension in the short-term by consciously downplaying the harm or subconsciously blunting our feelings. But

plainly, no one is going to put any effort into solving their problems if they don't give them proper consideration.

Many people's first impulse upon hearing a coworker talk about a problem is to pivot to problem-solving mode right away (that's what the next step called educate is about). However, if people don't spend time processing their experience and making direct connections between a workplace grievance and the personal effects it has on them, then they'll likely keep relying on coping mechanisms instead of thinking of ways to confront the problem.

So don't follow the first impulse of moving towards problem-solving right away. Rather, once an issue is identified in the conversation, the organizer can help stimulate conversation about the personal effects of that issue with open-ended questions. Some example questions include: "How does that make you feel?" "Is this what you thought the job would be like?" "How does this impact your ability to do your work?" "And then what happened?" "Am I right that I'm hearing you say [summarize back to them what they said]?"

As in all parts of AEIOU, active listening is crucial here. Let them speak for themselves, but find ways to provide them with more opportunities to do so and more angles from which to see the issues. You don't want to be prying, but if they seem to be going with the flow of the conversation, don't move on after hearing surface-level answers. If scheduling is the problem, "the scheduling sucks" is not a meaningful expression of how that affects them. Exploring further is not for the organizer's sake of knowing all the personal details, but for the sake of the person you're speaking with making the necessary connections between their inner emotional life and their daily reality at work.

action without first having real conversations with their coworkers about the attending risks. Conversely, you don't want to only focus on the risks, which will scare people away, but also discuss what preventative measures can be taken to minimize the risks and what examples there are of workers successfully taking action while evading negative fallout.

Part of the boss's response is their emotional reaction to worker action. Bosses will try to use their emotions to undermine the legitimacy or convictions around the workers' demands. Some bosses react with anger, intimidation, and the threat of discipline to scare workers from following through with any further action. Some bosses react with exaggerated agreeableness and say they are on your side and may try to give in to small parts of your demand as a way to undercut the full demand. Some bosses react with contrived sadness or feigned shock and paint themselves as the victim in the situation.

Remember that no matter how the boss reacts emotionally, the workers are always in the right when demanding a better workplace. If you're able to talk through with your coworkers *before* an action how the boss's likely responses are just attempts to undermine worker unity and demands, then they'll be able to see through the boss's ploy.

You don't want the boss to learn of the plans before the action happens. Coworkers who are enthusiastic about taking action for the first time might not be mindful about who they talk to and what they say at work. To help coworkers understand the risks and precautions that can be taken, you can ask, "What do you think the boss will do if they hear about this plan before we're able to execute it?" Then, "How can we make sure word of the plan doesn't get out before we pull it off?"

Often the first time a coworker is presented with the idea of taking direct action on an issue it just feels alien to them because maybe they haven't considered that before. In such cases they may need more time to consider it, to hear more stories where other workers did similar things, and to hear what other coworkers think before they're ready to sign on.

However, when a grievance does feel important to a coworker, initial suggestions of action will energize them to think creatively about how they're going to take their power into their own hands to make the changes they want.

Inoculate

The boss reacts. The boss always reacts, which is why organizers need tools to anticipate and prepare for the boss's counter-offensive in whatever form it takes.

In AEIOU, we talk about this in terms of inoculation, which is a medical term used to describe the way a person is given a mild version of a disease, like a vaccine, as a way to build up their body's defenses. To inoculate a coworker means talking with them about what the boss will do in response to the actions and organizing of the workers. **Inoculate has two parts: 1) Anticipating and preparing for what the boss will do, and 2) addressing people's fears.**

An easy way to start this conversation is to ask, "How do you think the boss will respond if we do what we just talked about?" Workers tend to have pretty good instincts about this, and will often come up with likely retaliations that the boss will attempt, including "small" things like moving their shifts around or taking away perks to life-altering things like cutting hours or firing workers. Only the most reckless and irresponsible organizers proceed to take collective

If someone refuses to engage these questions, in Agitate or any other section of AEIOU, respecting that is the only human thing to do. If your relationship with this person is built on trust and not on wanting to use them for your own narrow political goals, then you'll honor their boundaries. Also, chances are that other opportunities will come up to ask about them another time or for them to raise the issue again.

But sometimes these conversations can get real and people can get emotional and cry. As an organizer, it's not your job to shove people down an emotional staircase. However, an organizer can open a door and support them in exploring their situation and feelings. Validating their feelings and self-worth is important.

As an organizer I've too often shied away from deeper conversations because of my fear that I wouldn't be able to hold space effectively for people's emotions. To overcome this I've had to learn how to be vulnerable, how to share my own experiences when appropriate, and how to listen and give support during tough moments.

While it's useful to be able to wear the "organizer hat" to help others process their emotions about work, when you have good relationships with coworkers and are honest with each other about job issues it's often them that will be agitating you. When the boss does something terrible your coworkers will come to you saying that enough is enough. They'll be the ones pushing you through Agitate and onto the next steps.

Educate

The Educate step of AEIOU is about exploring how collective action can solve the problem. Educate can be subdivided into three main questions.

First, “*what would fix the problem?*” Sometimes that’s all the organizer has to ask. If the problem is erratic and last-minute scheduling, maybe you discover through conversation that getting your work schedule two weeks in advance would fix the problem.

Second, “*who has the official authority to fix the problem?*” In the case of scheduling, maybe it’s the shift manager. Of course, the CEO could probably also fix the problem for you, but as a rule of thumb it’s easiest and most effective to target the lowest boss in the hierarchy who has the authority to give into your demand.

Third, “*what collective action can you take to pressure the boss to fix the problem?*” With bad scheduling, perhaps the answer is to get all of your coworkers to go together to tell your supervisor in his office that you all need two weeks notice. Perhaps the solution is that workers talk to each other and collectively start to refuse to work shifts that don’t fit their schedules because they weren’t given enough notice.

These are examples of “direct action” in that you and your coworkers are putting pressure on the boss directly without asking someone else to do it for you. These are also examples of “collective action” because you and your coworkers are doing it together. Worker power is most effective when it’s exercised directly and collectively.

Sharing stories of other organizing efforts is an essential part of Educate and can be a powerful way to suggest ideas about collective action. In the scheduling example, if you know of any other instances where workers took action on a scheduling issue and won, you can share that and follow it up with, “Do you think that would work here?” You don’t want stories to be pre-packaged action plans but rather channels to think through what might be effective in your own context.

One thing good workplace organizers accumulate over time is an inventory of stories of different actions, which enables them to come up with useful examples on the fly to discuss as reference points in different organizing situations. Newer organizers with less personal experience to draw from should seek out as many stories as they can to add to their mental inventory, especially from other organizers in their industry. The old IWW pamphlet *How to Fire Your Boss* catalogues a variety of workplace direct actions (easy to find on google). “Job conditioning” is its own class of actions where workers decide themselves some new policy and implement it on their own without permission from above or directly confronting bosses over it.

Sometimes in the Educate step of an organizing conversation you can draw up a detailed plan for an action with all the parts you need to set it up. Other times you just come up with a rough sketch of ideas to start with that you’ll develop further in later 1-on-1s with more coworkers.

This third part of Educate (“What collective action can we take?”) is where many conversations with coworkers lose steam. This is honestly the most challenging part of organizing conversations in my experience. Sometimes it can be easy to talk about a problem but nerve-wracking to take concrete steps towards action: “Wait, we’re gonna do what now?”

If the conversations falls flat at this point don’t try to push through by forcefully convincing them or pressuring them. If sharing stories and asking open-ended questions doesn’t stimulate their interest, stay with coworkers where they’re at instead of trying to drag them around to action. You can go back to the agitate step to keep processing what this problem means for them, which can help them decide if it’s something they want to take action around or not. You can check in with other coworkers to see how they feel about it.