

A NEW ERA FOR PA

by Joel Wendland and Peter Zerner

A few weeks back, we received an e-mail alert from a friend to take action on behalf of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME) on standing up for California public workers in the face of steep budget cuts proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. After sending the e-mail on, the subsequent e-mail from AFSCME thanking those who took action included an invitation to stay connected with AFSCME on Twitter. That's exactly what we said: What the heck is that?

Well, it turns out that Twitter.com is a social networking Web site that allows friends and organizations to communicate both online and via cell phone. Being connected to AFSCME on Twitter allows you to get the latest blog posts from AFSCME's Green Blog on your iPhone or other wireless device while jogging through the park or working late nights at city hall. Learning more about social networks, labor's new push for online activism, and the growing impact of the Internet on news and information can help *Political Affairs* take some new steps into the 21st century world of publishing and movement building.

Labor has taken huge steps in how it uses 21st-century information technology to communicate with rank-and-file members and the broader public, educating and mobilizing union members and their families via blogs, new Web sites, e-mail action alerts, text-messaging, and more. On health care issues, organizing, and campaigning against John McCain and the Republicans, new information technologies are becoming more and more indispensable to the most organized

section of the working class, labor union members.

Both of the national labor federations have adopted online communication and mobilization technologies. You can read daily blogs by the AFL-CIO and regular posts from Change to Win. Today all the major unions have home pages, blogs, "spaces" on social networking sites, and even separate campaign sites on specific workers rights or political issues.

For example, the AFL-CIO has separate Web sites for each of its affiliate programs, from Working America, to CLUW, CBTU, Union Veterans and Pride at Work. Working America has separate sites whose sole purpose was to gather 1 million signatures in

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support of the Employee Free Choice Act. The Alliance for Retired Americans has both a standard home page and weekly e-mail alerts with news and action items. The AFL-CIO even purchased the domain name, McCainRevealed.com, for its campaign to educate members about John McCain's true record.

By way of one more example of among many, the Laborers' union (LIUNA), an affli-

ate of Change to Win, recently launched its online campaign to collect 1 million signatures on a petition to the next president and Congress demanding real investment in infrastructure repair to create jobs. It set up a separate site specifically for the petition and asks its members to sign up to receive text messages by cell phone for future actions and more information.

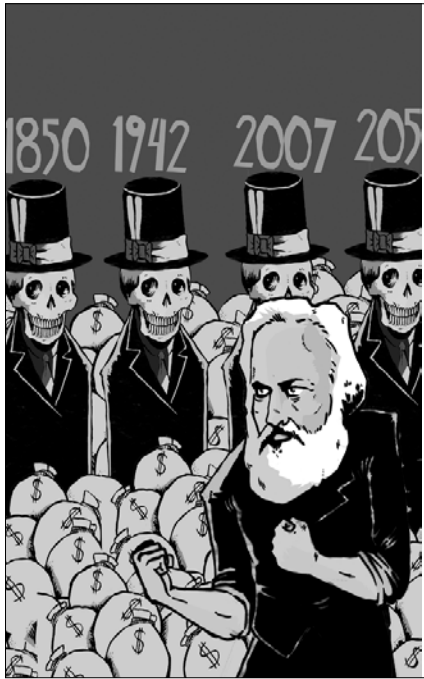
A list compiling all of labor's new online work would be too long to include here. Obviously, much of this new turn toward online organizing has resulted from lessons learned during the 2004 election campaign on the Democratic side, as well as the huge recent successes of the Obama campaign has seen with its work online, mobilizing voters, generating financial support to build the campaign, and creating excitement and broad participation. Suffice it to say that labor's presence on the Internet is growing rapidly. It is reaching out to its members from all backgrounds and building a more powerful, connected and independent movement.

This new labor-driven Internet mobilization is an important lesson for *Political Affairs* and the Communist movement generally. Labor is moving into the 21st century. The questions are: Will *Political Affairs* also make that leap? Is the Communist Party ready to be a 21st century political party?

More than a magazine

Shifting *Political Affairs'* focus to online publishing exclusively gives it the opportunity to be more than a magazine, to build a community of activists and readers who share a socialist consciousness and to reach out to a growing constituency of new participants who too can learn, share, and discuss the basic ideas of our movement. *PA* online, or PoliticalAffairs.net, provides far superior tools for doing this than the print edition ever could. *PA* was established decades ago as the theoretical journal of the Communist Party (at its founding called The Communist, and changed its name in 1945). In recent years, taking a cue from former party leader Gus Hall, former *PA* editor and current publisher Joe Sims sought to rethink what being "a theoretical organ" means and re-imagine and re-introduce *Political Affairs* as an in-print popular magazine of culture, ideas and politics combined with an online counterpart.

The Web site was originally conceived and created in 2001 as a sort of mirror for the



magazine, a billboard with which to promote the print magazine. Being new to cyberspace and the trends toward online publishing, we at first failed to grasp the full potential of the Internet and a Web site as its own unique mode of publishing and movement building, one aimed at a potential audience far larger than we could ever hope to achieve in print.

The results were staggering. Since becoming a regular online publication in 2004, *Political Affairs* has reached almost two million unique individuals in one form or another. With a peak circulation of around 3,200 in early 2007 for the print edition (approximately the same domestic circulation as two decades ago), there is no way the print edition could match the performance of the Web site. It is doubtful that *PA* in print throughout its entire existence equals this performance. The latest tools available to measure online readership also show that about 15 percent of these two million are repeat visitors to the site, which means that 300,000 people have returned to the site. Even further, about 10 percent of *PA* readers open our Web site on our homepage, indicating they have it bookmarked in their browser. In the past year alone, this figure reached about 65,000 people.

But a quick look behind the number raises some tough questions. Who are the people that read one or more articles on our Web site? Are they being exposed to articles that express the specific mission of *PA*, i.e.

promoting the theory, ideas, and culture of our movement?

The answers to these questions are complex. PoliticalAffairs.net, works on two basic levels. On the first level, our core mission remains doing the theoretical work of the communist movement, presenting our views the public on the socialist and communist idea, with debates and discussions, historical revisitations, and the ongoing development of ideas, old and new, that have been and will continue to be the foundation of our movement.

The second level is the product of necessity, the mother of invention and represents a different level of political work. When we began publishing online in 2004, it quickly became clear that in order to build the readership of our site, we had to have new content on a regular basis. This gave birth to regularly updated online edition that publishes or re-posts articles and content from the international communist movement, the labor movement, and other progressive sources. This activity helped build relationships with a number of groups and organizations that would not have happened otherwise.

It became clear that with these two levels of publishing taking place – one oriented toward the ideas of our movement, the other toward information and analysis of more immediate struggles – that one could now say that two audiences for *PoliticalAffairs.net* had emerged. As the numbers of repeat visitors to the site grew, however, it also became evident that the two audiences overlapped. The number of return visitors and unique visitors who open PoliticalAffairs.net at the homepage strongly suggests this.

Moving Forward

So the question then shifted from how to promote the print publication, to why have a print publication at all? More importantly, with such a large regular audience, how do we make PoliticalAffairs.net easier to use, encourage return visits, and tightly link the two levels of publishing described above together?

Once again the technological tools for doing this were already available. We created a *PA* podcast, featuring new content, including interviews with Party activists and leaders, *PA* editors and contributors, as well as activists in the broader movement. We also added a *PA* editors blog site, which allows edi-

tors and other contributors to express their often feisty personal opinions on key issues, to stimulate discussion, build a “online personality,” and add some interesting discussion to the mix. In addition, a new comments function, Disqus, has allowed more and more readers to participate online in a way that was not available to them before. All of these new features have been a huge success, both in terms of attracting new readers to PoliticalAffairs.net and in building relationships with the broader all-people’s coalition.

Other proposed new additions, such as regular educational features on the fundamentals of the communist movement, specifically the problems we face in the 21st century, new action resources such as circulating petitions and e-action items, topic-oriented online forums, and a chatroom are in the offing.

It is true that without a print publication, party members and our friends no longer have a physical object to circulate and discuss. The nature of a Web publication is different. It is open to everyone, except for potential subscriber-only information, and while it may be reproduced for the private use of a specific group of people (e.g. the Communist Party and its members), it is essentially an outward-oriented, public projection of our movement. Because of this difference, PoliticalAffairs.net, in its organizational role, needs to shift to more direct contact with member and non-member readers through forums, meetings, and e-mail contact.

As we wind up our print publication with this issue, PoliticalAffairs.net remains a vital tool both for spreading the ideas of the communist movement, recruiting new members to the Party, and enhancing the role of Communist Party members who do not have strong relationships to party organizations because of their remoteness from viable Party organizations. The aim should be to bring such people into Party work, help to educate them about the Party’s strategic aims and theoretical positions, and to train them on Internet-based tools for disseminating those ideas. For all of these reasons, PoliticalAffairs.net has become more than a magazine. We are taking our exciting first steps into the 21st century. With your continued support, *PA* can remain a key component of the Communist movement, both here in the US and all over the World Wide Web. □