Learning from the Covid Disruption: A Stop/Start/Continue Analysis for Unions

by Elaine Bernard

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only upended our lives and workplaces but also shaken up our unions, placing many new demands on activists and leaders. Representation, organizing, advocacy, education—just about every union activity or function has been disrupted or transformed.

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A period of massive disruption, however, is also an opportunity for change. Seeing how quickly some of your long-established practices stopped, and new practices started, demonstrates that change is possible. As we (hopefully) emerge from the pandemic, we don’t have to return to the way things were. Though the disruption was for an unpleasant reason, maybe some of the changes it prompted were good—they opened new opportunities or helped more members get involved.

Rather than automatically revert to your old “normal,” it’s worth thinking about how the practices of your union or organizing committee have changed over the past two years. Then you can decide how you want to continue in order to chart a more effective path forward.

Some questions to consider:

• Have you developed new ways of engaging and communicating with members?
• Has the union extended its connection to members’ families and communities?
• What are the most effective ways you have spent time, energy, and resources?
• How might your union emerge more resilient and prepared for new challenges?

A stop/start/continue analysis may assist you. Whether at the level of a local, branch, or committee, this simple analytical tool can help you think about and discuss what has changed.

It’s an easy exercise: At a meeting, get out three sheets of butcher paper and label them Stop, Start, and Continue. Or if your meeting is online, use a Google document or some other online notetaking software (some Labor Notes staffers recommend Google Jamboard—Eds).

Break up into small groups if it’s a big meeting. Then discuss the following questions:

STOP
What have you stopped doing since the beginning of the pandemic?

People will start by writing the obvious, like “I stopped going into the office.” Whoever is facilitating the conversation should ask follow-up questions to uncover more: “Well, what did that mean? What specific things did you stop doing?”

Can you identify activities that you could consider permanently eliminating? Are there things that used to consume a lot of time (and the time of other members, activists, leaders, or staff) for little return?

Are there things you used to do that are no longer necessary, or no longer need to be done in a certain way? What activities no longer make sense in the “new normal”?

For instance, most unions have cut down travel, saving money and time. Yes, we’ll still want to hold some
face-to-face meetings—but we might think more carefully about when in-person gatherings are appropriate, versus when we can quickly pull together an online meeting and assure greater participation, lower costs, and better use of time.

Some unions stopped printing copies of newsletters and bulletins and found that, by developing better online communication, they were able to circulate information faster, more frequently, and at a fraction of the cost.

START

When you've plumbed "stop," move to "start." What new initiatives, activities, and priorities have you had to undertake because of the pandemic?

What are you doing now that you have not done before? Are there also activities that you are doing in new ways, or doing more of?

Some unions that were forced to join the digital age suddenly and with little preparation were able to grow their activist networks by finding previously uninvolved members—especially younger members or those who use computers on the job—who were familiar with technology and anxious to help.

With more members now online and comfortable with technology, many unions have expanded their outreach with webinars and town hall meetings. Physical distance and travel costs no longer need to be a major consideration in pulling together networks of workers.

Many unionists with home responsibilities—disproportionately women and parents of young kids—who in the past found after-work meetings difficult to attend have been much more active now that more meetings have moved online.

CONTINUE

If "stop" and "start" had you assessing what your union is doing now, "continue" looks to the future—where do you want to go from here?

Often as you dig into what you started and stopped doing, the discussion will naturally shift into which changes you would like to continue.

What has been a success at engaging members or extending your union's reach in the community? Where do you want to go even further?

As members can link to each other using online systems, we may see much greater opportunities for developing caucuses and working groups in unions and even between unions. Even international guests can easily be included.

How do you want to use the time saved by stopping some activities? If you could get a few more members involved, what activities would you have them do that would benefit the union, its members, and the community?

Don't forget to talk about what new challenges have emerged with the changes and need to be addressed.

Unions that previously depended on the boss's email system have found better ways of reaching members—gathering non-work contact info, using various apps and video-call platforms, and engaging many members in conversations and online discussions.

Yet there are still barriers—not all members have access to or are familiar with these systems. So if unions want to keep using them, they will need to consider how to overcome the digital divide among members.

There is already lots of discussion about in-person vs. online meetings. Many unions are opting for hybrid meetings that use both.

But it's important not to dismiss online relationship-building out of hand. organizers have historically emphasized the importance of home visits because of the value of meeting a worker away from the boss, and to get to know the person.

An interesting observation with online meetings is that many of us have "met the family" as dogs, cats, and children dropped in on Zoom calls. Here's a very different way to do a home visit and get to know members.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Go through your STOP/START/CONTINUE list of ideas; evaluate and prioritize.

Are there items on the STOP list that you can move towards closing down for good? Are there initiatives in the START list that can be enhanced, or developed further?

For CONTINUE, start to lay out a plan going forward.

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