



Kmart Union in Greensboro Fights for a Contract Teaching Note

This two-part case describes the successful effort of a group of mostly young, male, African-American workers at a Kmart warehouse in Greensboro, North Carolina to start a local chapter of ACTWU (Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union) and the more protracted—but ultimately successful—struggle to bargain for a contract with Kmart. In the “A” case, students read about the formation of the union in 1993 and the subsequent unsuccessful efforts to bring Kmart to the negotiating table, including work actions in the plant; early efforts to win community support; interactions with the Pulpit Forum, a local association of mostly African-American clergy men and women; a union-sponsored civil disobedience action at a locally-beloved PGA golf tournament; the filing of a National Labor Relations Board complaint and a week-long strike. After two years of sustained effort has still not led to a contract, the members of the Kmart local grow dispirited. At that point, ACTWU enters the picture more forcefully and brings some new resources to bear on the battle. The “A” case ends there, tacitly posing the question, what should the union do to turn the tide? The “B” case picks up the story, telling of the renewed (though sometimes tense) collaboration among the Kmart local, ACTWU regional personnel, and the Pulpit Forum to reframe the issue from a management-labor conflict to one of civil rights and community standards. The new campaign includes a local boycott of Kmart, acts of civil disobedience by Pulpit Forum pastors and, later, acts of civil disobedience by workers and their supporters in the community. Press coverage noticeably shifts in tone as support for the workers broadens, and a community debate about wage policy, in general, ensues. A group of local businessmen eventually intervenes to urge Kmart to settle with the union. Support for the union expands to the national stage. In July 1996, the Kmart local finally wins its contract.

This teaching note was based on the notes and comments of Taeku Lee, Assistant Professor of Public Policy, Malcolm Weiner Center for Social Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and Marshall Ganz, Lecturer in Public Policy, Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. (0602)

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Teaching Context

At the Kennedy School, the case has been taught as part of a required course for first year students in the Masters in Public Policy Program called Mobilizing for Political Action (PAL-110). Within that course, it was part of a four-week module called Crafting Political Strategy. The module began with two key readings—*Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow; and *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policy* by John W. Kingdon. The first week of the module was spent learning three different perspectives for understanding how decisions are made—as the calculated choices of rational actors, as the by-product of organizational processes and culture, or as the result of complex bargains among many individuals. The second week then explored the process by which a particular problem is recognized, placed on a policy agenda, and eventually acted upon. The remaining two weeks built on this understanding, and were spent thinking about how an advocacy group can try to increase its political resources. Students were asked to explore these dimensions of political strategy in the context of a policy issue that they chose at the beginning of the module. In the last half of the module, two case studies were used—this Greensboro union case, to raise a discussion about reframing a problem and mobilizing other political constituencies, and another KSG case, “*No prison in East L.A.!*” *Birth of a Grassroots Movement* (ref # 1541.0, 1541.1) to raise a discussion about working both inside and outside the system. Both cases depict historically disenfranchised groups winning political victories against considerable odds.

Study Questions

Due to shortness of time, students were given a page-long summary of the Greensboro “A” case, written by the professor, and the “B” case to read before class. In addition, students were asked to read an essay by Deborah Stone, “Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas.” Students were given the following thoughts and study questions to guide their thinking:

How an issue is framed – what meanings, metaphors, and causal stories you evoke – is a vital resource at your disposal when crafting political strategy. Framing involves *selecting* some part of a complex reality and making that partial reality very *salient*. Frames can be used to invite other stakeholders and interested audiences to define problems, diagnose their causes, evaluate their morality, and recommend the best policy solutions to your advantage.

Framing an issue in the right way is an important aspect of building a constituency for your issue. Moreover, managing multiple interests – other stakeholders, potential participants, political constituencies – is critical to political success. E.E. Schattschneider notes that “the central political fact in a free society is the tremendous contagiousness of conflict ... there is usually nothing to keep the audience from getting into the game.” V.O. Key further

points out that political elites are usually not as concerned with the visible and regular indicators of public opinion (e.g., polls); rather, it is “latent opinion” that is “about the only type of opinion that generates much anxiety for political elites.”

1. Reflect on Stone’s thesis as it applies to the issue that you are working on for this module as well as to today’s case.
2. What are the different causal arguments that characterize your issue or today’s case? Do they fit with Stone’s typology of four kinds of causal theories?
3. Think about the streams in Kingdon’s process model – where are the sites in which different causal stories and issue frames compete with one another?
4. What was the key frame shift(s) in the labor action against Kmart corporation? What made this shift so effective?
5. How did the acts of civil disobedience by the clergy of the Pulpit Forum in the Kmart union case shifts the framing of the labor conflict?
6. What is your view on the use of civil disobedience in this case? Is there a conflict between the commands of political reasoning and moral reasoning?
7. What would you do if you were Kmart Corporation? How might you re-frame the issue to defend your company’s practices?
8. How much of a factor is race in the outcome of this issue?

Class Discussion

In class, the professor began with a discussion of framing as an important political resource. To illustrate, students were given a classic scenario from Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, in which framing an equivalent choice in terms of the certainty of saving life and the certainty of death results in a diametrically opposed distribution of preferences. Building on this example, students were then asked to identify the key frames that characterize the policy issues they were working on for the module. The professor found it useful to have, on reserve, a few other illustrations of framing as well. For instance, public support for AIDS policy varies dramatically depending on whether it is described as a matter of civil liberties or a matter of public health. Similarly, public support for affirmative action appears quite different if it is described as a matter of leveling the playing field than if it is described as giving preferential treatment or setting quotas.

The class discussion then moved directly on to the case. After describing the primary actors and key facts about the case, students were asked to identify the turning point in the case. From a teaching perspective, the key to this discussion was for students to see the importance of reframing the Kmart labor action in terms of community control and civil rights, and the impact this frame had in mobilizing new constituencies to the arena of conflict. To date, one of the most interesting parts of the discussion was an ethical debate over whether it was appropriate to invoke the civil rights struggle as a frame for this union battle. Students came down on different sides of

the question in different sections of the class. In an admittedly small sample, the students who tended to be most uncomfortable with invoking the civil rights frame were African-American. Another valuable discussion thread was a consideration of what Kmart Corporation might have done differently to counter the successful reframing of the issue.

The case would also support slightly different treatment than was used in this class. For instance, the “A” case—which ends with a dilemma—could be used to encourage a prospective discussion about labor organizing strategy, and, likewise, the “B” case could be used to talk about reframing an issue and reconfiguring a political coalition from a union-organizing point of view. Building on “Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959-1966,” (*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, No. 4, January 2000) by Marshall Ganz, the faculty sponsor of the Greensboro case, the case could be used to show how strategic creativity is related to who does the strategizing and under what conditions they do it. The argument here is that the reframing of the issue in Greensboro evolved naturally from the expansion of the people doing that reframing—not in a vacuum the way, for example, a public relations firm might have approached it.