

dents to help professors identify free and low-cost textbooks, and has promoted for-credit internships for political projects, allowing students to incorporate activism into their coursework. For-credit internships are a model PIRG uses on all the campuses where it works. But on community college campuses, where students often lack the time to commit to extra-curricular projects due to job or family commitments, the internships are an essential element to making activism an option. Since PIRG began its pilot internship program at the Los Angeles colleges, students have earned credit hours raising money for a local emergency food program and planning a "Voting Rocks" concert on campus to raise awareness about the primary elections.

COLLEGE DEMOCRATS OF AMERICA, TOO, is working to add more community and other nontraditional colleges to its ranks. On such campuses, college affordability has been a particularly important topic, says Katie Naranjo, programs director for College Democrats and a student at the University of Texas in Austin. Working on these campuses to organize around legislative issues like the College Cost Reduction Act and increasing Pell grants have been good entry points. Expanding the conversation to issues like health care has also been important for outreach on these campuses, where students are more likely to be feeling the crunch of rising costs. Increasing flexibility of event times has also been key.

"We have this demographic of people who may not be between the ages of 18 and 24, but they are Democrats, and they do want to be involved," Naranjo said. "We're trying to do things organizationally so that people can attend, [like] having two meetings a week, one set in the day and one set in the evening."

Campus Progress, the student-centered division of the Center for American Progress, is another group expanding its programs to nontraditional campuses, especially on issues like college costs and student debt. Campus Progress is forming chapters at schools like the City University of New York (CUNY) and Pasadena City College in California, large com-

muter campuses that draw students from the surrounding city, and has brought programs like film screenings and workshops to nontraditional campuses.

In November, Campus Progress hosted a workshop on credit-card debt at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale, bringing in experts on finance and legislative affairs to talk about deceptive solicitation, avoiding escalating fees and charges, and the role of government in protecting consumers. It was the first time the organization had hosted an event on a community college campus, said Ramya Raghavan, communications and outreach manager for Campus Progress. "There are willing and able activists at community colleges," Raghavan said. "They're ready to organize; they just need to be given the tools."

Those tools are now helping students like Kevin Killer open up the doors of political participation to other students. His organizing increased voter registration at Oglala Lakota College by 15 percent during the 2006–2007 school year

alone, and through the YP4 fellowship, Killer landed a position with Campus Camp Wellstone, a national program that trains students to become political organizers, where he is now helping launch a new national Native American leadership program. In April, he'll be bringing Campus Camp Wellstone to Oglala Lakota to train students from all of the school's 10 campuses in how to register their peers to vote and mobilize them on the key issues in preparation for the 2008 elections. He was also elected president of the YP4 fellowship network last year and continues to serve as a senior fellow, and has been working with the organization to create more opportunities for students like him. Last year, there were three fellows from Oglala Lakota, including Killer's sister, Kimberly. This year, the YP4 fellows will include four students from the campus.

"For a lot of these students, these schools are their only choice," Killer said. "We want to have all the resources possible to make those communities successful." **TAP**

Another Kind of Youth Movement

A new generation with new economic stresses rediscovers the benefits of an old idea—trade unionism.

BY DANA GOLDSTEIN

IN RECENT MONTHS, LABOR ACTIVISM has presented a younger, hipper face. Based on media coverage of the Writers Guild of America strike in Hollywood and the uprising of MTV and VH1 long-term, full-time Web "freelancers" in New York City, you'd think the typical unionist demanding economic security was a 20-something, college-educated, creative classer living in a major city.

Jonathan Upright is definitely not that guy. He works in a much larger and less glamorous part of the media industry. A 29-year-old lifelong North Carolinian, Upright dropped out of college after two years. In 2006, he was hired as a full-time retail-sales consultant at the Winston-

Salem branch of what was then called Cingular Wireless, now AT&T. He's one of the young people working behind the counter, answering questions about an ever-growing list of mobile communications products. He'll help you figure out exactly why your cell phone is failing—and then try to upgrade you to an iPhone.

Upright calls himself apolitical and a "moral values" voter. Progressive politics was pretty much off his radar screen. But in March 2006, his employer dealt a shock to his system: AT&T announced that retail-sales commissions would be cut in half while salaries remained steady. Then the company threatened to increase the sales staff's health-care

deductibles. It was a double whammy.

That's when Upright was introduced to the idea of collective bargaining by a colleague whose father was a union member. Alongside his friend, Upright brought the sales consultants' grievances to the Communications Workers of America's North Carolina branch. CWA already represented 180,000 AT&T employees across the country, including call center operators and network technicians. Why shouldn't the retail staff—the company's

challenges that we faced was that since we're in the South, a lot of people have a bad taste in their mouth because of all the violent strikes that took place way back when," Upright said. "There were stereotypes that you'd get in trouble with your employer or be forced to strike."

Indeed, although polls show young workers are much more likely than their parents to believe collective bargaining can help them achieve goals at work, for some young Americans, the word "union"

cans between the ages of 25 and 34. Amid these troubling trends, only 12 percent of American workers, a smaller proportion than ever, belong to a union. That number is even lower among workers under 35—just 4.6 percent of workers between the ages of 16 and 24 are unionized, and 10.7 percent of those between 25 and 34.

Faced with this decline, yet heartened by the occasional success of organizing drives like the CWA effort in North Carolina, the nation's largest unions are investing in fresh ways of reaching out to a demographic group largely new to the idea of collective bargaining. One highly anticipated project is the oddly named Qvisory, launched with \$500,000 from the Service Employees International Union and a \$1 million grant from the

Most employers force drawn-out, enervating contests for union certification, even after a majority of workers have signed cards.

face to consumers—have the same benefits?

Upright decided to take a leadership role in organizing workers in the Charlotte area. He went store to store but also organized online, launching a blog to educate his AT&T co-workers about the unionization process. On Oct. 2, 2007, after a union card check showed more than half of the employees supported unionization, CWA became the official representative of 240 AT&T retail workers in North Carolina, many of them under 30.

But it hadn't been a cakewalk. Card check is the exception in U.S. collective bargaining. Only thanks to the leverage that the parent CWA has with AT&T nationally was union recognition based on card check an option at all. Most employers force drawn-out, enervating contests for union certification, and many harass or try to fire pro-union workers even after a majority sign cards. Given the history of union-busting, worker demoralization and skepticism are also obstacles. Upright met many young workers, people like himself, who had very little idea of what a union was. Others held negative stereotypes about the union movement or were uncomfortable with its association with liberal politics. "One of the big



Stand-Up Guy: Jonathan Upright saw his organizing efforts pay off.

conjuges up little more than dusty history lessons. This is especially true in regions of the country, such as the South, with heavier "right to work" anti-union laws, brutal employers (like Wal-Mart), and less of an organized labor legacy. Still, union organizers say young workers are well aware they aren't getting a fair shake in today's economy. In 1979, 63 percent of recent high school graduates had employer-provided health insurance. Today, only one-third do. Adjusted for inflation, the average annual income of a young worker without a college degree is less today than it has been since the mid-1960s. And while all Americans have experienced an erosion of social protections in recent decades, the conditions are worst for those who don't hold college degrees. That's over two-thirds of Ameri-

can Rockefeller Foundation. Like the New York-based Freelancers Union, Qvisory will offer several health-insurance plans to transient young workers, as well as financial services such as retirement savings accounts. Qvisory will be Internet-driven and plans an ambitious rollout, marketing through social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and on blogs and Web publications popular with the post-college set. The group plans several national advocacy campaigns, the first of which is focused on predatory lending and student debt. Future campaigns will advocate increasing access to health care and protecting social security.

The strategy is geared toward reaching educated young workers, but membership—which costs \$36 annually—is open to anyone. Qvisory is partnering with university alumni groups to sell the memberships. Purchasing health insurance through the group will cost extra. Though young adults are notoriously cavalier about health concerns, Qvisory's internal research suggests they are willing to pay up to \$79 per month for insurance coverage.

About 30 percent of young adults are uninsured. But are they ready to organize collectively for services? Eileen Quigley, Qvisory's CEO, says part of the

organization's job is to educate young people about the benefits of collective action—without resorting to old vocabulary. And that means avoiding the word "union," at least for now. "We're trying to create a new institution for a new economic time," Quigley said. "This isn't about organizing in the traditional union way. It's about a collective voice, and it is about helping this age cohort find a voice. I wouldn't use 'union' language, because I think 'union' has a very specific meaning. This is something different."

Another union surrogate is Working America, a branch of the AFL-CIO. In effect, Working America is a union for people without a union in the workplace, with over 1.6 million members nationwide. Through Working America, members can access a health savings account, participate in local advocacy campaigns around issues of economic inequality, and support more traditional union organizing. In the St. Paul, Minnesota area, Working America members contributed 3,968 signatures to a petition in support of a nurses' organizing drive at a local hospital. Unionization had met stiff resistance from management but was eventually successful, in large part because of community support, said David Wehde, Minnesota state director for Working America. And after learning about the nurses' union, some Working America members expressed interest in unionizing their own workplace and were put in touch with organizers.

Working America has had particular success signing up people under 30 and people of color. Jenn Jannon, Working America's state director in Pennsylvania, explained, "When we reach out into suburban neighborhoods, a lot of folks in the 18-to-30 age range are living at home." Their living situation is a daily reminder that service jobs without health insurance, overtime, and other benefits don't allow people to build adult lives. The culprit isn't cultural malaise but economic insecurity.

Some commentators assume that young workers prefer to flit from job to job, rather than settle down, but this pattern is more the result of the structure of the labor market than a reflection

of worker preferences. In their first 16 years of work, today's average American will switch jobs 9.2 times. Frequent job changes can inhibit unionization, since unions rely upon workers rising through the ranks into leadership positions, and upon a work force highly engaged with its place of employment. But there's also an upside. Danica Finley, an SEIU organizing director in Oregon, said today's 20-something health-care workers will often risk more to unionize than older colleagues. Since they don't expect to be tethered to their employer for decades, young workers are less scared of angering management. "The fact that these workers are not especially afraid of losing their jobs gives them a courage and confidence that would have been hard to hold on to otherwise," Finley said.

In many cases, economic security and mobility are simply more important to young workers than job security. Tom Woodruff, executive vice president for organizing at the SEIU, said more often

than not, labor organizers hear from young workers that they are frustrated and depressed about their inability, over time, to buy real estate, educate children, and save for retirement. "They're not being paid properly, and they know that," Woodruff said. "They're looking to raise a family without having to work two or three jobs."

If the labor struggles in Manhattan and Los Angeles television studios have helped more typical young workers in any way, they have at least forced the mainstream media to look at organized labor and portray it as a pragmatic champion of Americans challenged by the new economy. That helps people like Jonathan Upright explain to workers on the ground how unionization can change their lives. And getting involved with a union can foster a real commitment to progressive politics. "With the upcoming election, I hope whatever candidate runs supports unions," Upright said. "Because you know, Bush doesn't at all." **TAP**

Democracy Versus Debt

Students are getting serious about organizing to change the rules of the game that leave young adults burdened with college and credit-card debt.

BY KAY STEIGER

ANTHONY DANIELS IS THE CHAIRPERSON of the National Education Association's student program but is saddled with nearly \$58,000 of debt in student loans from his undergraduate and master's programs. He's considering getting out of teaching. With payments of roughly \$600 a month and an interest rate of 11.71 percent, he just can't afford the payments on a teacher's salary, typically starting at less than \$30,000. "The passion is here," Daniels said, "but I just can't afford it."

Daniels, in a way, is lucky. At least he managed to get a degree. About one in five students at a four-year col-

lege or university end up dropping out, and financial stress is a prime cause. At community colleges, that number is one in four. The drop-out rate among white students at 43 percent is high, but the rate is even higher among Hispanics (56 percent) and blacks (61 percent). Debt burdens hit hardest at those with the steepest climbs into the middle class. Without a degree, there's little hope of earning enough income to pay back loans.

Debt levels have been increasing over the last several years. Once, student loans were labeled by financial advisers as "good debt" incurred in service of