

REMARKS

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The AFL-CIO, several years ago, initiated a program through its Community Services Department designed to inform and educate union members and their families in the consumer field. While the overall program was called Consumer Counselling, it was not, in fact, intended to train union members to counsel their fellow-workers about consumer problems. Rather, the program was designed to do four things:

1. To inform the union member and his or her spouse about the alternatives available in each of the major problem areas in the consumer field.
2. To sensitize union members and the community to the false ads, the high-pressure sales methods, deceptive packaging, fictitious pricing, unfair installment agreements and other dishonest business practices which are being perpetrated on the consumer public.
3. To assist the union member with a specific consumer problem by directing him to expert legal advice or to other community resources for help.
4. To make the community more aware of the need for more consumer education.

Our experience in the field of consumer information has been varied, rewarding and interesting. It's hard to evaluate the extent to which this program has helped union men and women become more intelligent consumers.

When the AFL-CIO went into this program, we told our friends in the consumer field who helped us develop our program that we had little experience in the various areas of consumer information; that we would have to rely on the knowledge and information of people in the universities, in the consumer groups and in government agencies for guidance, and that we hoped that they would be able to supply competent

leaders for our local programs. We told them, too, that we had no special materials for use in our information program and would have to rely to a large extent on existing materials.

In looking back over these past several years of our experience with consumer information programs, I'm sure we made some progress. But we also ran into many roadblocks that prevented us from making as much progress as we and you would have liked. For instance, in many communities we found a lack of qualified persons available for use as resource persons in our consumer information courses. We found too that while the materials available in many instances were good, they were not suited to the needs of wage earners. We also found that many persons in the consumer field, while competent, able and willing to participate in our consumer information programs, simply could not communicate effectively.

Then, too, in our newness to the field and in our eagerness to do a job, we may have made some mistakes. Our consumer information courses were broad, varied and often diffuse. Maybe our program should have concentrated on a few important areas and eliminated subjects that were of relatively little value to workers and their families.

Perhaps we should have done a more thorough job of preparing our local AFL-CIO Community Services staff for this new and major effort. Perhaps our local committees should have done more work in analyzing the consumer problems of AFL-CIO members and their families. Perhaps we should have done all of these things and more. But, even if we had done all of these things, we still would need the skills, the knowledge, the guidance of the men and women like yourselves. To a degree, the extent of our success or failure must be shared with our friends and allies in the consumer education field.

We are aware that consumer education cannot be a now-and-then program, infrequent and sporadic. Consumer education affects so many aspects of a worker's daily life that it must find a way of reaching him and his family on almost a daily basis. Over and beyond the formal courses, an effective program of consumer education must have built into it some method of effective follow-up -- some way of keeping union members interested and informed. The solution to this problem is still ahead of us.

The AFL-CIO program was, in a sense, meant to be a demonstration program to show the community that a) most people need more and better information upon which to make important consumer decisions; b) that existing channels for dissemination of honest consumer information are inadequate, especially against the daily din of advertising; c) since all of us are consumers of goods and services as well as producers, responsibility for educating and informing citizens about consumer problems is the proper responsibility of the public school system (including the adult education program), and of government; d) that voluntary associations such as cooperatives, credit unions, labor unions and citizen consumer groups can cooperate with public education and government programs in developing effective channels of consumer information.

While all persons need and should have available adequate consumer information, the greatest need exists among the lower income and minority groups.

It is this group that suffers most because of inadequate knowledge of market practices, credit and money management, installment buying, etc. It is this group which is the prime target for the gyps and swindles, the fast-talk installment salesmen, the phonies of all sorts. It is this group which presents us with the toughest communication problem. Every effort should be made to reach this group through their unions, churches, clubs and schools with consumer information programs and materials specifically designed to meet their needs.

We in the AFL-CIO are aware that our impact on the community has not been strong enough to substantially change existing consumer patterns. But if we are to do an effective job, we need the cooperation of many individuals and groups in the community who share our concern for the creation of ever-broadening channels of consumer education and information.

Specifically, we in the AFL-CIO have identified a number of important areas in which steps should be taken to improve both the quality and quantity of consumer education:

- A) We feel that there is a need to evaluate the various educational and communications methods for their effectiveness in reaching workers and low-income and majority groups.
- B) There is a need for the testing and evaluation of existing materials and, if necessary, the creation of new materials that will have an impact on union members, and on low-income and minority groups.
- C) There is a need to more carefully identify those subject matter areas which are most relevant to the interests and needs of particular groups in the community -- especially those groups that are most in need of consumer information programs.
- D) Consumer education specialists and other community persons who are informed about consumer problems should be encouraged to develop their contacts with unions in their communities through AFL-CIO central labor council and its community services committee.
- E) Public adult education programs, universities and government agencies should be encouraged to cooperate with AFL-CIO and other consumer-oriented groups in the sponsorship, promotion and development of year-round consumer education

programs, through formal courses, conferences, and neighborhood discussion groups, and they should also be encouraged to disseminate consumer information through public media, exhibits and printed material.

If we work together toward these objectives, I am sure that we can create a vast body of informed consumer opinion which, in the long run, is the best assurance that the consumer's voice will be heard where it really counts.