

**Commentary**  
**REGIONAL POWER BUILDING SPREADS**

David Reynolds

The December 2004 issue of *Working USA* explored an early generation of regional power building efforts in Los Angeles, San Jose, Denver and Houston. The articles in this issue reveal a new generation of regional projects. In this commentary we offer a brief overview of the power building model, the support for and challenges faced by its diffusion, and its potential to foster far reaching political change in America. The Building Regional Power Research Project continues to seek researchers interested in documenting power-building work in their or other areas of the country.<sup>1</sup> The Network posts its case studies and other materials at [powerbuilding.wayne.edu](http://powerbuilding.wayne.edu).

**What is Regional Power Building?**

Many observers of American labor history have noted that when organized labor has rebounded the context has always been one of broad social change and community empowerment, not simply individual workers joining an organization. Regional power building essentially seeks to reestablish this social movement context by growing a labor's capacity for political power in the broad sense of the term.

When we say that today corporate America has "power" and "governs" what do we mean? Obviously, the power structure involves more than simply electing endorsed candidates. With formal authority and resources of elected officials and administrators limited, especially at the local level, corporate leaders offer those in public authority the resources and capacity to get things done. They have institutions to develop and promote specific public policy. They have

networks to coordinate and build operational unity among themselves and their political allies. They also build strategic and tactical alliances with various community players. Most important, corporate leaders can articulate a social and economic vision, identify what government can do to pursue that vision, and shape public debate around that vision.

Regional power building attempts to put into place the strategies and capacities needed for labor to build such broad dimensions of power. The model aims to move organized labor from having access to those in public authority to becoming part of a new governing coalition. Rather than simply securing isolated public policy wins, regional power building defines the overall agenda that frames public action and debate. Power building grows labor's ability to offer and publicize a broad social vision that in turn provides the context for both expanded union organizing and decisive political change. The model looks to grow this capacity first at the metropolitan level as a base to contest for state and ultimately national power.

### **The Three-Pronged Model**

Whether or not local leaders articulate it as such, regional power building work reveals three consistent elements that must fall together over time:

\* *Deep Coalition Building* – In addition to campaign-specific coalitions labor seeks to nurture long-term alliances with specific organizations and communities around a vision of building real power. At the same time coalition work expands the universe of groups and institutions that understand unions and their importance for establishing prosperous and sustainable communities. Today, the Civic Leadership Institute -- first pioneered in San Jose and recently piloted in Atlanta – has emerged as one central tool for building deep alliances.

\* *Developing a Progressive Regional Agenda* – During the heyday of industrial unionism and the New Deal the labor movement had a clear and broadly shared vision of a just economy and the role of public authority in promoting this vision. Today, labor needs a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of such a vision linked to specific reforms that can be fought during and between elections.

Regional economic development policy offers a common central arena around which activists have built campaigns to influence how public authority interfaces with private business to shape an area's future. Since developing and organizing around a bold agenda requires significant commitments of time and energy, the founding of non-profit “think and act” tanks, such as Georgia Stand-Up, has emerged as a core element of the regional power building model.

\* *Aggressive Political Action* – Since the mid-1990s organized labor has improved its ability to mobilize during elections. Regional power building seeks to further increase labor's electoral operations by establishing an expanded and permanent capacity that does not rise and fall with each major national election cycle. Equally important, the model seeks to make labor's political work more comprehensive by better establishing its role in developing candidates, defining their agenda, and holding them accountable once in office. Traditionally, labor has asked very little of Democrats, especially at the local and state levels, in return for providing much of the party's grassroots energy. Through power building work regional and state labor movements begin to demand far more.

The leadership for regional power building typically comes through the revival of some form of cross-union labor body – be it a central labor council or area or state federation. The postwar heyday of industrial unionism saw the dramatic decline of such bodies. With activities centered primarily on limited political involvement and affiliate support, absent a larger strategic

vision, these institutions attracted few resources or inspired leadership. The regional power-building model defines new roles for cross-union bodies that place them once again at the center of labor movement revival. While direct worker organizing by unions is necessary, the labor movement as a whole cannot grow and cannot reshape several decades of corporate restructuring without a social vision that it is able to put before the vast majority of Americans. Deep community connections and real political power also provide the specific leverage and relationships often needed for worker organizing to be successful.

## **Diffusion**

Regional power building first emerged as systematic strategy in California where several unions were engaged in aggressive and innovative organizing work. From Los Angeles and San Jose (profiled in the December 2004 issue) the work spread to conservative San Diego, the Bay area and elsewhere. Today leaders of these efforts self-consciously work with each other to ensure that the activities of all key labor councils in the state orient around power building strategies. California activists also generously provided leaders in other parts of the country support to establish similar strategies. Denver (also profiled in the December 2004 issue) represented an early effort to self-consciously build the three-pronged approach in its entirety. Cities in which leaders have attempted to develop some form of power building work include: Houston, Cleveland, Seattle, Buffalo, Boston, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Milwaukee, New Haven, and our current Atlanta case study. In very different ways North Carolina and New York are good examples of pursuing regional power building through state level strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Several national resources have emerged to aid the spread of power building strategies. In 2001, the national AFL-CIO initiated a leadership development program for state and local

AFL-CIO bodies that reflected the best thinking from the existing power-building leadership. Central Labor Council leaders from San Jose, Seattle, Milwaukee, and Atlanta helped develop programs and training curricula that would inspire the next wave of regional power-building. Most of the leaders in the cases profiled in this volume have participated in the AFL-CIO's annual Leadership Institute. This activity has facilitated the development of a nationwide, informal network of CLC and state federation leaders that has helped shore up power-building work in outlying areas as well as large urban centers.

Led by former South Bay Labor Council leader Amy Dean, Building Partnerships ([www.building-partnerships.org](http://www.building-partnerships.org)) offers detailed curriculum and technical support for establishing the Civic Leadership Network Institutes first pioneered in San Jose. Successful pilots in Denver, Atlanta, and Boston have encouraged the spread of the Institute model to places such as Milwaukee and New Haven. The Partnership for Working Families ([californiapartnership.org](http://californiapartnership.org)) helps organizers establish 501(c) 3 "think and act" tanks as well as pursue innovative community benefits agreement campaigns common to many power-building experiences. As of late 2006 the Partnership listed 17 organizations as part of its network (8 in California and 9 elsewhere). The funding of both Building Partnerships and the Partnership for Working Families – as well as the many local projects – reflects a growing interest among foundations in this work.

## **Challenges**

The task of further developing regional power building strategies faces significant challenges at both the regional and national levels.

Regionally, leaders must struggle to win buy-in among key stakeholders. In almost every case, power-building efforts have been sparked by new leaders with a vision for ramping up labor's influence on social and economic justice work. This new vision can prove a hard sell to more traditionally-oriented players, especially since it involves a significant commitment of resources. New leaders have had to face negative reactions from within their own organizations. The negativity abates with success (read, small initial "wins"), though the success must not only be sustained, but spread among the stakeholders in order to maintain support. All power-building leaders take risks and inevitable periodic failures provide opportunities for skepticism to grow into opposition. Leadership transition is particularly difficult in the midst of the kind of sustained, involved efforts power building requires.

A second obstacle lies in the reality that power-building work is staff- and time-intensive, and must be sustained for a number of years to show success. In many cases, capacity has been increased by the development 501(c)(3)'s that attract foundation funding. As more of these institutions are created, however, competition for limited funds nationwide increases. Without outside funding, partners themselves must generate funds for increased joint activity. This has proved possible for generating seed money for new projects, but does not seem a sustainable strategy for capacity building over the longer run. A greater ability to tap regional foundation sources would clearly be a welcome addition.

Another common obstacle is the failure to knit individual pieces into a coherent, integrated whole. Maintaining a strategic vision is key to making change on a broad scale. Coalition building must tie not only to individual economic development projects, but also the struggle for workplace justice and to the building of capacity within individual partner organizations. The work of think and act tanks must strategically connect to the advocacy work

of labor and community coalitions, and to their political agenda. Political programs must succeed at the ballot box, but must also educate candidates and hold them accountable once elected. And they must move a policy agenda between elections. Strategic planning, regular evaluation of efforts, and constant monitoring of the opportunities and challenges are crucial. This level of strategic integration is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain, but unless it occurs victories will be isolated and short-lived.

Regional power-building leaders continue to have to build appreciation for their efforts among national union leaders who still often fail to link this work to needs of worker organizing and political revival. During the sharp 2004-2005 debate within the AFL-CIO that led to the formation of Change-to-Win regional power building strategies were notably absent from the arguments made by both sides. This omission may lie, in part, in the fact that regional power building work, while delivering leverage for organizing specific groups of workers, has not translated by itself into big number wins on the scale needed to revive union density. Ultimately, regional power building work helps reconfigure the context within which organizing occurs. Unions still need to mount the actual organizing at a scale needed to make a difference.

Yet, expanded worker organizing to the necessary scale requires the alliances and social climate shift that regional power building delivers. By choosing to disproportionately emphasize investments in the American South, many employers have demonstrated their appreciation for how cultural and political context shapes opportunities for union organizing. Yes, unions need to develop industry organizing plans and leverage. Indeed, Change to Win has adopted an organizing strategy for the South and Southwest. However, individual unions and even big-picture industry campaigns will continue to fight an uphill battle as long as they cannot draw upon well-established community relationships and a political and cultural context in which

organized labor is widely seen as a core part of building the community's future. It comes as no coincidence that regional power building originated in such places as Los Angeles – the city that also made Justice for Janitors famous. Establishing worker power in the workplace and at the community level goes hand in hand.

Similarly, shifting the nation's political debates requires more than simply mobilizing for elections, as important as that is. The New Right was able to achieve governance because it developed a broad vision tied to concrete policy battles, developed electoral champions, and built alliances among core grassroots groups. Learning from the Old Left, the New Right first built momentum and power at the local and regional level that in turn provided the agenda and capacity to push change at the state and national levels. While labor has significantly increased its capacity for electoral mobilization its political work remains largely episodic, connected to mainly to national election cycles and isolated policy campaigns. Yet, regional power building holds the promise of working toward a decisive political realignment – along the scale of the New Deal realignment – that can govern the nation for a generation.

### **The Promise**

The electoral activism of this New New Left coalition ... has reshaped the politics of many cities. As the country's national political scene has edged rightward, thwarting their ambitions in Washington, these groups have turned their attention to urban America, where they still have the power to influence public policy. Looking over the electoral map of the United States, one sees that the nation's cities are the most blue, even in states that are otherwise politically red.<sup>3</sup>

So writes Steven Malanga of the right-wing Manhattan Institute. Having learned from the Old Left of the 1930s and 1940s, some New Right activists and intellectuals have picked up on the potential for local power building work to reshape the course of the country. Regional power building leaders in California and elsewhere have had to fight

off right-wing legal attacks. Stung by the ability of regional power building work to put their traditional conservative power base in San Diego into contested terrain, right-wing funders established offices of the Performance Institute there to counter the labor-linked “think and act” Center for Policy Initiatives.

Slowly but surely, regional power building work has attracted increased interest among labor and its allies. Staff involved in the national support institutions described above are all kept busy with new inquiries and requests for assistance. Some leaders of this regional power building movement speak in terms of 25-30 cities. If regional power building takes hold in two dozen or more major metropolitan areas labor will have the capacity to mobilize people and move an agenda among a significant portion of the nation’s population. It would also likely produce an ability to push a progressive program at the state level in several key states. And thanks to our nation’s federalism state reforms can often foreshadow major national change.

In short, having first emerged at the margins of the American labor movement it is now time for regional power building work to enter the mainstream. The cases that follow offer compelling evidence of the spread, challenges and promise of such work.

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<sup>2</sup> Houston, Cleveland, Seattle, Buffalo case studies are available at [powerbuilding.wayne.edu](http://powerbuilding.wayne.edu) as well Los Angeles, San Jose and an updated study of Denver. A case study of the Milwaukee Community Benefits Campaign at Park East is also available on the site.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Malanga *The New New Left: How American Politics Works Today* (Chicago: Ivan R. Deem 2005) p. 16.