

News Headline: Labor Builds Power!

Beginning in the 1960's conservatives set out to transform a Republican Party and a nation dominated by moderates. They established "think and do tanks" to build a policy agenda, they cultivated activist candidates, they built coalitions with other conservative groups, and they fostered a grassroots army. While mobilizing for national contests, their secret lay in steadily building strength at the local and state levels. We saw the fruits of their efforts on November 2nd, 2004. Today, labor and its allies must pursue a similar, but progressive path. The good news: its already happening in at least a dozen cities.

Consider the Following Success Stories

- A few state votes shy of Right to Work law in the 1990s, in 2004 the Colorado labor movement swung two congressional seats Democratic and captured Democratic control of both state legislative chambers for the first time in 40 years. Thanks to volunteers speaking face-to-face with roughly 40,000 union households, in metro Denver 80% of union Republicans swung their vote for labor-backed candidates.
- The South Bay Labor Council helped translate calls for healthcare reform into action by passing a program to provide health care for all 70,000 uninsured children in the county.
- While a supposed slight majority of Florida voters went for Bush, 70 percent voted to raise the state's minimum wage in 2004.
- Backed by a powerful alliance between labor and the Latino community, Fabian Núñez, the Los Angeles AFL-CIO's former political director, has become speaker of the California State Assembly. In 2004, labor defeated Governor Schwarzenegger's counter-attack, in part, by drawing on progressive strength built not simply in the Bay Area and LA, but also conservative areas such as San Diego.

Below we illustrate the elements of regional power building and the promise it holds for labor movement revival both politically and through organizing by drawing on examples from Los Angeles, Denver, San Jose, and Houston.



Regime Change Begins Locally

The steady devolution of responsibility from federal and state governments downward has made local politics ever more important sites of struggle. In addition, given the results of the last election, the federal level offers only defensive battles. Regional politics provides the best battlegrounds for labor and its allies to begin to go on the offensive.

Regional power building means entering the realm of the urban regime. Regimes bring together public authorities with private power holders as formal and informal networks of local "shakers and movers".. They set the dominant framework for how people think about regional development as well as the concrete policies local governments pursue.

While some metropolitan areas have more coherent policy regimes than others, in the United States corporate interests dominate nearly all. Thus, discussions of regional policy revolve around subordinating public authority to the needs of "the market."

Economic success is defined in corporate terms of large-scale projects, outside investment, downtown-centric redevelopment, and business-defined success measures. Needless to say corporate-dominated policy regimes place little emphasis on job quality, equity, or social justice. In corporate dominated policy regimes, strong local labor movements are hardly seen as components of economic health.

Regional power building for labor means constructing a new progressive local regime in which:

- Unions and community groups are seen as central partners in regional economic development.
- Business interests are reduced to one voice among many.
- Goals for regional development revolve around social and ecological needs.
- There is a renewed sense of public role in social welfare.
- Workers' right to form unions is seen as central to economic health and democracy and becomes a core principle protected by the local regime.

Whether during the 19th century or the 1930's the craft and industrial labor movements grew by challenging local regimes and organizing in the community, not just the workplace. Indeed, the national New Deal had its predecessors in regional power building that fostered city and state reforms and planted seeds for the stalwart pro-labor communities that supported the sit-down wave. Today labor needs to return to this tradition.

Core Elements of Regional Power Building

In order to contest for power effectively, local leaders must establish a path that develops and meshes together six key elements.

1. Deep Coalition Building:

Constructing regional power requires going beyond labor support groups. It means labor and community groups developing mutual agendas that often transcend their tradition activities. Examples include living wage campaigns, community/labor benefits agreements for large developments, anti-privatization efforts, a Children's Health Initiative, and labor protections for immigrant workers.

Through deep coalition building organized labor repositions itself at the center of a broad movement for regional change. Specific union campaigns tap into established alliances, rather than having to re-invent the wheel. Labor and the community become use to helping build each other. In San Jose, for example, union organizers knock on doors to recruit for ACORN (the nation's largest low-income neighborhood organization). In turn, ACORN strength means more pro-union voters and important organizing contacts for broad-based organizing efforts. In Los Angeles, labor movement revival and Latino empowerment have become intimately intertwined to form an increasingly powerful force. Union organizing and political action is seen as a path for Latino empowerment.

2. Preparing for Governance:

Simply electing majorities of union-endorsed candidates by itself does not mean that labor and its allies have acquired regional power. A governing coalition must have a concrete program for progressive regional change and candidates prepared to champion this agenda. The Denver Area Labor Federation, for example, expanded their endorsement process into a candidate briefing program that educates office holders on labor issues.



Regional power requires grassroots political machinery. In Denver, unions pool rank-and-file members and lost-time-staff into a single coordinated get-out-the-vote push. Formed as a coalition of SEIU, HERE, UNITE, and Justice for Janitors, the Organizations of Los Angeles Workers has built a precinct structure that has helped increase pro-labor Latino voters from 10% of the city's turnout in 1993 to 22% eight years later.

3. Building Capacity to Shift the Public Debate:

The corporate right has been very successful in pushing its agenda into the mainstream through a systematic strategy of institution building. Learning from this success, labor and its allies need local think-tanks and research arms that can generate both concrete information on the workings of the regional economy and specific policy reform agendas. The coalition and electoral work then takes this economic information into the community and engages in broad public campaigns that redefine the official public debate. Ultimately, local power building lays the ground work for campaigns such as Voice@Work to enter public debates.

Los Angeles, San Jose, and Denver have labor-founded 501(c)3s able to draw foundation funds. The LA Alliance for a New Economy and Working Partnerships USA have both grown in less than a decade into powerful institutions with 20+ staff. Such staff has vastly increased the ability of organized labor to build alliances and impact public debates. Labor affiliated non-profits in Denver and Cleveland grew from one employee to four to six in their first two years. Today, the Partnership for Working Families (californiapartnership.org) offers concrete technical assistance for groups around the country who wish to establish non-profit think-and-do tanks or pursue progressive economic development strategies.

4. Organizing:

Ultimately power building must develop as a “virtuous cycle” in tandem with growing union membership. In LA and San Jose the political influence and coalition ties gained through power building work have provided direct leverage to help secure neutrality, card check and first contracts in Justice for Janitors and hotel sector organizing campaigns. The Denver building trades confronts low density, long out of work lists, and a lack of a state Davis Bacon. Yet, the Denver Building Trades Council worked with the revitalized Denver Federation of Labor

and its affiliated non-profit to successfully support efforts by Colorado University students to require strong union-supporting wage, benefits, and apprenticeship standards on \$400 million of campus construction. This partnership continues as the groups monitor contracting and subcontracting on what could be a decade of construction.



In addition to support for specific organizing efforts, power building shifts the public view of labor from an unfamiliar special interest to a familiar vehicle for worker justice and community empowerment. Such a cultural shift is critical for supporting broad industry-based organizing. While union density continues to decline nationally in California it has grown from 16% in 1998 to 18% in 2002.

5. Leadership Development:

The Labor-Community Leadership Initiative in San Jose brings together labor, religious, community, and political activists for an eight-week program to develop a common understanding of regional economic and political change. This kind of deliberate leadership development generates leaders with a broad vision and rich personal connections to diverse groups. These bridge-builders help labor support the community and the community to support union building.



Building Partnerships provides curriculum and direct technical support to help groups to establish Civic Leadership Institutes in their regions (contact Kathleen Fernicola kfern@uchicago.edu).

6. Real Victories:

Nothing builds a movement like tangible signs of success.

In Denver successful labor-community work on a community benefits agreement helped the UFCW win an agreement preventing big box stores from moving into a major development project. In San Jose, labor and its allies secured a plan that provides health insurance for all 72,000 low-income children in the county. Houston's Justice and Equality in the Workplace partnership gained over \$1.3 million in back wages for 1,900 workers in its first two years and has helped build bridges between immigrants and unions such as in the building trades.

Such victories open a path for greater gains. Highly successful living wage campaigns in Los Angeles and San Jose led to aggressive efforts for community benefits agreements which in turn will lead to a push to institutionalize strong community and labor standards into all city and ultimately state economic development programs.

Power Building's Long Term Promise

Power building ultimately aids union organizing and political revitalization by:

- Articulating a progressive agenda that combines strong public support with concrete policy. Local reforms point toward broader state and national agendas.
- Developing a pool of activist candidates dedicated to a progressive vision for the Democratic Party.
- Building a permanent grassroots army to elect champions to office, push policy reforms and win progressive ballot initiatives.
- Laying ground work for sectoral union organizing by developing policy leverage, deepening community alliances, and shifting public views of organized labor.
- Moving political debate from "morale values" and "big government" to economic justice and the right to organize. Shifts at the local level foster new debate at the state and ultimately national level.

Full Case Study Papers and Other Materials are Available at

powerbuilding.wayne.edu



Building Regional Power Research Project

This material comes from a collaboration between labor educators and researchers and the AFL-CIO's Field Mobilization Department and the Central Labor Council Advisory Committee. The project documents instructive examples of regional power building and publicizes such innovations inside and outside the labor movement. For more information contact:

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