

The Colorado AFL-CIO: The “Miracle” Continued

It's been a roller coaster ride. In 1998, Colorado lost its Democratic Governor by 0.5% of the vote, and thus lost his willingness and ability to veto right-to-work legislation. In 2000, organized labor pulled off a spectacular win, commonly referred to as “The Colorado Miracle,” when they retook the State Senate and thus staved off the legislation. In 2002, the state again lost its Democratic majority; then, in another incredible victory, in 2004 labor's efforts led to the election of Democratic majorities in both houses.

The Colorado State AFL-CIO and the Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF) played key roles in the victory, their work serving as a model for state federation and central labor council cooperation. Much attention has been given to DALF's transformation. This case study considers the work of the State Federation.

Background

Colorado's union density is about 8% or approximately 170,000 current members. It has the dubious distinction of being the least unionized state in the country without a “right-to-work” law. Around 70% of those members are in the Denver metropolitan area. It is a modified “right-to-work” state (requiring a 75% super majority in a DOL supervised election to negotiate union security clauses) and has been fighting becoming a full “right-to-work” state for years. Public sector workers have only limited rights to joint unions and no right to collective bargaining. Nor is there a state prevailing wage law. The political environment is conservative 30% of voters statewide are registered Democrats, while 35% are registered Republicans, and 35%, “independents”. Currently there is a Republican Governor, who must step down in 2006, and the newly democratically controlled State Legislature. But Colorado is one of the top 10 fastest growing states in the nation and has been shifting politically in the last few years.

The Colorado Labor Movement has seen change in recent years as well. In 1998, when Colorado lost its Democratic Governor, the new President of the DALF, Leslie Moody and then Secretary-Treasurer and Political Director of the State Fed, Ellen Golombek, began working very closely to build a grassroots movement. They began bringing their organizations together, defining the roles of each and working with local unions to create more activism. This resulted in a more coordinated program between the State and local AFL-CIO bodies, local unions working together as they never had before. Their efforts paid off in 2000 with the “Colorado Miracle.”

The labor movement continued to change. Golombek became President of the State Fed in October of 2001 and the New Alliance process kicked off in 2001, with its Convocation in 2002. In January 2003, Golombek left Colorado to take a position with the SEIU International. Steve Adams was elected to the President's position with Paul Mendrick from APWU as Secretary-Treasurer.

The Colorado AFL-CIO

The Colorado AFL-CIO has 203 affiliated unions with a total of approximately 80,000 members. The largest affiliate is UFCW, with approximately 18,600 members. The next 15 largest locals have 1,000-5,000 members each, and all other locals are under 1000 members. There are 3 large IBT locals with approximately 10,000 members that are not affiliated. There are 5 Central Labor Councils, and none have paid staff -- the Northern Colorado Labor Council, Boulder County Labor Council, Colorado Springs Labor Council, Western Colorado Trades and Labor Assembly and Southern Colorado Labor Council. The councils and many local unions depend on the State Federation and DALF for resources.

The State Federation President is a full-time position, the Secretary-Treasurer, part-time. There is a Political Director, a Political Organizer, 4 office staff and several interns. It has a 40-member Executive Board.

At the New Alliance convocation in March 2002, affiliates agreed to a statewide program with unified per capita funding. All per capita dues are payable to the State Federation and are to be distributed to all bodies based upon a budget and strategic work plan that is submitted annually and reviewed by a Budget & Finance Committee. The current per capita is \$1.25 and the annual budget for the state is \$1,125,000.

The Colorado Miracle and Aftermath

In spite of Colorado's challenging environment, the labor movement is still much larger than any community group and has accomplished some remarkable work in recent years. After losing the Governor's race in 1998 by 0.5%, Colorado labor challenged itself to build a grassroots movement. City Council and School Board races were used as a way to build an activist base, train new local leaders and prepare for the 2000 elections. In 2000, the State Federation and DALF worked together to build a program in swing Republican State Senate Districts. Ten Districts were targeted and 7 wins were needed to take control. Local unions released 110 staff, and 1300 volunteers were recruited to contact members by phone and at the door 7 to 15 times from June to November. Four to eight pieces of mail were sent to each member. Massive membership and community education on Right-to-Work and Paycheck Protection was accomplished, 80% of union member families in targeted districts were registered to vote and nearly 1/3 of the membership voted by mail. On Election Day, Colorado hit its goal, winning 7 out of 10 seats. Democrats had the majority in the State Senate for the first time in 40 years.

In 2002, Colorado once again targeted the State Senate to maintain the majority won in 2000 and remain a free bargaining state. Target overlap work also allowed for some focus on a US Senate and a Congressional Seat. Forty-nine union staff were released statewide to recruit and train volunteers for the Labor-Neighbor program, and 21 staff from UFCW blitzed weekends from Labor Day through Election Day. A total of 250,000 phone calls were made to identify, persuade, recruit volunteers, and turn out the vote. More than 80% of targeted union households were registered to vote and 35% voted by mail. Close to 20,000 door hangers were distributed on election weekend and more than 1100 volunteers worked on Election Day to get out the vote. But this time the Republicans knew Colorado's plan and the Democrats lost their majority in the State Senate by 1 seat and also lost the US Senate and Congressional races.

New Leadership, Big Challenges

Thus, when Steve Adams took office in January 2003, he stepped into a situation of turmoil and frustration. The gains of 2000 had been lost. Three large Teamster locals had recently disaffiliated. The State Federation's budget was low. The largest affiliate, UFCW, was engaged in difficult national negotiations and essentially unavailable to help with a political effort. And once again, "right-to-work" was being proposed in the legislature.

Adams was a relative newcomer to the State Federation. He had spent 17 years as a member of IAM #1886, which represents approximately 6,000 airline workers. For 10 years, he was Secretary-Treasurer of the local, bargained contracts and handled grievances against United Airlines. In 2001, Adams was asked to chair State Federation's Budget and Finance committee, which reviewed affiliates strategic plans and budgets under the recently-adopted New Alliance rules. ("We had to get them into a new mindset, where everything we do at the State Federation relates to building political power in order to organize.") At the time a registered Republican, he also spent 2 years lobbying for the State Federation in the legislature – his only experience before having to run a state-level political program.

Speaking of what he learned during that last two years, and what he brought to the Presidency, he says, "I saw how far to the right the state had gone. I figured that if we didn't do something major, we were going to be annihilated through "right-to-work" and paycheck deception. Out of sheer panic on my part, not wanting to have Colorado go "right-to-work" while I was leading the state's labor movement, I painted a bleak picture for everyone of what would happen if we didn't take back one of the two legislative chambers." Adams' first task, as he saw it, was to talk with as many affiliate leaders as he could to get this message across.

In Spring of 2004, Adams attended the AFL-CIO's CLC/State Federation Leadership Institute with his Political Director. Partly as a result of interaction with other leaders and staff at the training, he returned to Colorado with a different orientation toward staff. He made efforts to incorporate them more into the day-to-day work, getting them to be more systematic, and capitalizing on an already successful program. "Now we try to talk through a plan and the logistics before we march off. We're all busy and there are never enough resources, but at least we don't have to keep going back and refiguring."

Coalition for a Better Colorado

Adams convinced the Executive Board that the only thing that could save them politically was to raise more money than the Republicans could, over and above what was being raised by the John Kerry's Presidential and Ken Salazar's U.S. Senate campaigns in the state. Adams and his staff put together a 527 that brought labor into coalition with the Colorado Education Association, trial lawyers, environmentalists, NARAL, and what he calls "limousine liberals" – a handful of liberal millionaires whose past political engagement had been to back a few in ballot initiatives. Eventually, the Coalition for a Better Colorado (CBC) would raise \$1.6 million. In addition, there were 527's set up for the Senate and the House to handle mail and other expenses. The amount raised in each of these 527's was over \$2 million. Labor also played a big

role in hard money donations to targeted candidates and accounted for over 50% of the hard dollar donations in 5 targeted Senate races and 10 targeted House races, raising over \$400,000 in what are called small donor committees that are unique to Colorado. From the beginning, the goal was to win back the state Senate, but Adams knew that with the amount of money they had, labor had a shot at taking back the House as well.

Another piece of the strategy was to run a target field program like the grass roots campaign that the State Federation, DALF and the CLCs had already learned to do in 2002. Finally, affiliates were fully engaged in the campaign, conducting intensive member-to-member work. In the Labor 2004 campaign, a detailed plan was initiated to deepen involvement at the local union level and dramatically increase the number of activists. State Federation, DALF, CLC and national staff attended local meetings and recruited activists on cards, whose names were entered into a data base by desired function and activated regularly. Of the 2,774 activists from 189 locals that worked the campaign, 1,193 were new, 332 became Labor Neighbors and 1,225 volunteered on Election Day. Thirty local unions released 50 staff and, with the new activists, made 75,356 door contacts and 200,000 phone calls. 341,357 pieces of mail were sent, 10 by the State Fed, 7 by local unions and 5 by the Republican Labor Caucus or ARA. Over 40,000 worksite flyers were distributed, and 95 unions and 147 local leaders utilized the Working Families Toolkit. Strategy Group meetings were held with local leaders monthly beginning in December of 2003 and became weekly by the end of the campaign. Eighty-one percent of members in targeted districts were registered to vote, 35% voted by mail and 10% voted at early vote locations.

During the last 4 days of the campaign, union leaders and activists were asked to donate those 4 days of their time to the effort, working side-by-side with CBC, which was running the targeted public field program, and many did. In the end, labor won. They took a majority in both houses of the State Legislature as well as the U.S. Senate seat and one additional Congressional seat. Bush took Colorado, though by a much smaller margin than predicted.

Adams believes that much of their success is owed to the affiliates, who wholeheartedly bought into (literally as well as figuratively) the Labor 2004 program. Very little money was contributed by international unions, and national pressure to put more effort into the Kerry campaign was resisted.

What's Next?

The upcoming campaign season will be no easier than the last. In fact, the challenges are huge. Though the incumbent Republican Governor will be unable to run, there is no single Democratic candidate that labor is excited about and at least one that is not friendly to labor. Further, it will be a challenge to hold on to the majorities in the State Legislature, in part because the "talent pool" of labor friendly potential candidates for statewide offices is shallow. So much money was raised and spent in 2004 that many local unions are tapped out. The pending regulation of 527's will also affect the ability to fund the campaigns. Yet it is estimated that it will take three times the amount of money to take the Governor's office. And even enough money can be raised for 2006, unless labor grows in Colorado, "we aren't going to be able to keep up the fundraising for more than a cycle or two," according to Adams.

The work of the Colorado AFL-CIO has only begun!

Case written by Barbara Byrd and Linda Mulligan for classroom discussion purposes only, April 2005.

