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IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

Building Unions From the Outside In

THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT A RECENT ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN IN FAIRFIELD COUNTY, Connecticut. The Union Organizing Project, as it came to be called, was an experiment in many different ways. Our hybrid organizing model drew the best of union and community organizing into a tight blend. We gave equal weight to workplace concerns and broader quality-of-life issues.

In part, this model emerged from our confrontation with a power structure so lopsidedly against us that forging a radical union organizing agenda required creating a broader "culture of resistance." The model was heavily rank-and-file dependent, and sought to transform the members from thinking and acting like isolated workers, to community leaders capable of mobilizing all the resources at their command to better their lives.

Muscles grow from exercise, and we were in constant motion. From 1998 to 2001, we were engaged in intense fights, fights we started … and won.

• 4,500 workers were organized into unions, all with first contracts that significantly raised wages, benefits, and working conditions (new contracts covered public sector, healthcare, childcare, taxicab drivers, and janitors).

• Four public housing projects slated for demolition were saved.

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• $15 million in new state funds were secured to help pay for improvements in the same public housing complexes.

• An "Inclusionary Zoning Policy" was passed by the city.

• The nation's strongest one-for-one replacement ordinance was passed by the city council—protecting thousands of units of affordable public housing.

• The first-ever African-American woman was elected to the school board.

• Union-led electoral campaigns put two new members into the city council (including the first Latina, or for that matter the first person of Latin-American descent).

In 1998, one of a handful of experimental projects initiated out of the AFL-CIO's new national organizing department was launched in Fairfield County, Connecticut. The campaign was to experiment with ways to increase union organizing drive win rates, and to accelerate obtaining first contracts. The AFL-CIO had decided each region of the nation would have one funded project, using some mix of funds from the newly established organizing fund. Importantly, the unions and not the AFL-CIO funded the overwhelming majority of this campaign, constituting a buy-in from the beginning.

The labor movement had no base to speak of … [in one of the] wealthiest regions of the nation …

In the initial plans, the unique thing about the Stamford campaign was to be its multiunion character. The campaign was launched initially with four affiliates and four locals: United Auto Workers Region 9a, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 371, Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 217, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) District 1199 New England. The only real change by the campaign's end was that the food and commercial workers were out of the campaign, and a second SEIU local, Building Service Local 531, joined. Following an organizing victory for over 2,000 janitors, this local was merged into the newly reformed powerhouse Local 32 BJ of SEIU.

The campaign faced significant political challenges from day one due to strong dissatisfaction among key affiliates over the fact that the AFL-CIO's discussions about the campaign were held primarily with local unions, not the national leadership of these unions. At the February 1998 national meeting of the AFL-CIO Executive Committee, three progressive affiliates tried to ground the campaign, arguing that it did not fit into their sectoral approach to organizing. Connecticut in general, and Stamford in particular, was not seen as a priority spot to launch an aggressive organizing drive.

The factors that led the local unions and the AFL-CIO regional leadership to initiate the Connecticut campaign were compelling, and quite distinct from their national unions' agenda: political power in the state had gradually shifted to Stamford and Fairfield County, and the labor movement had no base to speak of in the area. This presented increasing difficulties with passing state legis-

lation favorable to labor. Furthermore, Fairfield County had the highest number of unorganized workers across all sectors in the state; in some sectors, across all of New England.

Fairfield County, Connecticut is among the wealthiest regions of the nation and world. During the 3 years under discussion, the Area Median Income (AMI) went from $83,400 to $108,400. Its proximity to New York City had long made it a bedroom community for rich business executives from New York City. Over the years, however, Connecticut grew its own Fortune 500 corporate presence, making it the home and office to thousands of millionaires.

In the late 1960s, millions of federal government dollars were made available to cities for "urban redevelopment" as part of the antipoverty programs of the era. Stamford was one of the few cities where a single developer got a monopoly on urban redevelopment funds, and the city was able to push forward a "redevelopment" scheme very quickly. Soon small-town Stamford was transformed into a major corporate headquarters region. This coincided with the white flight from urban areas that drew businesses and jobs, and not just commuters, out from the urban core.

One obstacle to this "redevelopment" was the acres of prime land filled with low-income tenement-style housing whose residents were African-American. The homes of over 1,100 black families (estimated to house at least 5,000 people) were bulldozed to pave the way for the 14 Fortune 500 companies who now call the area home.

The unions signed a written contract with the national AFL-CIO, complete with a signing ceremony with President Sweeney and the presidents of the local unions involved. Among the most important things written into the contract were a jurisdictional agreement among the unions, and a commitment to share all data in a central database. Central staff would be in charge of member organizing, politics, media, and just about everything beyond the most narrowly defined worker organizing plans. Labor as an institution takes contracts seriously, and there were moments of disagreement in the multiunion partnership when it was the signed contract that kept the project afloat. It also held unions accountable for commitments they made in the agreement.

At the outset, we decided to invest in developing a "Strategic Geographic Power Structure Analysis" (PSA) of the area.[1] Who were the powerful forces and why? Which would be allies and which would be obstacles? How could we enhance the power of our friends and neutralize that of our opponents? The idea was to measure power two ways—first in absolute terms, but also in relation to goals. It is conceived to be as much a political education tool as anything. Just like we "chart" workplaces as a crucial step to organizing, we need to "chart" real leadership and power in the community to understand how to hem in the boss.

The UAW and District 1199 New England of the SEIU had each just organized a shop, and as the organizing project began it was clear the first real test was to deliver contracts for these unions, fast. As the very first step in putting together the PSA, the new union workers were brought in for a Saturday afternoon session. From that very first meeting, pieces of the PSA began to come together. The UAW had just won an election that included the nonsupervisory public sector staff of the Stamford City Government, many of whom worked right in the main government building. They had unique understandings of city government,

and unique access to the workings of local power. The healthcare workers offered sharp insights into which churches mattered, which pastors mattered, and what the relationships were between them.

The class and race mix in that very first meeting led to amazing dynamics among the workers that continued throughout the campaign. White collar public sector workers joined nursing home workers, as well as a small unit of dietary workers District 1199, who were African-American, Jamaican, and Haitian.

The meeting agenda addressed two main questions: Who held power in the area among religious leaders, politicians, corporate leaders, community groups, and others? What was their quality of life like? What pressures bore down on them when they punched the clock and left work?

No matter how much workers might win … in wages, housing costs alone would condemn them to poverty.

The results were stunning. Across the board, workers talked about housing as overshadowing all other aspects of their quality of life. Rent was difficult to pay because of low wages, and purchasing a home was inconceivable. There were also serious issues about the declining quality and resegregation of public schools, and that even though the city had a bussing program, "always the Black kids from downtown bussed for over 1 hour to North Stamford to attend rich white well-funded schools."[2] A housing crisis and simmering racial tensions were dominant themes in the meeting.

A researcher was hired to do the more academic and statistical aspects of the PSA, gathering data on issues such as expanding and shrinking sectors, corporate donations to political parties, etc.

Some of the highlights were:

- Stamford had become the economic engine for the entire state, and home to more powerful politicians than any other part of the state.

- No matter how much workers might win through collective bargaining in wages, housing costs alone would condemn them to poverty.

- Fortune 500 companies held absolute political power, and a more diffuse social power, having convinced the population that "they" should be "thankful" to corporations for having jobs and a "cleaned up city."

- There was no organized independent power base to ally ourselves with—no universities, no community-based groups of any kind except conservative neighborhood groups, no local or regional offices or committees of the Hartford-based statewide progressive groups.

- Crucially, we learned that the city planned to bulldoze and demolish all the remaining subsidized affordable housing, as well as whole blocks of private, substandard housing.

The extreme power imbalance suggested that to win, we would have to:

- Find creative ways to expose the real cor-

porate agenda. Conventional union campaigns would not be sufficient given the local population's lack of contact with the modern labor movement, except as projected in mainstream media. Housing and racism would be the keys to this effort.

- Help organize and mobilize the only potential institutional ally with even a possibility of power: religious institutions and, specifically, the Black churches—every thing from evangelical Haitian storefronts to the largest Baptist congregations.

- Make our emerging rank and file base the key to making alliances in the local community.

There was no initial agreement on this strategy. To the contrary, serious tensions developed. Did housing work add to, or distract from, our goal of direct worker organizing? Was the housing issue simply a potential source for media work embarrassing to the bosses and political leaders—much the way unions think of "corporate campaigns"? Or was it more a strategic issue worth addressing because it profoundly mattered to our members and workers we sought to organize, and because running a "social justice strategy" meant we had to win on this and in the process it would help build a broad culture of resistance that would rebound to our advantage in every aspect of our work?

Black churches were particularly sensitive to the housing issue, since the history of "Negro removal" from downtown Stamford in the name of urban renewal was so loaded for the older African-Americans who had managed to stay in the area. The Union Organizing Project began to work with black ministers to educate them about the housing crisis. Because we were the first organization in the city to produce research on housing destroyed as the corporations moved in and sound the alarm about "Wave II" of demolition, we were able to establish unions as a force for good in the city.

How to proceed with organizing proved to be just as contentious an issue. Eventually, the UAW and District 1199 agreed that the campaign staff could, working with a small team of rank and file leaders, hold one-on-ones with the bargaining units of those two unions where we were facing tough first contract fights. These first one-on-ones focused simple questions such as where did their kids attend school, what religious institution did they attend if any, were they part of any community groups, did they vote, did they play in local sports leagues, and so on. In essence, we transported the time-tested union organizing model of "charting workers inside the facility" to charting workers' lives and relationships outside the facility.

... We began to organize 1199 and UAW rank and file ... as churchgoers.

After a couple weeks, we began to analyze what we had in terms of community ties. Religious institutions were the most obvious. We ignored church leaders inclined to be progressive by tradition in favor of powerful churches where a large number of our workers attended. Again, the PSA was critical here. Generally, the white ministers whom organizers often rely upon simply did not have much power in Fairfield County, and certainly not in Stamford.

By our fifth month in Stamford, we began to organize 1199 and UAW rank and file by church, and to hold weekend leadership sessions with workers as churchgoers. We developed worker teams by church. One or two workers per church agreed to request a meeting with their minister, not as union leaders but as congregants. Their message was "help us get a contract, not because you believe in unions, but because you believe in me as a member of your congregation, and you know my family suffers." The early weeks found organizers tense about when people would come out and support unions, and when progress would be made on the first contracts.

At the very first meeting, a minister agreed to write to the mayor and demand justice for his church members as they sought a better life. Suddenly, we had the most important black leader in the city taking on the mayor over a union contract fight, and our relationship with other churches spread quickly from here.

We learned a great deal from round one of this process, and our workers were broadening their profile and identity: worker, worker-leader, union-worker-leader, union-worker-church-leader, community-leader. Workers were often nervous about meeting with their religious leaders to ask them for support. Strength in numbers was the key: if workers went as a group to meet their ministers, they were likely to be successful in asking for support. The trainings prior to these meetings were also crucial.

Politicians in the city began paying attention as they realized the churches and unions were operating as one. By the winter of 1998–1999, they began showing up at events, informational pickets, and more, as long as they knew they had the "cover" of responding to the summons of religious leaders.

At the 9-month mark of the campaign, the religious leaders decided to host a multicongregation meeting on the housing crisis. We supplied the research, data, and analysis, and they supplied an overflowing crowd of 800 mostly Black parishioners. There was fire in the pulpit as minister after minister stood up and pronounced that we needed a housing policy, and then added, "and we need a wage policy. How come our people get bad housing and bad wages?" Media began reporting on the role of the unions in the new housing "crusade."

We won two first contracts in the nursing homes. We turned a situation where a boss fired workers in an organizing campaign into a pilgrimage with clergy and politicians rallying outside the nursing home, joining us at the bargaining table, and demanding that the workers get hired back as part of bargaining, not part of a multiyear National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) process. We held bargaining sessions in churches, not hotels. We won our demand to get these workers their jobs back, and beat Vencor, about the nastiest union-busting nursing home chain in an industry with a stiff competition for that title. A little more than 1 year into the campaign we had five first contracts under our belt and five organizing wins.

At the 1-year mark the housing fight took a turn: the Public Housing Authority announced an "improvement through privatization plan" at one of the housing complexes where we knew that we had a lot of new union members. We agreed that union members and staff organizers would door-knock the entire housing complex the next weekend. And we would turn out as many as we could to do an action at the "in-

formational session" to discuss the privatization plan.

With precious little time before the Housing Authority "informational meeting," our staff researcher discovered that the procedure for demolition of state-owned buildings mandated that some tenants get "elected" to "serve" in the "Public Housing Authority planning process," and that the Housing Authority planned to get "volunteers" for this function at the meeting.

We did media trainings for a leadership team of mostly union members who lived in the complex, and planned an entire action. Leaders, not staff, did the final night of door knocking in the neighborhood, often with piles of kids in tow.

At the meeting, we had hundreds of residents of the complex in the room. The plan was to shut down the meeting by leading a walkout, to forestall the appointment of "volunteers." A few leaders invited their ministers to come. Without asking permission, and to the shock of the bureaucrats, the ministers opened the meeting with two prayers asking God to prevent the Housing Authority from tearing down any more units of housing. The crowd went wild, the TV cameras went wild, and the leaders boldly took over the meeting. In their new-found role as tenant/union/church leader, the rank and file leaders announced their intention to block the housing demolition from ever happening.

The headline in the daily paper the next day read "Unions to Back Residents' Housing Fight," and quoted extensively from people who identified themselves as members of unions who lived in public housing. Yet another new "identity" was born.

About the same time as this, the mayor announced an end to bargaining for the public sector worker's first contract, and said the only way to get a contract was through arbitration. The UAW wanted to break the pattern that had been set in the bargaining with other smaller units, and position themselves as a union that was willing to fight and win. This fight had now been going on since we arrived in Stamford, but now the balance of power was shifting.

The Housing Authority action had shown we could generate a real coordinated movement against the mayor. And now our housing group had grown well beyond the union members to include leaders across the complex. The UAW decided to call for a general March Against the Mayor. The tenant leaders called on all public housing residents to march with the union.

... To the shock of the bureaucrats, the ministers opened the meeting ... asking God to prevent the Housing Authority's [demolition].

By the day of the March Against the Mayor, all hell had broken loose. The mayor himself was going to church leaders to ask them, beg them, subtly bribe them, not to show up at the march. The press decried the march as "too confrontational," and "unfair to take the fight to his house, his neighbors, his kids." But everyone on our side was enjoying their new-felt

power. The march came off, with fewer ministers in attendance than we had hoped for, but enough to show the mayor he couldn't out-organize the movement, in spite of the fact that the city was offering the Black churches new resources and a "seat at the table."

Our research showed that the city had slated every single public housing complex for demolition, and we were organizing every one. In each, we began by scouring our mental and digital databases to sort out where we had new members. In each, the organizing began by first meeting with our members, then working with them to set up door knocking squads to house call the complexes. This was just over 2,000 families, with many adults living under one roof. We had leaders from different unions in every complex.

Only one piece of the mosaic was missing: Latinos did not live in public housing—too much paper work and documentation is required. The more established immigrant groups of the area were Jamaican and Haitian, and along with African-Americans, they formed the public housing base. The problem of how and where to engage a mass base of Latino's in some of our nonworkplace efforts was growing increasingly important as we were beginning to lay the early foundations for organizing janitors throughout the entire county (who were overwhelmingly Latino/a). Despite the momentum we had already established in the churches, the Catholics were largely absent as then Bishop Edward Eagan, now the Bishop in New York City, was notoriously antiunion and held his priests and their activities on a very short leash. It would take another 7 months, the same strategy of congregant-to-parish-priest, as well as Bishop Eagan's departure to New York City, before we could seriously engage the Latino-dominated Catholic churches in the campaign.

The housing campaign was benefiting our work in several ways:

- The fight for their housing brought out members of our unions who were not active.

- It showed the ministers we were committed to issues that went beyond the workplace.

- It undermined the mayor's authority, at the very time we were challenging him to drop arbitration and return to the bargaining table for the union contract. He was clearly getting boxed in as antipoor, racist, and antiworker.

- Housing provided a way to keep our members active in the union in-between contract fights.

- The entire issue of the lack of affordable housing underscored the need for unions to raise wages.

- By now, we knew so many residents that we really could get union cards signed more easily, and engage workers in union organizing campaigns.

After almost 2 years, we won the first contract with the UAW. It was by far the best city contract, settled across the table (which the previously powerful mayor had pledged would "happen over his dead body"). The negative pattern set by the other unions was broken.[3] We not only stopped the demolition of the housing complexes, but eventually won a citywide ordinance mandating that any housing torn down in the city's limits must be replaced by an equivalent unit. The ordinance stipulates that the new unit has to go up first, must be located in the school district the resident family is already in, must be comparable

in size and affordability, and more. Housing advocates have judged these to be the most sweeping antidemolition protections on record.

It is worth noting that our opposition to demolition was a contrary position for some union people, who argued we had to be "smart" and "proactive" and allow the housing to come down because "the members deserve to live elsewhere." We were clear, however, that these members would not have that choice unless something was built for them first. And the first step to winning that was to stop the demolition.

We thought in terms of "workplace/non-workplace" issues, rejecting "community/labor" . . .

By June of 2000, we launched a campaign to organize the 2,000 janitors in Fairfield County. Workers struck for 7 weeks despite intense employer intimidation, including the now customary role of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). We won. Along the way, the members of the janitors' workforce launched new housing fights because they lived in the private housing that could also be razed, in some ways more easily than the public housing. This led us to campaign for an inclusionary zoning policy mandating minimum numbers of affordable units per new commercial and private development. We won.

Here are some of the key lessons of this campaign:

• We thought in terms of "workplace/non-workplace" issues, rejecting "community/labor," the latter implying that workers are not members of the community and that community members do not spend most of their time at work. Everything about this model is focused on creating synergy between workplace and nonworkplace struggles, and recognizing the labor movement's need to be at the table inside and outside the shop.

• We organized the "whole member" by integrating the members' concerns. Plenty of economic forces outside the shop conspire to negate even direct wage and benefit gains made by the contract.

• Leadership development is critical, and members do not divide their lives into "job concerns" that warrant energy and attention, and "everything else" which is somehow trivial.

• It takes resources and good organizers to do this, not entry level ones. Too often unions hire a "community organizer" who really has never organized anything, or subcontract this work to front organizations, often with foundation money. Organizing the "whole worker" leads to organizing wins, so unions need to make the resources—including talent—available for this kind of work.

• Investing in developing a power structure analysis up front is a must.

• Most unions are reluctant to discuss race explicitly. We talked about it all the time. Our organizing team was totally diverse racially (though it did not start out that way—we hired from the base as we grew). Our staff was multi-multilingual, and overwhelmingly female. We had huge, unwieldy meetings with translation

in Creole, Spanish, and English. Workers would say there was no place else in Connecticut where people bothered to translate.

• We also talked explicitly of class power. The fact that the project was multiunion was an added benefit as leaders began to identify as belonging to a workers movement instead of one union. The housing fight helped as it joined union members and unorganized workers together in an organization.

• We paid for childcare at our weekend meetings. This might sound ridiculous, but neither unions nor community organizations typically pay for childcare at meetings. We proved that if you provide childcare for a meeting, low-income moms will turn out in droves.

So much of the debate around union organizing strategy never leaves the realm of jargon and abstraction, it's important to spell out what organizing the "whole worker" means. Life was changing for these people. They were constituting themselves as a class. They were bargaining with their bosses, not begging. They were taking over government meetings and running them themselves. And they were winning everywhere. They were fundamentally building workers power, and it was an experience of class, race, faith, and personal liberation. ■

Notes

1. The PSA is the brainchild of Anthony Thigpenn, a long-time community organizer and founder-director of AGENDA, the Environmental and Economic Justice Training Project, and CIPHER, a related research think tank.

2. The city had just ended an acrimonious debate about where to build a new high school, and the mayor had pushed hard to build another one in North Stamford, perpetuating the existing pattern of kids rising early, spending hours on the bus, and without a neighborhood school.

3. We had already undertaken an effort to organize all six unions that bargained with the mayor with some units of municipal workers. Initially, they were skeptical, even fearful, that we would break the pattern, and make them look weaker to their members. Although we had modest success building the Municipal Workers Council, the UAW victory radically increased the participation of other unions as they realized the Mayor could be beaten, and wanted in on some winning!