

# THE POWER OF UNLIKELY COALITIONS

Thomas J. Sugrue†

Civil rights organizations, community groups, and the union movement are all at a critical historical juncture. Besieged by the transformations of global capitalism and beset by a conservative repudiation of welfare, racial equality, and economic regulation, it is time to rethink the strategies for both grassroots community and shopfloor union organizing.<sup>1</sup> In many parts of the country, the relationship between unions and community organizations ranges from inattentiveness to outright suspicion and distrust. Many activists and their academic counterparts have drawn a sharp line between the politics of community and the politics of class or of the workplace. The case studies of New Haven, Connecticut and Greensboro, North Carolina illustrate the great promise of forging sustainable and viable relationships between unions and community activists. The key lesson from these case studies is the need to transcend conventional boundaries between community and union, class and race, and political economy and identity. To borrow a phrase from historian David Hollinger, the task at hand is to "wide[n] the circle of the we," in order to find common ground where we can begin working together.<sup>2</sup>

The starting point for the creation of unlikely coalitions is the recognition that workplaces and communities have both been devastated by fundamental economic restructuring. For the past half century, unions have struggled with the multiple impacts of deindustrialization, the rise of service sector employment, and the emergence of a part-time, contingent labor force. Traditional union structures since the postwar union-corporate settlement have greatly hindered creative responses to these changes.<sup>3</sup>

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† Bicentennial Class of 1940 Professor of History and Sociology, University of Pennsylvania.

1. This rethinking is currently represented in a number of important collections of essays. *See, e.g.,* A NEW LABOR MOVEMENT FOR THE NEW CENTURY (Gregory Mantsios ed., 1998); AUDACIOUS DEMOCRACY (Steven Fraser & Joshua B. Freeman eds., 1997); *see also* NEW LAB. F. (Labor Resource Ctr., Queens College, City Univ. of N.Y.) and AHORA NOW! (Labor/Community Strategy Ctr., Los Angeles, Cal.) (rethinking the links between community, civil rights, and unionism).

2. David A. Hollinger, *How Wide the Circle of the "We"? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos Since World War II*, 98 AM. HIST. REV. 317 (1993).

3. The literature on this topic is vast. For an introduction, see Nelson Lichtenstein,

With the exception of the public sector, organized labor has steadily lost membership and political clout since the early 1950s. The same forces have had corrosive effects on urban communities, particularly on communities of color. Major American cities, which are disproportionately home to the nation's African-American and Hispanic populations, have battled against the combined and interactive effects of de-industrialization, persistent workplace discrimination, political marginalization, urban disinvestment, and public policies that favor suburban growth.<sup>4</sup> These problems are fundamentally intertwined in the daily lives and experiences of working people, despite the insistence of some academics and activists that questions of race and class are analytically distinct. Both the trade union movement and the grassroots community activists need to recognize that racial inequality is fundamentally a matter of political economy and that economic security in the workplace depends on eliminating persistent racial and gender discrimination.

The struggles of community groups and unions are so difficult because capital is relentlessly mobile. Capital is translocal and transnational and therefore seldom respects the integrity of either workplace or community.<sup>5</sup> The most successful social movements in American history have started with a strong local base—on the shop floors and in the neighborhoods. These movements, however, have seldom succeeded when they have maintained a local focus. Coalitions between unions and community groups must build on local strength but must also think big. They must broaden their notion of community by reconciling what are often perceived as mutually antagonistic interests.

This reconciliation requires rethinking our institutions. Community organizations and unions alike must retool if they want to challenge effectively the public policies and economic powers that are reshaping their world. Community organizations must look beyond their neighborhood boundaries—beyond the immediate crises that are usually the basis of community organizing and activism. They risk becoming marginalized unless they create translocal, transregional, and even transnational networks. Left to their own devices, local organizations have the will but ultimately not the capacity to address the overwhelming array of social, political, and economic problems besieging their communities. Likewise, unions must look beyond the workplace to grapple with the public politics

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*American Trade Unions and the "Labor Question": Past and Present*, in WHAT'S NEXT FOR ORGANIZED LABOR: THE REPORT OF THE CENTURY FOUNDATION TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF UNIONS (1999).

4. See generally THOMAS J. SUGRUE, *THE ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POSTWAR DETROIT* (1996).

5. For an excellent discussion of these processes, see JEFFERSON COWIE, *CAPITAL MOVES: RCA'S SEVENTY-YEAR QUEST FOR CHEAP LABOR* (1999).

that devastate communities and put hard-won shop floor struggles at risk.

Throughout the country, imaginative campaigns have emerged from unlikely coalitions between organized labor and community organizations. Many of these alliances are fragile and difficult to sustain. Building bridges between organizations with separate agendas, constituencies, and institutional histories is difficult, but much can be learned by looking to experiments around the country. In Baltimore, BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) and its offshoot, the SSC (Solidarity Sponsoring Committee) have forged a community-labor coalition to push for a living wage for local service sector workers. "[A] little bit of church, a little bit of union, a little bit of social service and a *whole* lot of politics," as one organizer describes it, the Baltimore campaign has created a cadre of savvy grassroots leaders who have strengthened both unions and community organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Other union-community coalitions have challenged anti-worker and anti-community public policies in an era of conservative retrenchment.<sup>7</sup> In Los Angeles, for example, the Janitors for Justice union organizing drive has worked closely with advocates of public transportation reform. This alliance developed because so many low wage service workers are dependent on the city's ill-run bus system.<sup>8</sup> In New York, unions and community groups have formed a more tentative effort to challenge "welfare reform" that is devastating poor communities of color and expanding the ranks of the working poor.<sup>9</sup> In California, Florida, and elsewhere, unions and immigrant rights organizations are forging a powerful progressive alliance to organize supposedly "unorganizable" new Asian and Latino immigrants and to challenge laws that deny new immigrants access to education and other social services.<sup>10</sup>

There are three additional case studies that illuminate the process of coalition building and provide examples, analogies, or inspiration for local community activists. The common ground in each of these case studies is

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6. Janice Fine, *Moving Innovation from the Margins to the Center*, in *A NEW LABOR MOVEMENT FOR THE NEW CENTURY*, *supra* note 1, at 139, 152.

7. In recent years, public pressure has mounted for welfare reform and other policies which have negative effects on the working poor and other less fortunate members of society.

8. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *The New Urban Working Class and Organized Labor*, *NEW LAB. F.*, Fall 1997, at 7.

9. See generally Bill Fletcher, Jr., *Seizing the Time Because the Time is Now: Welfare Repeal and Labor Reconstruction*, in *AUDACIOUS DEMOCRACY*, *supra* note 1, at 119, 119-31; Frances Fox Piven, *The New Reserve Army of Labor*, in *AUDACIOUS DEMOCRACY*, *supra* note 1, at 106. For a somewhat skeptical view of union-community efforts to challenge workfare in New York, see David Glenn, *Surplus Meaning in Brooklyn*, *DISSENT*, Winter 1998, at 110.

10. See generally Mae M. Ngai, *Who is an American Worker? Asian Immigrants, Race, and the National Boundaries of Class*, in *AUDACIOUS DEMOCRACY*, *supra* note 1, at 173.

the unlikelihood of coalition. First, in the 1940s and 1950s, the United Packinghouse Workers of America ("UPWA") overcame formidable racial and geographic divisions. Although black and white meatpackers lived in separate worlds, it did not prevent them from fighting together against employers who sought to exploit regional and racial divisions to deflate wages, divide workers, and discourage union organization. Second, the Massachusetts building trades unions long had a hostile relationship with women and communities of color. Yet, in the crucible of a statewide anti-union referendum campaign in 1988, construction unions allied with African-American and Hispanic organizations on issues of racial equality in the workplace. Finally, in the 1990s, a Philadelphia organization of tradeswomen dedicated to breaking down gender barriers in the skilled trades responded to the crisis that many poor women faced in the aftermath of welfare reform by initiating a training program for women seeking employment in the construction industry and related trades.

## I. THE UPWA

One of the most imaginative trade unions of the twentieth century, the UPWA offered an alternative to the racial gradualism and organizational stagnation of many unions in the post-World War II years.<sup>11</sup> The UPWA faced real obstacles in its effort to organize workers. Employers did their best to use racial animosity as a tool to divide workers in multi-racial meatpacking plants. Their task was aided by the nearly complete separation of black and white packinghouse workers outside of the workplace—black and white workers seldom interacted in any meaningful way in their communities. They lived in separate and unequal neighborhoods, did not interact socially, and did not attend the same churches or schools. White UPWA workers fiercely protected their all-white enclaves; a majority was deeply, instinctively anti-black.

However, the UPWA gave black and white workers a sense that their interests were common. As labor historian Roger Horowitz writes, "the UPWA countered group identification based on racial superiority by promoting and demonstrating the material benefits of collective action based on class interests."<sup>12</sup> UPWA organizers did not assume, as many civil rights activists in the Cold War era did, that moral suasion and

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11. My account draws from the rich body of scholarship on the UPWA. See DEBORAH FINK, *CUTTING INTO THE MEATPACKING LINE: WORKERS AND CHANGE IN THE RURAL MIDWEST* (1998); RICK HALPERN, *DOWN ON THE KILLING FLOOR: BLACK AND WHITE WORKERS IN CHICAGO'S PACKINGHOUSES, 1904-54* (1997); ROGER HOROWITZ, *NEGRO AND WHITE, UNITE AND FIGHT: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM IN MEATPACKING, 1930-1990* (1997); *UNIONIZING THE JUNGLES: LABOR AND COMMUNITY IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEATPACKING INDUSTRY* (Shelton & Stromquist et al. eds., 1997).

12. HOROWITZ, *supra* note 11, at 4.

conversion could change the hearts and minds of racist workers. Their tactic was simple and brilliant. They worked to change the *institutions* that perpetuated racial inequality. The UPWA organizers recognized that racism was not solely a consequence of individual attitudes and beliefs, but was built into the very structure of key social organizations. Attentive to the "dynamic interplay of race and class," UPWA activists fashioned a strategy that addressed both issues simultaneously.<sup>13</sup>

The second element of the UPWA's success was that it built on a strong base of grassroots organization but did not stop there. Community organization was a means, not an end. By creating what the UPWA activists called "chains," informal translocal networks of local unions that shared information and collaborated in the organization of new workers, the UPWA as a whole was able to respond to the mobility of capital in ways that local unions, alone, could not.<sup>14</sup> The UPWA pursued another translocal strategy that proved quite effective. It persuaded workers in predominantly white communities like Waterloo, Iowa; Austin, Minnesota; and Chicago, Illinois that they had interests in common with black workers in communities like Fort Worth, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; and Shreveport, Louisiana.

The UPWA activists built a coalition on civil rights that transcended racial, regional, and cultural differences. They built this coalition by emphasizing the fact that the existence of an underpaid and predominantly minority workforce in the South directly affected the fate of all workers. The UPWA activists thus created a community of common interest between northern and southern workers, between workers in big and small towns, and between black and white workers. The UPWA was one of the few organizations in mid-twentieth century America that was truly racially diverse.

## II. MASSACHUSETTS BUILDING TRADES UNDER SIEGE

A second case offers an example of the ways that civil rights organizations and community groups influenced union policy. Through coalition building, they forced union groups to reappraise their training, apprenticeship, and affirmative action policies. In 1988, Question 2, a statewide referendum to repeal the state's prevailing wage law, appeared on the ballot in Massachusetts.<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts had been one of the first states

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13. *Id.* at 4-5.

14. *See id.* at 209-13 (describing union chains).

15. *See* MARK ERLICH, *LABOR AT THE BALLOT BOX: THE MASSACHUSETTS PREVAILING WAGE CAMPAIGN OF 1988 (1990)* (discussing the efforts to preserve the prevailing wage law in Massachusetts in 1988). It should be noted for the sake of full disclosure that I was a political organizer for Painters District Council 35 in Eastern Massachusetts for the

to pass a prevailing wage law. Since 1935, the state required that all workers on government contracts be paid the area's prevailing union wage.<sup>16</sup> The Question 2 campaign was coordinated and well-funded by a national anti-union construction industry lobbying group, the Associated Builders and Contractors ("ABC"), and Citizens for Limited Taxation, a Massachusetts group that had won two statewide anti-property tax referenda campaigns in the 1980s.

The primary beneficiaries of the prevailing wage law were the state's building trades unions. Long infamous as bastions of white male privilege, the building trades had been the special targets of civil rights protest and of government-mandated affirmative action. Many building trades unions had been insular, drawing their members from neighborhood, ethnic, and kinship networks. All-white construction crews were not uncommon, even at work sites in cities with large minority populations. The building trades unions were also known to be hostile to the hiring and advancement of women workers.<sup>17</sup>

Alone, the building trades unions could not mount a successful campaign against Question 2. They needed to form a broad-based electoral coalition to have a chance of victory against the seemingly populist, anti-tax campaign led by the opponents of the prevailing wage. This meant that the building trades unions needed to reach out to groups whom they had traditionally excluded. But what could persuade minority voters, women, and community activists to join the campaign? Black church and community leaders were particularly skeptical of the building trades' long history as a bastion of white privilege. When construction unionists approached the Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus with hopes of enlisting the support of prominent black activists, including the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, they were met with distrust.

African-American and Hispanic groups used the opportunity to pressure building trades unions to expand their outreach programs and to admit more minorities to apprenticeship programs. They withheld endorsement of the campaign opposing Question 2 until the building trades unions agreed to increase the representation of minority workers on worksites. This demand had particular significance since the Massachusetts economy was booming at that time and since the state was about to begin a massive reconstruction of Boston's expressway system. A

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Question 2 campaign. What follows draws on both Erlich's account and on my recollections of the campaign.

16. *See id.* at 18-19. Massachusetts passed its prevailing wage law in 1914 and amended the law to link the prevailing wage to collectively bargained wage agreements in 1935.

17. For a brief discussion of the discrimination and affirmative action in the building trades, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Tangled Roots of Affirmative Action*, 41 AM. BEHAV. SCI. 886 (1998).

"working partnership" between the building trades and black leaders was hammered out during often-tense negotiations in the summer and fall. While the building trades-minority leadership alliance had some critics who wanted the alliance to go further, it did succeed in creating a working coalition between groups that had a long history of mutual antagonism.<sup>18</sup> By November 1988, metropolitan Boston was awash in "Vote No on Question 2" posters and lawn signs. Union-funded "get-out-the-vote" efforts led to high turnouts in working-class wards, both white and non-white. The conservative opponents of the prevailing wage law were disappointed because the referendum lost decisively, and by extremely large margins among black, Hispanic, and women voters. Equally as important, the campaign brought minority groups and predominantly white union members together for the first time and forced a frank discussion about achieving racial equality in the construction industry.

### III. TRADESWOMEN: FROM AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TO WELFARE REFORM

Unlikely coalitions often form in response to immediate crises such as the Question 2 campaign in Massachusetts. However, coalitions may also result from the creativity of community and union leaders involved in long-term struggles for economic and social justice. In Philadelphia, a group of tradeswomen played a crucial role in expanding traditional unionism by reaching out to non-union workers and addressing issues seldom considered within the purview of union organizations. Tradeswomen of Purpose/Women in Non-Traditional Jobs ("TOP/WIN") emerged in the late 1970s to promote solidarity among women entering "non-traditional occupations," occupied predominantly by men.<sup>19</sup> After the passage of the Job Training Partnership Act in 1987, TOP/WIN further advanced its purpose by creating a training program for women seeking employment in the construction industry and related trades. It also drew funds from unions and employer groups that were obliged to comply with affirmative action orders.

TOP/WIN transformed itself again in the aftermath of the bipartisan legislation that abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996<sup>20</sup> put time limits and other strictures on the receipt of welfare and required welfare recipients to either work or participate in job training programs. Maintaining its role in increasing the representation of women in the skilled trades, TOP/WIN turned its energies toward helping women

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18. See ERLICH, *supra* note 15, at 105-20.

19. See *Breaking Barriers the Hard Way*, PHILA. DAILY NEWS, May 20, 1993.

20. Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105 (codified as amended in scattered sections of 7, 29, and 42 U.S.C.).

who had been forced off welfare. Its three-part training program includes: basic literacy and mathematics; training in the "hard skills" of electrical work, plumbing, carpentry, and machine operation; and training in "soft skills," particularly dealing with gender issues in predominantly male workplaces.<sup>21</sup>

Advocates for the poor in Pennsylvania have been particularly critical of the draconian requirement that welfare recipients work a minimum of twenty hours per week after two years on welfare. In major postindustrial cities such as Philadelphia, where unemployment rates remain above the national average, employers are reluctant to hire former welfare recipients and even part-time jobs are difficult to find.<sup>22</sup> As community criticism of welfare reform mounted, TOP/WIN grappled with Pennsylvania state welfare regulations requiring all welfare recipients to work at least twenty hours per week after two years. Because Pennsylvania is one of the small number of states that does not allow education or job training to count toward the work requirement, TOP/WIN has helped trainees meet their work requirement by purchasing shell houses in South Philadelphia and paying trainees to renovate them.<sup>23</sup> The renovated houses will both improve the housing stock in impoverished communities and will be offered for sale to graduates of TOP/WIN's training program. TOP/WIN also places nearly all of its graduates into unionized employment in skilled trades.

What makes the TOP/WIN program so ingenious is that it responds to the interests of several groups simultaneously. First, it assists women, particularly women of color, who want to work in the remunerative but male-dominated skilled trades. Second, it meets the demands of community groups for job training programs that lead to jobs. Third, it helps revitalize the physical fabric of Philadelphia's impoverished inner city communities. Finally, it provides a creative alternative to the make-work schemes and low paying jobs that entrap many former welfare recipients in a life of working poverty.<sup>24</sup>

The postwar UPWA, the building trades' prevailing wage campaign, and TOP/WIN are all examples of the redefinition of group interest and

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21. For information on the last ten years of TOP/WIN efforts, see Remarks of Linda Butler, Executive Director TOP/WIN, in *WELFARE REFORM AND SELF SUFFICIENCY: STRATEGIES FOR '99 AND BEYOND*, SUMMARY REPORT OF 1999 COMMON GROUND CONFERENCE, 1999, at pp. 8-9.

22. See generally KATHERINE NEWMAN, *NO SHAME IN MY GAME* (1999). On Philadelphia specifically, see JANET E. RAFFEL, *THE 21ST CENTURY LEAGUE, TANF, ACT 35, AND PENNSYLVANIA'S NEW WELFARE SYSTEM: A REVIEW OF THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION IN GREATER PHILADELPHIA* (Bill Hangley, Jr. ed., 1998).

23. See Butler, *supra* note 21. On earlier efforts, see *Rehabbing Homes, Careers: PHA Tenants Learn Construction Skills*, PHILA. DAILY NEWS, Aug. 31, 1993.

24. On the working poor generally, see NEWMAN, *supra* note 22.



social justice that challenges public policies that are detrimental to working people and their communities. These are three small examples of how unlikely coalition building can push beyond the parochialism of trade unions and community organizations. These examples help us answer three important questions. First, can unions overcome the racial divisions that are deeply entrenched in working class communities? The UPWA offers one example of unions overcoming racial animosity by highlighting class interests that bind black and white workers together. Second, can often-conservative organizations that have long protected the privileges of race and gender build bridges with groups committed to racial and gender equality? The Massachusetts Question 2 campaign reminds us that coalition building is sometimes accomplished by coercion rather than cooperation, but that even coercion can yield gains for all parties involved. Third, how can unions and community groups work together to challenge pernicious public policies like welfare reform? Philadelphia's TOP/WIN program has diversified skilled trades unions, provided essential job training for underemployed women, embarked on community economic development, created new jobs, and reshaped social policy in the wake of welfare repeal.

Each of these efforts faced formidable odds. Each brought to the table folks who had seldom met, considered their interests common, or collaborated in a common struggle. These unlikely coalitions offer powerful lessons to those of us who want to bring unions and civil rights groups together. Imagination, coercion, and collaboration are all necessary to challenge those corporate policies that sacrifice the needs of working people and their communities for stockholder profits. They are necessary to reshape public policies, from labor law to welfare, that undermine the quality of life of many working Americans.