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Labor Unions and Coalitions in Buffalo

Abstract

Labor unions have evolved tremendously since their inception in 1866 in the United States. Today, some unions in the Buffalo region are responding to free market fundamentalism with the development of multiple coalition partners. Coalitions are composed of unions and like-minded activist organizations. This creative response to a long-term economic crisis has created a high road social infrastructure. Unions have moved beyond their traditional roles of collective bargaining and representation to a more community-oriented mission of improving the quality of local jobs.

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Labor Unions and Coalitions in Buffalo

By Heather J. Anderson

How Have Local Unions Evolved?

Labor unions have evolved tremendously since their inception in 1866 in the United States. Today, some unions in the Buffalo region are responding to free market fundamentalism with the development of multiple coalition partners. Coalitions are composed of unions and like-minded activist organizations. This creative response to a long-term economic crisis has created a high road social infrastructure.¹

Unions have moved beyond their traditional roles of collective bargaining and representation to a more community-oriented mission of improving the quality of local jobs.

What Happened to the Booming Industry in Buffalo?

Industry has declined in the Buffalo region over the past 50 years. Since the mid 1950s, manufacturing has shed over 125,000 jobs in the region. To give one example, many local jobs depended on the U.S auto industry, which took a hard hit in the 1970's and 80's with the combination of oil embargos and foreign competition. As Americans turned to smaller, high-quality imported cars, employment in the auto industry declined by almost 30% from 1979 to 1982. When the auto industry began to decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United Auto Workers negotiated employment protections with the Big Three American auto companies. The workers took wage concessions in exchange for job and income guarantees and a profit sharing plan. The relationship between labor and management underwent a fundamental change. More of a partnership evolved from the traditional adversarial relationship.



Economic decline led to population decline in Buffalo. The diminishing tax base has led to chronic budget problems, fiscal insolvency, and supervision of city and county government finances by state appointed control boards.¹

Buffalo boasts miles of waterfront, ample renewable energy, a highly skilled labor force with a strong work ethic, rich architectural assets, distinguished institutions of higher educations, and exceptional arts and cultural institutions. But despite the abundant resources, private investment has been difficult to attract to the Buffalo region.¹

Is the Buffalo Region Still a Union Town?

In 2003, Buffalo's union density was 25.3%, ranking it 13th in the United States 260 metropolitan areas. The efforts of local unions have saved high quality jobs in the

¹

region. Through lobbying efforts, labor unions have advocated successfully for businesses subsidies in the form of discounted power for manufacturing facilities. Labor officials, with the help of state and local government and local labor educators, led workplace change in the 1980's and early 90's, that brought unprecedented growth to in-firm employee involvement and quality of work life programs.²

Labor unions in the Buffalo region are joining community coalitions. The new outlook for unions is known as social movement unionism. In the most general sense of the term, social movement unionism refers to labor unions organizing beyond the point of production and into the communities where workers live. It is an ideological transformation, in which unions look to address the issues of workers as a class, rather than simply as employees of a specific workplace. Labor's activity in the fight to improve the situation of housing for the poor and working-class is an example how social movement unionism works.³



What New Things are being Accomplished Through Collective Bargaining?

During contract negotiations or collective bargaining, some unions are pushing for the inclusion of various social justice clauses to be added to the collective agreement. One example of this may be a demand that a percentage of future wages be transferred to a fund to be used to effect social justice issues nationally or internationally on behalf of the union membership. Another example is a recent trend of demanding a portion of hourly wages to be deferred to a P.E.L. (paid education leave) fund, to allow union members to leave the work place for a period of time, at no loss of pay, so they can attend social justice seminars and educational programs.

Local Coalitions and Labor Unions

Coalitions are politically active around issues such as immigrant rights, trade policy, health care, and living wage campaigns. Living wage laws typically cover businesses that receive state assistance or have contracts with the government.⁵

1. The Coalition for Economic Justice (CEJ): Formed in 1986, CEJ works with religious, academic, labor, and community activists to improve living standards for the Western New York community. It seeks to forge effective alliances, educate the community at large, and provide direct support for workers facing injustice. CEJ has helped thousands of workers over the years stand up for their right to form a union, bargain a fair contract, prevent unjust lay-offs, and lift up their voices. CEJ is a local chapter of the organizations Jobs with Justice and the New York State Labor Religion Coalition. The goals of CEJ are to organize support for workers treated unjustly or illegally in the workplace, and to address the root causes of poverty while working for economic policies that benefit the entire community.
2. The Champions Network is a partnership of business and union leaders that utilizes their experience in collective bargaining at the firm and industry level to create a more collaborative, creative approach to regional economic development. Originally

formed through a study conducted by Cornell University in 2000 entitled *Champions at Work: employment, Workplace Practices and Labor-Management Relations in Western New York*, the partnership expanded in 2003. It is now comprised of four task forces that tackle issues such as the region's image, coordination of development functions, citizen involvement and voter registration, and business-labor relations with government.⁷ The Champions Network has found clear evidence of world-class workplace practices and workforce quality in Western New York, and as a result, recognizes leaders in sustainable cooperative progress in the workplace through the Champions @ Work Award. The award was granted to Ford Buffalo Stamping plant in 2004 for its work with the UAW Local 897, New Era Cap Company in 2005 for its work with the CWA Local 14177, Mittal Steel USA-Lackawanna in 2007 for its work with the USW Local 2604, and Cameron Compression Systems in 2008 for its work with the IAMAW Niagara Lodge 330, District 65.



3. The City of Buffalo Living Wage Commission was established by law in 2003 to evaluate, monitor, and enforce the City of Buffalo's Living Wage Ordinance. The Living Wage Ordinance was unanimously passed by the Buffalo Common Council in 1999 and amended in 2002 and 2007. The Ordinance applies to all City of Buffalo employees as well as to all employees of contractors with City contracts worth more than \$50,000 and who employ more than 10 people. The 2008 living wage is \$9.90 with health benefits and \$11.11 without health benefits. On January 1, 2009 the living wage rate will increase to \$10.31 with health benefits and \$11.57 with benefits. The living wage rate is adjusted for inflation by an annual cost of living adjustment based on the Consumer Price Index. The Living Wage Commission has the power to investigate and address grievances, recommend sanctions, and review exemptions. A grievance form, and other information can be found on the web at www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Living_Wage_Commission. The Commission is made up of nine voting members from area organizations including faith groups, academics, business and labor organizations.

4. The Buffalo Economic Development Group (EDG): The EDG represents the Labor Councils of Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara and Orleans Counties. This broad-based union coalition collaborates with the Champions Network and engages in its own projects. The EDG formed in 1999 when union officials met to devise a response to the Buffalo Niagara Enterprise, a project of local politicians and business people to attract private investment in the region. One of the EDG projects is district energy systems and the re-licensing of the Niagara Power Authority to ensure low-cost sustainable energy sources for the future. Another project is the HUD-

sponsored housing rehabilitation in the City of Buffalo. The EDG also works on skills training programs for urban youth.⁴

5. The Buffalo Chapter of The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU): The CBTU consists of members from seventy-seven international and national unions with forty-two chapters across the country. The CBTU projects and objectives are to improve economic development and employment opportunities for black workers, work within the framework of the trade union movement to provide a voice and vehicle for greater African American and minority participation, increase union involvement in voter registration, voter education and voter turnout projects, organize unorganized workers, actively support civil rights and civic groups working to improve living and working conditions in the black community, and increase effective political alliances between labor, churches and the general community. The CBTU supports job training initiatives and programs aimed at reducing the African American youth unemployment rate, which consistently hovers around 50%. Recognizing the correlation between youth unemployment and education, CBTU chapters continue their support for the public school systems and oppose reduced funding for educational projects and programs, particularly those involving inner city schools.⁸

What Are Some Large Local Labor Organizations?



The region's most important unions are in health care (SEIU, CWA and AFSCME), construction, transportation (IBT), manufacturing (UAW, USWA and IAM), and public services (AFSCME, NEA, AFT).

1. AFL-CIO: The Western New York Area Federation of Labor: Officially established in June of 2001, the Federation consists of the 5 Western New York Central Labor Councils, governed by 7 officers and 25 board members from affiliated local unions. The five Councils are the Buffalo Labor Council representing Erie County, the Niagara/Orleans Labor Council representing all of Niagara County and the western part of Orleans County, the Dunkirk, Jamestown, and the Cattaraugus/Allegany Labor Council representing those two Counties in the Southern Tier. These 5 councils represent over 100,000 members.

The Federation is the city of Buffalo's umbrella organization for unions. It uses most of its resources to gain the respect of the community, by doing good deeds. The federation is a major contributor to an array of United Way Campaigns. Another example of community work done by unions is that the National Letter Carriers Union, Branch 3, collected over 1 million pounds of food in Western New York to supply church food pantries, agency food pantries, soup kitchens and the Western NY Food Bank.

**PROJECT
LABOR
AGREEMENTS**

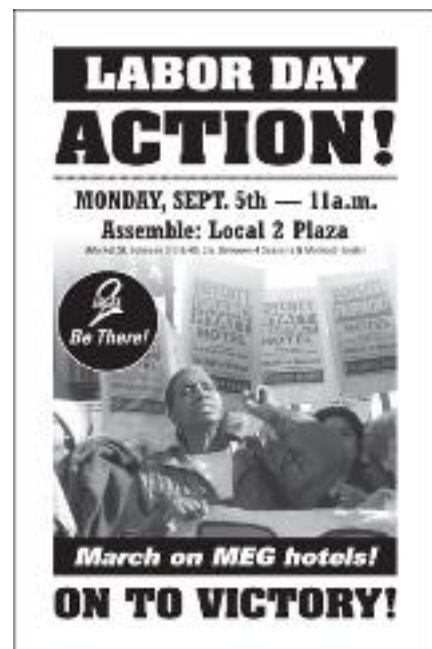
2. Buffalo Building & Construction Trades Council: provides its members with professional education and training to better their skills and to maintain productive and safe working environments. The Trades Council also dedicated to completing its projects on time and under budget, which they attain by fostering positive relationships between organized labor and management.

Unions that are members of the Buffalo Building & Construction Trades Council:

- International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators and Allied Workers, Local #4
- International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Local #7
- Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, Local #3
- Empire State Regional Council of Carpenters Local #289
- Cement Masons, Local #111
- International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local #41
- International Union of Elevator Constructors, Local #14
- International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental, and Reinforcing Ironworkers, Local #6
- Laborers, Local #210
- International Union of Operating Engineers, Local #17
- IUPAT Painters District Council #4
- Plasterers, Local #9
- U.A. Plumbers & Steamfitters, Local #22
- Road Sprinkler Fitters, Local #669
- Roofers, Local #74
- Sheet Metal Workers, Local #71
- Teamsters, Local #449⁹

3. The United Auto Workers Union (UAW): The UAW was chartered in 1935. The first UAW president was Mr. Homer S. Martin. In May 1937 a local UAW charter was granted to the GM East Delevan Plant. That charter, Local 424, is the oldest auto workers' local in the Northeast. In that same month Local 425 was created at Ford Motor Company's assembly plant in Buffalo, winning recognition from Ford in 1941.

The UAW made progressive strides for auto workers. The UAW's first sit down strike was in Flint, Michigan and lasted 44 days. Their demands were a thirty-hour week to share work with the unemployed, an end to line speed up, UAW recognition, minimum pay rates, and seniority rights. Local 686 at Harrison Raditor, now Delphi,



negotiated its first contract in 1942. That contract gave the union recognition, increased wages equal to other GM plants, and gave women equal pay for equal work. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the UAW adopted a no-strike pledge for the duration of the war. After the war the UAW was successful in negotiating health insurance, pensions, paid vacation, lay-off protections, cost of living adjustments, productivity bonuses, and wage increases.

What are some examples of policy advocacy by unions?

IDA REFORM

In 2008 the AFL-CIO was a major supporter of the Hoyt IDA reform bill (Bill No.: A8703A). IDA's, independent authorities, offer financial incentives to attract, retain and expand businesses within their jurisdiction. The incentives may include one or more of the following: issuance of a low interest rate bond, abatements from real property tax and exemptions from sales tax and mortgage recording tax.

The bill requires:

- ❖ The payment of prevailing wages for any construction or building renovation work done by IDAs,
- ❖ All employees to be paid no less than the median hourly wage for "all occupations" for the duration of the financial assistance and for five years thereafter;
- ❖ Successor contractors, in cases where a previous contract has been terminated, to retain all service employees for ninety days after the date of contract termination and prohibits the discharge of such employees without cause.
- ❖ Prohibits IDA funds from being used for projects not on a brownfield, served by existing public sewer and water, or on lands designated as suitable for conservation, unless there is no viable alternative.
- ❖ Reinstates the ability of industrial development agencies to provide assistance to civic facilities and continuing care retirement communities.
- ❖ Consolidation of the sub-county IDAs of Erie County.
- ❖ The bill has provisions that pertain to obligations of Board members, financial reporting to the Comptroller, and Community impact reporting.
- ❖ Other provisions provide for reforms such as compliance schedules for green building standards.¹⁰



One example of an IDA reform issue is clawbacks. IDA incentives have requirements attached to them, requirements that if not fulfilled result in wasted taxpayer money. Taxpayers want to ensure that the companies that benefit from the incentives follow through on the proposed promises that they make to the IDA's when requesting the incentives. One method to ensure the accountability of these companies is through the use of a claw-back provision. Claw-backs may require the company to, for example, actually create the amount of jobs that it proposed that the project would create.

Apprenticeship Bill

On September 19, 2008, Erie County Executive Chris Collins effectively suspended the controversial county Apprenticeship Law, originally passed by the legislature in 2006, which requires contractors on Erie County construction jobs to offer apprentice-training programs. The Apprenticeship Law prevented contractors without apprenticeship programs from competing for county construction work. The County Executive believes the Apprenticeship Law harms local business, drives up the cost of county projects, and wastes taxpayer dollars. Proponents of the law, including union members and union supporters, want Apprentice Programs required for any company doing business in a county funded program. Opponents of the law, for example, the Empire State Chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors, purport that the law simply bolsters union support at the expense of taxpayers.



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¹ Fleron, Lou Jean and Greer, Ian. Labor and Urban Crisis in Buffalo, New York: Building a High Road Infrastructure, June 2006.

² Fleron, Lou Jean and Greer, Ian. Labor and Urban Crisis in Buffalo, New York: Building a High Road Infrastructure, June 2006.

³ FINDING LABOR'S VOICE: Social Movement Unionism and Labor/Community Coalitions, Robert Penney, George Washington University 2003.

⁵ "Living Wage: Frequently Asked Questions" (factsheet). Retrieved on 6-29-2008.

⁷ Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Pamphlet *high road economics @work* Conference. February, 2004.

⁸ www.cbtu.org

⁹ <http://www.buffalotrades.com/our-mission.shtml>

¹⁰ <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?bn=A08703>