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Building the Road As We Travel: New Political Coalitions and the Washington State Labor Council

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Building the Road As We Travel: New Political Coalitions and the Washington State Labor Council

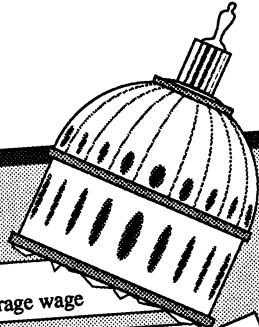
Abstract

[Excerpt] New political action often involves testing ideas and approaches that do not always come together immediately or as envisioned. The political agenda of the Washington State Labor Council was formulated as one of three fronts in a comprehensive strategy to help the labor movement gain momentum over the next decade. This agenda was shaped during a tumultuous period of highs and lows in the political climate of Washington. Before 1988, the labor movement participated in politics through a traditional COPE mechanism. They turned to a more activist approach and had stunning victories by 1993, only to face a more sobering situation with business victories in 1994. LRR asked Lynn Feekin, an associate editor with the Review, to explore the recent political action experiences of the council with its Research Director, Jeff Johnson.

Keywords

Washington State Labor Council, COPE, Jeff Johnson

Capitol Clout



ESSB
5702

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE REFORM
Raises maximum benefits from 60% to 70% of state's average wage

HB
1248

WORKERS' COMPENSATION REFORM
Increases time-loss benefits by 5% in each of next 4 years.

HB
1249

PERMANENT PARTIAL DISABILITY
Increases PPD award schedule by 32%.

HB
1393

HIGHER MINIMUM WAGE
Increases from \$4.25 to \$4.90 an hour.

ESHB
1988

TRAINING AND RETRAINING
Creates \$42.9 million training fund for unemployed.

HB
1635

BUILD 'EM IN WASHINGTON
In-state firms get bidding edge on ferry construction.

When the smoke finally cleared after the 1993 legislative session, many of labor's causes had come out on top.



Rick Bender, president of the Washington State Labor Council (left), meets with (from left to right) Senate Majority Leader Marc Gaspar; Ray Moore, chair of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee; and Senators Margarita Prentice and Larry Vognild.

Building the Road As We Travel:

New Political Coalitions and the Washington State Labor Council

■ Lynn Feekin

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LRR: What is different about the way the Washington State Labor Council approaches political action and legislative activity now compared to the past?

Johnson: Until 1988, the Washington State Labor Council practiced a fairly traditional COPE (Committee on Political Education) strategy in terms of electoral politics and the legislature. Basically, that meant raising as much money as we could and throwing it at Democrats, so that

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if you put a “D” after your name you got money-if you put an “R” after your name, you didn’t. It was pretty straightforward. Top-down and money-oriented. Even though some folks in local unions and central labor councils had developed fairly decent candidate questionnaires, there was no accountability behind the questionnaires, so things weren’t taken that seriously.

Since 1988, things have changed. We developed a more activist approach by forming local labor legislative committees.

We moved towards a much more coalition-building approach, both within the House of Labor and outside of it. Within labor, two organizations were formed. One, the Labor Roundtable, is a collection of unions that meet every two weeks during the campaign season and invites folks in from the Democratic caucus, the House and the Senate, to make presentations. It is a way of tracking of who is running, how the campaigns are going, and who needs what. A way to get better politically organized.

LRR: And this was with your friends or with all candidates?

Johnson: With our friends. It’s a support mechanism, a solidarity mechanism. It was a way for politically active unions to compare notes and strategies as well as a way for us to touch base with the formal Democratic caucus recruitment machine.

A second organization, known as the “Big Four” consisted of the state fed, the Washington Education Association (WEA), the Trial Lawyers Association, and AFSCME. Those four, the biggest money donors on the progressive side of politics in the state, came together to target candidates. It is a very loose organization, and no one is bound by any candidate. But there has to be unanimity on a particular person for Big Four support.

Some of the more interesting coalition work happened with groups outside of labor and the state labor council. We formed what was called the Livable Income Campaign, spearheaded by the state labor council, the Washington Association of Churches, the local branch of Citizen Action, the National Organization of Women, the Fair Budget Action Coalition which is a welfare rights group, and a myriad of other community and environmental groups.

Our state minimum wage at the time was \$2.30 an hour, so any business that didn’t do interstate commerce could pay that. This was our first real taste of working in coalition on a sustained effort. After a legislative defeat to raise the minimum wage, the coalition decided to run a [ballot] initiative in Washington state, which required an incredible amount of fundraising and organization. So working together, we drafted

the initiative, put together a campaign headquarters, hired people—organizers—and then worked within our own organizations to collect signatures. We were able to gather the second largest number of signatures on an initiative in the state's history back then. And we won. We were able to raise the minimum wage in two jumps to \$3.85 an hour and then up to \$4.25 an hour. The state labor council dropped something like \$50,000 into the initiative in outright money and probably another \$60,000 for in-kind support. So, it was a major commitment in terms of financial resources. And it was a major, major victory and showed us what working in a coalition could do.

LRR: And is the coalition still around?

Johnson: Formally, no. In fact, after we won, there were a series of discussions on whether we should keep the organization alive or not. The decision by the state fed president then was no. Because while he gained a lot of political mileage from that victory, he essentially was leery of tying the state labor council into a long-term coalition, afraid of sharing the power. So while there were progressive moments, there were reactionary moments as well. It was a kind of an interesting leadership period at the state labor council.

Let me mention one thing we did that year that was instrumental in showing how we did things differently. We actually challenged the Democratic party for the first time in the state's history. The Senate Democrats were in the minority by a 25-24 margin and were looking to labor to blindly support all of their candidates in hopes of winning back the majority. We didn't play ball and in fact we challenged a conservative Democrat who had consistently voted against budgetary items, hurting social service programs as well as state employees. We went after him. We recruited our own candidate, dumped a ton of money into the race, and we lost. We made a lot of mistakes in that process but there's no question that we shook up the status quo and scared the pants off a lot of politicians.

LRR: What was the process that led you to say, well we are going to have a more activist approach, we are going to recruit more labor candidates, and we are going to use coalition-building. How did those decisions get made and at what level was this dialogue going on?

Johnson: It became real clear to us that, regardless of whether we had a majority or not, we needed a more grass roots approach to lobbying. Since the Washington State Legislature is a part-time citizen-legislature, once you are down in the legislative session, you are basically talk-

ing about crisis lobbying. You are not talking about organizing or educating. You are trying to do your last bit of persuasion. And no matter how good a relationship someone from the state labor council had developed with them, the conscientious legislator is going to call back to their district and talk to the people they actually know and care about. So if we didn't educate them at the local level, it was too late to educate them when they were in the state capital. If you don't hit them back in their districts, you are out of luck. We realized that our approach was very limited, and we had to expand that.

LRR: Have the principles around the coalition building changed? And have the players changed in terms of the kinds of groups that you work with?

Johnson: Since the formal coalition ended, we continued working with the various groups in the coalition on an issue by issue basis. Issues like minimum wage and labor standards, employment discrimination, and farmworker issues were likely to pull us together across union-nonunion boundaries. There was a natural alliance between labor and the church community to work on farmworker issues. Child labor became a major issue that we aligned with the churches, with the Association of Pediatricians, with educators, and others. It was a five-year battle to change the child labor laws on both the agricultural level and the non-agricultural level.

LRR: And you were able to win that, right?

Johnson: Yes, we won those. They were really hard-fought battles, and in my opinion, the only reason we won was because we were in coalition. We now have, along with Maine, the most progressive set of child labor rules in the country. And clearly the most progressive agricultural child labor standards in the country.

LRR: Let's talk for a second about this 1993 legislative period because it seems like it was pretty phenomenal and this was also done, you believe, because of the coalition? What happened here?

Johnson: To make a long story short, there was a pretty big sea-change in our political scene in 1993—probably the biggest in about a decade and legislatively in about 25 years. In our House of Representatives, twenty-seven new Democrats were elected in the 1992 election and six of them were trade unionists. Out of those six trade unionists, we had recruited four of them. That changed our advantage in the House from 58 seats to 40 (that was the split going into the election) to 65-33. Since

it takes 50 votes for a majority on any bill, having a 15-seat buffer was real big. In the Senate, there was an even more profound impact. Eleven new Senate Democrats were elected, and it actually changed the majority in the Senate. There had been a 25-24 Republican majority up to that point, and now there was a 28-21 Democratic majority which was a complete reversal with a substantial majority. We were also able to elect two progressive Democrats, Mike Lowry for governor and Patty Murray for U.S. Senate.

LRR: So you were able to accomplish that based on the strategy of both the activist approach and the recruitment of candidates. And then the legislative agenda, how did this happen?

Johnson: We had some dramatic legislative wins in 1993. We raised the minimum wage 65 cents an hour, to \$4.90; increased wage replacement benefits for injured workers by 20%; increased disability awards by 32%; raised unemployment benefits by \$72 a week and set up an extended benefit program; created a \$45 million training program for dislocated workers; and helped pass a universal access health care reform package. Pretty heady stuff!

There were two issues we worked in coalition on during that legislative session. On one, the minimum wage, we got a victory. So that was enough to keep the coalition trust level high and not have the other groups feel like labor had abandoned the coalition because we did play a major role in helping to get that off.

The other issue that we worked on with the churches in particular was trying to get a collective bargaining bill passed for farmworkers. We failed miserably, and we actually had major fights with Democrats in both the House and the Senate. It was pretty dicey times because we had a lot of other big bills that were hanging in the balance.

LRR: I think that is interesting. Is there some way that you have found to sort of negotiate the coalition work around controversial issues like that?

Johnson: The issue of collective bargaining for farmworkers was one where the trust between the churches and labor had been honed so well over the years. So much so that when a Democratic senator started trying to basically “buy an advocate” for her bill, the church community stayed with us and it was extremely difficult for them to do that. That put them at great risk on some issues they were working on with the Senator, but they stayed with us, so I think that revealed to me the strength of the relationship that we build up over the years.

LRR: So, it sounds pretty rosy. You built a strong coalition in 88, you are moving on an agenda, in 1993 your legislative strategy has this giant payoff, you get these major victories, and now you have this abysmal 1994. What happened?

Johnson: Well, 1994 happened. What I think we saw was occasionally at unique junctures in history you can pull off some things that are fairly dramatic, that what actually got us there was the beginning of real coalition building, of real educating, of real activist approach. We had this big victory and we inadvertently stopped doing our careful organizing and coalition-building and went for the jugular, right? We figured, okay, we got it. Well, what we learned was, not good enough.

The business associations had out-organized us. What they were able to do was to take all our 1993 victories and make the argument to the legislators and the governor about the cumulative impact that this had on the business community. And their arguments were not very sophisticated. They didn't sort out differential impacts of these bills on different-sized businesses. They were going for the purely political analysis—"you are killing business, you are going to force business to move to Idaho, to Oregon, to anywhere else, because you are killing them."

So we come into the 1994 session and we obligingly narrowed our list of priorities for the session. We went in with about six bills, as a state federation, that we wanted to see passed. What we came up against was legislators and legislative leadership saying there is a great need for legislative balance here. Last year was labor's year, this year is business's year. And out of the six priorities we had, only one passed. Or two passed. One passed in its original form, removing the seasonal worker exemption in the state's health care reform.

The second one that passed in a very diluted form was our major economic development piece which would have required that businesses applying for state tax exemption deferrals or development loan fund grants would have to sign a binding contract with the state that would make them adhere to a set of socially acceptable principles, environmental laws, affirmative action laws, pay at least the state's average wage, provide health care, and give plant closure notification if they were shutting down regardless of their size. Well that got whittled down to a study, and then the governor actually vetoed the study portion of it, and we ended up with an intent section of the law which basically says that economic development should strive to create family wage jobs in the state of Washington and pursue a course of sustainable economic development. A bunch of crap.

LRR: So was there a coalition approach to that?

Johnson: Well, unfortunately no. In previous years we had the environmental community and the church community working with us on the economic development issue. And actually to give them credit, it was more their issue and leadership than ours. They came to the hearings and testified on behalf of this bill. It was their initiative and this year, for whatever reason, we didn't work in coalition on the economic development issue and we lost. It was a bad judgement call.

But we learned that if we keep doing it on an issue by issue basis, then our results are going to be real sporadic, and people look at the coalition as an issue by issue coalition so that they can then more easily whipsaw one group against another.

I think the biggest lesson coming out of this for us is the need—the desperate need—for a permanent, long-term electoral and legislative coalition bringing together the various natural constituencies from these groups and recognizing that, in fact, we have common interests, common class interests, and common social interests.

The second thing is we are going back to our labor activist approach. I think there are a lot of local unions that are ripe for this sort of thing, that have been waiting for something. I mean our state probably isn't all that different than a lot of others. There are certain activists that have been pushing for either the formation of a labor party or trying to get endorsements for Labor Party Advocates or for broader coalition party building. And all they need is a little bit of coordination, work, a little solidarity support to get them up and going.

The idea would be to combine that with the permanent coalition building. That's the goal, so that if you are in a particular county it is the labor activist along with the representative from NOW and the environmental community that go in together and then we start getting some momentum. We are going to win progressive issues together. We are going to lose progressive issues when we are separate and not organizing together. In the state of Washington, we have, I think, 35 initiatives that have been drafted and people are out collecting signatures on right now. And I think 34 of them are reactionary. The right has developed this organizing strategy and in many ways has been successful in dividing and conquering our natural constituencies. They have kept us running around in circles, constantly on the defensive. Unless we can form a permanent coalition that takes up the offensive and defines short, medium and long-term vision, the wins that we have been able to make over the last few years will quickly become losses. To me, the only answer is, "keep organizing!" ■