



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 5
Fighting Shutdowns

Article 13

1984

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Shutdowns & the New Jobs Coalitions: The Philadelphia Experience

Abstract

[Excerpt] Surely the bleeding of Philadelphia-area jobs — 140,000 fewer manufacturing jobs in 1980 than in 1970 — set the climate. Yet the plant closing ordinance could not have been passed without the skillful organizing efforts of the Delaware Valley Coalition for Jobs (DVCJ). Virtually all of the pro-ordinance testimony presented in City Council hearings was orchestrated by DVCJ. At the hearings, DVCJ arranged for statements from dozens of witnesses - unionists, unemployed activists, families of laid-off workers, community leaders, clergy, lawyers, and academics (like myself).

The victory in the Philadelphia City Council was a major accomplishment for DVCJ and the plant closing fight in general. But the new law is not being enforced by the city, and the anti-plant-closing movement is stalled. Partly, this situation arose because DVCJ is a defensively-oriented direct action group and not primarily a legislative lobbying group. The coalition paid less attention to the details of legislative processes and enforcement mechanisms than to rallying support for the idea of a law. DVCJ's strength has been in mobilizing mass actions against plant closings and in agitating for full employment policies.

Jobs coalitions such as DVCJ have great potential for changing the public agenda on job loss and unemployment, but they also have some inherent stumbling blocks. The example of DVCJ, one of the more successful jobs coalitions, illustrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of the movement against plant closings in general.

Keywords

labor movement, layoffs, unemployment, Philadelphia, Delaware Valley Coalition for Jobs, DVCJ

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the Philadelphia Experience

□ Arthur Hochner

"The worst legislative body in the free world," raged Mayor William Green of Philadelphia in June 1982. Over Mayor Green's veto, the City Council had made Philadelphia the first major city in the country with a plant closing law, requiring businesses to give sixty days notice before closure or relocation of operations. The mayor's denunciations of the Council were echoed by business spokespeople who howled about the "hostile business climate" the law would foster.

What had united the Philadelphia City Council so solidly behind a bill so despised by business and Mayor Green's administration?

Surely the bleeding of Philadelphia-area jobs—140,000 fewer manufacturing jobs in 1980 than in 1970—set the climate. Yet the plant closing ordinance could not have been passed without the skillful organizing efforts of the Delaware Valley Coalition for Jobs (DVCJ). Virtually all of the pro-ordinance testimony presented in City Council hearings was orchestrated by DVCJ. At the hearings, DVCJ arranged for statements from dozens of witnesses—unionists, unemployed activists, families of laid-off workers, community leaders, clergy, lawyers, and academics (like myself).

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DVCJ in National Perspective

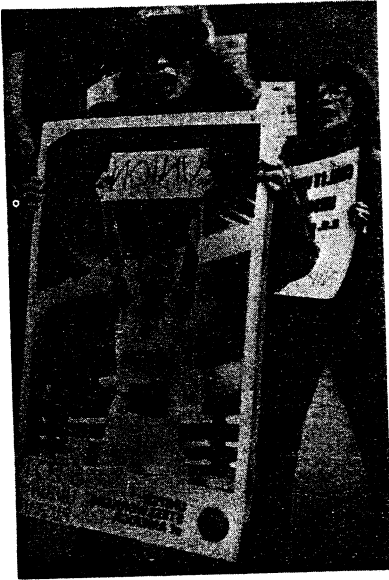
DVCJ was founded in December 1979 by leaders of 40 labor, church and community organizations in the Philadelphia area. Although its size has waxed and waned, it has been a constant presence in the area. It has held press conferences, pickets, rallies, marches, demonstrations, and campaigns concerning particular plant

closings; it has sponsored conferences and mobilized mass lobbying actions in Harrisburg and Washington, involving many of the major unions in the area, as well as significant numbers of local clergy, churchpeople, and other citizen activists.

The DVCJ is unusual, but it is not unique. Similar organizations have sprung up elsewhere in the United States. These local coalitions unite unions, public interest organizations, clergy, neighborhood and senior citizen groups and academics to perform several activities: responding to calls for help in particular closings and mass layoffs; providing public forums for the issues through

literature, conferences, rallies, demonstrations, and publicity campaigns; and lobbying in legislative bodies for bills regulating shutdowns and mass layoffs, as well as for other bills relevant to jobs, unemployment, and welfare.

As the pace of plant closings accelerated through the late 1970s, coalitions formed in many states, primarily to press for plant closing legislation. Jobs coalitions formed in several states, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Oregon and California. In each of these states—as well as in Delaware, Maine, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and Wisconsin—plant closing legislation has been introduced into the legislatures.



The Emergence of DVCJ

The Delaware Valley is comprised of southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and northern Delaware, a region traversed by the Delaware River and dominated by Philadelphia. The Valley has a highly diversified economy, though manufacturing has historically been its strength. In the 1970s, however, recessions and corporate reshufflings brought swift change and massive disinvestment. A report by the Pennsylvania Bureau of Employment Security showed that between 1969 and 1979 more than 170 firms of greater than 30 employees closed plants in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The rapid pace of shutdowns and relocations rocked workers in virtually all sectors and industries.

In early 1979, several groups of activists came together to plan a conference, which they called "Save Our Jobs and Build Our Neighborhoods." It was sponsored by four groups: 1) the Delaware Valley United Labor Committee for Full Employment, a group of progressive union leaders and activists, who wanted to get around the inertia of the local Central Labor Council; 2) the Human Resources Development Institute, the AFL-CIO's manpower and training arm; 3) the Philadelphia Council of Neighborhood Organizations, itself a coalition of groups from most of Philadelphia's neighborhoods, headed by a Catholic priest; and, 4) the Philadelphia Unemployment Project (PUP), an organization of and for the unemployed formed in the 1974-75 recession. John Dodds, director of PUP, had long been working with unions and church people on unemployment issues.

Many of the conference planners and scheduled participants had worked together before. In the J.P. Stevens boycott campaign from 1976-80, ACTWU unionists, clergy, community and civil rights leaders, academics, and politicians had joined together. Dodds and PUP had previously worked with the UAW to get laid-off workers Trade Readjustment Assistance benefits. And many of the unionists had joined forces through the Philadelphia Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PHILAPOSH).

The actual spur for the 1979 "Save Our Jobs" conference came from the UAW's efforts to fight the closing of Gould-ITE. The Illinois-based Gould conglomerate had bought ITE Imperial, a 100-year old local company in the auto parts industry, and was slowly but surely closing it. Joseph Ferrara, area director of UAW Sub-Region 9, was very involved in this fight. He wanted to build a campaign around the Gould closing and to create a permanent link between unionists and the unemployed to fight future closings and job loss. Other concerns of the conference included community control of local economic development, improvement of CETA and manpower

programs, and the creation of jobs.

From the conference planners' viewpoint, their timing couldn't have been better. On January 23, 1979, the Food Fair chain abruptly announced that in four days it would shut 128 local supermarkets, throwing more than 4400 people out of work. David Neifeld, vice president of Retail Clerks (UFCW) Local 1357, to which the Food Fair workers belonged, was one of the conference planners. The "Save Our Jobs" conference, held Saturday, February 10, at the ACTWU Hall in South Philadelphia, drew more than 600 persons, most of whom participated in the workshop on plant closings. Among those present were four Philadelphia-area Congressmen and several Pennsylvania state representatives. Pledges to support national and statewide plant closing bills were made by several legislators.

The Food Fair closing brought many to the conference, and the stories of that shutdown and of the Gould case enraged other unions. Officials of UFCW Local 1357 recounted the financial finagling and mismanagement of Food Fair executives. UAW officials discussed the lies and deceptions of the Gould company concerning its future plans.

Out of the 1979 conference came a closer, but still loose, knitting together of groups around shutdowns and runaway shops. PUP became the focal point of local efforts to fight layoffs. One of the first activities was a march by 3000 people from City Hall to the U.S. Labor Department's regional headquarters to protest proposed CETA layoffs. The march committee was called "First Things First—Jobs Coalition" and was comprised of PUP, AFSCME locals, the CETA Workers Organization, and several community groups. In late October 1979 U.S. Senate hearings were held in Camden on the national plant closing bill. Testimony was given by union leaders from many unions in the area, including ACTWU, IUE, UFCW, USWA, ILGWU, and Joe Ferrara of the UAW. These witnesses detailed the ongoing pattern of shutdowns and runaways and the hardships faced by workers with no advance notice or other protection.

Then, on November 16, 1979, at 10:30 a.m., four hundred workers at Cross Brothers Meat Packing were shocked to hear that in just four hours, the 59-year old company was permanently closing. PUP and a coalition of groups, many of which had attended the February conference, joined a demonstration of Cross Brothers workers in front of the meat plant to protest the closing and to publicize the state plant closing bill, which was stuck in the House Labor Relations Committee.

A week later, the fight against the Gould closing resumed with Joe Ferrara in the lead. One hundred-fifty people picketed the Gould plant near downtown Philadelphia, protesting the removal of equipment to new plants in the South and the company's plan to move 2200 jobs. Although an arbitrator had ruled earlier in the year

to protect the Philadelphia plant's jobs, UAW Local 1612 accused the company of not living up to that ruling. The picketers included retired UAW members, members of other unions, PUP members, and members of the Philadelphia Council of Neighborhood Organizations; the local union had been legally prohibited from picketing.

Shortly after the Cross Brothers closing, forty leaders of church, community, and labor organizations met at UAW Local 1612's hall to form the Delaware Valley Coalition for Jobs (DVCJ). The coalition's aims were to combat plant and store closings with educational and lobbying actions. A structure was established and regular meetings of a steering committee were scheduled. Joe Ferrara was selected as chairman, and John Dodds of PUP became the active director. The constituent groups chipped in for coalition expenses, and a staff organizer, Jeff Blum, was put to work.

Blum saw the plant closing issue as a good statewide focus for public action organizing, along the lines of the Ohio Public Interest Campaign. Moreover, Blum wanted to turn the plant closing fight from a protest against foreign imports to a campaign against corporate power. He wanted to re-direct affected workers from an exclusive "Buy American" orientation to a fight with corporate managers over the control of American corporate decisions.

Such ideas corresponded to the sentiments and beliefs of the other coalition members. DVCJ formulated a statement of principles:

The Delaware Valley Coalition for Jobs believes that Big Business must be held responsible for the economic blight they inflict on working people and our neighborhoods when they decide to pack up and leave. We seek to establish once and for all that the public interest must come before the corporations' drive for ever-greater profits.

The first major action DVCJ sponsored was a day of public hearings on plant and store closings at City Council on February 16, 1980. Over six hundred people attended to hear over twenty-five witnesses. Unionists from a dozen locals joined with clergy, community activists and social workers to address the community and social consequences of shutdowns. A city planning professor from the University of Pennsylvania discussed the exodus of jobs and capital from the Northeast and Midwest. And four local Congressmen, eight Pennsylvania state legislators, and a number of city officials attended and spoke about legislative efforts to halt job loss.

The hearings were a fantastic kickoff for DVCJ as an organization. They provided a great opportunity for an outpouring of pent-up outrage; they served to unite unions and other groups in solidarity against corporate and government actions which affected them each

separately. State legislation on plant closing in Pennsylvania and Rep. Ford's Federal bill provided a rallying point for all.

Much attention focused on the state plant closing bill. In late February, DVCJ held a press conference in the State Capitol in Harrisburg to get the state bill out of committee. On April 11, DVCJ sponsored a legislative breakfast attended by fifteen state representatives and state senators. Over a hundred union, church and community leaders attended.

DVCJ's Plant Closing Campaigns

Despite all this attention on legislation, DVCJ saw its main purpose as galvanizing a mass movement. Even at the February hearings, John Dodds noted: "The struggle is as important as what we get out of it. The point is to build an awareness that corporations are doing us in. We're trying to build an awareness in people that we need more protection from corporate power." This awareness was to be built in the course of campaigns around particular shutdowns.

The mobilization efforts in the Gould case set a model for DVCJ that was to be followed in numerous other plant closing fights over the next several years. Members and leaders of a local union threatened by a plant closing would initiate the fight and would call upon DVCJ for support. Coalition members would provide organizing and research expertise, help mobilize community support, recruit speakers for rallies, help prepare leaflets, press releases and other literature, and participate in marches, rallies, and pickets.

On March 15, 1980, over three hundred-fifty people marched from City Hall to the Gould plant to celebrate a partial victory in collective bargaining for the UAW at Gould. Combined union and DVCJ pressure had persuaded Gould to revise their plans for removing jobs. While the core of the Gould effort was located with the UAW, subsequent plant closing fights involving DVCJ have originated in a variety of other local unions, including the Paperworkers (UPIU), the IAM, the Dupont Employees Philadelphia Works Union, the Boilermakers, and the USWA.

In November 1980, UPIU Local 392 called upon DVCJ for help. Local 392 represented one hundred-ten workers at a Container Corporation of America (CCA) folding-box plant in Manayunk, a close-knit, working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia. The plant was threatened with a Christmas closing by CCA, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Mobil Corp. Local 392 and DVCJ organized a protest demonstration blocking traffic on a bridge for nearly an hour. The purpose was to draw public and press attention to the workers' plight. A community meeting was held the following week in St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church. DVCJ mimeographed recent newspaper articles along with the meeting agenda for attendees and

provided some speakers, including Rev. Gracie, who had helped rally local clergy. Over a hundred people attended. They heard Joe Pedrick, president of Local 392, and other CCA employees, community leaders, and a few local politicians discuss the stonewalling tactics of CCA.

Out of this meeting, a Manayunk Coalition to Save Jobs was formed. This coalition, with DVCJ's help, fought the closing for three months, while Local 392 tried to negotiate with CCA. In mid-February, 1981, twenty-six activists chartered a bus to take the campaign to Mobil's corporate headquarters in New York City. They met with lower-level CCA officials who tried to put them off and prevented them from seeing Mobil executives. In the end, the efforts of Local 392 and the jobs coalition led to an agreement between CCA and the union for severance benefits and transfer rights.

During the CCA-UPIU fight, in early January, 1981, Sun Ship of Chester, Pennsylvania, a subsidiary of the huge Sun Co. (formerly Sun Oil), announced its decision to get out of the shipbuilding business. This meant a layoff of 3100 workers. DVCJ and the Boilermakers, the major union at Sun Ship, discussed a campaign around the layoffs, but by union choice a decision was made not to make the campaign public. A week after the layoff announcement, Sun Ship announced that it would commit \$4



million to soften the economic and social effects. Up to \$800,000 of that money was eventually given to the city of Chester as compensation for loss of tax revenues.

In Spring 1981, attention shifted to the announced closing of the Eaton Corp.'s lift-truck plant in the Northeast section of Philadelphia. One thousand workers and their jobs were at stake. Eaton, a \$2-billion conglomerate, had for years assured the workers that the plant was profitable and would remain open. But in early April, Eaton announced plans to close the lift-truck plant because it wasn't making enough money "to maintain the minimum level of profit required by our strategic objectives." Operations would be shifted to Eaton plants in the South, in Mexico, and in Japan. IAM Local 1717 members were infuriated to discover that their own employer was the "foreign competition" that was taking away their jobs.

Union local leaders and rank-and-filers initiated a militant campaign against the company, which lasted for the rest of 1981. Business agents Tony Galvin and Danny Chmelko led a series of raucous demonstrations with the aid of DVJC. Chmelko, who had not been particularly active before, emerged as a leader. "Brothers and sisters," he told his fellow unionists, "it's time to do more than stand up for our rights. It's time to take direct action. It's time to fight."

The IAM had not been part of the coalition before, but one of the Eaton workers was a brother-in-law of a worker from the CCA plant, so he called DVCJ. Once again DVCJ provided literature, leaflets, and organizing help. The first major action of the campaign was a march blocking traffic on heavily-trafficked Roosevelt Boulevard outside the plant. Over two hundred protesters rallied outside the factory gates with colorful signs and American flags. This tactic was repeated on a larger scale a few weeks later, with the Eaton workers joined by DVCJ members. Over five hundred protesters marched on the Boulevard, rallied outside the fence, and then poured through a hole (prepared in secret the night before), and rallied right outside the building. The militant action brought lots of press attention to the Eaton workers' cause, excited the workers, and made the company nervous.

Eaton workers and DVCJ kept up the pressure. They held meetings with a variety of union leaders in the local area. They got help from workers at other plants, large and small, in the neighborhood. Workers contacted their ministers and organized a "Coalition of Conscience." Seventy-five clergy of all denominations signed a telegram to Eaton chairman E.M. de Windt, asking for a reconsideration of the closing. In June, the campaign held a march of five hundred workers through center-city Philadelphia to City Hall.

The campaign failed to reverse Eaton's closing decision, but it

helped slow and ease the layoff. Local 1717 won an agreement with Eaton to quadruple the severance pay the company had been contractually obligated to pay and won life-time medical coverage and early retirement benefits for hundreds of Eaton workers and retirees.

Finally, in late 1982, DVCJ worked with two USWA locals to keep open a small, locally-owned steel fabricating plant. The owners gave into pressure and decided to keep the plant open, saving one hundred-twenty-six jobs.

Broader Efforts

PUP and DVCJ efforts, coordinated by Jeff Blum, led in the summer of 1980 to the formation of the Pennsylvania Public Interest Coalition (PennPIC). PennPIC opened offices in Harrisburg, Allentown, Erie, and Pittsburgh. Harry Boyer, the state AFL-CIO president, became one of its four co-chairs, along with Joe Ferrara of DVCJ and two clergymen. DVCJ became the Philadelphia chapter of PennPIC.

PennPIC took plant closings as its leading issue to build a statewide base. While DVCJ was based in the plant closing fight, it had also involved itself in more general unemployed and welfare issues, reflecting the importance of PUP's part in DVCJ. PennPIC went even further afield. Jeff Blum wanted to create a state-wide multi-issue progressive coalition. The plant closing fight would be a jumping-off point for a diverse set of concerns, such as oil tax loopholes, gas decontrol, fair interest rates, and electoral campaigns.

On October 6, 1981, PennPIC and the state AFL-CIO held a mass rally and "lobby day" inside the State Capitol. This demonstration, coming on the heels of September's national Solidarity Day in Washington, attracted about a thousand participants—laid-off steelworkers from Pittsburgh, PUP and DVCJ activists from Philadelphia, and leaders of civil rights, welfare, and community groups from throughout the state. Although the main focus was the state plant closing bill, participants also lobbied against tax breaks for big business and against antiquated welfare policies.

DVCJ and PennPIC consistently kept the issues before workers, communities, the general public, and the politicians through a variety of tactics. An article by the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Harrisburg correspondent in late 1981 looked at the campaign against plant closings this way: "The difference between the tactics being used in Philadelphia and the approach being used in Harrisburg is like the difference between guerilla warfare and conventional warfare. . . . In Philadelphia, the DVCJ uses tactics employed by civil rights and anti-war activists to draw attention to their causes."

Although the state plant closing bill remained stalled in Republican-controlled legislative committees, the contacts forged with politicians

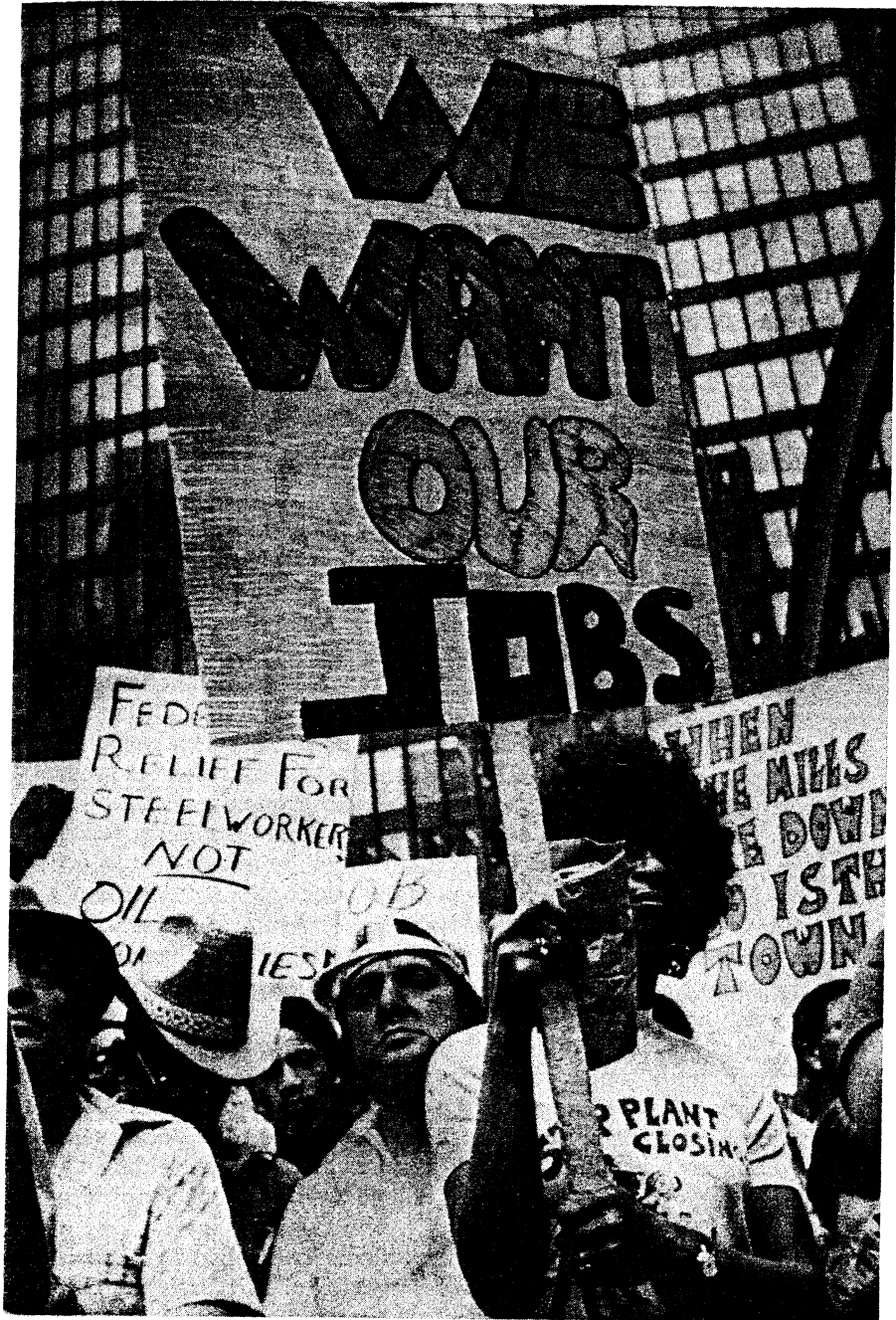
at both the state and local levels were valuable. DVCJ and PennPIC succeeded in stopping corporate tax breaks in the Pennsylvania legislature in 1981. And in 1982, Philadelphia City Councilman John Anderson drafted a plant closing ordinance for Philadelphia, providing for sixty days' advance notice to the city and the affected workers and their unions. Passage of this bill in June 1982 prompted the angry remarks of Mayor Green cited earlier.

The Ebbing of Activity

Surprisingly, since the Philadelphia plant closing ordinance became law, DVCJ has lost some of its momentum. Partly this reflects the split that occurred between DVCJ and PennPIC late in 1982. The split involved: (a) PennPIC's politics—a shift toward broader consumer issues; (b) its methods—greater emphasis on electoral involvement; (c) organization—a shift of concern and of control away from Philadelphia, as well as toward the national organization, "Citizen Action," a coalition of statewide organizations.

Mostly, however, the ebbing of DVCJ activity reflects the shifting of momentum from preventing plant closings to dealing with their aftermath and with Reaganomics. DVCJ activities always waned between particular plant closing fights. Now the ranks of DVCJ activists have been thinned by their need to go on to other jobs and activities. Furthermore, local activity shifted back toward PUP and its focus on serving the poor and unemployed. The fight to preserve extended Federal unemployment benefits once again grew in importance. In early 1983 PUP, with DVCJ support, began a long battle to halt the growing number of mortgage foreclosures. After almost a year of constant organizing, demonstrating, pressuring banks and local authorities, arguing in court, and lobbying the legislature, PUP was successful. Not only did they arrange a court-imposed moratorium on foreclosures in Philadelphia, PUP's work also won passage of a bill to provide \$5 million in state money for low-interest loans to unemployed workers.

At present DVCJ activities are in a state of some indecisiveness. Rev. Gracie described the situation that occurred at a luncheon meeting in early 1984 of coalition activists. A very warm comradeship has developed among the church, union, and unemployed groups, particularly centering around John Dodds of PUP. At the lunch, Dodds sat flanked by Danny Chmelko of IAM Local 1717 and Frank Redmiles of UAW Local 1612. While both men took turns praising Dodds, Redmiles emphasized the need to tone down the militancy now. Chmelko, who was tapped by the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Central Labor Council (CLC) to coordinate Greyhound strike support activities and then turned around to become the main challenger for the CLC presidency last fall, urged greater militancy.



Plant closings are still occurring, but there is a cautious tendency in local unions not to want to go public with a DVCJ campaign. There has been such a bleeding of jobs already that unionists are hurting and wary that activism may push management into leaving. Moreover, activity on plant closings periodically has taken second or third place to electoral involvement or strike support, such as in the Greyhound case. In addition, the Philadelphia AFL-CIO CLC tends to favor quiet, nonadversarial paths to job-saving, such as through the Philadelphia Area Labor-Management Committee (PALM).

Still, as Ann Schwartzman of PUP points out, the DVCJ steering committee meets several times a year and keeps the contacts and communication going. And as Rev. Gracie says, when a union does want to go public, the coalition and its tactics are just a phone call away.

Some Inherent Limits

Despite an impressive amount of activity, there are some serious limits to the work of the jobs coalitions.

First of all, the focus on plant closing legislation limits the consciousness raised and the solutions proposed. In fact, in Philadelphia passage of the plant closing ordinance seems to have led to the perception that the battle had been won, rather than that labor now had a new weapon. Similarly, economic problems of enormous complexity and the intricate dynamics of multinational capitalism often get compressed into the simple notion of "corporate responsibility." Though this simple concept can easily lead to much more probing questions about the political economy, it can easily pass over the deeper issues too. Corporations like Sun Ship, which voluntarily provide advance notice, severance benefits, and concern for the community, may be taken off the hook. Though occasional actions like these are far better than simple, brutal shutdowns like the Cross Brothers plant, they do little to blunt the power of big corporations to take the money and run. Instead, the notion of corporate responsibility may lead to a new version of *noblesse oblige*.

Secondly, there are limits to the nonlegislative activities of the jobs coalitions. Mobilizing workers around a particular closing and helping them achieve a between shutdown settlement can be useful and consciousness-raising. But it does not change the basic decisions of corporations, nor does it lead to permanent coalition-building, for after the shutdown most workers will go their own ways in picking up their lives again. Even in DVCJ, which has formed a core of activists, many of those involved in particular campaigns have drifted away. Some union activists, like Joe Pedrick of UPIU and the CCA fight, have apparently been blacklisted in their attempts to find new

jobs. Unemployment has been more likely to lead to demoralization than to activism. Furthermore, who *does* want to get involved? Activists, organizers, academics, clergy, and union officials may help sustain, but cannot substitute for a true mass movement. DVCJ worries about this, but has not come up with an answer.

Thirdly, the local focus of the jobs coalition is another limit. Their spontaneity and autonomy insure direction by local activists and adaptation to the local context, rather than domination by national bureaucracies. But the lack of overall coordination requires local coalitions to reinvent the wheel, and weakens the fight for raising the issue nationally. Small wonder that national plant closing legislation is no farther now than it was in 1974, when it was first introduced. DVCJ is not organized to think strategically, either. Aside from answering the calls when they come, there isn't a sense of what to push for next.

Conclusion

As the capitalist economy shifts jobs and capital around, and as long-term stagnation brings frequent recessions, working-class political movements are changing. Jobs coalitions are part of this change.

The jobs coalitions may be harbingers of broader change in the tactics of organized labor and in its relationships to its allies and to broader political questions. While not all job coalitions have done as much agitation as DVCJ, all have done things to bring the issues to wider audiences and to strengthen their alliances.

Though the jobs coalitions are relatively few, small, and limited in focus, they mobilize important political responses to corporate policies. They have great potential to: (a) link together various elements within organized labor over common economic issues; (b) broaden the appeal of labor unions to outside constituencies; (c) achieve a coalition not totally dominated by unions or by the Democratic party; (d) fight for political goals in conventional and unconventional ways; and, (e) raise fundamental issues concerning the economy. In fact, they raise the key question facing those interested in saving jobs and creating a full-employment economy: How can the public control corporations and capital?