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## Social Unionism in Western New York: The Case of the Economic Development Group

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### Keywords

social unionism, Economic Development Group, EDG, labor relations, workforce development, working families

### Comments

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# **Social Unionism in Western New York: The Case of the Economic Development Group**

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July 2, 2009

## *Abstract*

The academic literature on union-community engagement—labor activity often called *social unionism*—has grown steadily since about 1980, an expansion paralleling a similar evolution in union practices. This article examines one manifestation of social unionism in western New York: the labor-led Economic Development Group (EDG), which emerged in the late-1990s as a way for that region's union leaders to jointly engage in regional economic development activities. Part I surveys the existing literature on labor-community engagement, with an emphasis on the U.S. experience at the metropolitan level. Part II traces the EDG's origins and early development. Parts III, IV and V examine the EDG's major initiatives: in labor relations, regional energy, and workforce development, the latter of which includes a neighborhood revitalization component. Part VI identifies some of the EDG's current challenges and opportunities, and in the process highlights lessons of its experience. Part VII offers a summary and concluding thoughts, including suggestions for future research. A number of EDG projects appear to be on the leading edge of innovation with respect to regional development; thus, the case of the EDG warrants the attention of academics and practitioners, including policymakers interested in improving the wellbeing of the nation's working families.

*A condensed version of this paper is scheduled for publication in Labor Studies Journal.*

At a June 2009 public forum on labor and employment relations, UAW vice president Bob King reflected on the work of American unions during the past half century. “Unions probably did too much through collective bargaining and not enough socially,” he said. Identifying the need for public policies that reform the nation's retirement and healthcare systems as the tip of the iceberg, King stressed that a stronger social foundation is required to address the challenges confronting working families. The labor movement must do a better job of representing the interests of all workers, not just those who are union members, he concluded (King 2009).

While King is certainly not alone in believing that unions and working families would have both benefited from greater social involvement by labor in recent decades, some amount of labor-community engagement has existed throughout U.S. industrial-relations history. Moreover, the academic literature on such engagement—labor activity often called *social unionism*—has grown steadily since about 1980, an expansion paralleling a similar evolution in union practices. This article examines one manifestation of social unionism in western New York: the labor-led Economic Development Group.

The Economic Development Group (EDG) emerged in the late-1990s as an organization enabling western New York union leaders to jointly engage in regional economic development activities. During the past decade, the EDG has operated a variety of initiatives to foster shared regional prosperity. While the organization has had only a modest impact on its area's economic wellbeing, a number of EDG projects appear to be on the leading edge of innovation with respect to regional development. Thus, the case of the EDG warrants the attention of both academics and practitioners, including national policymakers interested in the retention and expansion of family-supporting jobs and the pursuit of broadly shared American prosperity.

The article is organized as follows. Part I surveys the existing literature on labor-community engagement, with an emphasis on the U.S. experience at the metropolitan level; the purpose is not to offer a comprehensive review, but to illustrate the literature's breadth and variety. Part II traces the EDG's origins and early development, beginning with an overview of the historical background and context in which the group emerged. Parts III, IV and V examine the EDG's major initiatives in each of the following areas, respectively: labor relations, regional energy, and workforce development, the latter of which includes a neighborhood revitalization component. Part VI identifies some of the organization's current challenges and opportunities, and in the process highlights lessons of its experience. Part VII offers a summary and concluding thoughts, including suggestions for future research. This analysis is based on close observation of the WNY labor movement for more than two decades, including interaction with area workers, union representatives, employers, and community leaders. In addition to serving as a participant observer in the region for a number of years, the author has conducted a series of formal and informal interviews with members of the WNY community over an extended period of time.

## **I. Labor-Community Engagement**

According to *History of Labour in the United States*, by John R. Commons and his University of Wisconsin colleagues, the U.S. labor movement's involvement in metropolitan-level community issues can be traced to at least 1827 (Commons et al. 1918). That is when members of various craft unions in Philadelphia formed the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations. Its purpose was to raise the condition of the city's skilled workers, but also to promote the "happiness, prosperity and welfare of the whole community" (Commons et al. 1918, 190). The Mechanics' Union pursued its aims through political action, which included endorsing candidates for public office and establishing the Working Men's Party.

Free public education was an important part of the Working Men's Party platform, which also included planks that called for reducing the working day to ten hours for public employees, reforming banks, and abolishing imprisonment for debt. At first, the party spread quickly to cities across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, but by the mid-1830s the Mechanics' Union and the Working Men's Party had both vanished. The party, which lasted a few years longer than the union, was brought down by "misrepresentation without and discord within," yet not before advancing measures that were soon widely recognized as being "in the line of progress toward real democracy" (Commons et al. 1918, 332).

The *History of Labour* also indicates that a number of citywide groups, similar to the Philadelphia Mechanics' Union, emerged just as the Working Men's Party disbanded. By 1836, there were at least thirteen of these local organizations, called "trades' unions," in communities located as far west and south as Louisville. These groups, most united by a national federation called the National Trades' Union, were designed primarily for mutual protection of trade unionists, and nearly all sought to steer clear of partisan politics to avoid the same fate as the Working Men's Party. Lobbying, however, was not considered off limits, and the Trades' Union of New York mounted a coordinated statewide effort to stop convict labor from producing goods that compete with products made outside prisons. The trades' unions also sought to galvanize grassroots support for a ten-hour workday and for the strikes designed to achieve that end. The strikes often accomplished their objective, but the financial panic of 1837 ushered in an industrial depression that wiped out the trades' unions and the National Trades' Union (Commons et al. 1918, 362-395).

In *The Future of the American Labor Movement* and a related essay, Hoyt N. Wheeler (2002; 2004) highlights the labor-community engagement of the Knights of Labor during the 1880s.

According to Wheeler, the Knights—whose membership peaked at 700,000 in 1886—“aimed at a broad reform of society.” They sought to foster solidarity among all producers of wealth (not merely among members of a particular craft or even all workers) and to replace the wage system with worker-owned cooperatives by means of education and peaceful politics. Thus, in addition to traditional trade assemblies, the local structure of the Knights included mixed assemblies (1,088 trade assemblies and 1,279 mixed assemblies in 1886, for instance). “The mixed assemblies included all kinds of workers, employers, and members of community social-action groups such as eight-hour-day leagues, women’s suffragettes, and temperance societies,” writes Wheeler (2004, 84-85).

The craft-oriented, American Federation of Labor (AFL) soon overshadowed the Knights of Labor, bringing with it a focus on business unionism, which emphasizes pursuit of member interests through collective bargaining. However, even the AFL and the combined AFL-CIO participated in lobbying and political education by creating Labor’s Educational and Political League, which eventually became the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education. For example, as journalist Archie Robinson demonstrates in *George Meany and His Times*, the federation has often been a leading voice for working families, regardless of union membership, on matters such as social security, healthcare policy, the minimum wage, employment of African Americans,<sup>1</sup> human rights, and economic policy (Robinson 1981).

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) have their own robust traditions of social engagement, as demonstrated by the work of Robert H. Zieger (1995) and David C. Jacobs (1987), respectively. In the case of the CIO, such engagement took the following forms: union organizing strategies that linked the workplace and surrounding community; a socially active network of community-based industrial union councils (the

industrial union equivalent of the earlier trades' unions and the AFL's city central labor councils); national and local political action committees; efforts to promote racial equality; and active involvement in discussions of national policy issues (Zieger 1995).<sup>2</sup> In the case of the UAW, there has been a vigorous and sustained campaign for national health insurance, in addition to crucial financial support for Americans for Democratic Action, the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, and the Progressive Alliance (Jacobs 1987).

Jacobs's article on the UAW connects that organization's social engagement to the term "social unionism," which he defines as "union concern for social issues beyond the immediate workplace" (Jacobs 1987, 119). In addition to arguing that industrial-relations scholars often unjustly discounted such unionism, Jacobs fleshes out the notion by arguing that the term becomes operational when union leaders respond as follows to a problem of concern to members: "by choosing from among a variety of possible responses the one strategy that unites (1) the interests of members as workers and citizens, (2) the interests of all trade unionists, and (3) the interests of the poor and unorganized." Jacobs also explains that such unionism is not a substitute for collective bargaining; rather, social unionism is expressed "through political institutions parallel to the institutions of collective bargaining" (Jacobs 1987, 134-135).

The concept of social unionism also appears in the aforementioned writings by Wheeler, who uses the notion interchangeably with the terms social movement unionism, reformist unionism, and uplift unionism.<sup>3</sup> According to Wheeler, such unionism includes any of at least three strategic endeavors: emphasizing political action and coordination with other community groups; establishing and supporting worker-rights organizations; and using workers' capital as an instrument of power (Wheeler 2004, 85). The literature on labor-community coordination at the metropolitan level has seen explosive growth in the past few decades, giving attention to issues



including the fight against plant closings (Haines and Klein 1982; Lynd 1983; Craypo and Nissen 1993), revitalization of union organizing (Wial 1992-1993; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Turner et al. 2001; Clawson 2003; Ness 2005), living-wage campaigns (Nissen 2000; Reynolds and Kern 2001-2002; and Luce 2004), and the prospect of regional power building (Craft 1990; Reynolds and Ness 2004; Reynolds 2009). There is also emerging literature on worker-rights organizations and worker centers (Wheeler 2002, 63-65; Karson 2004; Fine 2006; Heckscher and Carre 2006) and a robust literature on community renewal through worker ownership (Whyte et al. 1983; Mackin 2001; Gates 2001; Fung et al. 2001; Croft 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Other dimensions of social unionism include labor-management involvement in city and regional revitalization and the revival of city central labor councils. The literature on labor-management participation at the city and regional level was strongest in the 1980s, but has never disappeared and may indeed be resurgent (Leone et al. 1982; Woodworth et al. 1985, 97-178; Whalen 1987; Miller and Zeller 1991; Bernhardt, Dresser and Rogers 2004). Meanwhile, the literature on central labor councils, which often intersects with research on previously mentioned aspects of social unionism, has expanded over the past dozen or so years (Eimer 1999; Ness and Eimer 2001; Connelly et al. 2001-2002; Colburn 2004; Byrd and Rhee 2004; Schurman 2008-2009).<sup>5</sup>

Economic development is a common concern of city and regional labor-management partnerships and central labor councils. Since the mid-1990s, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and San Jose have been among the metropolitan areas best known for union involvement in economic development. In Pittsburgh, the Steel Valley Authority (SVA) is an inter-municipal economic development agency covering that city and eleven adjacent municipalities. The SVA was founded in 1986 to retain family-supporting jobs and revitalize the region's economic base.

Catalysts for the SVA were local steelworkers, religious leaders, and area public officials seeking a way to address the region's loss of manufacturing jobs. The SVA focuses on saving jobs through its Strategic Early Warning Network; creating jobs and rebuilding neighborhoods through community projects and strategic research; and promoting industrial innovation through pension-financed venture capital funds (Croft 2004).

Two notable avenues for such union involvement in Milwaukee have been the Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee (CSM) and the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP). The CSM was created in 1993 by representatives of organized labor and a variety of community activists for the purpose of crafting and promoting a community-generated plan for Milwaukee economic development. The organization folded in 2001, but not before spearheading successful local and county living-wage campaigns and partnering with the business community to establish a seven-year (1997-2004), multimillion-dollar Milwaukee Jobs Initiative that trained and assisted job seekers (Rogers 1994; Norman 1998; Abelson 2001; Dresser 2009).<sup>6</sup> The WRTP, which partnered with CSM on the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, was formed by business, labor and government officials in Milwaukee in 1992. WRTP develops and administers a number of workforce development initiatives for the Milwaukee metropolitan area, including training and apprenticeship programs in healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and information technology (Parker 2004; WRTP 2009).

In San Jose, often referred to as the capital of Silicon Valley, unions channel most of their economic development activities through Working Partnerships USA (WPUSA). Established in 1995 as a coalition of labor, faith organizations, and other community groups, WPUSA describes itself as an "action-oriented think tank," combining research, advocacy, and policy development with special attention to the needs of working people in San Jose and Santa Clara County.

Through a series of research reports, WPUSA documented widening regional economic inequality, provided support for San Jose living-wage advocates, and promoted the notion of “accountable development,” whereby public development funds are aimed at creating community benefits (such as family-supporting jobs, affordable housing, and access to healthcare). Drawing on WPUSA’s economic development framework, the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council has influenced two San Jose Development projects, one downtown and another on the southern edge of the city, and continues to press for a citywide accountable development policy (Brownstein 2000; Rhee 2004; Turner and Cornfield 2007, 178-190; WPUSA 2008).

Western New York (WNY) has also been the site of labor involvement in economic development. In the 1980s, that involvement was energetic and caught the attention of both academics and practitioners (see, for example, Woodworth et al. 1985 and Whalen 1987). After a period during which considerable union energy was redirected to plant-level matters (see, for example, Klingel and Martin 1988, 51-70), attention of area labor leaders shifted back to the community as a whole in the late 1990s and the region again became the subject of growing interest regarding labor and the economy. One reason for this change is revitalization of the area’s Coalition for Economic Justice, which mounted a successful living-wage campaign in Buffalo in 1999 and has kept up pressure on enforcement ever since. Another reason is establishment of the EDG.

In the 2007 book, *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*, Ian Greer, Barbara Byrd and Lou Jean Fleron contribute a chapter on Buffalo and Seattle. Looking at each community in turn, their chapter offers a broad survey of labor’s engagement in economic development—broadly defined to include anti-World Trade Organization protests, strike support, and living-wage initiatives, as well as more conventional economic development topics. The EDG is discussed, of

course, but the authors focus on examining the parallels of social “infrastructure building” in the two cities (Greer et al. 2007).

The discussion of Buffalo by Greer, Byrd and Fleron draws on two earlier articles, by Greer and Fleron (2005) and Fleron and Applegate (2004). Using the same broad conception of economic development as in the 2007 chapter, Greer and Fleron—writing for the *International Journal of Action Research*—describe the contours of labor’s social infrastructure in Buffalo, emphasizing the role “socially engaged researchers and educators have played” and addressing how “successful development politics are hampered by many of the same problems seen in European regions” (Greer and Fleron 2005, 219). In contrast, Fleron and Applegate, writing for a mostly American audience, focus their attention on the EDG and describe it as pursuing a dual-faceted development strategy that includes independent action akin to the work of U.S. community development corporations. As explained below (Part VI), this article yields a different perspective.<sup>7</sup>

## **II. EDG Origins and Early Development**

In 1999, union leaders in WNY decided to take an active role in shaping the economic future of their region. The leaders’ project began as an initiative of the Buffalo AFL-CIO Labor Council, with assistance from Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. It soon developed into the seven-county “Economic Development Group, Inc.” a nonprofit led by a 13-member board of all-union directors. Since its inception, the EDG has consistently worked to achieve its aims by forging ties beyond the traditional realm of union-management relations.

### ***National, State and Local Influences***

In the early decades following World War II, the WNY economy boomed. Jobs were so plentiful that workers needed only to cross the street to change employers. During the 1970s,

however, the region became fixed in the nation's mind as an archetypal "Rust Belt" community. Indeed, an area resident's 1978 report acknowledged that Greater Buffalo "displays the classic syndrome of economic illness endemic to many Northeastern cities" (Ahern 1978, 2). A rash of huge, permanent layoffs and plant closings diminished local economic prospects and fueled urban decay. Working families, local enterprises, and area municipalities have been struggling to recover ever since.

While it is true that WNY cities such as Buffalo and nearby Niagara Falls were hit hard by wrenching economic change, the experience of those communities in the 1970s was in many ways a bellwether for the challenge to industrial competitiveness that soon confronted the entire nation. By the mid-1980s, there was widespread concern—among leaders in business, labor, academia and government—about America's ability to prosper in an increasingly competitive, global economy (President's Commission 1985).

Two paths to national economic revitalization eventually emerged—the "high road" versus the "low road." The low road involves competing on the basis of low wages; the alternative involves competing on the basis of productivity, skills, innovation, and product quality. (Today, these avenues are often described as wage competition versus value-added competition.) Many observers maintained that America had taken the low road in the 1970s and 1980s, and that the high road was needed to achieve broadly shared prosperity and to enable a steadily improving quality of life (Harrison and Bluestone 1990).

In the 1990s, interest in the high-road path spread within academic, policy, and activist circles. Among the organizations whose leaders were attracted to this notion was the AFL-CIO's Human Resources Development Institute (HRDI). In 1998, it sought to promote pursuit of this economic strategy at the community, state and regional levels by producing *Economic*

*Development: A Union Guide to the High Road.* In addition to highlighting work of the AFL-CIO's various state federations and local labor councils, the guidebook reported on the WRTP and Pennsylvania's SVA (HRDI 1998). The common feature of the organizations described by the book was that each forged business, labor, and community partnerships to retain and foster creation of family-supporting jobs.

A number of labor leaders in Buffalo and the surrounding area learned about the HRDI book and were intrigued by the idea of pursuing a high-road regional development strategy. In part, that is because the notion of creating labor-management partnerships resonated with them. Such partnerships were not new to WNY unions in the 1990s.

Throughout the post-World War II era, political leaders in New York State worked to promote labor-management harmony by supporting the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (Cornell ILR). Particular attention has been given to the WNY region, long a largely manufacturing-oriented area with a high union density. The first office of the Cornell ILR Division of Extension and Public Service was opened in Buffalo in 1946 and has since found many opportunities to assist the establishment and operation of joint labor-management initiatives in the region. Although much of its focus has been on collective bargaining and workplace issues, the school's Buffalo office has encouraged union participation in area economic development since the mid-1960s, when it organized the first in a series of forums at which business and labor leaders discussed the region's economic future (Merrill 1997; "City's Economic Issues Discussed" 1964; "Public Forums Will Focus on WNY Recovery" 1983).

A regional economic summit organized by Cornell ILR in 1975—and attended by over 500 representatives of area workers and employers—helped support creation of the Buffalo-Erie County Labor Management Council (BELMC). Earlier that year, the Buffalo AFL-CIO Labor

Council—troubled by deterioration of the region’s manufacturing base and its economic and social consequences—adopted a resolution calling for establishment of such a labor-management body (modeled after a similar organization operating in Jamestown, New York), and the 1975 conference marked the start of its activities. For 18 years, the BELMC’s small staff of professionals brought area unionists and managers together to address common economic concerns.<sup>8</sup>

In the early years, the BELMC took steps to improve local job creation and retention and to provide training and other services to unskilled or displaced workers. Its first project, for example, led to a reorganization of the county Industrial Development Agency (IDA) that brought representatives of business, labor and key area economic development bodies to the IDA’s board. Although the institutional change did not dramatically alter the county’s economic fortunes, there were modest job retention and business recruitment achievements. Even more successful were BELMC workforce development activities, overseen by a group that eventually evolved into the area Private Industry Council (predecessor to today’s Workforce Investment Boards).

The BELMC devoted most of its attention to achieving positive labor relations across the county, in part because lost work time due to strikes had hurt the region’s image and the executive director, Robert Ahern, had experience as a mediator. At the heart of this labor-relations work was an ongoing effort to form and sustain plant-level labor-management committees. In the late 1980s, when the BELMC was most active, it worked with about 90 committees (many in existence for about a decade) that operated in over 40 WNY workplaces and a variety of industries. More than 30,000 hourly and salaried workers were involved in these groups, meeting regularly to address workplace concerns ranging from staffing levels,

occupational safety, and employee training, to productivity, job design, and product quality. The record shows that these committees improved employee morale, labor relations and customer service (Woods et al. 1991, 10-13). A sharp reduction in the region's record of work stoppages since the mid-1970s can be attributed at least in part to plant-level BELMC efforts.<sup>9</sup>

While BELMC leaders always preferred to keep a low public profile, the organization lost much of its local impact when executive director Ahern departed in 1993 to engage in labor-relations consulting. Although Ahern had been scrupulously nonpartisan, the BELMC became a casualty of local politics at the start of the new century; Erie County withdrew funding for the organization in 2002. Nevertheless, for a generation of local leaders the BELMC served as a proving ground for collaborative approaches to union-management relations. As a result of the efforts of the BELMC and the decades of Cornell ILR work that fostered and complemented it, most of the region's union members are as comfortable engaging with employers in cooperative endeavors as in hard-nosed negotiations.<sup>10</sup>

### *Organizing for Action*

Industrial-relations studies suggest that union involvement in economic development comes most often in response to a crisis—usually a plant closing or prolonged labor dispute that highlights declining job opportunities and deteriorating labor relations. At first glance, then, it might seem strange that WNY labor leaders organized to participate in regional development activities during the boom period of the late 1990s. Although the local manufacturing sector had struggled for over two decades, the economies of WNY and the nation were expanding as the new millennium approached; unemployment rates locally and nationally were lower than they had been in years; and union-management relations were generally harmonious. In fact, a number of WNY labor-relations partnerships won national awards in this period.



The union leaders' decision to organize for action is partly explained by the fact that WNY residents felt they were not sharing adequately in the nation's prosperity. In early 1999, economists at Buffalo's Canisius College reported that, for the decade, personal income in the area was growing only about half as fast as in the nation as a whole (Palumbo and Zaporowski 1999). Statistics of that sort struck a nerve in the region. As a participant observer in WNY during that period, this author heard residents from all walks of life say time and again that the area was being bypassed by the U.S. investment boom and that action was needed to enable the region to profit from the country's robust economic expansion.

There was also a critical incident that galvanized the labor leaders into action. In the spring of 1999, the Buffalo area's Chamber of Commerce, called the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, established a nonprofit, private business development and regional marketing organization in conjunction with the industrial development agencies of eight WNY counties. Members of the new group, called the Buffalo Niagara Enterprise (BNE), pooled resources and set ambitious goals for attracting capital investment and jobs to the Buffalo-Niagara region (see Figure 1).<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1. Buffalo-Niagara Region  
(Eight Counties in WNY)**

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Source: Institute for Local Governance  
and Regional Growth (2009)

Labor leaders wanted to let the members and staff of the new BNE—indeed, the entire community—know they were willing to do all they could to expand area business and job opportunities. To be sure, these union members wanted to encourage creation of family-supporting jobs and a high-road approach to business development. As community residents, however, they also wanted the BNE to achieve its objectives; the unionists were interested in chipping in to support the BNE’s efforts, not in battling over economic development strategies.

Union leaders believed they could play a valuable role in the regional marketing effort. Buffalo’s image as a “union town” was as deeply embedded in the national psyche as its association with snow and chicken wings, and for good reason: the metropolitan area had the highest unionization rate in the country in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, labor had to have a presence in the business-recruitment process, said the unionists—and not just to give a human face to the abstract notion of “organized labor.” Union involvement provided labor and management the opportunity to undermine unfounded stereotypes while jointly spreading the word about the many area successes traceable to worker-management cooperation. It was not merely impossible to promote WNY and ignore unions; it would also amount to a missed opportunity.

The public-relations firm hired to work with the BNE seemed to think the union leaders had a point. After studying the region’s strengths and weaknesses for three months in early 1999, Development Counsellors International (DCI) stressed the importance of drawing attention to the region’s highly productive workforce. Noting that General Motors had publicly described its Tonawanda, New York, plant as one of the most productive engine plants, Ted Levine of DCI suggested promoting Buffalo-Niagara as the “the most productive region in North America” (Meyer 1999, B7).

As news about the creation of the BNE spread throughout the region, labor leaders met informally to discuss their response. One participant in the discussions was Richard Lipsitz, a former Teamsters Union business agent who had recently become director of the Buffalo Labor Studies program at Cornell ILR. Lipsitz was a veteran of enterprise-level labor-management partnerships in the Buffalo area; he was also one of the WNY leaders familiar with the AFL-CIO's HRDI (renamed the Working for America Institute by the end of 1998) and its support for applying the notion of a high-road economy to communities and regions.

As it had many times before, Cornell ILR stepped forward to lend a hand. Lou Jean Fleron, then director of the school's Buffalo office, gave generously of her time and expertise as a facilitator, consultant, and chronicler of area labor relations. She also reallocated work assignments so that Lipsitz and other Cornell professionals could provide the union leaders with advice and technical assistance.

The EDG took shape in the late spring and early summer of 1999. Lipsitz and Fleron helped the Buffalo AFL-CIO Labor Council convene two meetings of more than a dozen interested union leaders from WNY. The leaders participating in those initial gatherings came from a range of industries (manufacturing, building trades, and nursing and other service occupations in the public and private sectors) and most had extensive experience with workplace-level union-management initiatives and other joint labor-management projects. The meetings generated a set of objectives and possible initiatives for what participants called the "WNY AFL-CIO Economic Development Group."<sup>12</sup> The union leaders agreed to build a working relationship with the BNE (in pursuit of mutual economic development interests) and to expand the geographic scope of the group's efforts by reaching out to AFL-CIO councils in nearby counties. The group also selected Kevin Donovan, area director of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in WNY and vicinity, as the

EDG spokesperson (Buffalo AFL-CIO Council 1999).<sup>13</sup> On July 22, 1999, the EDG convened a breakfast meeting with public officials from the region and introduced the EDG and its goals (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Objectives of the WNY AFL-CIO Economic Development Group** (as declared on June 25, 1999 and presented to the region’s public leaders on July 22, 1999)

- Create a strong, diversified economy with living-wage jobs for all and quality standards of living in WNY
- Strengthen a highly skilled workforce as a competitive regional advantage
- Secure a voice for organized labor in economic development in the region
- Mobilize organized labor to seize and expand opportunities for partnership with regional job creation efforts, building on mutual interests
- Actively promote progressive, constructive labor relations throughout WNY, and publicize the successes as a regional advantage
- Coordinate and build labor cohesion in regional economic development efforts, learning from one another

Source: Buffalo AFL-CIO Council (1999)

By early 2000, the EDG was ready for action. AFL-CIO labor councils in seven WNY counties backed its structure and mission, and EDG leaders had opened a dialogue with AFL-CIO’s Working for America Institute.<sup>14</sup> Services of a day-to-day coordinator had been secured—through an in-kind gift from Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation in conjunction with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)—and specific project areas were identified to address the issues that members thought were most important to the region and that would best allow them to make a difference. In addition, progress was being made on chartering the group as a nonprofit corporation and securing funding for its operations through local foundations (both goals were achieved by 2002, when annual funding via local grants totaled just under \$33,000).

### **III. Labor Relations**

At the outset, a primary EDG goal was to promote cooperative labor-management relations at the enterprise and community levels within WNY. Such cooperation was viewed as essential not only to retaining and improving existing jobs, but also to creating new ones via local business expansion, new enterprise startups, and the attraction of corporations from outside the region.

To initiate pursuit of this goal, the EDG partnered with the BNE (the region's business-development group described above) to commission a study of WNY employment relations and workplace practices. The EDG board expected the study would attract attention to its effort to strengthen labor relations in the region by demonstrating that constructive labor relations already contributed widely to enterprises success in WNY—and even if the unionists were wrong, the study would at least provide a baseline and insight into what improvements were needed. The New York State legislature funded the study and Cornell ILR faculty members supervised the research, which was published in 2000 as *Champions at Work: Employment, Workplace Practices and Labor-Management Relations in Western New York* (Fleron et al. 2000).

The goal of promoting labor-management cooperation also resulted in establishment, in 2000, of a business-labor practitioners' network called the Champions Network. That group was intended to extend the EDG-BNE relationship and help spread the use of cooperative labor relations in the region. It was also created to assist in attracting companies—union or non-union—to WNY by fielding business re-location inquiries and by participating in ongoing public-private regional marketing initiatives. Moreover, the Network was conceived as a mechanism to alert unions and the community to possible job loss in the region, thus allowing sufficient time for intervention and collaborative problem solving by area stakeholders.

### *The “Champions at Work” Study*

The *Champions at Work* study was the organization’s first accomplishment. The final report, based on employer and union survey responses, regional economic data, and case studies, demonstrated that WNY “is a world-class region” in terms of workforce quality, workplace practices, and labor relations.<sup>15</sup> It also confirmed the results of earlier academic studies that show “unions contribute to the success of high-performance workplaces” (Fleron et al. 2000, 7).

The *Champions* report garnered media attention in the region and in the nation’s business press; it was also well received by local leaders. *The Wall Street Journal* mentioned the findings on its front page, and *Expansion Management* magazine devoted a column to the study in its November 2000 issue (Tejada 2000). On the research results, EDG chairman Donovan said that while he thought WNY labor relations were very good, “this study exceeded my expectations.” BNE president Thomas A. Kucharski, meanwhile, felt confident the study could help dispel some misconceptions about the region. When asked whether the report would make corporate site-selection professionals change their views of WNY, Lance Yoder, managing editor of *Expansion Management* said he expected it would cause them to “take a second look” at the area (Williams 2000).

The EDG study does seem to have made an impact on site-selection consultants and business decision makers. In 2005, the BNE—co-sponsor of the *Champions* report—was named by *Site Selection Magazine* as one of the Top 20 local economic development groups in North America (Starner 2005). In early 2006, meanwhile, *Expansion Management* named Buffalo to its list of “America’s 50 Hottest Cities” for business expansion or relocation (Kirzner 2006).<sup>16</sup>

### *The Champions Network*

The related Champions Network initiative, however, was never able to get off the ground as intended. When the Network was established by the EDG in 2000, its roster included more than 50 WNY labor and business leaders. The EDG's leadership envisioned that the Network would institutionalize a regional business-labor partnership and forge an enduring working relationship between the BNE and the EDG. That did not happen. In fact, the organization exhibited few signs of life for about three years.

In 2003, the "Cornell ILR staff revived the Champions Network" (Greer et al. 2007, 123). That staff convened a series of "focus group" discussions and other meetings during which Network members identified obstacles to further area economic development (Cornell ILR 2003). Then, in early 2004, Cornell ILR organized a conference in Buffalo on behalf of the Network to promote joint labor-management collaboration in the realm of regional economic development. The conference included presentations and workshops featuring leaders from other regions where labor and management were partners in economic revitalization projects (Cornell ILR 2004; Purdy 2004).

Activities of the Champions Network in 2003 and early 2004 led to creation of three task forces consisting of union, employer and community representatives. One was convened to examine the coordination of economic development functions in the region. This group met with heads of the region's industrial development agencies to discuss improving economic development incentives. Another works to encourage civic involvement (with special attention on issues of common interest to companies and workers), voter registration, and election-day turnout. A third was established to address the image of the region as seen by outsiders. Its main work has been to support a grassroots signature collection campaign called "Believe in Buffalo

Niagara,” which seeks 100,000 signatories to a letter created by a WNY resident. The letter promotes the region’s vitality and promise and was designed for delivery to the heads of hundreds of corporations with business expansion potential (Greer and Fleron 2005, 234-235; Believe in Buffalo Niagara undated; Cornell ILR undated).<sup>17</sup>

The “Champions” involved in these Network task forces deserve praise for their volunteer efforts to make WNY a better region in which to live and work, but there is no solid evidence that the Champions Network has achieved its aims of improving enterprise-level labor relations and employment prospects in WNY. Cornell ILR has continued to draw attention to the link between constructive labor relations, organizational performance and worker gains by creating a “Champions @ Work Award” and bestowing it annually—initially on behalf of the EDG, but later on its own—upon WNY union-management partnerships since 2004 (see, for example, Cornell ILR 2008). There is surely a value to highlighting joint labor-management endeavors, but since the Network has so far relied only on raising community awareness—rather than, for instance, helping to create or nurture workplace labor-management committees—its impact on WNY employment relations remains indirect, un-measurable, and probably quite small.<sup>18</sup>

According to Greer and Fleron, Cornell’s work with the Champions Network “has an educational role” that involves teaching the business community the value of organized labor and promoting “a better understanding of mutual concerns.” They add that this has resulted in BNE officials referring prospective investors to union leaders when there are concerns about local unions (Greer and Fleron 2005, 235). Still, no system tracks these contacts and their impact.

While Cornell ILR keeps the Champions Network alive, the EDG no longer considers the Network one of its projects. Janice Barrett, executive director of the EDG since 2002, is aware of the Network’s activities and of some membership overlap between the Network and the EDG.



“Some EDG board members participate in the Network; I don’t,” Barrett says (Barrett 2006).

Like the earlier BELMC (and the metropolitan trades’ unions of the 1830s), the EDG has chosen to avoid partisan politics from the outset, viewing the region as a political minefield of factions and intense partisan wrangling. In part, then, one senses that the EDG leadership feels the Network has moved too much in the direction of cheerleading and political action, but the BNE may also be partly responsible for the EDG’s decision regarding the Network.

If the BNE had taken steps to better integrate the Champions Network into its regional development and marketing efforts—and had recognized the Network’s establishment as an opportunity to begin working more closely with the EDG—then perhaps the Network would still be an EDG project. It is clear that EDG leaders feel their business counterparts missed an opportunity in the wake of formation of the Champions Network, and it seems that the Network was neglected and then abandoned as a consequence. As one WNY academic familiar with the EDG and BNE observed regarding this matter, “Real business collaboration with the labor movement means more than ‘we’ll use you when you’re useful,’ but the business community has been reluctant to structure collaborative institutions and partnerships with unions (Stanger 2007).”<sup>19</sup>

Despite its experience with the Champions Network, the EDG has not given up on partnering with the business community on economic development issues. In 2007, for example, the EDG joined with the National Electrical Contractors Association to convene a regional business exposition showcasing WNY and its constructive employment-relations climate. The event attracted 55 potential employers from as far away as Japan and China, all interested in exploring the benefits of doing business in WNY.

#### **IV. Regional Power**

Reliable and affordable supplies of electricity and heat are essential to WNY, where winters are long and as many as half of the jobs depended on manufacturing at the start of the new millennium (Maguire 2002). As a result, the EDG has pursued two projects designed to retain and expand low-cost energy in the region. The first, involving power plant relicensing, succeeded on many levels. The second, involving a plan to acquire and expand a multi-structure heating system in downtown Buffalo, hit a snag in 2006, but may open the door to an abundance of opportunities in the near future.

##### ***The Niagara Power Project***

Shortly after the EDG was established, it took the lead in working to renew the 50-year federal license that governs the region's hydropower plant, the Niagara Power Project (a 2.4-gigawatt facility located 4.5 miles downstream from Niagara Falls). The non-profit, state-owned New York Power Authority has been generating power from the Niagara River at that site since the early 1960s, but its license needed to be renewed by August 2007. EDG leaders initiated an unconventional, consensus-building relicensing process that gave all area stakeholders a voice in the economic and community issues associated with operating the plant during the coming decades. In fact, the EDG's chairman (Donovan, from the UAW) co-chaired the relicensing consensus committee.

The relicensing of a power plant involves a myriad of issues, including allocation of power and the plant's environmental impact. Thus, as residents of the region, EDG members were interested in how relicensing would affect the area's ecology, recreational opportunities, and water quality in the coming decades. They were also interested in retaining the plant's low-cost electric power, upon which many area residents and employers have come to depend. For

example, when U.S. industrial users were paying an average of five cents per kilowatt-hour in early 2004, many WNY employers were paying 1.5 to 2.5 cents for Niagara power (Pataki 2004).

The EDG became involved in the Niagara Power Project (NPP) license renewal at the urging of Phil Wilcox, an EDG founder and member of the IBEW. Wilcox was employed by Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation (now part of National Grid), distributor of electricity generated by the NPP, and understood the power issue and its relationship to economic development better than most members of the WNY community. According to Wilcox, the NPP's plant supplied inexpensive power to about 110 companies (responsible for 50,000 jobs) in addition to residential customers in numerous WNY municipalities (Williams 1999, A7). At Wilcox's urging, the EDG convened a meeting on the power issue for WNY labor, business and government representatives in September 1999.

At that meeting, the economic significance of relicensing became clearer to all. Assemblyman Robert A. Daly explained that license expiration was "already an issue" affecting local firms: "If you try to capitalize an investment over 10 years, you can't do it," he said. Wilcox added that Carbide Graphite Group in Niagara Falls shelved a \$40 million expansion "partly out of uncertainty of future power allocation" (quoted in Williams 1999, A10).

The traditional approach to relicensing does not involve community stakeholders until plant operators submit license renewal applications with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. As a result, renewal usually gets bogged down in an adversarial process involving lengthy legal challenges. Wilcox was aware a community-involvement alternative was available and advocated that the EDG initiate use of the alternative.

The consensus-building, community-involvement approach to license renewal had never been initiated by a labor organization, but the EDG members found the project attractive for many reasons, including: the plant's impact on economic development in WNY; the initiative's focus on a process of negotiations, which was, of course, familiar territory for the unionists; the opportunity for organized labor to take the initiative on a regional issue; and the chance to show the community that the EDG could serve as an honest broker for a broad array of community stakeholders. By July 2000, the EDG had shepherded into existence the WNY Relicensing Consensus Committee. Co-chaired by the EDG's Donovan and Samuel M. Ferraro of the Niagara County Department of Planning, Development and Tourism, the Consensus Committee brought all interested stakeholders together to help shape the relicensing effort via a three-stage process. First, the committee enlisted community members and educated them about license renewal; then, mutual-gains negotiations (commonly used in contemporary collective bargaining) were conducted with New York Power Authority (NYPA) and its stakeholders; and, finally, the committee engaged in the formal steps associated with relicensing.

In August 2005—two years prior to expiration of its license—NYPA filed its application for a 50-year license renewal. The application eventually received federal approval and the plant has been operating under the new license since September 1, 2007. The settlement agreements (that determine power allocation and the community impact of plant operations) and the EDG's leadership in the process have received praise from all corners of the WNY community, including business and labor leaders, environmental activists, government officials in municipalities hosting the power plant, and the Tuscarora Nation. The inclusive approach provided area stakeholders “with an integral say in the project's future,” said Assemblywoman

Francine DelMonte. “This has been a real team effort,” added state Senator George D. Maziarz (Saltzman 2005; 2007).

The project gave labor “a place at the table” and ensured that the renewal process was used “for purposes of improving the WNY economy,” says Lipsitz, who is back with the Teamsters and sits on the EDG board. “Without the EDG, environmentalists and developers would have had a voice, but not area workers” (Lipsitz 2006). It also demonstrated labor’s ability to galvanize the entire community in a project requiring cooperation and compromise.

### ***Buffalo District Energy***

More recently, the EDG teamed with Siemens Building Technologies, Inc. in an effort to acquire a gas-fired plant providing thermal energy to city-owned buildings in downtown Buffalo. The EDG’s near-term plan was to convert the plant into a biomass-fueled facility and expand it to heat numerous workplaces and residences in the city center. From the start, however, the long-term goal of the EDG’s Buffalo energy project has been establishment of a cogeneration plant that provides customers with heating and cooling and that sells “green” (clean and renewable) electricity to the WNY power grid. The EDG has also envisioned establishing a similar facility in Niagara Falls and elsewhere. (Despite the Niagara Power Project, much of WNY still relies heavily on expensive, imported energy inputs.)

Providing reliable, low-cost energy to private sector employers is seen as a way to help retain and expand job opportunities in the city, but the EDG also has other goals for its Buffalo energy initiative. Fueling the plant with willow shrubs and other “energy” crops grown in WNY would keep energy dollars in the local economy, support the region’s farmers, and reduce pollution. Moreover, construction associated with the plant’s expansion would provide jobs for skilled workers and training opportunities for area youth. Indeed, the EDG considers “training the

underrepresented to take advantage of new opportunities” to be a cornerstone of the project (Economic Development Group 2004, 17; Buffalo District Energy 2006).

When the EDG was established, a number of its members were interested in sustainable development and generation of environmentally friendly sources of energy. As a result, Edward Cohen-Rosenthal, who directed Cornell’s Work and Environment Initiative, was invited to Buffalo in 1999 to discuss “eco-industrial parks,” sites where businesses join together in the management of their resources. The idea is that companies can achieve economic gains and minimize environmental damage by collaborating to boost energy efficiency. As Cohen-Rosenthal explained, “In this form of industrial symbiosis, one company’s wastes or outputs can become another’s raw materials/inputs” (Cohen-Rosenthal 1999).<sup>20</sup>

EDG members then learned the city of Buffalo has a district-heating loop that delivers thermal energy to city-owned structures in the downtown area. This prompted the labor group and city officials to explore the idea of using WNY farm crops as fuel and expanding the loop to include non-city buildings, including hospitals, county and federal facilities, educational institutions, apartment buildings, corporate offices, and even industrial plants. When it became clear that there were legal restrictions preventing the city from expanding the project, the EDG offered to lead the expansion initiative, and city leaders agreed.

The EDG has been working on this district energy project since 2001. To get the ball rolling, it created the non-profit Buffalo District Energy Corporation (BDEC). It then had to address an Internal Revenue Service challenge to its non-profit status. BDEC also needed engineering expertise, so the project became a joint venture with Siemens Building Technologies. By the end of 2005, the BDEC had a clear plan: it would issue bonds, take over

operation of the existing heating loop, install biomass boilers, and begin to expand the distribution system. The addition of a cooling system would come at a later phase.

While Buffalo District Energy contains elements of what Cohen-Rosenthal described conceptually, the project is modeled after a system that heats over 75 percent of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. The St. Paul facility—which provides, heat, hot water, chilled water, and electricity—can be fired by coal, natural gas or wood waste. In fact, the non-profit “District Energy St. Paul” recently constructed a 25-megawatt heat and power plant fueled with wood waste—the largest wood-fired district energy system in the United States (District Energy St. Paul 2008).

To help retain and generate jobs over time, reducing energy costs is an essential part of the energy loop project. In 2004, BDEC estimated the city of Buffalo would reduce thermal energy costs by 30 percent in the first year of the project—and save more than \$21 million over thirty years. Expanding the system to Erie County buildings was projected to generate a savings of nearly \$30 million for the county over the same three decades (Economic Development Group 2004, 13). Expanding the system further would make cost savings available to additional consumers, including low-income Buffalo residents.

The project stalled in 2006, however, due in part to election of a new city mayor, replacement of the public works commissioner, and approval of new real estate developments near the plant. Those developments would require relocation of the biomass plant and BDEC is now reexamining the feasibility of the project in light of the required changes (Barrett 2008; Donovan 2009). Since then, however, the EDG’s work on district energy has caught the attention of groups elsewhere in the region and in other parts of the Northeast, and, as will be explored below (Part VI), the timing of its pursuit of green energy may ultimately prove fortuitous.

## **V. Workforce Development and Neighborhood Revitalization**

While the Buffalo biomass initiative remains in a state of development, the EDG has been engaged in workforce development initiatives since 2000, when it created the Buffalo Niagara Jobs Initiative (BNJI). That project's goal is to prepare low-and moderate-income Buffalo residents for skilled employment. The BNJI—overseen by representatives of business, labor, local government, church groups, and community organizations—links training and other employment support services to a ten-year, billion-dollar (largely state-funded) project to renovate Buffalo's public schools. In addition, the EDG has met recently with area employers, unions, educational institutions and civic groups to facilitate creation of an education and training initiative that can meet emerging employer needs in the healthcare professions.

Since 2003, the EDG has also been working to complement the Buffalo schools renovation project with a neighborhood revitalization initiative. A for-profit wing of the EDG was created to buy abandoned houses, rehabilitate them, sell them to area residents, and use the proceeds to buy more houses. As part of this project, craft workers were hired to train BNJI enrollees in carpentry and other lines of work associated with housing renovation.

### ***The Buffalo Niagara Jobs Initiative***

Improving employment opportunities through training and workforce development—especially for women and minorities long underrepresented in high-paying union jobs—has always been a goal of the EDG. “It's not a high-road economy unless the whole community can benefit,” says Lipsitz. “We need to enable participation by those who have been excluded from paths to prosperity in the past” (Lipsitz 2006). With so much of the Buffalo infrastructure and housing stock in need of rehabilitation, EDG members were looking for a way to link workforce development and neighborhood revitalization since the day their group was founded.



In 2000, the EDG convened representatives from the business, labor, government, and education communities to consider how area workforce development resources might be coordinated and better utilized. The BNJI evolved out of those discussions. The core idea of the jobs initiative was to link training and other employment support services to a new, state-supported project to renovate Buffalo's public schools, a venture that included a project labor agreement requiring construction unions to meet certain targets for employment of women and minorities.

A community advisory board, co-chaired by the president of a local construction company and the EDG's Kevin Donovan, leads the BNJI. The 16-member advisory board meets regularly with members of the EDG staff and a reliable core group of about a dozen additional community participants. The BNJI holds its meetings at an inner-city Baptist church, a sign of its ability to bring together labor, industry, government, community organizations, and local religious leaders.

Since the BNJI aims to prepare low-and moderate-income Buffalo residents for skilled employment, it has worked with a host of local organizations to identify interested job seekers and to provide child care and support services, life-skills training (including time and money management), remedial math and reading instruction, and other educational opportunities. The latter has included the chance to enroll in pre-apprenticeship construction-trades programs and in Erie Community College's building-management program.

The BNJI completed its first year of providing educational services in mid-2006. In that year, 127 participants were registered (106 men and 21 women) and 69 completed both the life-skills and construction-skills classroom programs (59 men and 10 women). Of the 69, nine were subsequently employed in union apprenticeships, and 25 found related employment or work as a private contractor. Another 21 found jobs unrelated to construction, and 14 were unemployed.

Many of those not completing the program were hired directly into a union apprenticeship, found another job, or elected to stay in school to earn a degree. The vast majority of the BNJI enrollees were African American and their median age was 33 (BNJI 2006).

By the end of 2008, the BNJI had graduated three cohorts of approximately 100 students in total (Lipsitz 2008). The second and third cohorts were smaller than the first because the EDG decided to move away from engaging its staff in the direct operation of training programs. In June 2009, however, the EDG began a dialogue with the AFL-CIO to explore ways the two organizations could work together to revitalize the BNJI (Donovan 2009).

According to EDG executive director Barrett, the EDG's strength in the education and training realm involves serving as a catalyst and facilitator; it is capable of bringing groups in the public and private sectors together into teams that address specific community workforce-development needs. The EDG can help such teams find the financial resources they need, and is willing to "stay in the trenches" and work with the parties until new projects get off the ground. Operating and managing such programs on a long-term basis, however, is best assigned to others outside the EDG, says Barrett. This is not surprising: the staff of the BELMC came to the same conclusion a few years after it launched a series of workforce development initiatives.

A new EDG initiative provides an example of the role the EDG wishes to play. Working with area hospitals, nursing homes, healthcare unions, community organizations, and educational institutions, the EDG recently created a new workforce development advisory board to focus on allied health professions. (The original BNJI advisory board will retain its focus on construction skills.) This board has secured a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation and from the State of New York and has applied to the New York State Department of Education to establish (by the 2010-2011 school year) a charter high school, which would prepare students for work and

further study in healthcare fields (Donovan 2009). The overall goal of the healthcare partnership is to train new and incumbent workers in a way that meets industry needs; the healthcare group “won’t train for training’s sake,” Barrett says, emphasizing a main workforce development principle that has governed the EDG from its inception (Barrett 2006; 2008).

### ***Housing Rehabilitation***

EDG leaders have long envisioned linking housing rehabilitation to the Buffalo school renovations. “It was one of our original ideas,” says Lipsitz. “If school reconstruction can be accompanied by improving the housing stock, whole neighborhoods can be improved” (Lipsitz 2006). In late 2003, however, schools were being fixed and many neighborhoods remained blighted by abandoned and deteriorating homes (Moses and Koch 2005). That is when the EDG created its Joint Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative. An outgrowth of the BNJI, the neighborhood stabilization initiative is a construction-skills program designed to provide BNJI enrollees paid employment for hands-on training at worksites where area houses are being rehabilitated. To that end, this arm of the EDG hired a crew of skilled craft workers to teach BNJI enrollees by involving those students in the reconstruction work.

In the first six months of 2006, three homes in one of the city’s most neglected neighborhoods were renovated. A few more homes were refurbished later, but the entire housing rehabilitation project has been on hold since the start of 2007. The notion of such an initiative—including the opportunity to enable local residents to benefit from both skills training and home ownership—remains attractive to the EDG, but the group has not yet found a viable way to cover the costs involved and does not want the initiative to displace area residents.<sup>21</sup>

## **VI. Current Challenges, New Opportunities**

The lack of a dedicated funding source constitutes one of the biggest current challenges for the EDG, according to Barrett and other board members. The EDG's limited funding and dependence on soft-money (project-oriented, fixed-term grants) has restricted staffing levels and constrained its ability to plan and initiate new initiatives. Projects such as Buffalo district energy and the jobs initiatives take years of preparation, and that advance work is made more difficult when operational resources and "capacity-building" grants are scarce (Barrett 2008).<sup>22</sup>

A 2007 report by the nonpartisan, Albany-based Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) indicates that the region served by the EDG is also facing persistent economic challenges. Between 2000 and 2006, a time when total U.S. employment rose 1.7 percent and overall New York state employment fell by just 0.6 percent, employment in each of the two western-most regions of the state (as categorized by the FPI) fell by more than 2 percent—and job losses were especially significant in manufacturing. During the same period, a group of counties the FPI calls Western and Northern New York experienced an average annual decline in real wages (0.2 percent), while the other segments of the state saw wages rise (by at least 0.7 percent) (Fiscal Policy Institute 2007, 15, 48).<sup>23</sup>

The FPI report, the latest to provide a detailed examination of the state's demographic and economic trends by region, also shows a population decline of 2.7 percent in Western New York for the period 2000-2006. In contrast, during the same period, New York City experienced a population increase of 2.6 percent, and Eastern New York (the Capital region, Hudson Valley, and Long Island) experienced an average population expansion of 2.8 percent. Some parts of the state experienced small population declines (Central New York and the Mohawk Valley, for instance), but none were nearly as large as WNY (Fiscal Policy Institute 2007, 53).<sup>24</sup>

Today, in the midst of a state fiscal crisis, deep national financial trouble, and a disquieting recession, the EDG leadership remains cautiously optimistic. The region has been hit hard by the recent downturn, but President Barack Obama's effort to revitalize the U.S. economy by means of a major public-investment initiative provides a reason for hope. Indeed, the EDG is well positioned to work in partnership with key domestic-policy branches of the new administration, which has from the outset expressed an interest in modernizing schools, improving the nation's infrastructure, boosting job training, and promoting "green collar" jobs that address the nation's energy and transportation needs in an environmentally friendly manner (Kuhnhehn 2008). According to the EDG's leaders, the key is to forge ahead in a way that treats the group's experience and the region's characteristics (including its skilled workforce and tradition of manufacturing) as "a bundle of assets" (Lipsitz 2008; Barrett 2008).

While the EDG's experience over the past decade has produced an asset bundle with three core competencies (labor relations, energy production and workforce development), its experience also provides lessons applicable to any future EDG initiative. One is the value of not merely taking advantage of opportunities, but also creating them. For example, when the business-led BNE was formed, the unionists in WNY did not complain about being excluded or simply ask to be involved in a BNE project; instead, they organized, fashioned an agenda, and invited the BNE to partner with them to examine and then promote the productive character of the workforce as a regional asset. Similarly, when the unionists learned that power plant relicensing was an important economic development topic and that a consensus-building relicensing process existed, they did not ask an area legislator to form a group that could initiate such a process; instead, the EDG took the lead and created a chance to demonstrate its interest in

finding common ground with other area stakeholders. Time and again, the EDG sought to create opportunities as a way to pursue its agenda, and those efforts have paid off.

Another lesson of the EDG experience is the importance of combining self-reliance with openness toward forging regional partnerships. Other observers have described the EDG as building a “two-lane high road” to regional economic development: one lane involving collaboration with willing members of the business community and another involving independent action reminiscent of the work of community development corporations (Fleron and Applegate 2004, 11). While that interpretation has some merit, it also obscures a deeper point: every time the EDG has taken the initiative it has also sought to find a partner, establish a dialogue with other stakeholders, build on shared interests, and fashion opportunities for mutual gains. If the EDG involves a “two-lane” road, then one of its strengths is that EDG initiatives aim to straddle the lane dividers.

Still another lesson that comes from the EDG experience is the need to remain undaunted in the face of broader economic and political currents. “There’s a lot we can’t control, and we recognize our accomplishments can be overshadowed by forces beyond our influence,” says Lipsitz. What he and other EDG leaders describe is a marathon, not a sprint, and the EDG seeks to remain active for the long haul. From their perspective, there are plenty of constraints and no quick fixes, but there is also no excuse for giving up. As Lipsitz explained to this author in 2006:

Judging us by looking at aggregate statistics misses the whole point. We are making a difference in people’s lives, and we hope to make more of a difference over time. We don’t try to be overly optimistic about the EDG’s potential—which is a reason we don’t seek to draw attention to ourselves—we just try to make a

difference as we can. Meanwhile, if the community comes to realize that union people aren't the enemy, then that's all the better (Lipsitz 2006).

Today, the EDG is especially hopeful about opportunities involving renewable energy projects. A number of EDG members are convinced that environmentally friendly energy systems and technologies have a boundless future as direct and indirect engines of job growth. In fact, to this end, the EDG's Donovan retired from the UAW at the end of 2008 to pursue such projects on a full-time (unpaid) basis by means of a new nonprofit EDG spin-off and partner called Northeast District Energy Corporation (he remains chair of the EDG).

In Buffalo, the EDG's downtown energy loop may have stalled, but the idea has attracted interest in other WNY communities and across the northeastern United States, including Vermont and New Hampshire. Northeast District Energy entered 2009 with a \$250,000 Vermont Clean Energy Development Fund grant to conduct technical and feasibility studies on construction of a biomass plant that would serve two schools in Brattleboro, and with optimism that it will secure at least one of three, \$2 million New York State Energy Research and Development Authority grants for projects in WNY (Barrett 2008; Pierce 2008). The EDG is also exploring the possibility of applying the district energy concept to heat and cool its new health-professions charter school and other nearby structures (Donovan 2009).

## **VII. Summary and Conclusions**

The ten-year experience of the EDG represents part of the latest chapter in a long history of labor-community engagement in the United States. With a brief survey of that labor history as a backdrop, this article has examined the EDG's origins, development, and major initiatives. Current challenges and opportunities have also been identified, in the process drawing attention to lessons that shed light on the EDG's past and are likely to guide its future.

Although the EDG has had limited impact on overall economic wellbeing in WNY—in part due to a lack of financial resources, but primarily because of the overwhelming impact of national and international economic trends—a number of its projects appear to be on the leading edge of innovation with respect to regional development. The EDG successfully charted a new path regarding power plant relicensing. Across the northeastern United States, and presumably in the nation’s capital as well, the EDG’s efforts to pursue renewable energy and associated “green-collar” jobs are now recognized as prescient.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, across the country labor economists and public-policy researchers stress that the future of regional development and national labor-market policies depend on nonprofit metropolitan labor-market intermediaries and sectoral workforce-development policies linked to regional economic needs (Benner et al. 2007; Glover and King 2010); these are precisely the institutions and approaches the EDG has created and relied on in their workforce development initiatives. Moreover, the high-performance workplace practices highlighted and promoted by the EDG’s labor-relations initiatives continue to be recognized as vital to future U.S. industrial competitiveness (Lynch 2009).

As a case study in social unionism, the EDG experience offers more than insights for practitioners seeking the retention and expansion of family supporting jobs in their communities. It also provides a starting point for further scholarship capable of enhancing our theoretical understanding of union structures, strategies and practices. By comparing the EDG experience with that of other institutions used by labor to contribute to regional development, scholars can test and further develop frameworks that help understand how and when labor-community coalitions are forged (see, for example, Tattersall 2008b; Tattersall 2008c; and Turner and Cornfield 2007, 1-19). Further research can also draw on the EDG experience to deepen our understanding of the dimensions and challenges of regional power building (following, for



instance, the work of Reynolds 2009 and Reynolds in Turner and Cornfield 2007, 79-94) as well as increase our knowledge of the overall effectiveness and limits of labor-community engagement (see Craft 1990; Nissen 2004; and Schantz 2009).

The UAW's Bob King may be right when he says that unions probably did too much through collective bargaining in the past half-century and not enough through broader forms of social engagement. Early in the twentieth century, however, labor economist Robert F. Hoxie argued that unionism "has its finger in practically every social pie that is baking" (Hoxie 1917, 4). Today, with the spread of social unionism in forms such as the EDG, Hoxie's statement may be more accurate than it has been in decades.

## **Notes**

1. The labor movement's record on civil rights is, of course, mixed. And the legacy of racism lingers and continues to impede union effectiveness. See, for example, Nissen and Henry (2008).
2. The AFL and CIO, both separately and as a merged body, have also encouraged member involvement in community service through organizations such as the AFL-CIO's Community Services Program (Craft 1990, 146-147).
3. Not everyone uses the terms "social unionism" and "social movement unionism" interchangeably. Social movement unionism is often characterized by mobilization of activists and/or voters to press for substantial social change, while social unionism is a broader term encompassing social movement unionism, consensus-oriented labor-community partnerships, and other forms of union social engagement such as community service (Turner and Cornfield 2007, 15; Hyman 1996, 69-72).
4. There is considerable overlap of Wheeler's conception of social unionism and the term "community unionism," which appears in a number of recent articles and papers, especially by

Australian authors. See, for example, Fine (2001), Lipsig-Mumme (2003), Rainnie and Ellem (2006), Tattersall (2008a; 2008b; 2008c), Wray (2008a), and Cockfield et al (2008). According to Carla Lipsig-Mumme (2003, 3), community unionism “describes a whole range of alliances between union and community, and who the community is that we want to link with may also take many forms.”

5. In addition to the literature on specific aspects of social unionism, there are also compilation volumes that address various topics involving labor-community coalitions. See, for example, Breecher and Costello (1990), Reynolds (2004), and Turner and Cornfield (2007). See also the survey volume by Reynolds (2002) and the extensive literature review in Nissen (2004), which includes attention to matters not mentioned in the present article, such as labor-environmental alliances, religion-labor partnerships, unions and the global justice movement, and coalitions supporting union contract campaigns. Along with Shantz (2009), the aforementioned works by Nissen (2004) and Turner and Cornfield (2007) are also part of the literature that assesses social unionism’s prospects, challenges and limitations.

6. For the Milwaukee development plan that provided a foundation for CSM’s subsequent initiatives, see CSM (1994) and Jobs & Environment Campaign (1997). In addition to the accomplishments mentioned above, CSM successfully mobilized to prevent cities from using federal block grants to encourage plant relocations (LeRoy 2000).

7. Another article, by Whalen (2007), also looks at the EDG, but while the present article contributes to labor studies, that article contributes to the critical management studies literature. In particular, it draws attention to the concept of solidarity, usually ignored in conventional management scholarship, and explores implications of how solidarity is defined by the EDG’s leaders.

8. The discussion of the Buffalo-Erie County Labor Management Council in this article is based on Ahern (1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1985) and Whalen (1987).

9. Although work stoppages were at record-low levels across the nation in the 1990s, WNY rates of lost work time had by then fallen to just a fraction of the national level (Fleron et al. 2000, 33).

10. The BELMC may have vanished, but Cornell ILR's extension and public service activities have continued in WNY (although its operations have been scaled back considerably in recent years and its future is uncertain due to the current recession and its impact on state finances). For a brief discussion of two workplace-oriented Cornell initiatives that contributed to the WNY climate of labor-management dialogue and joint problem solving—the Program on Employment and Work Systems and the Institute for Industry Studies—see Greer and Fleron (2005). That article also mentions another local contributor to labor peace, the Western New York Employee Involvement Council, which was established in 1985 and operated through the late 1990s. Still another organization instrumental in contributing to the diffusion of positive labor relations in the region is the WNY chapter of the Labor and Employment Relations Association (formerly the Industrial Relations Research Association), established by area practitioners and academics in 1965.

11. The BNE sought \$1 billion in new investment and a net growth of 50,000 jobs in the region during its first five years.

12. In 2003, the organization—by then a non-profit (501 (c) 3) corporation—severed official ties to the Buffalo AFL-CIO Labor Council and its name was shortened to the Economic Development Group, Inc. Nevertheless, the organization still functions much as envisioned at the outset. At present (mid 2009), a full-time executive director and a part-time office assistant

manage the organization's daily operations. (Additional part-time staffers and volunteers have been assigned to specific initiatives, and that number has fluctuated with project needs and the availability of funds.) The executive director is in regular contact with the EDG's officers, and convenes EDG board meetings eight times per year. All board members must belong to a union, and the board continues to contain members from a diverse set of occupations and industries. (Unions include, for example, the UAW, Teamsters, CWA (representing nurses as well as telecommunication workers), AFSCME, NYSUT (teachers), SEIU, and IBEW.) The organization strives for consensus, though the board can operate by majority rule when necessary. The group has no official ties to the state labor council or national labor federations. In short, it is a group of WNY union leaders who meet to identify and pursue local economic development initiatives (in partnership with other local groups and constituencies whenever and wherever possible).

13. Kevin Donovan was widely recognized as the perfect leader for the EDG. As a longtime union representative at a General Motors plant sold in the 1990s to American Axle and Manufacturing, he forged innovative labor-management partnerships that helped avoid shutdowns in tough times. In the mid-1990s, Donovan and colleagues successfully presented American Axle with the business case for expanding operations to address a persistent problem with the quality of work on outsourced parts. The result was creation of 120 new WNY jobs in 1999 and a facility that by late 2000 had so much work it was "busting at the seams" (Donovan 2000).

14. EDG represents union members in the following WNY counties: Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, and Orleans. The business community's BNE includes an additional county, Wyoming, a largely rural area with few union members. According to a

regional studies institute at the SUNY-University at Buffalo, the total population of these eight counties was just under 1.6 million in 2000 (Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth 2006).

15. The following are some of the *Champions at Work* survey results:

- WNY workers are more productive than employees at comparable facilities outside the region, while unit labor costs are comparable to industry averages;
- Flexible or “high-performance” practices—such as workplace teams, employee involvement, cross-training, and job rotation—are more common at worksites in WNY than they are in the nation overall; and
- Approximately 80 percent of the area’s unionized employers and union leaders characterize their labor-relations relationship as positive or professional, rather than adversarial (and back this up with supporting evidence regarding grievances and collective-bargaining negotiations) (Fleron et al. 2000).

16. According to Greer and Fleron, the BNE and other marketers of the region used the report “to make a case to potential investors nervous about the region’s high union density” (Greer and Fleron 2005, 223).

17. A fourth group, devoted to business-labor relations with government, was envisioned, but its mission was incorporated into the other task forces. The “Believe in Buffalo Niagara” campaign, meanwhile, appears to have recently folded without accomplishing its objective.

18. It is particularly disheartening to this author to find a Champions Network task force seeking to improve coordination of the region’s economic development functions. As mentioned above, the first project of the BELMC—undertaken in the mid-1970s—was designed to coordinate economic development activities within Erie County, and a central reason for establishment of

the BNE was to create an institution coordinating all WNY industrial development agencies. Thus, this task force seems to signal the continued absence of a well-coordinated regional development infrastructure.

19. Reviewing the AFL-CIO's "high-road" guide for this journal in 1999, Bruce Nissen anticipated the business community's reluctance to partner with groups such as the EDG. "Few businesses are willing to engage in such partnerships on a genuine basis," wrote Nissen (1999, 84).

20. Buffalo City Council member James W. Pitts made a similar presentation before the EDG in early 2000. He called his vision of an "eco-industrial park" the "Green Gold initiative" (Pitts 2000).

21. In addition to avoiding political campaigns, the EDG also shuns involvement in public policy battles, but housing rehabilitation might be one area where the EDG could benefit from reconsidering its detachment from policy matters. Recalling the real estate development projects that have become an obstacle to the EDG biomass initiative, one could envision a city policy that requires a certain amount of neighborhood renovation in exchange for development rights.

22. A review of the EDG's financial statements through 2008 (Internal Revenue Service Form 990 records) shows that its annual grants revenue was highest in 2006, at just under \$150,000. (The EDG was also able to generate income on a one-time basis through its sponsorship of the 2007 business exposition in WNY.) In addition, the EDG has generated revenue—from public and private sources—to support its workforce development and neighborhood revitalization initiatives, but that revenue has merely covered associated program expenses.

23. Meanwhile, the BNE fell far short of its initial five-year employment and investment goals. Instead of creating 50,000 new jobs, for example, it created or retained 14,500 (Fink 2004). In its

sixth year (2004-2005 fiscal year), the BNE's most successful to date in terms of employment, it helped create or retain 4,730 jobs and attract \$229 million in capital investment (Buffalo Niagara Enterprise 2005, 9). (The group's record year for attracting investment was 2005-2006, when it attracted \$258 million (Buffalo Niagara Enterprise 2006, 7).)

24. Buffalo, meanwhile, can accommodate about 600,000 residents, but now has fewer than half that number.

25. For recent analyses concerning the economic benefits of investing in clean energy, see Pollin, Heintz and Garrett-Peltier (2009) and Pollin, Wicks-Lim and Garrett-Peltier (2009).

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