WORKING WITH LABOR:
A PRIMER, A HISTORY, A GUIDE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is part of a series of resources developed with funding from the Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium that are designed to help advocates bridge tobacco control organizing and other health justice issues. The Praxis Project would like to thank the publication authors Kim Fellner and Alec Dubro for an incredible job of pulling this guide together. The Praxis Project staff made several editing and research contributions including Juan Carlos Vega, who provided research support in acquiring permissions for images. Former training director Maria Firmino Castillo managed staff coordination with the authors and Carmelita Lacey provided manuscript preparation support. Michelle D. Muhammad of MDM Design did the graphic design work and Jamila White of Jamila White and Associates prepared the guide for the web.

ABOUT THE PRAXIS PROJECT

Praxis is a national, nonprofit organization that builds partnerships with local groups to influence policymaking and win equitable treatment in health care and health-related issues for all communities. Committed to closing the health gap facing communities of color, we forge alliances for healing and building healthy communities.

We help local groups hold institutions and governmental agencies accountable by designing community-based plans, conducting research, developing media strategies and legal assistance to achieve sustainable results.

Our goal is to help build community power and support local groups, especially those in communities of color, as they become effective advocates capable of sharply influencing legislative and policy decisions that affect community well being.

Praxis trains our local partner organizations and provides research, technical assistance and financial support to tackle issues impacting the well being of communities.

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How can community organizations and public agencies work with labor unions to advance social, environmental and economic health? This quick primer on labor unravels the mysteries of union structure, explores its rich history, and offers some hints for successful collaboration. But first, we need to tackle one critical question: why bother?

A union, at its most basic and profound, is people organizing collectively to gain voice and power to achieve a greater common good. However, when we think “labor union” our images are often in the sepia tones of old photographs - coal miners covered in dust, young girls hunched over sweatshop sewing machines, sit-down strikers in auto plants in the 1930s. Even César Chavez and a long line of farm workers winding across the Delano Valley in California, or Martin Luther King, Jr. marching with sanitation workers in Memphis - all seem like ghost flickers of another era.

And that’s how corporations, right-wing think tanks and many politicians want it. They want us to believe that unions are a relic of the past — outdated, ineffective and unnecessary in today’s economic, political and social environment.

Given some of the most obvious indicators, you might almost believe them. Union membership is down from a high of one-third of the work force in 1960 to a low of 12.9 percent in 2003. The news is filled with stories of failed strikes and contract give backs. Millions of people are working at Wal-Mart and McDonalds in dead-end minimum wage jobs with no union in sight. Even the rallying cry of the 1886 movement for an eight-hour day - “Eight hours for work, Eight hours for rest, Eight hours for what we will” - sounds almost as radical today as it did more than a century ago.

Furthermore, it sometimes feels like labor doesn’t know which side it should be on. When the United Automobile Workers come out against new auto emission air quality standards, or the construction unions favor a pipeline in the Alaskan wilderness, or you look at the small numbers of women and people of color in top union leadership positions, it’s enough to make one wonder.

But dig below the surface, and we discover another reality - one that transcends the self-interested policies of corporate America and the flaws and vulnerabilities of labor itself.

To begin with, the problems that precipitated the growth of the labor movement are still very much with us: jobs that don’t pay a living wage; huge income disparity among individuals - and among countries; more than 40 million Americans without health insur-
ance; companies that steal from workers by altering their timesheets and raiding their pension plans; intimidation and discrimination in the workplace; no say over the conditions that govern at least a third of our lives.

Secondly, the face of labor has changed along with that of the country. Where once union constituencies were based in crafts and industries, they are now often public and professional. Today, there are about five times as many unionized actors in the country as unionized coal miners. And the major growth in unionization since the 1950s has been in the public sector. More than 37 percent of public workers are unionized (as opposed to just over 8 percent of the private sector), with teachers having one of the highest rates of union membership. In addition, the numbers of women and people of color in unions have risen steadily...and for good reason.

In 2002, unionized workers earned 26.9 percent more than nonunion workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The differential is even higher for African-American and Latino workers, and the impact is especially large in low-wage occupations. For example, unionized cashiers earn an average of $10.97, while unorganized workers earn $8.05 - a difference of more than $6,000 a year.

Unionized workers are more likely to have health and retirement benefits. In 1999, 73 percent of union workers in private industry had medical benefits, compared with only 51 percent of nonunion workers. Union workers also are more likely to have retirement and short-term disability benefits; 79 percent of union workers are covered by pension plans versus 44 percent of nonunion workers. However, beyond bread and butter issues, beyond the individual workplace, unions have a critical impact on the social policies that affect all of us. A popular bumper sticker says, “The Labor Movement - The Folks Who Brought You The Weekend.” And that’s just the beginning.

- Unions were a major force in the fight for public education, for social security, for occupational safety and health legislation and a host of other social programs.
- In the 2000 presidential elections, union households represented 30 percent of all the votes cast.
- Unions have in recent years been at the forefront of recent attempts to advance citizenship opportunities and worker rights for immigrants.
- Unions currently underwrite the most effective campaigns for comprehensive health care and coverage for the uninsured.
strikes, sit-downs, negotiations, wages, benefits. What could they possibly have to do with health? As it turns out, nearly everything. According to sociologist Dr. David R. Williams, 90 percent of health factors are non-medical. Housing, immediate environment, and working conditions all have a huge impact. In fact, how you live during your waking and sleeping hours makes more difference to your health than what medicines you take or even what access you get to health care providers. And here is where labor unions come in.

Life expectancy began to rise dramatically in the latter half of the 19th century when communitywide public health measures were instituted. But the major breakthrough in health was the attainment of the eight-hour workday. Not only were people less over-worked and better rested but they were able to attend to other matters that influenced health. And a rise in wages meant better and more food.

Little of this could have happened without the growth of labor unions. Even where workers were not directly organized, the improvements that unions sought often benefited other workers. By agitating, struggling, and fighting, unions managed to earn the passage of some of the most significant legislation and practices in our history: child labor laws, the minimum wage, health and safety regulations. And they continue to be the strongest and most vociferous proponents of workplace environmental issues.

Several events in the early 1900s created an impetus for occupational safety and health legislation. Jacob Riis, a New York City police reporter, pioneered the use of photography for social justice, recording the hazards of tenement life and advocating for reform; his efforts helped give rise to modern social work. Upton Sinclair's famous book, The Jungle, about the health and safety hazards of the meatpacking industry was published in 1906. And in 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company sweatshop in New York City killed 146 young seamstresses who had been locked in by company management, many of them jumping to their deaths from the top floor of the building. The resulting public uproar led to important changes in building codes and working conditions and brought new energy and converts to the union cause.

More public action was to come. In 1919, the International Labor Organization (ILO, now a UN agency) was asked to "draw up a list of the principal processes to be considered unhealthy," and in 1930 the organization published its first Encyclopedia of Occupational Health and Safety. In 1939, Carey McWilliams' book, Factories in the Field, followed by John Steinbeck's novel, The Grapes of Wrath, highlighted the desperate conditions of migrant farm workers.

Mine worker safety has always received attention, due to the frequent and dramatic accidents in the mines. The United Mine Workers of America Welfare and Retirement Fund was established in 1946, with the federal government as a party to the agreement. In its wake, new clinics and hospitals were built in the coalfields to deliver health care to miners and their families. Many of the health problems involved black lung disease, and the union was critical in achieving legislation to protect workers from coal dust and to compensate victims. Ironically, this history has not translated into a current clean air policy by the union.

For many unions, health and safety is a double-edged sword that pits public health against the threat of job loss...
In fact, for many unions, health and safety is a double-edged sword that pits public health against the threat of job loss. These days, employers faced with a push for more stringent health or environmental rules threaten to move to countries with no such legislation, forcing unions to make difficult decisions about their priorities. In 2000, Appalachian coal miners moved to back George W. Bush in the presidential election based on Bush’s promise to revive the coal industry. He did, but part of the result is that he eased or eliminated safety and health protections, and miners are now scrambling to maintain standards that protect them from airborne coal dust and resulting black lung disease.

Yet, even with its flaws, the labor movement still provides a political and cultural environment to introduce and help implement health changes. The science exposing the dangers of smoking was already decades old before a social movement - aided by public health organizations, activists and unions - was ready and able to challenge the tobacco industry and people’s ingrained habits. And while the impact on public policies and health has been nothing short of revolutionary, it came at the expense of tobacco workers’ livelihoods; there are moves to compensate the affluent tobacco farmers, but the workers have often been left with neither jobs nor compensation.

However, despite the conflicts and competing interests, many unions have a history of facilitating health legislation. How many people know that the long-overdue move to ban smoking in airplanes was the direct result of lobbying by the flight attendants’ unions and the AFL-CIO? Or that unions were the most important group behind passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) in 1970? Without the efforts of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW, now called PACE), and particularly those of its late legislative director Anthony Mazzocchi and vice president Robert Wages, there would have been no OSHA. Mazzocchi also assisted OCAW member Karen Silkwood, a worker who revealed that the Kerr-McGee corporation of Oklahoma was falsifying safety data about its nuclear fuel rods - a case that received national attention. OCAW also instigated one of the first union corporate campaigns - a public drive that includes intense research and community coalition building to put pressure on corporations as part of a 1973 strike against Shell Oil on health and safety issues. They created coalitions with environmental and community groups, and forged
alliances with Shell Oil workers in South Africa as well. In the end, Shell agreed to bargain on these issues.

Labor also has a vested interest in health issues because it includes more than a million health care members. Since the 1960s, we’ve seen a huge leap in the organizing among health workers. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and 1199 - now merged - were the major forces in this organizing, and now have more than 755,000 members in the health field. SEIU and 1199 have also taken strong positions linking the well-being of their members in hospitals and in home health care work to the health and safety of patients and the public. Their Americans for Health Care campaign is an important part of the struggle to achieve health care for all.

In fact, most unions are actively engaged in the policy debate over health care insurance, and are facing major battles to preserve the health care provisions in their contracts. The crisis means that there are new opportunities for collaboration and common goals around which to build relationships.

**LABOR AND KYOTO**

Activists battling the effects of globalization often mention labor and environmental concerns in the same sentence, but labor usually doesn’t see it that way. Labor has managed to thwart environmental protections, and environmental groups often fail to consider the problems of labor. In the 1970s, for instance, the glass workers’ unions strenuously opposed bottle return plans on the grounds that they would reduce the need for new glass and, therefore, reduce the need for glass workers. Over the years, the United Auto Workers have consistently sided with the auto industry in opposing any emissions or fuel economy standards because they would possibly increase the price of new cars and thereby cut into sales.

Even at the international level, U.S. labor has fought environmental regulation, sometimes successfully. Leading up to, and during the negotiations over the Kyoto Climate Change Convention and Treaty, the AFL-CIO sought to oppose any greenhouse gas reductions because of the possible effect on employment. The opposition was headed by the United Mine Workers of America on the grounds that if Kyoto were approved, there would be fewer coal mining jobs. As a result, the AFL-CIO opposed the Kyoto Treaty and helped keep the U.S. from ratifying it. Whether this action helped the 20,000 or so active UMWA members keep their jobs is uncertain, but it showed that to gain support, the environmental movement has to take labor into account.

One way to do that is to take labor’s issues seriously, and for environmentalists and other activists to work with labor before their support is needed. A coalition only works, of course, when all components believe they benefit.
Ellen Golombek brings a powerful commitment to working families and to the difficult challenge of taming the American health care crisis. A former president of the Colorado Federation of Labor, she is the director of Americans for Health Care - a nonpartisan campaign launched by the Service Employees International Union to establish affordable, quality health care for all.

SEIU has a big stake in the health care issue from many perspectives. For one, it represents more than 755,000 health care workers, making it the largest union in the health field. SEIU is also the largest union in the AFL-CIO, with 1.6 million members - many of whom are lower-wage workers with a huge stake in negotiating health care benefits in their contracts and communities. Finally, SEIU has a long history of engagement with African-American and immigrant workers, and its innovative campaigns, like Justice for Janitors and the groundbreaking home health care workers organizing effort in California, have pushed the envelope on forging labor-community coalitions to advance worker rights.

Americans for Health Care takes those struggles the next step, consciously building a broad coalition of working families, small business owners, seniors, health care workers, community leaders, policy makers and individuals. Noting that 44 million Americans are uninsured - and nearly twice that number have had a lapse in coverage sometime over the past two years, AHC goals include:

- Care that is cost-efficient and medically effective;
- A core package of health insurance benefits with choices comparable in quantity and scope to those available to federal employees; and
- Financing that is fair and includes employers, individuals, and the federal, state and local governments.

AHC is preparing for campaigns in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington and Wisconsin to:

- Help pass legislation that increases access to quality affordable health coverage,
- Showcase good employers who provide coverage for their workers, and shine the spotlight on bad employers who don’t; and
- Develop a nationwide voting bloc of millions of Americans who declare health care for all as their criteria for supporting specific candidates.

“Whenever there is a health care event/action, we’d love community support and where we have AHC campaigns and it’s appropriate, we could reciprocate that support,” Golombek says. She noted that there are many opportunities for collaboration as part of larger health care coalitions and to support legislation at the state level. She urges agencies and community groups to, “let us know about your activities. This is a goal that so many of us share, and that needs all of us to be successful.” For the latest information, go to www.americansforhealthcare.com.
Although the structure of the American labor movement might seem a mystery from the outside, a map and some good clues can lead you to a wealth of opportunities. The difficulties come with knowing who is who, and which specific unions and individuals are open to collaborative efforts. Some clues for identifying union allies are included in the next chapter.

While some European countries have competing socialist, communist, Christian-Democrat and other national labor federations, the U.S. has only one - the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, AFL-CIO - and the vast majority of U.S. trade unions are part of it. The key independent unions remaining outside the AFL-CIO are the National Education Association (NEA), the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC), and the United Electrical Workers (UE). Here are the basic building blocks of the American labor movement from the bottom up:

**MEMBERS**

Employees in a workplace, or who work for the same employer, may decide they want a union to help them improve their wages and working conditions, and to provide a structure for negotiating with management. Workers who arrive at this decision will generally contact a few unions to see which one might best suit their needs. If they decide to proceed, they will establish an organizing committee and sign union authorization cards saying they want the union.

Once a majority of workers have signed cards, these are submitted to the U.S. National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which sets an election date. A majority of the workers must vote for union representation, before it is authorized to bargain on behalf of the workers. This is a common scenario, although there are many variations. Sometimes, if a majority of workers have signed cards, the employer can decide to recognize the union without an election - although this is increasingly rare.

Some unions are trying to create worker organizations without NLRB jurisdiction. For instance, the IUE-CWA, part of the Communications Workers of America, formed a membership organization called WAGE (Working at GE) to create pre-unions at two of GE's nonunion facilities. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) has frequently staged walkouts and boycotts without becoming NLRB-sanctioned. Fewer than half of all states legally support the right of public employees to bargain collectively, so many have formed unions anyway. In Mississippi, a notoriously anti-union jurisdiction, the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees has represented thousands of workers despite the lack of legal protection. Similar organizations exist elsewhere.
The basic membership unit of the labor movement is the union local. There are, literally, thousands of local unions, and each is generally affiliated with a national, or international, union.

The purpose of the union local is to insure workplace democracy. Locals help create an organization close enough to the members so that all who wish can participate in deciding contract priorities, deliberating on important issues and electing officers.

Originally, locals were based in one factory. Some of those like the Ford River Rouge automobile plant employed as many as 120,000 workers, but most were more modest in size.

Other locals were citywide in scope. Originally, all the union carpenters in Chicago, for instance, might belong to one local. If it got too big or unwieldy, or if there were a political conflict, it might split into two or more locals. Today, in Chicago, there are 21 carpenter union locals, united in a district council. Other big cities are similar.

As transportation and communications improved, though, local unions came to cover much larger territory. In public worker unions, for example, all the employees of one, or several, government agencies might belong to one local - even though they might be hundreds of miles apart.

The Pennsylvania Social Services Union is Local 668 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Its jurisdiction includes state welfare social workers throughout Pennsylvania, who are covered by a single contract.

There are even a few national locals. The National Writers Union, for example, is chartered as a local of the United Auto Workers, although its members live all over the United States. But for the purpose of the parent union, it is considered as one local. For these locals, meetings might take place within geographic chapters or sublocals.

Locals usually have their own bylaws and officers and control their own finances, with a percentage of dues money going up the ladder to regional and national entities. Many locals have the power to negotiate contracts with employers, although sometimes these are done by several locals acting in concert, or even by regional or national unions. But many contracts exist only at the local level.

Whether they're headquartered in Washington or Detroit or Nashville, American unions are usually called internationals. That's because many unions have locals in Canada. Although many Canadian divisions of American unions have broken away, others remain tied to U.S. unions.

An international is the strongest power within the labor movement. Although locals have considerable autonomy, internationals have the power to compel locals to act, and usually make sure that any variations in bylaws are reconciled. Internationals are the glue...
holding the locals together and they do that through national conventions, standing committees, executive boards, financial and technical assistance, and national communications.

Internationals are responsible for lobbying on a federal level; they try to influence both executive and legislative policies. Most internationals also have organizing, policy, education, research and communications departments. Many internationals also have safety and health departments which do research and training.

Almost all the international unions are referred to by their acronyms - which can be confusing. The AFL-CIO website (www.aflcio.com) provides a list of all its member national and international unions. However, here are a few that you may encounter in your work. Public employee unions, the most rapidly growing sector of the labor movement, are found in almost all communities, and tend to be fairly progressive on a host of issues.

**Among the key unions representing (non-teacher) public employees are:**

- **AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees, www.afge.org)**, which represents federal workers.

- **AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, www.afscme.org)**, which has 1.4 million members in a wide range of job categories.

- **SEIU (Service Employees International Union, www.seiu.org)**, which has 1.6 million members in public employment, health care and building service.

SEIU and AFSCME both represent (and have in the past competed for) some public employees at the state and local levels. Unlike AFSCME though, SEIU represents workers in both the public and private health care sector, as well as in building maintenance. Several years ago, SEIU affiliated District 1199, which represents hospital and health care workers in a number of cities, especially in New York. SEIU is also responsible for the Justice for Janitors organizing campaign. SEIU is seen as progressive in its policies and aggressive in its organizing although, like all unions, its locals vary widely.
There are two teachers’ unions:

- AFT (American Federation of Teachers, www.aft.org), which has approximately 1 million members and is part of the AFL-CIO. Its membership base is somewhat diverse, including support personnel and even some locals covering hospital nurses.

- NEA (National Education Association, www.nea.org), which is the largest union in the country, with 2.6 million members, mostly in suburban K-12. It is unaffiliated (not part of the AFL-CIO).

The AFT was founded in 1916, and has functioned as a union since the 1940s; it is active in 43 states. The NEA was founded in 1870 as a professional organization, but has, for the past 50 years or so, served the role of a union. Some states have more NEA representation, some have the AFT, and some have both. The AFT was traditionally the more militant, although it was often more conservative on foreign policy issues. In recent decades, there have been merger talks between the two.

There are dozens of private sector unions; which ones you encounter may depend on the industries in your region, or on whether a union has targeted your location as an organizing priority. In the past, unions sought to organize one craft or one industry (plumbers or the auto industry), but today most unions have a much more diverse membership, with locals and units that may have nothing to do with the union’s original purpose. Below are some of the largest and most familiar of American unions:

- The UAW (United Automobile Workers, www.uaw.org), the USWA (United Steelworkers, www.uswa.org) and the IAM (International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, www.iamaw.org) are the backbone of industrial unionism. All have gone through periods of being less and more liberal. The UAW has a long-standing liberal tradition in areas of social justice and foreign policy, but has often seen environmental issues as conflicting with the interests of their members, especially when it comes to auto emission standards. All these unions are shrinking as factories move overseas.

- UNITE/HERE (www.unitehere.org) came into existence this year as a merger between UNITE, the garment workers union, and HERE, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union. UNITE was itself an amalgamation of the old International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. UNITE has also suffered severely from the loss of jobs, as employers move their manufacturing plants offshore. HERE represents workers at hotels and restaurants primarily in major cities, and also represents support workers at
Yale and several other universities. UNITE and HERE both have strong organizing histories; and the newly merged union, with 440,000 active members, is likely to be a major player on the community-labor scene.

- **UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers, www.ufcw.org)** is the other major union in the commercial service sector; among its members are the supermarket clerks at Safeway, Albertson’s and other chains who recently endured a difficult strike in California over health benefits. The UFCW has been working on a campaign to organize Wal-Mart.

- **The construction trades are well-organized in many geographic areas.** These are organized along craft lines, although many now have divisions that may have little or nothing to do with construction. The largest construction unions are the Laborers International Union (www.liuna.org), generally known simply as the Laborers, and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (www.carpenters.org). Other major construction unions are the International Union of Operating Engineers (www.iuoe.org), the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (www.bacweb.org), and the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (www.ibpat.org). There have been some innovative efforts to organize the construction trades, especially in Las Vegas; these efforts frequently include large numbers of Latino workers.

- **The Teamsters, officially the International Brotherhood of Teamsters or IBT (www.teamster.org)** have 1.4 million members. Although they were thrown out of the AFL-CIO for corruption in 1957, they returned to the fold 30 years later. Teamsters have a base in trucking but the union has a diverse membership that includes nurses and office workers. Although there are exceptions, the Teamsters have not been known for collaborative work.

- **OPEIU (Office and Professional Employees International Union, www.opeiu.org)** represents office workers, including some at universities and non-profits.

- **CWA (the Communications Workers of America, www.cwa-union.org)** have their base among phone company employees but have organized widely in the communications sector. The union also represents some public employees and has been innovative in its organizing approaches among high-tech workers. It is the sponsoring union of Jobs with Justice, (uni JWJ, www.jwj.org), a progressive organization that plays a pivotal role in uniting labor and community efforts around workplace issues. CWA has also affiliated a number of other unions in the communications sector, including typographers and The Newspaper Guild (www.newsguild.org), and television camera operators, National Association of Broadcast and Technical Employees, (www.nabetcwa.org).
Many writers, actors, musicians and athletes are also unionized. Many screen and television writers are members of the Writers Guild of America, WGA (www.wga.org) and book and magazine writers often join the National Writers Union, NWU (www.nwu.org). Stage actors are part of Actors Equity, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG, www.sag.org) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA, www.aftra.org) - and many belong to all three.

AFL-CIO

These unions, and dozens more, belong to the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO speaks for labor collectively in the United States and advances labor’s political and public positions. It represents a consensus of labor’s priorities and opinions.

The AFL, as it is often called (it is also sometimes referred to as The Fed) is based in Washington, D.C. It is actually a collection of departments and semi-independent institutes, which work more or less in concert. Among these are 11 program departments such as field mobilization, legislative, political, international, research, safety and health, and legal. In addition, there are seven trade and industrial departments, such as construction trades, food and allied services, metalworkers (auto, steel, machinists), and professional employees.

For small organizations, the program departments are notuser-friendly, with the possible exception of field mobilization, whose job includes working with regional and central labor bodies. Field Mobe, as it is often called, has regional offices as well. However, other AFL departments have tons of information and can be helpful in specific circumstances if you get the right person. The trade and industrial departments are generally for internal labor coordination and have, for the most part, not been active in building coalitions with community organizations.

There are also constituency groups: These include the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), and Pride At Work, representing the LGBT community within labor. The Alliance for Retired Americans advocates for retirees. Although these organizations tend to deal with issues inside the labor movement itself, they can provide some access and, on certain issues, can become allies.
But wait, there's more. The AFL-CIO is not confined to Washington. There are 51 state AFL federations (Puerto Rico is included) that coordinate union locals within the state and lobby at state capitals. Finally, there are some 570 central labor councils which do everything from coordinating campaigns to sponsoring parades. The state federations (usually referred to as state feds) are critical if you are pursuing state policies and legislation, although they vary widely in quality and vision. Central labor bodies are usually citywide (although they sometimes encompass a larger area); again, they are variable in terms of their use and accessibility.

In the past few years, there has been a debate within the labor movement about how it could be more effectively structured. Several international union presidents have joined together to form the New Unity Partnership (nicknamed "the Nupsters"). One of their proposals is that the number of international unions be reduced, and that each one organizes only in its core sector. They also want the AFL-CIO to be more centralized and play a more aggressive role in coordinating organizing and political action. This is brewing into a major internal controversy. Stay tuned.

GLOBAL UNION CONFIGURATIONS

Although it sometimes seems like we're determined to be all alone in the world, U.S. unions belong to two major groupings of unions at the international level.

The better known, perhaps, is the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, based in Brussels. The supranational organization is composed of 215 national trade unions, or union groupings, from 145 countries. The ICFTU claims to represent 125 million union members around the world.

The ICFTU has active programs to advance union rights and works on such things as child labor, the environment and health. It also has official status with United Nations groups such as UNESCO and the International Labor Organization, and works with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It has an office in Washington, D.C. as well as at the UN in New York.

Then, there are the ten Global Union Federations (GUFs), international bodies that represent unions in specific industries or occupational groups. These include the International Metalworkers' Federation, Public Services International (government workers), Education International (teachers and educators), International Union of Food Workers, and the International Transport Workers' Federation. Unions may belong to more than one GUF. All GUFs are headquartered in Europe.

GUFs tend to do internal organizing, strengthening individual unions through trainings and educational programs. If you are working on a campaign that involves a multinational corporation (i.e. Coca Cola or IBM), these entities might prove helpful, at least for research and connection with activists working on a similar issue in other countries. Most have regional groupings, such as Latin America or Southeast Asia, and all of them move resources from the North to the global South. Several have offices in Washington. With this general map of the labor movement, we're ready for some tools of navigation.
You'd think it should be easy. Pick up the phone, call a union with whom you want to collaborate, and when they say yes, you're on your way. But how do you know which union to call, how do you know with whom you want to speak? What can you do to promote a positive outcome?

Labor history and structure are prologue to crafting a relationship with unions, but the success of the process is, like the devil, in the details. Like most organizations, labor unions are full of contradictions, and navigating within them can be a challenge. Here are a few steps to guide you through the process:

1. Be informed about the labor movement.

You can discover a lot through public sources — your local newspaper and at least one national news source (NPR, New York Times, Washington Post), the internet, the library. These will help you track current negotiations, which often feature the issues that are on labor's agenda. For example, a United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) strike in Southern California highlighted the crisis in health care coverage as well as the pernicious impact of Wal-Mart on unionized workers.

2. Pick issues that resonate.

Not all the issues you work on will provide an equally good basis for collaborative efforts with labor. Start out with one where you can make a good argument for its relevance to the union.

Unions today are under siege. U.S. laws governing labor organizing are among the most regressive in the developed world; manufacturing and industrial unions are losing thousands of jobs, and therefore members; and globalization is creating tremendous downward pressure on American wages and benefits. Faced with a hostile political climate and sinking membership in the private sector, unions are feeling the pinch financially, and most tend to urgent member-driven priorities. This means they must see your issue as related to their self-interest in order to devote resources - staff time, money, political capital - to it.

As Cathy Howell, Deputy Director of the AFL-CIO Southern Region explains, “Labor unions don’t exist to be social justice organizations. The primary focus is to represent people in the work force and to enforce contracts.” TransAfrica President Bill Fletcher, who spent years working in the labor movement, concurs, noting that, “Unions often make political alignments based on the perceived needs of their members. This is often very narrow rather than longterm.”

This fact also requires your sensitivity to the internal conflicts that unions may feel between advancing the broader social good - such as clean air - and hanging on for dear life to members’ jobs - which may involve building gas-guzzling SUVs, mining coal or working in smoky bars. In some of these cases, even the long-term
health of the workers may take second place to the short-term retention of jobs.

As Economic Policy Institute’s Janice Fine puts it, “Think about the campaign from labor’s point of view. What’s in labor’s self-interest, and what’s not. Then you can identify problems you wouldn’t think about otherwise, and develop strategies to address them.” Generally, if you want to advance your efforts with labor, you will have greater success if you’re able to frame your issue as an important part of union organizing or political goals. As Howell summarizes, “To get the deepest buy in, you need the strongest connection to their issues.” But that doesn’t mean you can’t be innovative in how you make the connections. For example, the supermarket strike raised the issue of Wal-Mart as a force in depressing wages and benefits. Therefore, if you were fighting Wal-Mart because of their discrimination against women or their impact on the environment or on urban sprawl, you might well find an ally in the United Food and Commercial Workers. In that case, it would also be useful to know that the UFCW has plans to organize Wal-Mart workers and is close to signing up thousands of employees of Wal-Mart in Canada.

Like the Chinese ideogram for “crisis” that signifies both danger and opportunity, this moment also holds some real promise for collaborative ventures:

• Health care is at the top of labor organizing and political agendas.
• Living wage campaigns have provided opportunities for collaborative work in dozens of cities.
• Hard times mean that we all need to expand our base of allies.

In fact, because the labor laws are so biased against unions and the new economy forces workers to move more rapidly from one low-wage job to the next, many issues that used to be dealt with in union contracts are now being addressed through local ordinances instead. Over the past decade or so, living wage legislation has been passed in more than 100 cities - and most of those struggles have involved vibrant labor-community coalitions.

Howell notes that, “Health care is a really good issue on which to connect. It’s the number one bargaining focus in everyone’s contract, and union people have an interest in support for their bargaining fights.”

Fletcher puts it this way, “Unions often fear that community-based organizations are approaching them with a hidden agenda or
seeking funds. Interactions with unions need to be straightforward.” This means that the relationship goes both ways. Remember, when you ask for help, you should also have some ideas about how you can support the union in meeting its own goals.

3. Figure out whom to approach.

Now who are the right partners for the issue you want to address? Which industries or workplaces are affected? On whose jobs does the harm, or proposed remedy, have an impact? Are any of the issues similar to those that might be addressed in a union contract or grievance procedure? Have any unions been vocal on the issues involved? Has labor been active promoting any related legislation, locally or nationally? Can you make the case for why the issue should be of concern to a particular union? The answers to these questions will lead you to unions that may share your interest in an issue, although you will have to probe further to discover whether they also share your views.

You should also consult other organizations who have taken this path, or who may serve as intermediaries between labor and community organizations. If you have a Jobs With Justice chapter in your city (check at www.jwj.org), that is often a good place to start; tell them a bit about what you are doing, and ask them to give you some advice about local unions that might be willing to engage. You might also check for a local affiliate of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice (www.nicwj.org), which unites progressive clergy and laity around worker issues. There are also 22 members of the National Coalitions/Committees on Occupational Safety and Health - known as COSH groups - around the country (www.cosh-network.org). These groups offer training on health and safety issues; work with unions to address these issues in organizing campaigns and at the bargaining table; and advocate for enforcement of legislation that protects workers on the job.

Finally, there are often politically-based city or statewide coalitions that bring together progressive organizations and unions. Some examples are the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action (www.mapa-mn.org) or Progressive Maryland (www.progressivemaryland.org). Several similar groups have citizen action in their name. For advice on finding this kind of coalition in your region, you might consult the Midwest Academy in Chicago (www.midwestacademy.com). Where no such organizations are available, and no one in your wider circle has union contacts, there are a few additional options. You might look for a state-level union lobbyist who has dealt with issues related to yours (assuming that they have taken positions that potentially mesh with yours). If you have a predominant union in your area (the UAW in Detroit, SEIU in California, the NEA or AFT concerning education issues), you will need to understand how they feel about your issue, whether or not they are allies - and it is worth having a sense of this prior to making formal union contacts.

If you are trying to get a sense of which unions in your region to approach, you can also contact your state federations of labor and central labor councils. Regional labor federations play a major role in state legislative issues and policy debates and although they are not all equally

Can you make the case for why the issue should be of concern to a particular union?
effective, or helpful, there are probably 100 that have some capacity to do so, and more than 50 that are extremely active. From Atlanta to San Diego, Cleveland to Denver, there are talented staffers with knowledge about the unions in their area. The AFL-CIO Field Mobilization Department in DC, or its regional offices (see AFL-CIO website for contact information) may be able to help you assess whether an approach would be fruitful and steer you to a person with whom to have an initial conversation.

If you have identified a union you wish to approach, but have been unable to assess whether or not they might be interested, you can also ask for an informational meeting at that union with the head of an appropriate department that dovetails with your issue (occupational safety and health, organizing, legislative, etc.); if you are going in cold, keep it at the informational level, since a formal request for collaboration should be made through the elected leadership.

4. Deal with the union leaders, not around them.

When you have done your research and are ready to forge a relationship, contact the union leadership. Fletcher suggests, “Unions need to be approached formally about initiatives and not indirectly, even if one knows members of a particular union. Those members can support an initiative that you advance, but a community-based organization should approach the elected leadership and be conscious of protocol.”

“Don’t ever try to go around the leadership,” Fine cautions. “This doesn’t mean you don’t figure out allies, but you can’t move something substantial without being direct. And don’t make assumptions about who the leaders are or what they care about. People are complicated. There are people you might not agree with on every issue, but they are committed trade unionists who believe in social justice.”

5. Understand the differences between unions and community organizations.

Unions can be progressive, conservative or uncommitted depending on the issue; often the same union can be progressive on one issue and conservative on another. “Unions are united fronts,” Fletcher explains. “They have within themselves various political tendencies, religious groups, etc. that are bound together by the union itself and not by ideology. Workers,” he adds, “generally join unions as a condition of work and not because they have made a conscious decision to join. This makes them different from many community-based organizations.”

Fine relates, “One of the most profound pieces of advice I ever got was from the local union president of the electrical workers at the GE plant in Lynn, Massachusetts. He reminded me that they didn’t select their members, GE did. It’s a very different challenge than groups whose members seek them out because they agree with the issue and want to work on it. Anything a union tries to do with its members politically is a sell.”
Unions and community organizations also have different systems for establishing policy and accountability. Union leaders are elected, and are accountable to their memberships; sometimes the memberships are more progressive than the leaders, just as often it’s the other way around. It’s always a delicate balancing act. With some agencies and community organizations, the staff is often the driving force; there is often a more fluid, and less clear, process for decision making and accountability. These differences can lead to misunderstandings. It’s important to be clear on how the union decision-making functions, and how to be respectful of that.

6. Forge a real relationship. Tread carefully on common ground.

“Relationship building is not optional or a perk, it’s central and critical,” says Fine. This is the heart of whether a cooperative or collaborative alliance will work - and although forging a relationship will not guarantee success, its absence will almost surely guarantee failure. Yet this key component often gets lost in the press of time, or falls between the cracks in staff transitions, or fails to blossom for lack of institutionalized social structures that nurture interaction.

Relationship building takes a long time, which requires patience and a willingness to understand the other person’s realities. It also means being both tactful and truthful, and building trust over time. “Approaching a relationship with unions tactfully and strategically does not mean being a supplicant,” Fine elaborates. “What makes it work is the level and depth of honesty and reciprocity. Don’t yield your autonomy or agenda. Building a relationship does not mean doing labor’s bidding and never challenging anything. It won’t get the movement or your organization where they need to go if you don’t build a relationship that’s based on honesty. Face up to the differences and be courageous, be tactful, be personal.”

Best Practices for the Long Haul

In the summer of 2001, the National Organizers Alliance convened a meeting of labor and community organizers to explore the nature of this complex relationship. Their discussions yielded the following recommendations for working together:

- Build long-term strategic relationships based on mutual respect. Do not rely on old history, perceptions or assumptions. Forge trust, open and honest communication, and the ability to work through differences
• Arrive at a shared vision and values, reflected in a common agenda
• Agree to shared goals, developed collectively
• Develop joint strategies and structures with all members of the coalition
• Be open to learning from each other’s strengths and experiences. Complement each others approaches and tactics - borrow each other’s strengths. Learn stuff together
• Make a mutual commitment of resources, staff and members - and treat those commitments seriously
• Do what you say you’re going to do
• Be generous in accepting responsibility and sharing credit
• Be prepared to sustain a long-term commitment in specific communities, and around specific issues
• Do internal organizing and education around coalition work, so that the leadership brings the membership along, and broadens everyone’s agendas in substantive ways for the long haul

Beyond achieving some short-term objectives, your efforts to expand the relationships for change will continue to reap rewards - for you, your organization and the larger community. This isn’t the last word, it’s only the beginning.

Among the people consulted for this section were Cathy Howell, deputy director of the AFL-CIO Southern Region; Bill Fletcher, Jr., president of TransAfrica; and Janice Fine, senior fellow on policy and organizing at the Economic Policy Institute. All have spent years working both in community organizations and with the labor movement.

Worker Centers: Another Resource

Another avenue for alliance in your community may be a worker center. Dr. Janice Fine has recently completed a study for the Economic Policy Institute on the growth of immigrant worker centers in the U.S. She defines worker centers as “community-based institutions that provide support to low-wage immigrants, using a combination of service delivery, advocacy and organizing. They are part settlement house, part local civil rights organization, and part union.” The numbers of such centers have increased tremendously in the last decade— from fewer than 5 in 1992 to 133 in 2004 in more than 80 cities, towns and even rural areas.

Fine notes that the term “worker center” does not properly reflect the breadth of the work these organizations are pursuing. “These organizations have much broader agendas,” she comments. “They are really building a local immigrant civil rights movement.”

Among the projects worker centers tackle are: pressuring individual employers to change practices through coordinated local and national actions and boycotts; organizing to raise wages across an industry; targeting industries to raise wages or provide health benefits through passage of public policy; and creating worker-owned cooperatives.

Unfortunately, according to the Fine study, only 15 percent of all centers have ongoing relationships with unions and, in 2002, only 5.6 percent of the lowest fifth of the workforce was unionized. Fine laments that, “If you’re a low-wage worker, you’re just as likely to be struck by lightning as approached by a union.”
The labor movement in the United States did not arise spontaneously. Its history is part of the larger story of human development, tracing vast changes in how people work and for whom, not just here, but throughout the world. This summary reflects the ideas and trends that emerge from union history and continue to shape our current labor, political and cultural landscape.

**Supply and Demand**

The labor movement in the United States has its origins in European peasant movements and in the medieval trade guilds - two lineages that don’t always easily coexist with each other. One way the skilled, hereditary guilds traditionally improved wages and working conditions was to limit the labor supply. Employers then had to meet worker wage demands because there was nowhere else to go for those services. However, as peasants moved from the land to the cities - a migration that exploded during the industrial revolution in the 1800s - it brought a much larger, less uniform, less skilled group of people to the work force - creating a constant pool of replacement workers for each job. This tension between limiting the supply of skilled labor and maintaining decent wages for an ever-growing supply of workers has been a constant thread of union history. It still plays a critical role today in understanding the pressures of the global economy, as workers in the global North try to retain their wage standards in the face of an easily accessible, much poorer work force in the global South.

Most early white settlers of what we now call the United States were individual farmers, and most craft or industrial enterprises were small. The one exception was shipping. Sailors, bound together by close quarters and frequently brutal employers, instinctively understood labor solidarity. What owners and captains called mutinies were what we would call a strike. In fact, the very word is traced to Atlantic sailors. When the sails are furled, they are struck. When a group of sailors refused to work, they called out, “strike the sails.” The word eventually applied to any labor stoppage.
The first land-based recorded strike in the United States was among cordwainers - as shoemakers were then called - in Philadelphia in 1804. Most craft unions at that time were formed for just one strike or action and then disbanded. By the 1820s, though, more or less permanent unions did form and even federations began to emerge.

From the start, unions ran into the same major problem they face today: Employers would use the power of the government to limit or crush them. Owners tried to persuade the courts to rule that strikes - and even unions themselves - were criminal conspiracies. In 1842, Massachusetts courts said that strikes for better working conditions were not criminal, but often local authorities behaved as if they were, using police and even militia to suppress union actions.

**The Industrial Revolution:**

**Class Solidarity Meets Racial Division Meets Women’s Aspirations**

The industrial revolution really was a revolution - fueled by a dramatic increase in the number of inventions and technological advances - and coinciding with a huge move in populations from the farms to the cities and from one country to another.

Industrialists in Europe and the United States began to accumulate more money than anyone outside of royalty had ever seen. These Robber Barons, as they were called in the second half of the 19th century, became immensely rich as they sucked up ownership of railroads and mineral resources. The names Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Carnegie and Frick today convey foundations and museums, but in the 19th century, these super-rich industrialists were as polarizing as Halliburton is today.

Meanwhile, the industrial revolution spawned mass production and a new class of wage labor, as previously inde-
Independent farmers moved to the cities, joining a growing mass of immigrants. These migrations gave birth to a working class consciousness and a host of new philosophies and movements to counter the power of the owners. Socialist ideas had been around at least since the beginning of the 1800s, but they became a potent force through the thinking of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, among others. Not only did socialist ideas gain recognition, but strong international movements tried to confront capital and gain power for the workers. When the huge wave of immigration to the United States began in the 1890s, many immigrants brought socialist ideas with them, as well as some organizing skills. Increasingly, workers, native-born as well as immigrant, responded to the pressures of the new industrial environment with organizing. More than two dozen national unions, such as the first railroad unions, formed during this period.

The American Federation of Labor was founded in 1886. It initially included about 140,000 workers grouped in 25 national unions, and it was concerned only with organizing skilled workers and with supporting political action that benefited its members. It was avowedly not socialist, nor hostile to capitalism. As a result, the AFL philosophy is sometimes called business unionism. But the new working class was often divided by racial and ethnic conflict, as well as gender inequities, and the AFL and its constituent unions reflected these rifts. They were, in short, white supremacist and most, but not all, explicitly excluded people of color from their ranks.

In California and other Western states, many unions were formed in large measure to prevent Chinese workers from undercutting their wages and jobs. Many employers deliberately imported Chinese laborers in order to pay substandard wages and, just as they do today, used the threat of cheap foreign workers to keep established workers from pressing their own wage demands.

Women, too, had second-class status within unions - in the rare cases where they were allowed in at all.
where they were allowed in at all. Throughout the 19th century, male workers kept women out of the work force for cultural reasons and to limit the supply of labor. That changed rapidly with the rise of garment factories where young immigrant women formed a significant part of the labor pool.

Women played an integral role in militant unionism. In 1912, under the banner of the anarchist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), 25,000 textile mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts - more than half of them women and children - went out on strike for 10 weeks. In the end, they secured better wages and a 54 hour work week - after public hearings on their plight drew widespread public outcry. The strike spurred organizing by women textile and garment workers throughout the Northeast and gave us the concept of “bread and roses” - the feminist understanding that organizing was not just about money but about a sweeter, more meaningful life for all workers.

By 1925, there was a 500 percent increase in women union members, nearly half among garment workers. Even so, union leaders in that industry were always men. This is not to say that all unions and union leaders were uniformly sexist, xenophobic and racist. Many did seek to include women, the foreign-born and non-citizens, and some tried to organize black workers. However, the AFL was convened at a time when Jim Crow laws were fully developed and the federal courts were condoning them. In truth, union racial practices were probably no worse than those elsewhere, but by making them part of union culture, by even writing them into the bylaws of many unions, these racist practices were hard to root out, even when labor activists and leaders knew they had to be eliminated.

In 1925, A. Phillip Randolph founded The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first national African-American union. The Brotherhood was opposed by the Pullman Company, by racist elements among existing unions, and by African-American conservative followers of Booker T. Washington. But Randolph had allies in the labor movement, and after a decade-long struggle, the union received a charter from the AFL. Randolph became one of the nation’s most prominent spokesmen for racial equality. The struggle for racial, ethnic and gender inclusion would continue to be fought decade by decade, into the present.

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WORKING WITH LABOR: A Primer, A History, A Guide

The New Deal:
A New Role for Government, A Big Chance for Labor

The law and government were, and remain, ambivalent about unions. In 1914, Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act to limit the size and power of industrywide corporations. However, attorneys for employers read the law as also forbidding workers to combine for the purpose of setting wages. Most courts agreed and for years any industrial action was met with injunctions based on the anti-trust laws. It took the Great Depression to break the deadlock and give the labor movement some new tools for success.

Prior economic depressions had always created job losses and weakened unions. Two things were different this time: labor had the support of the Roosevelt administration and organizing went in a new, dynamic direction.

In 1934, under the urging of President Roosevelt, Congress passed a broad exemption to the Anti-Trust Act called the Wagner Act, which essentially legalized and encouraged union organizing. There were serious shortcomings in the Wagner Act. Southern and some western Democrats would only support the law if it excluded agricultural and domestic laborers - most of whom were black or Latino. But overall, the Wagner Act was a vast improvement for unions and labor gained great power, economically and politically, to the lasting rage of business owners and their allies.

Equally important, part of the labor movement decided to pursue a different kind of organizing model. This model was driven by the need to organize a broad range of diverse skilled and unskilled production line workers, especially in the steel and automobile industries. When the craft unions stymied the AFL's organizing efforts, United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis and his members broke away, leading to the formal establishment of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1938. Defying the traditional craft model of limiting membership, the CIO began to organize everyone who worked at a particular plant, regardless of skill, regardless of race or gender; this is known as wall-to-wall organizing, or the industrial model.

Together, the burgeoning labor movement, progressive forces and the Roosevelt Administration passed a host of progressive legislation which, for the first time, provided a safety net for most citizens. Social Security, Aid to Dependent Children, Unemployment Insurance and Workers Compensation were all part of the package. Unfortunately, these programs are under attack today, under the guise of curbing big government.

The 1950s: Feeding Capitalism, Fighting Communism

By the end of World War II, more than 14 million workers belonged to unions, and collective bargaining had taken hold throughout the industrial economy. Despite a resurgence of anti-labor legislation after World War II, the growth in union membership continued and, in 1955, the two major federations merged to form the AFL-CIO.
The merged AFL-CIO could claim a membership that incorporated close to 35 percent of the work force, an all-time high. Heavy industries such as steel, automobiles, oil, coal and shipbuilding were almost entirely unionized. The Teamsters organized not only trucking company employees but many independent truckers as well. Almost the entire national telephone system, then controlled by American Telephone and Telegraph (ATT), was organized by the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Hollywood had been organized in the 1930s and ‘40s, and those unions quickly unionized the new television industry. The rapidly growing commercial air travel and freight industries took somewhat longer to organize; the first contract with the International Association of Machinists was signed in 1939, but by 1952 the union had agreements with over 80 percent of airlines. In time, pilots and flight attendants formed associations and joined the long-organized mechanics in the labor movement.

However, while the 1950s heralded a new era of prosperity for many workers, and a growth of the middle class, it also signaled a complex change in the culture of the labor movement, brought on by the anti-communist crusade of the McCarthy era.

Communism was, in theory, a workers’ movement, and many members of the Communist Party were active in union organizing and rose up through the ranks. However, after World War II, when the U.S. declared war against communism, and started to purge communists from all sectors of public life, the more conservative unions, and union members, united with the government to get rid of communist influence. They tossed out not only individual members and leaders but, in some cases, entire unions. The International Longshoremen and Warehousemen, the United Electrical Workers (UE) and the Meatpackers Union were among those purged from the CIO.

The communist presence in the house of labor had added militancy to the movement, based on a progressive vision of society that went beyond wages and working conditions. Communists and socialists brought energy to working class solidarity, racial and gender equality and opposition to the seductions of pure capitalism, which ultimately encompassed thoughtless workers and union staff - some of whom more than attended a progressive meeting sometime in their lives - robbed the labor movement of many of its best organizers and thinkers.

With the consolidation of labor power in the AFL-CIO and the ouster of progressive and militant voices, many unions became more complacent and more conservative. Some went beyond mere com-
placency in organizing and representation, with corrupt union leaderships bilking members and thwarting democracy within their organizations. The public was often more familiar with the criminal ties of the Teamsters, Hotel Workers and some construction unions than they were with the many positive accomplishments of the movement.

By the end of the decade, although it still usually promoted liberal domestic policies, the labor movement as a whole no longer aggressively organized workers. And when it came to international affairs, the AFL-CIO consistently promoted a conservative agenda. All these issues would come home to roost in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and beyond.

The War at Home

The ‘60s, that era of dynamic change and enduring myth, tossed a number of ideas into the political stew: The right to vote is not enough to guarantee democracy; class, race and gender are the inseparable triplets of social and economic analysis; the personal is also political; and white men and Western culture are not ordained by God to be in charge of anything, let alone everything. People have been in conflict over these ideas ever since, and on a global scale.

Labor reflected all those rifts in the larger society as they played out in the 1960s and ‘70s through the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the women’s movement and the growth of corporate power.

The Civil Rights movement pushed unions, along with the rest of the country, to live up to their espoused ideals - with mixed results. A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, pivotal figures in the labor movement, were critical organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, but the AFL-CIO itself refused to endorse the march. UAW President Walter Reuther marched arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and King himself was killed on a trip to Memphis in support of striking sanitation workers. With innovative leadership from César Chavez and Dolores Huerta, the United Farm Workers of America was chartered by the AFL-CIO in 1966, and District 1199 mounted campaigns around the nation to organize low-wage hospital workers, many of them African-American, under a rallying cry of “$100 a week.”

However, the house of labor was not always welcoming, and often downright hostile. Black
construction coalitions in many states, demanding integration of building trades unions, were greeted with epithets and garbage hurled from construction sites. The Teamsters tried to destroy the UFW by signing sweetheart deals with growers and sending thugs to intimidate workers in the fields. And people of color in the elected and staff leadership remained a rarity.

The Vietnam War also created a wedge within the ranks of organized labor. Ever since the McCarthy era purges, the AFL-CIO had been an avid proponent of the Cold War, even permitting its international departments to serve as fronts for the CIA and participating in the destruction of left-leaning trade unions in Europe, Central and South America, Asia and Africa. The AFL-CIO endorsement of the war in Vietnam led the UAW to withdraw from the Federation in 1968. At the same time, the rise in state laws that permitted public employees to unionize was bringing large numbers of new, younger and often more liberal workers into the ranks, and many of them were staunchly opposed to the war. They also tended to include a greater proportion of women and people of color, who soon started to push for much greater representation in union leadership positions. In the 1960s and '70s, there were no women on the AFL-CIO Executive Council; the establishment of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) in 1974 finally helped force the Council to elect its first woman member in 1980.

These efforts to liberalize AFL-CIO foreign policies and achieve full inclusion for women and people of color have continued. At the same time, the labor movement found itself confronted with a new set of external corporate and global obstacles that define our current labor climate.

**Challenges of a Changing Environment**

The uneasy peace between labor and management that lasted through the Cold War - thanks in part to a combination of management cooperation and government assistance - began to fall apart in the 1970s. Spurred on by new, aggressive management organizations such as the Business Roundtable, owners drew back from agreements and began using legal and illegal means to break contracts and break unions.

However, the most significant event, symbolic and real, followed the election of the openly anti-union President, Ronald Reagan. The irony was that Reagan himself was a
two-time president of the Screen Actors Guild, the only union official ever elected U.S. President. In 1981, 12,500 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, PATCO, went on strike against the Federal Aviation Agency, principally over working conditions and excessively long working hours. Within 48 hours, Reagan fired the workers and later decertified the union.

Prior to Reagan's action, labor averaged 300 major strikes a year, but since the PATCO firing, the average has been fewer than 50. Business saw Reagan's success as a green light to pursue wage cutting, downsizing and an overall weakening of labor’s power.

Yet, despite the attacks and challenges, there have been a number of positive developments among unions. For one thing, the conservative Cold War labor leadership began to age and, finally, to lose substantial power. In 1995, John Sweeney, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), was elected president of the AFL-CIO, ushering in a new generation of leadership. Sweeney had devoted his life to organizing minorities, low-wage and service workers, and brought a real commitment to organizing. In 1985, SEIU started its Justice for Janitors campaign which, along with aggressive organizing in the health care field, brought tens of thousands of low-wage workers - most of them immigrants and African-Americans - the improved wages and benefits of a union contract.

Labor's renewed efforts to confront a hostile government and corporations forced it to begin to confront its own isolation - both at home and abroad. For the first time in decades, many unions understood that they needed to be part of a larger community in order to win at the bargaining table - or even to survive.

The incoming Sweeney administration also refocused attention on the AFL-CIO's central labor councils (CLCs) and brought them together to create the Union Cities program. Under Union Cities - now active in more than 50 communities - CLCs built long-term community alliances around work and family issues. Some CLCs - such as those in San Diego, Seattle and Cleveland - created non-profit arms for specific community purposes. In San Jose, California, for instance, the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council and community-based organizations formed Working Partnerships; one of its projects was to improve conditions for temporary clerical workers in Silicon Valley by exploring new forms of health

Labor's renewed efforts to confront a hostile government and corporations forced it to begin to confront its own isolation - both at home and abroad. For the first time in decades, many unions understood that they needed to be part of a larger community in order to win at the bargaining table - or even to survive.

The incoming Sweeney administration also refocused attention on the AFL-CIO's central labor councils (CLCs) and brought them together to create the Union Cities program. Under Union Cities - now active in more than 50 communities - CLCs built long-term community alliances around work and family issues. Some CLCs - such as those in San Diego, Seattle and Cleveland - created non-profit arms for specific community purposes. In San Jose, California, for instance, the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council and community-based organizations formed Working Partnerships; one of its projects was to improve conditions for temporary clerical workers in Silicon Valley by exploring new forms of health
American unions are being forced to consider global forces and to work with labor in other countries as equals. Working Partnerships joined with People Acting in Community Together (PACT), a faith-based group, to access tobacco funds to provide health insurance for local children. Other similar groups have worked with environmentalists and building trades to renovate low-income housing using green principles. And still others are deeply involved in state and local Living Wage initiatives.

In 1987, the leadership of the Communications Workers of America initiated an ambitious labor-community organization, Jobs with Justice, to build a new constituency for united action. Today, Jobs with Justice has coalitions in more than 40 cities in 29 states, including unions, worker centers, community groups and individuals, all dedicated to strengthening the rights of workers on the job within a broad context of social justice.

Coalitions came to be essential, because American unions, like those elsewhere, were fighting what has come to be called globalization. Attacks on labor here are part of a worldwide move to enhance corporate development and profit making, regardless of the costs to workers and communities. The economic philosophy of low taxes, few business regulations, privatization, low wages and weak or no unions has affected the United States just as it has Bolivia or Nepal. Now, American unions are being forced to consider global forces and to work with labor in other countries as equals.

Although some U.S. unions still want to address these threats by retreating into a protected high-wage shell, the old tactics of blaming foreigners and immigrants are being challenged by a more internationalist view. This has created some new alliances and new opportunities for collaboration, both at home and abroad. Many new relationships between labor and environmentalists, for example, were forged during the fight against the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and refined in the 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization.

By 2003, organized labor had evolved a clear position on trade. According to Bruce Nissen of the Center for Labor Research and Studies...
at Florida International University, “The officially stated position of the AFL-CIO is that the problem with the FTAA negotiations was not that they promoted trade and globalization, but that they did so in a manner that promoted the interests of multinational corporations at the expense of workers on all sides of national borders.” And, labor took its position to the November Miami demonstrations against the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas where the Steelworkers, the AFL-CIO and other unions were gassed and beaten along with other demonstrators.

Also, in an historic shift, the AFL-CIO in 2000 changed its traditional stances against undocumented workers by supporting stronger immigrant rights provisions and relaxed criteria for citizenship. Sidestepping the opposition of more conservative voices within the Federation, the AFL-CIO sponsored the 2003 Immigrant Freedom Rides, bringing together an unprecedented number of allies to advance a pro-immigrant agenda.

These actions, breaking new ground in collaborative efforts, were forged by mutual self-interest. Labor recognized that its new constituencies included large numbers of immigrants - and that new global economic realities required new allies for survival. Likewise, community organizations have increasingly seen their own struggles as closely tied to the fate of the labor movement.

Particularly in the time since 9/11, when labor, immigrant, civil rights, environmental, community health and advocacy organizations have all been under attack, the message is as clear as it is familiar: the public sector, the safety net and many personal freedoms are all at risk. Progressive forces must band together by building bridges to the oldest and largest movement outside corporate control - the labor movement. It’s time to find that common ground.
This article reflects the successes and frustrations that immigrant community organizations experienced in forging a relationship with labor. It first appeared in The Ark Number 20, January 2003, National Organizers Alliance. It appears with permission of the author. The experiences chronicled in this piece helped create better collaboration in the Immigrant Freedom Rides later in 2003.

Unions are from Mars, Community Groups are from Venus:
Does that Mean We are All Aliens?
By Pancho Arguelles

On October 9th I was one among the many community representatives attending a Washington event to deliver one million post cards for legalization to representatives of Congress. The event was supposed to cap a “One Million Voices for Legalization” campaign spurred by SEIU, with the slogan, “Reward Work.”

But the immigrant community was not rewarded, at least by its allies in the labor movement. On the day of the event, they failed to turn out members and turned the rally itself into an affront. The most blatant offense was when the masters of ceremonies “lost” the order of the speakers, and left the two key speakers representing the community - Maria Jimenez from the AFSC and Dolores Huerta from the UFW - until the very end, when the media photographers were packing up, people were leaving and even some of the organizers of the event were getting off the stage.

And if this weren’t enough, the guest of honor, Congressman Richard Gephardt, led with the silly insistence that we are fighting for “earned legalization.” As if the people haven’t done enough to deserve it - braving the dangers of river, desert and ocean to get here; living underground for years; doing the hardest jobs for the worst wages; enduring the loneliness away from families. We have already done the earning.

The campaign strategy was to bring the issue of legalization directly to the forefront prior to the 2002 mid-term elections and, thereby commit both parties to action and make their positions (or lack thereof) public. Almost from the beginning, the alliance faced problems. The most serious was a conflict about the wording of the postcard. The initial labor-created message said:

Dear President Bush and Members of Congress: Every day, immigrant workers make vital contributions to our economy, our communities, and our nation. Nearly 50,000 members of America’s Armed Forces are immigrants who defend our country. Unfortunately, our outdated immigration laws force many immigrants and their families - who work hard and pay taxes - to live in fear of being deported for simply going to work each day. I urge you to support immigration policies that reward work by giving hard working, tax paying immigrants already in the United States the opportunity to earn legal status. Sincerely,
While the idea of the legalization postcard campaign appealed to us - as a vehicle to project a pro-legalization voice and to partner community, labor and faith groups, we were disappointed by both the process and the message. The initial message was drawn up by folks in labor, and leaned heavily toward patriotic themes - such as language recalling that immigrants serve in the armed force to “defend our freedom around the world.” It also focused the call for legalization as one for “hard-working, tax-paying” immigrants. We didn’t believe the reference to defending freedom was useful in communities where the defense of U.S. freedom has been used as a rationale for U.S. support of repressive governments that created refugee flows, and we didn’t think it was useful for us to place narrow limits on legalization — our call should be broad; it’s the policy makers who want to exclude people from legalizing their status. While some language on the postcard was changed - the reference to defending freedom - the postcard message still did not represent a collaborative effort, with a message that might be more appealing for community organizations and faith-based groups to rally behind. In the end, the postcard collection - which is sometimes a great organizing tool - is very labor-intensive and was just not a priority tactic given everything else that is taking place.

However, after a difficult negotiation back and forth, the community organizations received some small concessions in the postcard language and decided to forge ahead for the good of the larger cause; after all, the unions were promising the resources to coordinate this mega-signature collection, heighten the visibility of the effort - and turn out 5,000 people for the culminating rally on October 9th.

The postcards were collected by a very broad coalition of unions, community groups and churches. It was an amazing effort by thousands of volunteers and organizers expending many hours of many days. But when the day came for the rally at Freedom Plaza, the thousands of people that were supposed to be there weren’t. The most generous estimate would be 2,000, although many put the figure at half that amount. And most of those were from the strapped immigrant community organizations that had struggled to raise the funds to get their people there. However, there were hardly any union people; why labor failed to mobilize is still a mystery to me.

What I do know is that the event was a turning point for immigrant organizers struggling to craft a successful collabora-
tion with unions. It’s almost as if the event closed the cycle that started in February 2000, when the AFL-CIO rectified its position on immigration and came forward as a formidable ally in the struggle for legalization and immigrant rights. From the high level of expectations that existed at that time, we have arrived at a situation where there is a good level of agreement on the goals but a low level of trust and a lot of confusion about how to get things done, and especially about who gets to decide the how.

At the rally, one longtime union organizer from New Jersey voiced shock at the lack of mobilization of the DC labor locals; a New York colleague who is also very active in the antiwar effort was upset by the grating “patriotic” tone at the beginning of the event. When I suggested that at least we will learn that if you want to bring your message to Washington you have to do it on your own terms, she told me, “Oh, you are always looking for the silver lining”. She didn’t add “sucker,” but maybe we were both thinking it.

The way the event was conducted highlighted concerns that many community organizers have had about working with unions: the fear that once you get to the moment of visibility, the big guys shove you off and forget about those promises of respect and equality. What if besides one million voices for legalization, we try a couple of dozen of respectful ears? It was a disrespect that hurt a lot more because it came from those who invited us to be part of this campaign. It came from our “strategic allies”... even after very specific discussions and agreements to avoid this kind of situation.

There seems to be a common ground, a shared space and a pressing necessity. After all, there are powerful common adversaries moving their own agenda and applying a lot of pressure. After the November elections, we all know things are going to get worse before they get better. Everybody seems to agree that nobody can get things done alone, yet for a lot of people it is also clear that we cannot keep doing things in the same way.

One union organizer, who experiences these tensions at the day-to-day level told me that, “One of the major challenges for collaboration is understanding the dynamics of the political culture of each group. We have a common goal, but have not taken the time to understand how our own political dynamics interact with each other. I think the leadership of both must step back to genuinely understand the language each communicates in. At times, community groups misinterpret the actions of unions, and unions are oblivious to acts that may seem offensive to community groups. I believe that for a true and long-term cooperation, we must begin by learning each other’s dynamics and language.”

So how might we change the equation in the time ahead? What should be done differently? To know each other better will help a lot - even if it includes the risk that after analyzing our respective political cultures, the parties come to the conclusion that we don’t really share the same values and goals. I think it is a risk worth taking, especially when defining long-term strategies. To treat strategic allies as tactical is a mistake that threatens the relationship; but to treat tactical allies as strategic allies is a dangerous mistake that threat-
ens your existence, especially if you are the smaller partner.

A longtime community organizer, with a history of good and bad experiences building alliances with unions suggested that, “The relationships between union and community can be very strong, but I think that an impediment to becoming a real alliance has been that labor sometimes comes with a predetermined agenda without including those long-term organizations whose mission has been to work on immigrant issues. They are trying to impose something new instead of making alliances with groups that have already been recognized and worked for many years on that issue. That is one of the major tensions.”

Still, the responsibility for change is not all on the union side. “I think that labor understands power and numbers,” she notes, “so I think community groups need to spend more time and resources enlarging their base. Then, when they come together to negotiate with labor they have a base to bring to the table. How many people can you bring - that determines your power. If you only are an expert on an issue, you are not bringing any power to the relationship.

“I don’t think that is right,” she adds, “but I think that is labor’s culture, so when we play with labor, we play by those rules. I think that it should be one of the main goals for us to organize, educate and be able to mobilize the community.”

A younger organizer, who is newer to the immigrant rights movement, reflected on how things can get better: “I think that in the last 18 months we have learned how unions work, and I think we are smarter now on how to relate to labor. We need to build our power and we need to prove that we have power. Here’s a thought: labor is strong in bigger cities like Chicago and in places like California. But they are not strong and haven’t built a massive membership in parts of the Midwest and the South. So if we, as community groups, build immigrant bases in those emerging areas, we can prove to them that it is to their advantage to relate to us. I think that is the way we need to think - not that we participated in this postcard campaign and then they screwed us. We knew in the beginning we would get screwed in the end. I mean, even I knew that. We just need to be smarter at the beginning and be able to negotiate the relationship better... and you can only do that with power... and with a base.”

“Fundamentally unions have a self-interest in terms of how it builds membership and how it gets members,” one longtime union organizer told me, “and the critical part is in terms of how much political capital unions use in terms of defending the rights of immigrant workers. Community groups have to go to the locals, to the local base, instead of going to the big cheeses.”
As always, money is also part of the equation. “The biggest challenge is that unions have more money and therefore don’t see themselves at the same level as community groups,” notes another young organizer. Unions should not think that they are the gran cosa (the real thing) because they have money.

“Also, sometimes the unions think they don’t need to involve the community groups because they think they’re so powerful. When I worked at a community-based organization and we collaborated with local unions, one of the main issues was that the union always took full credit for all work even though we at the community-based organization did a lot of preparation for the events. They should also look for the leadership at community based organizations.”

Where are we then? Stuck with each other? One way to keep the discussion going is to share success stories and identify the principles that make the relationship work. We can also try Dr. Phil and ask his advice on how to get out of abusive relations... but I have a feeling that it won’t do the trick.

In a time when hundreds of immigrants are detained without access to due process, while tens of thousands are losing their jobs because they don’t have social security numbers, and hundreds are being harassed and arrested just for having a job cleaning in an airport, we cannot afford to fail in building a stronger movement for immigrant and workers rights. We need to find a way, or many ways.

After all, we did get 1,000,000 post cards, a million of voices for legalization. That’s a real achievement, fruit of the passionate work of union organizers, community organizers, grassroots activists, volunteers and allies. And of that we can all be proud. But the October 9th political event - what was said, and what wasn’t said, the participation and especially the lack of participation - are a sharp reminder of the long road still ahead.
American Federation of Labor Congress of Industrial Organizations AFL-CIO

National Unions

State Labor Federations

Local Unions

Central Labor Councils

Unaffiliated Unions
WORKING WITH LABOR:
A Primer, A History, A Guide

ORGANIZATION CHART

68 Affiliated Unions

Executive Council
51 Vice Presidents and President
Secretary-Treasurer
Executive Vice President

AFL-CIO
Programmatic Departments

Civil & Human Rights
Organizing
Organizing Institute

Corporate Affairs
Political

Field Mobilization
Public Affairs

International Affairs
Public Policy

Legislation
Safety & Health

Trade and Industrial Department

Building and Construction
Professional Employees

Food and Allies Services
Transportation Trades

Maritime Trades
Union Label and Service Trades

Metal Trades

A. Philip Randolph Institute
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
Pride at Work

Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
Coalition of Black Trade Unionists

Coalition of Labor Union Women

Nearly 590 Central Labor Councils

51 State Federations

Union Privilege

Working for America Institute (Formerly HRDI)
George Meany Center for Labor Studies
George Meany Memorial Archives and Library

International Labor Communications Association
National Council of Senior Citizens
Center for Working Capital

American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center)

Affiliated Unions

Thousands of affiliated local unions and 13 million members

Provided by AFL-CIO, 2004
There are surprisingly few good resources on interacting with the labor movement. However, here are a few things that might be helpful.

**Two good intermediary organizations to help navigate the terrain.**
- **Jobs With Justice, [www.jwj.org](http://www.jwj.org).** Health care for all is one of their strategic priorities.
- **National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, [www.nicwj.org](http://www.nicwj.org).**

**Two interesting magazines about labor issues**
- **Labor Notes [www.labornotes.org](http://www.labornotes.org).** A left perspective on labor that grew out of Teamsters for a Democratic Union. It has been around since 1979 and focuses on rank and file democracy.
- **New Labor Forum, [www.qc.edu/newlaborforum](http://www.qc.edu/newlaborforum).** This is a “journal of ideas, analysis and debate” about labor issues, published by Queens College in New York City. It deals with the issues and culture of the labor movement and has both academics and practitioners as contributors.

**Interesting Websites**

- **The AFL-CIO website is at [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org).** It includes a labor history timeline at [www.aflcio.org/aboutaflcio/history/history/timeline.cfm](http://www.aflcio.org/aboutaflcio/history/history/timeline.cfm). And the “About the AFL-CIO” tab will also bring you to the officers and executive board. The first tab on the site, “All About Unions,” will provide a list of all 64 AFL-CIO unions.

- **Biglabor, [www.biglabor.com](http://www.biglabor.com),** the website of Union Communications Services, has links to every union website, plus things like “today in labor history,” quote of the day, and most importantly, information on every major union.

- **The International Labor Communications Association, ILCA,** has an informative website, [www.ilcaonline.org](http://www.ilcaonline.org), aimed at labor communicators, with a well-organized bank of stories on current labor issues.

- **Labornet, [www.labornet.org](http://www.labornet.org),** was, say the founders, “the first regular Labor News webpage in the United States,” offering a “point of view that is independent (and critical) of official Labor yet sympathetic to it.” Good labor news and connections to other labor nets around the world.

- **Labourstart, [www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org),** is an international, U.K. based, multilingual (select one of 15 languages) site that bills itself, “Where trade unionists start their day on the net.” Labor news from around the world, plus links to all sorts of stuff.
RE SOURCES

Books


IMAGE CREDITS

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Lathe operator machining parts for transport planes at the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation plant, Fort Worth, Texas, October 1942 (Photograph). Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Reproduction No. LC-DIG-fsac-1a34951 http://lcweb2.loc.gov/


Jobs with Justice. [Annual Meeting photo], June 2003 (Photograph) http://www.jwj.org/index.htm


