

A Labor Movement of Social Justice Activism: The Legacy of Hector Figueroa

by Gregory DeFreitas

One of the most influential and widely admired labor leaders in the country died suddenly on July 11th.

Hector Figueroa, president of the New York-based 170,000-member Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), passed away of a heart attack at his family home in Queens at age 57. Among the first public reactions: Sen. Elizabeth Warren said: 'I'm honored to have known him.' And Sen. Bernie Sanders said: 'Hector's legacy will live on forever.'¹ At his memorial service two weeks later, over 3,000 building cleaners security guards, airport workers filled Riverside Church alongside other union and community activists and elected officials. In the words of NYC Mayor Bill deBlasio:

“He did so much for so many. He touched every corner of this city. His impact was felt all over this nation. I offer my personal condolences but I also offer my condolences to 8.6 million New Yorkers because the city became a better place the moment Héctor became a leader here, the moment we felt his passion, his belief.”

Hector was a labor activist, intellectual and strategist as well as an inspiring leader who played a decisive role in the Justice for Janitors campaign and other immigrant organizing drives that dramatically increased the size, power and influence of what had long been a dormant union of low-wage building service workers. As other unions withered under anti-worker assaults by corporations and governments, 32BJ members committed to an organizing culture in which at least one-fifth of all spending had to go to organizing new union members. In his years at the helm, 32BJ attracted another 50,000 new members in new industries, markedly improved all members' pay and benefits, and took a leading role in a host of far-reaching campaigns. These included coalitions battling for immigrant rights and against climate change, as well as successful campaigns to win a \$15 statewide minimum wage and collective bargaining rights for farmworkers.

I first met Hector Figueroa in late May 2001 at Local 32BJ's headquarters, then on lower Sixth Avenue in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood. It was an interview unlike any I have ever done. He had just turned 39, but still radiated the enthusiasm, articulateness and intellectual vigor of a brilliant young activist. While dozens of young union staffers swirled around us for over an hour and a half, periodically if politely interrupting him for brief bits of guidance, Hector was the embodiment of a modest, witty, calm, focused and fully engaged conversationalist. He replied to my brief questions with lengthy, deeply informed and analytical answers always presented in a clear, well-organized, broadly accessible style. His intellectual curiosity was as evident as his ongoing search for creative strategies to expand the union's membership and mobilization efforts to meet the many challenges it faced.

Hector had accepted my request for an interview in part to help spread the word that the union was launching its famed "Justice For Janitors" (J4J) organizing campaign on Long Island. At that point, Local 32BJ represented over 70,000 building cleaners, maintenance workers, doormen, and other service employees. The J4J campaign was of great interest to us at *Regional Labor Review* because it focused on low-wage, often undocumented immigrant workers and because it had the ambitious goal to pursue a novel, region-wide strategy -- to organize the entire industry of over 15,000 nonunion building service workers in the New York metropolitan area. In its first 2 months, the campaign won union recognition for over 1000 workers in "Wall Street West," the growing concentration of New Jersey office complexes across the river from Manhattan. By mid-summer, the union achieved what the *New York Times* described as a "breakthrough:" it won a countywide

the campaign against NAFTA. In 1995, he joined SEIU as research director of the Justice for Janitors campaign. In late 1997 and 1998, he went back to Puerto Rico as SEIU Organizing Director for the island. He helped lead the successful effort to win a collective bargaining law for public sector employees. In February 1999, he was asked to serve as deputy trustee for Local 32BJ when it was put into trusteeship. In Fen -10 ()4 (r)-4 (a)-ee

Hector Figueroa (Photo credit: SEIU32BJ)

Q: Do the women janitors with small children have an especially hard time? Since many must work night shifts cleaning these office buildings, how do they manage to arrange childcare with this kind of pay?

HF:

HF: The most common ones are threats of being fired for union activity or for wearing union buttons or are distributed flyers. Another threat is in promotion: someone in line for promotion to foreman or forelady may not be promoted because of her sympathy for a union. Another one is moving people's shifts: if you have a day shift and are sympathetic to the union, all of a sudden you are put on the night shift with no real justification. So

of lawyers and supporters who fight for the workers, and we have been very successful in retaining people in our campaigns. But it is a cost of a campaign. So we tell people this happens, we need to be prepared. And

50,000 people in J4J, but we represent several percentage points less janitors nationwide than 10 years ago because the industry has grown so much. The same thing in health care. So the issue is whether we can catch up or even supersede the rate of growth in the service sector. There was a mandated dues increase of \$20 per month over 5 years for our members and that money is to go primarily to organizing. Our members were willing to accept that increase because they know that the only way we can sustain our standards is by organizing. We don't want SEIU to go through what happened to the auto workers or to other unions. Once they got a critical density, they stopped making organizing a priority, and soon the industry was nonunion again. We don't want that to happen. So there is a tremendous effort in the union at the top of the agenda in terms of personnel, commitment, and obviously money. We ask the members to contribute even more to that, because we don't want other services of the union program to be weakened by organizing. So it calls for more resources.

Q: What kind of training do you give your organizers?

HF:

of absence for 6 weeks. Sometimes 20, 40, or 50 at a time, but other locals don't have that capacity. And that's why the international is trying to pull together the big and small locals to be able to contribute percentage-wise to a common solidarity fund. The bigger locals have a responsibility to help small local with resources to enable them to bring members on a leave of absence for the same programs, or for the big locals to develop members who can be sent to the small locals to build their organizing capacity. That's just starting now. For example, the East Coast janitors campaign is from Baltimore to Philadelphia to New Jersey. We have organizers going from New Jersey to Philadelphia and Baltimore, as well as organizers coming from Baltimore and Philadelphia to New Jersey. And, as a big local, we bear the responsibility to make sure that the whole campaign succeeds.

Q: The regional nature of this organizing drive is really distinctive. Why has the union adopted a broad regional, rather than a more local, strategy?

HF: When J4J started it was a local effort. Even though it was a national campaign with a national theme, it was really a local campaign. Denver, Seattle, Washington, D.C. — all were done as local campaigns. Over 10 years, that's how it was conducted. This new strategy was really imposed on us by the industry. As we were doing local campaigns, more and more of our cleaning contractors grew to reg gre u o f(e)4 (w)03 ((g)10 (gr)3 (c)4 (t)0

make sense just to have a local campaign. We can help each other. We can move a strike to Baltimore when we are striking a building owner (if they employ the people directly) or a contractor in New Jersey. Because we have also adopted a set of principles in the union that all locals try to negotiate in contracts. One of them is honoring picket lines. For example, if we have a picket line against Colin Care in New Jersey, we can also put that picket line in Philadelphia. And, if they have in their contract the principle of honoring picket lines, then the workers are not going to cross that line. That's a very powerful instrument in spreading the strike across the region. In our industry, workers can be replaced very easily. So you have to have a multi-site strategy for strikes that involves different cities and adds to the power of the union. A contractor finds it more difficult to sustain a regional strike than a city-wide strike. It's more difficult to replace the workers and more difficult to manage for them.

Q: What are the main challenges that the union tends to experience in organizing immigrants?

Immigrant workers are, of course, a subject of great controversy for some unions. But they are central to your organizing, aren't they?

HF: Yes. In New York in particular, one of the biggest challenges is the multinational character of immigration. In New York you have Latino, Eastern European, African, English-speaking Caribbean, Asian. So, one of the issues is always how do you develop unity among these workers. In New Jersey, most of the workers have been Latino, but in New York, it is incredibly diverse. I remember a meeting here of nonunion workers where we had to translate into 5 languages: Serbian, Sri Lankan, Italian – believe it or not, we still have Italians coming into this industry -- and Spanish and English. So, that's one of the challenges: to create unity out of this diversity. The second issue is obviously the fear of intimidation and deportation. That's why we're putting such high stakes on the question of immigrant rights. It will be a lot easier for workers to take action and join the union if they know that deportation is not going to happen and if they had the ability to bring their families and enjoy the fruits of their labor without retaliation from employers. We have found that, more often than not, people are willing to take risks because the conditions of work are so shameful and terrible. But it's not good that people have to overcome this because the conditions are so horrible and they fear deportation. That's not how it should be. So, that's an issue we have to deal with.

Lastly, there's the question of how do you integrate the members into the formation of the union. That's the biggest challenge of the Justice for Janitors campaign. It's still a new campaign and it hasn't gone without difficulty integrating the immigrant workers who are organized into the life of the union and developing the capacity to be leaders of those unions and the people who drive the program of the union. The biggest challenge we'll have long-term is to ensure that people we organize are not just rank and filers but are key protagonists in the whole life of the union in many different ways. It's still always a question of language. But it's also a question of recognition of the special needs of immigrants, and making room for them, both in the course of the campaign and afterwards so they can fully participate in the union. You have to be mindful of the ways that families are valued among immigrants are very different, the way that relationships between them and employers work out are very different. You have to be very mindful of all those things in enabling them to enjoy the benefits of the union. Like we have a training school here, but maybe we should have training schools in Brooklyn and Queens so that immigrants do not have to come all the way here. We have English as a Second Language courses, but many of our Anglo and African-American members want to learn Spanish so they can speak to their co-workers. So it opens up a whole series of issues that I think we have to address.

Q: What role in immigrant organizing does coalition building play; that is getting community groups, labor-religion folks, academics, students, and others involved?

HF: It plays a critical role, because one way that immigrant workers can have rights at work and be able to participate in society is through the union. So we try to make it very clear with immigrant advocacy groups and others that the union can be very good for them to realize the American dream. And likewise, we see that those groups have many needs for them to succeed in advocacy. If unions are supportive of their efforts, with resources and political relationships and with expanding general awareness of the issues, that's what we have to deliver. It has to be a 2-way street. It's difficult to build these coalitions because there's always pressure in organizing campaigns to win one campaign and move on to the next campaign. There's always a tension between how stable and long-term a relation you build and how much immediate involvement of people you have so that the work will succeed. But I think that, in the end, no campaign works unless we have a lasting

public attention, and can drive and mobilize the rest of the workers. We don't necessarily strive for an immediate majority of workers to be brought into the fight, we just look for a critical mass. And once they show their coworkers that there is a fight that is public, more often than not the rest of the workers do support one another. You know, solidarity is a very real thing; it's not just an analytical construct. Once you have workers move very quickly from, "Yes, I'd like to have a union in my worksite and be a leader in that effort," to saying, "Yes, I'm willing to strike and to pull my coworkers in a strike and to be able to make my case on the street" – that whole dynamic actually drives people to be very active to support a union. I think it's a more effective way than going through a NLRB election and asking people quietly to vote after being subject to an anti-union campaign bo0 (w)2 (i)-2 (l (n)-4 (o0 ((t)-6 (r)- (eetemTw 0 -2.3 TD[(imme)6 (d8.07t)-2d (a10 (l-6 (84 (o22 (b)2 (e)6.)

International solidarity is another aspect of the campaign that we have been developing quietly. The work force is so international that we have very good relations with the unions in the countries our workers come from. Also, the international building service industry has been reorganized and its unions have all joined into one network: Union Network International (UNI). When we meet in Berlin this August, we want to put at the forefront of the agenda the issue of immigrant rights. In some industries that connect internationally through the movement of capital, commerce, and trade, in our industry it is through the movement of workers. And that's what we want to build our international solidarity around. We may participate in a proposed march to the Mexican border in 2003, an international gathering in front of the "new Berlin Wall" there, to demand respect for human rights and better policies.

Q: Is each master agreement just countywide, or do you try to spread the city's master agreement as far across the region as possible?

HF: Well, the master agreements need to reflect the economics of the region. So, the wages in an agreement on Long Island cannot be the same as in New York, because office rental rates are not the same as in New York. That being said, we try to have a master agreement that has common language across a wide geographical area. So we try to have the same language in New York as in Long Island and New Jersey. Although, if a campaign offers us an opportunity to improve that language, we take that opportunity. And then we try to have wages such that the differential in terms of rents is reflected in the wage differentials, with the understanding that there is always a floor that is necessary for basic human needs that everybody needs to commit to: a living wage. So, in the case of this metro area, it's hard to say. But people should not be living below \$9 to \$11 an hour. Below that you're at less than a poverty level. In the case of Jersey, we think that the areas outside cities should have at least \$9 an hour, if not more, and that the cities there should have a rate not much below New York, because the rental rates and the cost of living are similar. We try to raise the floor and then try to figure out how high the ceiling is. But it's better that it be multi-employer, multi-site and as broad as possible, because then you can defend it better. If not, you can lose a union overnight, because owners just have to put their building up for bid and then the union disappears. What we try to avoid is contractors competing on the basis of how much they pay a worker and get building owners to accept that this is what the cost of labor is in the market. Let the

contractors compete on quality of service and hours, but not on the backs of these workers. And that's why we try to establish an area-wide agreement.

Q: What kind of demands does the union make about improving work hours?

HF: Most of the nonunion work around New York is part-time. So, our campaign revolves around 4 demands: first, a living wage; second, family health care; the third is moving part-time work to full-time; and the fourth is other kinds of benefits that are specific to the nature of an immigrant work force, like the leave of absence issue I mentioned, English as a Second Language, and training. We want people to be able to leave this industry and find a better future somewhere else. Who wants to be cleaning toilets all their life? We want the union to be a vehicle to find something better.

Q: Which of those 4 demands do employers resist most?

HF: Part-time work and health benefits are the ones that they fight to the bone. They claim that part-time work has been imposed by the building owners who want to save energy costs because of buildings operating just part of the day. They even claim that workers want part-time work, which I don't believe at all. Nobody has come to me and said, "Oh, don't work me full-time!" I think it's a way for them to save money. But those are things which we have been able to move in other cities and we are very determined to move it back to what it was. This industry was once full-time and directly contracted by the building owners. Then they started subcontracting, and that's when it deteriorated to the point that it went to part-time. One reason it went part-time is that nobody in her right mind would be willing to have a full-time job that pays so little. That's part of the problem: we have to make these good jobs, and going full-time is part of it

Q: A few weeks ago, students at Harvard staged a 3-week sit-in at the university's administration building to demand a living wage for janitors there. This drew national attention to the plight of building service workers at a university with a \$20 billion endowment. What do you think unions can and will do in coming years to try to attract more young people?

HF: I think we need to put the message out there, and match that message with the reality of our commitment and resources, that the new civil rights movement for the 21st century is fighting for low-wage service workers, many of whom are either people of color or immigrants. And that's where the next fight for civil rights needs to

happen. And I think that, if we do that, we're going to have much more of an ability to attract young people. Look who does the hotel work – it's mostly young workers. Look who cleans buildings – it's mostly young workers too. So we need to have a movement of young people, at work and in the universities. I don't think we

the strength of our organization, the success of our organization lay in our ability to mobilize our members and have them feel that the organization was theirs. And so that's who he was.

Q: The union has a lot of immigrant members. Would you say that's a central aspect of the organizing that he was a part of?

KB: I think that our organization is a very diverse union. It might be one of the best unions around. We have members from dozens of different countries, speaking 37 different languages, and Hector found a way -- by focusing on justice issues, whether it's justice at work or justice in the community -- that found the commonality of interests that allowed us to stand together side by side and fight for worker justice.

And that went far beyond the borders of 32BJ. He knew that for us to continue to be successful that we had to use the platform and the strength of our organization to uplift all workers. So, for example, he was heavily engaged in giving farm workers the right to organize upstate.

Q: That really was a victory a long time to go to the end of the road (Wou) kne (t)2 ha rc-2

We need to ensure that there's a future for our next generation in dealing with this climate change crisis that we're in, instead of denial. And that this country lives up to its principles by finally creating a fair and equitable immigration system that respects basic human rights. That's what we're looking for in a presidential candidate.

Q: What about the P.R.O. bill that's just been introduced in Congress?³

KB: Yes, we obviously want to make sure that people have a stronger right to organize. We believe that labor is the path for equity and justice for working families. It built the middle class in this country, and since then people got away from that. Unfortunately, the time that we're in, you know, there's an unbelievable presence of hate.

Hector was a person of love and compassion, and he truly believed that love, compassion and working together with each other was our path forward to making a more just society and building both power and dignity for workers. Building strong communities, regardless of what your cultural beliefs were. And if we don't do it together, if we don't dismiss those minor things that separate us, and embrace our commonality of interests, then we will fail. But he didn't know failure. He helped build a successful union.

Q: In coming months, some key 32BJ contracts in New York City and Philadelphia are expiring.

KB: Right, the commercial workers' contracts expired in New York City, covering over 25,000 members. And we have commercial contracts expiring throughout our jurisdiction. We're working on these contracts in New York City, Philadelphia and other jurisdictions. We're working on these contracts in New York City, Philadelphia and other jurisdictions. We're working on these contracts in New York City, Philadelphia and other jurisdictions.

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