

A Vision of Social Unionism *A Conversation with Artemio Guerra*

by Sharryn Kasmir

Artemio Guerra is Director of Organizing for New York Civic Participation Project (NYCPP), whose mission is to promote a pro-immigrant, pro-worker agenda, to get unions active

AG: People see unions as very big and powerful with their own set of interests. There are difficult feelings, and we have to guard against that. And I think all you have to do is look at one hundred years of labor history to realize that not everyone in the labor movement is a saint. There have been very significant problems. But John Sweeney's New Directions Movement was a significant change. I don't think it's the end, but I think it is the beginning, and I think some people within the labor movement recognize that.

There was a historic commitment to legalization and the rights of immigrants coming out of AFL-CIO in February of 2000. At that time I was working with the Catholic Church as an immigrant advocate, and one question we kept on asking: Where is organized labor? We were working with thousands of immigrant workers in this rural area of Pennsylvania, farm workers and also a number of manufacturing workers, and nobody was servicing their needs. They had the Church—that was the only place people could go. It was like a breath of fresh air when the AFL-CIO came and made a statement, because the connection was so clear. These are people that come to this country to work. They're completely vulnerable, and they have nothing to rely on besides faith communities or ethnic associations. There's no organized effort to incorporate them into the larger labor movement.

It also says a lot about this project to bring somebody on board like me who hasn't had any direct experience with labor who primarily has experience organizing in neighborhoods, and my co-director Gouri Sadhwani who comes from working with the international community on peace and other global issues. Our organizers also come with very diverse backgrounds: Gladys Sanchez was a journalist back in the Dominican Republic and a community organizer in Washington Heights, and Angel Vera has been organizing with the Ecuadorian community in Bushwick for more than ten years.

Q: Can you think of specific campaigns that can serve as models for successfully bringing communities and unions together?

AG: Something that comes to mind is LAANE's, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, housing campaign. It was a partnership between organized labor and community-based organizations, advocacy groups, elected offici