

*A New Vision on Monetary Policy for the New Economy  
A Conversation with Jose Alvarez, AFL-CIO Regional Director*

by Gregory DeFreitas

Since November 1996, Jose "Joe" Alvarez has been the AFL-CIO's Regional Director in the Northeast. Based in New York City, he is responsible for implementing the federation's pr





**JA:** Absolutely. The logic of this new economy is working itself into all the different sectors. This is a story to illustrate: I was driving around in the middle of a political campaign in '94 at which time Secretary of Labor, Reich, was talking about how the solution to the low-wage economy was education. It was a call-in show and there was a professor, a woman, who called in and said: "Secretary Reich, I've received two Ph.D. For the last four years I've been working as an adjunct with no benefits earning \$12,000 a year teaching what is considered a full load. Should I get a 3<sup>rd</sup> Ph.D.?" The fact is the logic of this economy is moving into every single sector so you see in universities more and more where faculties are made up of growing number of adjunct professors. They are the university temp workers, who work for significantly lower wages, often without benefits. There is no question that all the different sectors of this new economy -- without organization, without making sure the economic setup is one that is focused on the question of: how do people make a living, how are they able to attain some benefits for their work with some sort of security and expectation of stability, without organization --that is not going to happen.

These groups are starting to organize. There is an organization, in New Haven, Connecticut, for example, the Graduate Students' Employees Association, that is active precisely among those workers. Right here in New York City, we've seen at the New School where the adjunct instructors in the music program who are jazz musicians just not only organized, but successfully just negotiated a historic first contract. I think these are harbingers of activities we will see spreading throughout our economy. Just in the same way some years ago, it wasn't that long ago, the organization of teachers at the elementary and high school levels was not viewed as a likely place for union organization and now it is almost commonly accepted. I think that we will see the same happening more and more in different sectors of our economy.

**Q: What do you think about the potential for more involvement of community groups in organizing drives, like ACORN's recent efforts to organize thousands of workfare employees?**

**JA:** There are many organizations that are dealing with the results of the new low-wage economy that's emerging. The new labor movement realizes it is critical to build alliances with other organizations today that are trying to address the same kinds of issues. Actually, we are working and many of our affiliates are working very closely with ACORN, not only in what I just described but also in "living wage" campaigns in cities throughout the nation. We're organizing workers in sectors that don't yet lend themselves to organization, like certain categories of low-wage and temporary workers. It's actually another way of dealing with the whole privatization system.

**Q: In last November's elections, there was unusually high turnout by union members. In New York, over one-third of all votes were cast by union households. This surprised many people, that such numbers would come out to vote during an economic upturn. What concerns motivated union families to do this?**

**JA:** Well, even though we are in the midst of an economic expansion, that expansion is hardly being reflected in improving wages. Nor is it being reflected in the way our public officials are dealing with public policies in areas like social security, education and health c52(1)0.8

talking about everything but those issues. At that time, we were in the throes, well we still are, of the debate surrounding impeachment. But our message focused on: let's get back to talking about working family issues. Our members very strongly responded to this and turned out in tremendously large numbers.

Take a very specific example of what a union city central labor council is doing. In that election, the New York City Central Labor Council had 3,000 rank and file volunteers out on the street on election day. That's a very good example of what we are talking about, looking at what are the factors that lead to the fact that 1/3 of the voting households ended up being union households. There is an excellent example of what that effort actually looks like. In terms of our alliances with community organizations, a lot of the Labor Council's effort was particularly aimed at and in concert with the African-American communities and Latino communities. There were 50,000 new Latino voters in this last election. So that's just further making a point of what the efforts look like in the local area.

**Q: In New York, in that election an effort was made by third parties like the new Working Families Party which managed to win a place on the next ballot, in large part due to union households. Do you see third parties as possibly a useful means in the future to get the labor message out, insofar as the Democratic Party isn't always reflecting the full set of labor concerns?**

**JA:** First of all, let me say that the AFL-CIO is open to all kinds of different efforts to try and mobilize our membership and welcomes experimentation with those kind of efforts. Campai

joining in with allies looking at the impact that some of the schemes that are being drawn up, like privatization, particularly would have on groups like minorities and women who are particularly going to be impacted with the kinds of proposals that are being floated here. Around the country right now we have forums in local hall after local hall. In the next few weeks, there will be community summits in 60 cities across the country. So we are doing both an internal education effort and weighing in in the public debate that is taking place, making sure that this critical element for retirement and family security is not dismantled and basically handed over to Wall Street in the next several months.

**Q: For the future, if you had to guess where unionization will be in five years time, are you optimistic?**

**JA:** There is no question for anybody who looks at history that workers will find a way to build self-organization, that they will find a way to make sure that their ability to exist and survive in our society will be achieved through self-organization. The challenge we have in the AFL-CIO is that, throughout history, there are points during major transitions of an economy where workers organizations came to a point where they represented the past economy. The only way the new economy and its concerns was achieved was through a new labor movement. We are now in the middle of an effort to change our current labor movement to be able to address the organization that is going to be necessary in the new economy. And that is something that really has not taken place before. In the 30's the new labor movement emerged out of the CIO, which eventually came together with the previous labor movement in the merger some years later. Going back another 50 years when the AFL was founded, the Knights of Labor and the other organizations that existed before that basically faded away while the AFL emerged as the new labor movement in the new economy.

So the challenge before us is: are we going to succeed in this tremendous change effort? I15()-3.01205(k1.35041(t)0.89126()-183