

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW

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Preview

With this issue, we begin our second decade of publishing the *Regional Labor Review*. When *RLR* first appeared in the autumn of 1998, the country was in the sixth year of what would prove to be the longest economic boom in U.S. history. The national unemployment rate – just 4.6% that September – had steadily fallen from 7.8% in mid-1992. By year-end 1998, it had remained below 5% for 18 consecutive months, with no signs of the inflationary pressures that many economists had predicted.

The welcome tandem of low unemployment-low inflation moved Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve, to declare at the time that: "The current economic performance, with its combination of strong growth and low inflation, is as impressive as any I have witnessed in my near half-century of daily observation of the

This issue also features an interview with Bertha Lewis, the leader of ACORN. This is one of the first full-length interviews for publication that Ms. Lewis has given since ACORN found itself the target of almost daily Republican criticisms during the 2008 campaign for the White House. Given the centrality of housing to both the economic crisis and to ACORN's organizing and self-help agenda among working class families, the interview is unusually timely and thought-provoking.

The ACORN interview is by Niev Duffy. No one among the founding editors of *Regional Labor Review* was more important than Niev to the original conception, design, and production of this journal. From her earliest days as an economics professor at Hofstra, she devoted herself tirelessly to the most fundamental matters of graphical design, intellectual content, planning of future issues, building the readership and subscriptions, fundraising, and organizing conferences and other events focused on related labor issues. When she wasn't conducting interviews or writing her own articles for *RLR*, she was soliciting original pieces by others, at Hofstra and well beyond. And even after leaving the University for senior research positions elsewhere, Niev has continued to play an indispensable role on our editorial board and to contribute in many ways to each issue.

Clearly, we begin our second decade of *Regional Labor Review* at an historic moment. The United States has broken sharply with the past in electing its first African American President, a pro-labor Northern Democrat who replaces a conservative Southern Republican. And it has done so at a time of spreading economic turmoil and record-challenging job losses. As we struggle to come to grips with a global recession, clear thinking about its main causes, full dimensions, and most effective remedies will be vitally important in shaping solutions with broadly shared benefits. The power shift in Washington, the economic crisis, and government responses to it have already succeeded in reinvigorating and broadening public debate over the proper balance of the public and private sectors' respective roles in the economy. It is our hope in planning upcoming issues of *RLR* that it might make its own modest contribution toward that debate.

Our goal has been from the start to offer a unique journal of original research and features focused on important labor issues in the New York Metropolitan Area. *RLR* is designed to achieve that goal through writing that is widely accessible to a broad audience. Each issue is distributed to thousands of labor and community activists, students, educators, journalists, businesses, nonprofits, and policymakers. We have been most fortunate to receive the generous financial support of Hofstra University and its Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy (CLD). Founded by Bert Silverman, now Emeritus Professor of Economics at Hofstra, CLD provided the initial funding and institutional base that proved so vital to assembling the staff and research resources needed for such a new and ambitious publication.

None of our accomplishments so far would have been possible without the generous contributions of the University, the *RLR* Editorial Board, our eminent Board of Advisors, and our thousands of readers. We are deeply grateful to all of you for your continued interest and support.

The Editor

INTERVIEW

And we are being recognized as the premier organizing group. We stuck to our guns and stuck to organizing all of this time. President Obama was an organizer and he thinks like an organizer.

I have to tell you about the attacks on us from the Right. You know, nobody likes to be attacked and called names. But I do have to say that at the end, it's been a net good for us. After 38 years and all of the work

Q: How would you describe ACORN's relationship with the union movement, or with the labor movement in general, workers' centers and unions? Is it just an active, permanent, ongoing relationship? Does it have its stresses?

BL: We've always been pro-labor. We certainly are accused of being in labor's pocket. But, like I say, we model ourselves like a community union. Now, is that to say that we agree with all our brothers and sisters in the labor movement? No. Is that to say that we're not critical? We definitely support the right-to-organize movement that they have, and workers' rights, and the right of household workers to choose to be in a union. We think America is better if it has stronger unions. We think any worker -- any worker -- should be organized in some way. So we are very pro-union.

The union movement is changing. I think a lot of our brothers and sisters in the labor movement see that they fell away from organizing, you know? Instead of having organizers, they had business managers. We've been forming partnerships, labor-community partnerships, because there are some in labor who know that they need to use community organizations and community folks, grassroots folks, to get into the neighborhoods. And to get their rank and file into more issues than just workplace issues. So the labor movement in practice -- and this is changing -- they understand that they will die. They needed to turn themselves around. We've always been there, and now I think the partnership is just deepening. They used to treat us as little brothers and little sisters. Now they see us as equals.



Q: ACORN's use of surveys is really interesting. What would you say about the role of research in aiding your efforts?

BL: Critical. I think that's the difference between organizing and mobilizing and advocacy. I don't think we get enough credit (and it may be our own fault) for doing research and intellectual work. Because as an organizer, if you're going to map out a campaign you've been out there knocking on doors, and a majority of people keep coming up with pretty much the same issue, and they're saying, "We want to fight, and we want to see change on this particular issue."

When you work with your members, the first thing you do is lay out a campaign plan, and one of the first things that you do when you're laying out a campaign plan is ask: what is the research we need to do? We may assume that X is true, but we need to be able to find out whether X is really true. And we need to know this particular area.

So research is always one of the first things, you know. Then you figure out, how many other people does this affect? What other people? Who are your allies? Who are your opponents? What kind of media strategy? What kind of legal strategy? What is your street strategy? In your research, did you publish something? Do you do a survey? Has somebody already done this? So this is the bricks and mortar of a campaign, and I don't think we always get enough credit for doing it, but it is critical to us. We never, ever do any kind of campaign without doing some research.

Q: Do you do the research in house, or do you also reach out to other groups to do it for you?

BL: We do it both ways. You know, we've worked with the Brennan Center [at NYU Law School] a lot, because we may not have the in-house expertise and resources to do it ourselves. Some people do it better, you know? You've got to sit down with folks and say, "Here's what we're thinking about," and we might outsource the research, or we might partner up, and we'll do part and they'll do part, and we'll put it together. So we do both.

Q: I know that you have on your website the results of a national survey of yours that found three-fourths of low-wage employees don't get any sick days. Have you taken that on now as a major new campaign, trying to get legislation on sick day pay?

BL: Oh, yeah. I mean, we have paid sick day campaigns. You know, several states, cities here in New York, of course, Missouri, Florida, Texas, California are part of our national campaigns. We have also, as you know -- For years we have fought for minimum wage and living wage, and have led living wage campaigns, and state-to-state minimum wage campaigns. We do it legislatively wherever we can, as well as trying to force concessions, again, to make it through CBAs [Community Benefit Agreements].ⁱⁱ So absolutely, paid sick days is one, is in our 2009 basket of national campaigns -- part of our ACORN agenda.

Now we're getting ready to launch our Home Defender campaign. Rather than squatting, we are actually going to have people stay in their homes that have been foreclosed on and do civil disobedience, refuse to leave and move. We will have volunteers putting their bodies on the line to defend those homes against the sheriff and the police.

We had our folks actually come out and work in ACORN neighborhoods to door-knock folks and finding people who might be facing foreclosure and mortgage problems. So we did that on our Day of Action. We flied neighborhoods and actually did phone banking and used the Internet to say, "Join ACORN if you want to do service. Here's all the stuff that we work on."

Q: Is the Home Defender campaign national or is it just in New York?

BL: The national campaign launches February 19th. In New York, we're having the first home defender training tonight. We'll have about 100 people with a mix of families that are facing foreclosure that are going to get the first home defender training here in New York. Trainings are going on around the country so that on the 19th, next week, when we launch in about 15 cities, folks will be ready. Rapid response teams, people coming together to say: "Enough is enough. We're not leaving. We're staying."

Q: Have you gotten partners, like politicians and religious groups involved?

BL: We've been building the coalition. All of the above. Homeless organizations, sheriffs. Do you believe it? Sheriffs saying, "We're with you. This might be our job, but morally we're not going to do it." Incredible!

Politicians, you know? Governors, senators, state lawmakers who are saying, "Yeah, stay in your home. Don't move." I mean, Barney Frank just the other day had said that he had been skeptical, because we'd been calling for a moratorium. And he was like, "No, no. That's not necessary." Barney Frank stood up on the House floor and said, "That's it. You know, we're not moving fast enough. We're not doing enough. These banks aren't doing enough. I'm calling for a moratorium."

Q: Can you say something about the current Atlantic Yards projectⁱⁱⁱ in Brooklyn?

BL:

So then we sat down and said, “What, if you made a demand and you did a campaign, what would you demand?” “We demand 50% of the housing that’s being built be low and moderate income and affordable. We demand that there will be a community benefits agreement, where there will actually be real jobs, a real system.”

So the membership came up with demands: a real CBA with a lot of different components. But for ACORN, our main thing was housing. So we said, “Okay, we’re going to go in there and we’re going to see if we can meet with this guy and see what he says.” We fully expected to be rebuffed. You know, you’re so used to getting kicked that, the first time we sat down and met with these folks, and they said, “Well, let’s talk about it,” we didn’t really hear it. We just kept wailing. They’re like, “No. Let’s talk about it. Show us how to do this.” And it was amazing.

Now, politically, we are who we are. We’ve built up a reputation. You know, we’re strong, we’re a political group, we’re a housing group, and people pay attention to us. I mean, these folks wanted to not have us as their enemy. But we came in and actually got a CBA, got a 50/50 housing deal, were able to shape the affordable piece of the housing. I was able to show these folks who had never done affordable housing. They didn’t have a clue about how to do it and brought in other folks to deal with this. Tied it down by having subsidies for the whole project tied to making certain deliverables in the community as well as housing.

We believe nationally that the community benefits agreement movement and strategy is a way for small cities, especially small cities and inner-ring suburbs and other groups to actually be able to wring something out of these developers. And other cities have -- You know, there is a CBA movement, as small as it may be, in the country, and are using CBAs to wrest concessions and not have the government negotiate for you.

So that’s the Atlantic Yards story. They brought their bean counters. We brought our bean counters. They brought their lawyers, we brought our lawyers. It took about a year to hammer out a CBA and an agreement around the affordable housing.

Q: Bottom line, why do you think it worked?

BL: I think it worked because, one, we were very clear on what we wanted and we had solutions to what we wanted. We had a way to show this developer by spreadsheets and other stuff, we spoke development language. We actually understood what we were talking about, and we had a concrete proposal. Two, we were value-added: one, in expertise; two, in political cover – let’s face it – and political might and our ability to fight them.

You know, you make an analysis as if you’re going to lose. But we would have put up a hell of a fight, and they didn’t want to fight with us. So you have to be big enough, deep enough, have the expertise, have a real plan. You can’t come to these folks with vagaries. You know, “We want affordable housing.” “When do you want it?” “Now.” “What does it look like?” “We don’t know. You figure it out.” You can’t do that. You really have to know your shit.

So that’s why I think it worked. I think we were the right group at the right time with the right stuff in the right place, and finally you have to have a willing partner. As I said, we’ve met with developers for 30

BL:

BL: It absolutely is. One of the reasons that we embarked here in New York on the fight to save Starrett City was because Starrett City was the largest federally funded housing complex in the country. Public housing projects had been blown up, torn down all through the HOPE VI program through HUD for years. You know, that was a national disgrace. Public housing is the housing of last resort. So there's a lack of funding and commitment to public housing nationally and they're using the HOPE VI program to tear down and blow up public housing. We wanted to fight for Starrett City not to go on the auction block in the market, and to keep it affordable. There's no commitment to having permanent affordability. It's really disgraceful.

Q: What do you think about President Obama's economic stimulus package?

BL: Oh, did you see what Vitter did on the floor of the Senate the other night?^{iv}

Q: No, I missed that.

BL: Well, Friday night, when the bill was being debated in the Senate, Vitter – who shouldn't cast any stones from his glass house at all – gets up on the floor of the Senate and says, "I want to offer an amendment to this bill, that no funds that have anything to do with this bill can go directly or indirectly to ACORN. We know that they're guilty of causing the home mortgage crisis because they're guilty of pushing people into subprime loans. And we all know that they're guilty of massive voter fraud."

I mean, two of the biggest lies. But that's one thing you've got to admire about these Republicans. When they lie, they lie big. I mean, to single us out of the thousands, hundreds of thousands of organizations in this country, to single us out, that's it. Not the Ku Klux Klan, just us. Fortunately, it was defeated along party lines. But that was pretty, pretty damn incredible.

I think it's incredible that the stimulus bill finally wound up passing. I think there was too much sausage-making. I think it's great, because, damn it, we need it. You know, we needed this thing. It really was obscene that they passed very quickly a \$700 billion bank bailout package & finally wound up passly STm8alf5 0 TD. sausage-maanenteid on need ot. Yuoc– getSTm 8avthey lie, they lie biywealthys a totimtey this t?

We called it Working Families Party for a reason. You know me, I'm always saying, "Don't get lost when the Democrats tell us." You need a piece of real estate: a party that's not afraid to just go straight to working people's issues and community people's issues.

They can see if there's a Working Families Party candidate, it has an imprimatur, you know? It's the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval. Imagine if you had a Working Families Party in all eight states where fusion is legal. Now you have a force that really can affect national and local politics, and it gives community people, poor people, working people, union people a place where their vote actually counts and stands out. And I also, quite frankly, believe that a third-party fusion strategy is the strategy for black and brown people in this country. It's just my belief.

Q: Do you see the WFP model expanding into all eight states any time soon?

BL: If I have anything to do with it, it will. That's our goal. Our current goal is to slug it through. We had to build here, then we went to Connecticut, and we are going on. We don't care. We're going to slug it out. You know, we've got to do California, Mississippi. Yes, that's our goal, and I think that is what we want to happen over the next five to ten years, absolutely.

Q: Both Governor Paterson and Mayor Bloomberg have released their budget proposals with service cuts and so on. Could you say a word about the local scene? And also, could you say a word about the income tax proposal of the WFP?

BL: We're for the Fair Share Tax proposal. It is outrageous that either one of them should not even consider having people pay their fair share.

You can label it the "millionaire's tax" all you want to, but we're talking about a handful of people who got a truckload of benefit all these years. Come on. "Ooh, they're going to move away." Good. Get the hell out of here, so that real people can live. Like they're going to just leave. Remember all of the subsidies that companies were getting to encourage them to stay in New York because they could always leave?

Q: The "retention deals."

BL: False premise, number one. They never challenged those folks, because there is a certain thing called location, location, location. And if Wall Street was going to move and be a virtual Wall Street, they would have

Don't mistake me here. You know, we have high standards, because we believe that he actually does have some ideology and he actually does have progressive bones in his body. Certainly, when you get into high office, there are things that you find out that maybe us average folks don't know. Must be. Because that's the only explanation I could have for why people change: that somehow or other they get into office and there's some box or some room where the secrets are, and so it forces them to take different actions from what they did before. And because we're not privy to all of that information, we just don't understand. Now, I say: open up the door and let everybody look in.

So I think all of this cutting is ridiculous, especially when you cut the highest-income people's taxes. You know, any time I'm making \$40,000 and I'm paying the same rate as somebody making \$4 million, what's wrong with that picture?

I disagree with the service cuts that they're making. I just disagree with them not listening to folks, because Working Families Party, the unions, other groups — none of us are irresponsible. We know that there has to be revenue. We're not stupid. And when we come in and we actually offer alternatives, I don't think we get as much heft and weight as, dare I say, a campaign contributor business, capitalists in general, and more right-wing people. We just don't. But we're the ones that they run to when it's a mess, to help clean it up.

ⁱⁱ A Community Benefit Agreement (or CBA) is a binding contract between developer(s) and the community in and around the site where the planned development is to be built. CBAs vary from area to area, but often contain one or more of the following general principles: neighborhood clean-up and environmental safeguards, relocation assistance to displaced residents, guaranteed employment and training of some local residents during and/or after construction, and living wage and health care benefits on such jobs.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Atlantic Avenue Rail Yards in downtown Brooklyn is the site of a \$1.2 billion residential and commercial center proposed by developer Bruce Ratner. In a legally binding Community Benefits Agreement with ACORN and other local organizations, Ratner pledged to reserve half of the 4,500 apartments for low- and moderate-income residents. Ten percent of these apartments will be reserved for seniors and residents currently living