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Year 2007

ILR Impact Brief - Transcending Free
Market Unionism: A New Alliance for
New York State Unions

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IMPACT BRIEF

BRIEF #20 / SEPTEMBER 2007 / ILR SCHOOL / WWW.ILR.CORNELL.EDU

Transcending Free Market Unionism: A New Alliance for New York State Unions

Research question: Will a restructuring of organized labor's regional associations in New York State re-energize the union movement and enable it to mount new and more effective programmatic initiatives?

Conclusion: In the few years since the AFL-CIO consolidated 25 of the 31 central labor councils in New York State into five area labor federations (ALFs), local union affiliates have begun to transcend the narrow interests that long divided one union from another. ALFs have begun to embrace new and more diverse leaders, strengthen their functional capabilities, forge coalitions with community groups, and help elect politicians who are more responsive to the concerns of working families. Whether the restructured labor movement has a greater ability to affect organizing drives and contract negotiations is still unclear.

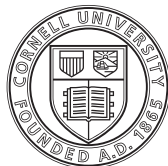
Policy and workplace implications: A resurgent, coordinated, and focused union movement in New York State will seek to influence public policy on issues such as economic development, universal health care, and the living wage. New and well-funded programming by the movement could stem, or perhaps reverse, the downward slide in the percent of unionized workers (26.5% prior to the consolidation) in the state.

Abstract: Shortly after John Sweeney was elected president of the national AFL-CIO in 1995 on the strength of

his vow to revitalize the American labor movement, federation leaders focused their attention on boosting the movement's effectiveness at the local level. A less-than-successful effort to enhance the central labor councils (coalitions of local unions that joined together decades ago to advance their common interests) in key cities led officials to conclude that the movement's structure was anachronistic and lacked credibility with the local leaders and members the councils were meant to serve. Their solution: the New Alliance initiative, a process that would evaluate the purpose and performance of the central labor councils (CLCs), probe local unions' perceptions of the councils, and suggest changes that could enhance labor's relevance and power.

In 1999, New York became the pilot project for the new initiative. Two top statewide leaders, Denis Hughes and Al Davidoff, embarked on a nine-city listening tour and found that most of the 31 CLCs lacked programmatic focus and/or strategic direction. They were short of funds and staff, lacked the support of their local unions, and had limited capacity to react to events, mobilize members, or reach out to potential allies. Making matters worse, local leaders throughout the state seemed to adhere to a philosophy of "free market trade unionism." That is, they independently pursued what they individually determined to be the interests of their own union under the assumption that if all union locals followed suit, the common good of the labor movement would be achieved. In reality, labor's presence and influence in New York State was not growing with the desired speed or intensity.

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A committee of statewide leaders proposed the varying CLC structures be reconfigured. They looked to a model devised by the AFL-CIO that laid out four steps of organizational development — reacting, mobilizing, power building, and agenda driving — and determined that larger groupings of local unions were more likely to successively pass through these stages. More locals consolidated under an area labor federation umbrella would generate sufficient revenue to support paid staff and effective programming while fostering interunion teamwork. Equally important, the ALFs would create value sufficient to warrant the affiliation of, and active participation by, more area locals.

Despite some pushback from local leaders, 25 of the 31 councils were reorganized into five ALFs. To date, the results are encouraging. Energetic new leaders have been installed, more locals have voluntarily affiliated with the ALFs and paid their dues, and the number of fulltime salaried staffers statewide has increased four-fold, to 20. The ALFs have crafted strategic plans for the allocation of resources and staff, improved their communication with the rank-and-file, and mobilized members to campaign and vote for labor-endorsed political candidates. Such tactics have helped secure victories for Democrats in mayoral and county legislative contests in the city of Schenectady, for example, and in Ulster, Suffolk, and Nassau counties.

ALFs are leveraging these electoral successes to wade into the public arena on economic development and other regional policy issues. Democratic victories in Westchester and Sullivan counties, for example, led to passage of a living wage ordinance in the former, and a commitment from the state that a proposed privately-

developed casino would be built by union workers and that casino management would agree to card-check union recognition for employees in the latter. The ALFs are also moving to bolster relations with politically kindred community groups to help secure for themselves a toehold in regional affairs and to generate support for organizing and contract campaigns. Part of this effort involves considering ways to recruit previously excluded groups into apprenticeship programs sponsored by the construction trades.

But for all the outreach and coalition building, both within and outside the labor movement, the ALFs' growing confidence and competence has not yet affected many organizing campaigns. Moreover, area and local leaders have been frustrated and distracted by the split within the national AFL-CIO, which led seven disaffected unions to quit the organization and form the Change to Win coalition. New York State leaders from the rival groupings nonetheless see value in continuing to work together at the local level and are encouraged by recent achievements.

Methodology: The research for this paper involved review of relevant documents, interviews with approximately 50 state and national labor leaders, and a survey of approximately 50 New York State labor leaders.

Source publication: "A New Alliance in New York State: A Progress Report on the Labor Movement's Restructuring, Capacity Building, and Programmatic Work" appeared in *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Volume 10, March 2007.

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