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Building Independent Political Power

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Building Independent Political Power

Abstract
[Excerpt] I am excited that the new leadership of the AFL-CIO is committing an additional $35 million to building labor's political operation during this election year. But I'm especially excited that they will be doing more than returning Clinton to the Presidency and Democratic control to the House and Senate—They are going to move labor's own agenda through ongoing political organizing, and not just in federal elections but in state and local ones.

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Central Labor Councils

BUILDING INDEPENDENT POLITICAL POWER

■ *Bruce Colburn*

I am excited that the new leadership of the AFL-CIO is committing an additional $35 million to building labor's political operation during this election year. But I'm especially excited that they will be doing more than returning Clinton to the Presidency and Democratic control to the House and Senate—They are going to move labor's own agenda through ongoing political organizing, and not just in federal elections but in state and local ones.

Labor's leadership has promised to judge our success in November by whether we have substantially more capacity than we do now, and whether we have built that capacity in a way that excites our membership, does not compromise our values, concretely improves the lives of workers and their families, and that is openly pro-union. These performance measures are exactly what we need to keep labor's agenda on track.

For a long time, building labor's own political capacity was not part of our work at all. Instead, we wrote checks to politicians, and set up phone-banks and knocked on doors. We had COPE meetings and made endorsements. . . *after* the field of candidates was already selected; we tried to mobilize members to vote for "our" candidates at election time. . . *without asking* our members' opinion of them, or doing much political education. Finally, we even got people elected. . . only to see many of them "go south" on us. We didn't have a real political organization that could identify, train, run, and elect our own candidates, and hold them accountable once in office. Indeed, it's been a very long time since labor even had the ambitions of building such an organization.

Now, maybe, things are going to begin to turn around and as they do, the recent experience of central labor councils (CLCs) can provide some direction. Responding both to the need for a more effective political operation and to the latest devolution of federal power to states and localities, some CLCs have begun building labor's independent political power at the local level. In my home state of Wisconsin, unions and

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their allied organizations (Wisconsin Citizen Action and Wisconsin Council of Senior Citizens) have come to appreciate our considerable political potential given our combined membership of over 550,000. Member households contain 36 percent of the state electorate for this Presidential election; they represent 60 percent or more of the electorate in off-year races. That's real potential power.

In building the capacity to move our base, we've begun in the major population centers—Milwaukee and Madison. These centers are also the areas of greatest union density and strongest CLC organization. CLCs make sense as the coordinating vehicle for building our political machine for three key reasons: 1) they are the place where the COPE endorsements get made; 2) they are the best place to begin to get real coordination among unions; and 3) they have the stability and focus needed to develop and stay on a long-range course. Building real political power, we know, is going to take five, ten, maybe fifteen years. Like the Right, which has shown us all how to organize politically, we're in this for the long haul.

In Milwaukee and Madison, CLC members have taken leadership in developing two sorts of political formations: Labor Electoral Coalitions and New Party affiliates.

The Labor Electoral Coalitions include both AFL-CIO unions and non-AFL-CIO unions such as the Wisconsin Education Association Council (the Wisconsin NEA affiliate); and they also include such labor-friendly citizen advocacy groups as the Wisconsin Council of Senior Citizens and Citizen Action. These coalitions have already boosted turnout in key local races. In Milwaukee, during the last school board election cycle, we were able to drive up our base turnout by 10 percent and win four out of five targeted school board races in April 1995. Candidates from Progressive Milwaukee, the New Party affiliate, were elected in two of those races.

The New Party, called the New Progressive Party (NPP) in Wisconsin, has four affiliates in the state. The different NPP affiliates have elected some 40 candidates over the last three years, running their own candidates in local non-partisan elections, and supporting member Democrats in partisan ones. And there have been real payoffs to having our own people in these positions. In Milwaukee, the school board passed a minimum "living wage" of $7.70 for their workers and workers in private firms contracting with the school board. Before our action, those same workers had been making less than $6 an hour. In Madison, the Progressive Dane affiliate recently displaced the anti-union developer block from the county board. While the New Party does not yet control the board, they hold the balance of power. In coalition with tra-

ditional Democrats, they have been able to enact much tougher land-use policies, and are moving on to a living wage campaign.

While many labor council members and leaders are active in the New Progressive Party, there are others who don't agree with the NPP's approach. The central labor council plays the unique role of helping to find common ground and coordinating labor and community activities that engender mutual support. These activities include specific candidate endorsements, grassroots organizing, and educational programs.

Building labor's political power takes time and hard work and there is no "formula." But there are some basic lessons we have learned from the work we have done so far:

Get Your Lists in Shape. We've spent a lot of time trying to develop a comprehensive data base on our members, including information on voting and volunteer history. We have also invested heavily in phone bank capacity, partly by urging that every newly built or occupied union hall have phone bank capacity built in.

Develop A Program. Until we embarked on this project, we really didn't have a clear, simple, 5-10 point program on our issues. Of course we had legislative priorities—but the only people who really knew them were full-time lobbyists and other union officials. Now we have a Campaign for Working Families that is being widely communicated to our members, and used as a benchmark for candidate performance.

Build a Network of Election Volunteers. Labor is only as strong as the members it can move, and the number we could move reliably a few years ago was pathetic. But through patient one-on-one organizing, and clearer specification of just what will be asked for when, we've begun to remedy this. In Milwaukee, our volunteer data base now has 400 proven workers in it. Some people say that you can never recruit enough volunteers to do all the work of an election campaign—and of course they're right. You also need TV, automated phone banks, advertising, mail, and all of the rest of the capital-intensive campaign machinery. But volunteers are still crucial, and one-on-one organizing of members by members remains the most effective way to deliver votes.

Organize Precinct-By-Precinct. An independent political machine must go beyond a strong base of election volunteers. It needs permanent organization, ongoing membership, and leadership to work during and after elections. In the last two elections, the Milwaukee CLC organized door-to-door visits to each one of its members in support of its endorsed and targeted candidates. And the New Party affiliates in Wisconsin now have in excess of 1,000 dues-paying members, organized into chapters that are usually county-wide, with concentration in the cities within those counties. And with those chapters we've begun to organize Precinct Leader Action Networks in key districts around the state. This gives us real canvass and Get-Out-the-Vote capacity.

Recruit and Train Candidates. The best candidate is someone out of your own organization. He or she is more likely to be accountable, share your values deeply, and have some sense of what being "pro-union" really means. Our past efforts to "grow our own" have been weaker than we would have liked. But we have recently tried to encourage good people to run for office by providing more advanced notice on races we're trying to enter, offering program materials and organizational supports for those insecure about running for office, improving our training of would-be candidates before the elections, and improving our support once they're in office. Again, it's going to be a long haul, but we are making some progress, and will make more. Failure is simply not an option.

I believe that if they put their heads and hearts together, most CLCs in most major cities could do what we've done—probably better! And I know that for labor to build independent political power—as the national AFL-CIO leadership is now committed to doing—patient electoral organizing at the local level and capacity-building for the long haul is the way to get there. ■