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The Making of a Pro-Labor Mayor

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The Making of a Pro-Labor Mayor

Abstract

[Excerpt] One of the most important functions of central labor councils (CLCs) is making electoral politics work for labor. While the issues that a CLC tackles need to be linked to a national labor agenda, which includes fighting against privatization, securing a living wage, and promoting unions, the actual struggles take place on a local level. An effective council needs to listen to and develop consensus around the issues of concern to its member unions and then endorse those candidates who will be most supportive and effective at addressing those issues. After a candidate is elected, CLCs need to continue to have a political presence. Ideally, CLCs use electoral politics to build community alliances, understand power relationships, and wield political power in a way that builds the labor movement.

Our success in the Atlanta mayoral election shows that a CLC with active affiliates can change the course of an election and forward labor's agenda after an election. The stakes of the mayoral race were high: labor had the potential to stop privatization; strengthen construction unions; secure the jobs related to the 1996 Olympics for union workers; and demonstrate labor's power and electoral muscle. We needed a decisive victory and the CLC had to deliver.

Keywords

central labor councils, CLC, labor, politics, worker rights, organization

Central Labor Councils

THE MAKING OF A PRO-LABOR MAYOR

■ *Stewart Acuff*

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FINDING THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

In 1993 Mayor Maynard Jackson was retiring after heart bypass surgery. Atlanta had been governed for 20 years by either the well-known Maynard Jackson or civil rights legend Andrew Young. The city was on the verge of a new political epoch.

It was a crucial, potentially watershed year for organized labor in Atlanta. The business community wanted a more business-friendly chief executive. Some members of the city council, including its president, were hostile toward unions and had repeatedly tried to privatize sanitation services. And organized labor was in the middle of a bitter, two-year campaign against the Atlanta Olympic Committee, which was

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refusing to have the work associated with the games done by unions.

Against this backdrop, three candidates entered the mayoral race. Michael Lomax, Fulton County Chief Executive, promised to downsize, prioritize, and privatize city government. Myrtle Davis, City Council Finance Chair, had been difficult to deal with during previous budget negotiations. And Bill Campbell, Council Floor Leader for Maynard Jackson, had a perfect record on labor issues and was seen as progressive. Unfortunately, Campbell had only 42 percent name recognition.

In an unusual and controversial move, the labor council endorsed Campbell two months before “qualifying day” when all candidates have to be registered. In other words, the council did not wait to see if a better candidate would appear. We already knew we had the best candidate in Campbell and we needed to play as large a role as possible as soon as possible. As a favorite local expression puts it: “We had decided to come early and stay late.”

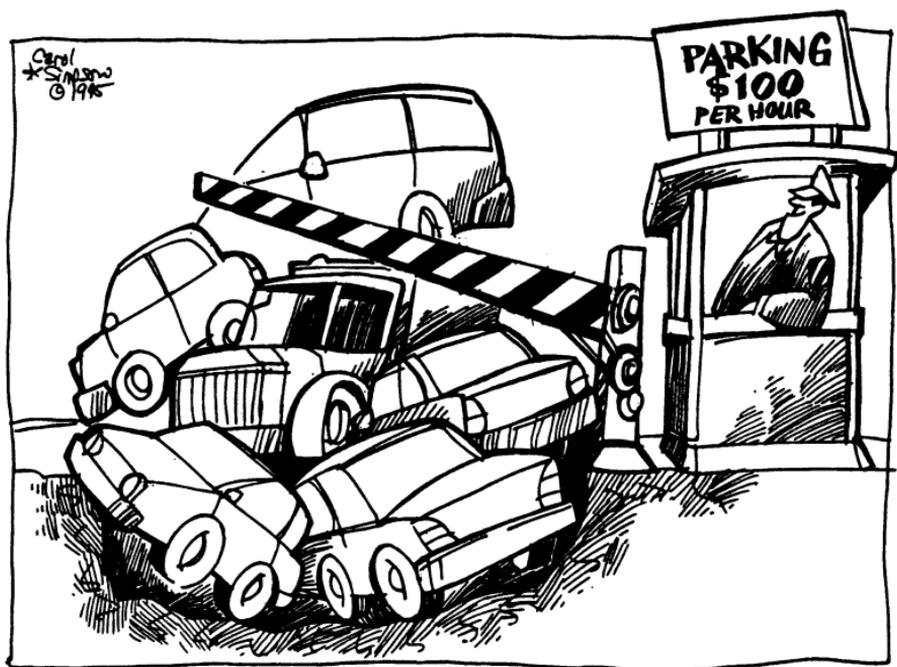
GETTING CAMPBELL ELECTED

Right after the endorsement, I went inside the campaign as deputy campaign manager working on field operations. The central labor council and the state federation wanted to do more than get our membership out to vote for our endorsed candidate. We wanted to reach beyond our membership into the broader community through our members’ involvement in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and places of worship.

With more than 20,000 members in the city, we had more than 10 percent of the electorate. Properly organized and motivated, we were confident that our members could spread the word about Campbell and take him from third to first place.

Organized labor kicked off its efforts for Campbell on Labor Day weekend with a sound truck and 50 volunteers canvassing housing projects, shopping centers, grocery stores, and city parks. On qualifying day, September 13th, Campbell held a rally with 200 mostly union supporters in front of city hall. He then took us inside with him to sign up for the campaign. Then, throughout the campaign Campbell came to labor council and local union meetings. His presence and his up-front commitments to our members’ priorities helped us recruit volunteers and raise money.

Then, in mid-October, when Campbell was working hard to increase his name recognition, all of the local television stations announced they were limiting campaign ad time. A judge had ruled that stations could not charge the same fees for campaign ads as for other commercials.



Highway potholes after government services are privatized.

So, rather than suffer a loss in revenues, the stations limited the reduced-rate air time they made available to candidates. This limit on advertising meant that labor's field operation would be particularly important.

THE AFFILIATES PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS

As Marilyn Sneiderman points out in her opening piece, a central labor council's ability to succeed in the field lies in the hands of its membership. In Atlanta, our affiliated unions heed the call and are motivated to fight because they know that together we have the power to win.

Here are some of the membership activities that led to victory:

AFSCME ran a 30-telephone phone bank for three months. Every union member registered to vote was called at least twice.

The Cement Masons' office became the Southeast Atlanta campaign headquarters.

Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 72 volunteers put up campaign signs in Southeast Atlanta.

The Atlanta Federation of Teachers held a large and well-publicized endorsement rally for Campbell.

The International Brotherhood of Police Officers provided campaign security. Their endorsement was a major source of credibility on the crime issue.

The Communication Workers and the Stage Hands provided teams of volunteers for the campaign phone bank.

Rank-and-file participation was particularly strong throughout the campaign. Every Sunday morning for two months, between 5 and 20 volunteers leafleted churches. At least three union members took vacations to volunteer on the campaign. Canvass teams leafleted high-union-member precincts every evening and Saturdays for weeks prior to November 2. And on election day, 100 union volunteers worked the polls, provided rides, and phoned voters.

Thanks to the coordinated efforts of our affiliates and their members, Campbell won the plurality of votes in the election. But the race wasn't over yet. He was 1000 votes shy of Atlanta's "50% plus 1" rule for multi-candidate races. The city held a runoff election between Campbell and Lomax. Labor's efforts did not slow after the first election. Canvass teams continued to leaflet every evening and Saturday, and on the day of the run-off election 100 volunteers were out there again. This time Campbell won a decisive victory with 73 percent of the vote. At his victory celebration the Mayor-elect thanked and credited labor as key to his win.

FORGING A PARTNERSHIP

These days, labor has become frighteningly accustomed to backing candidates only to have them turn their backs on unions and their members after the election. Not so with this Mayor.

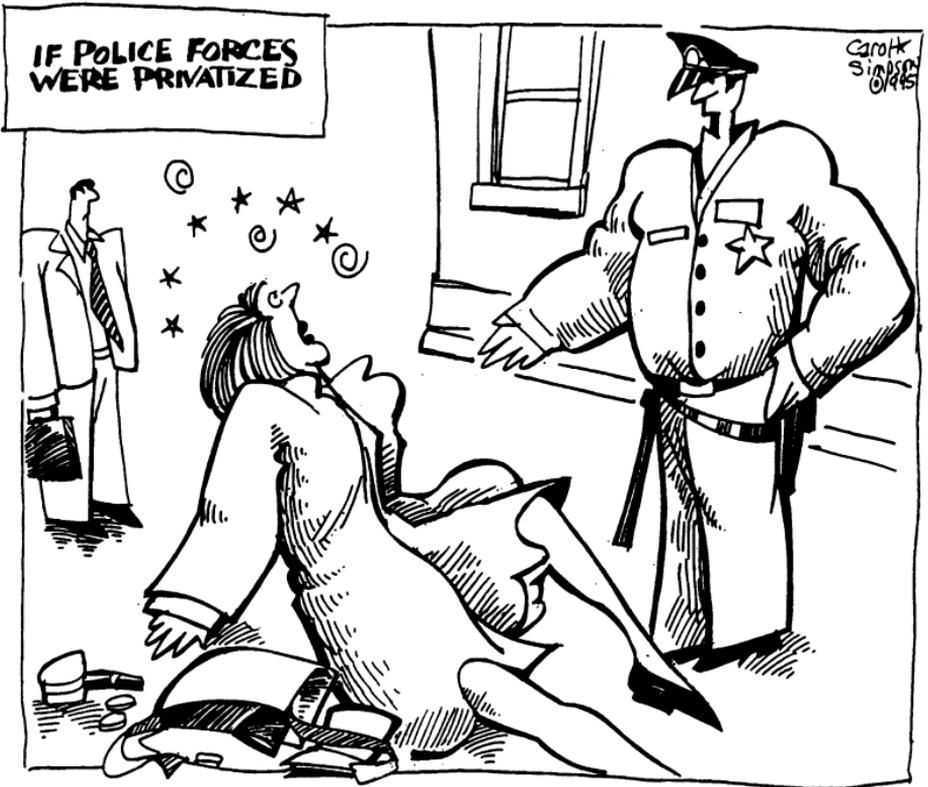
Three months after his election, the Mayor came to our monthly labor council meeting with media in tow. After thanking delegates and their unions for their support, the Mayor announced that he was appointing me (the CLC president) to the Board of Directors of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. Now labor has a fighting chance to win the struggle over union work and wages at the Olympics.

And the Mayor's support has not stopped with my appointment to the Committee. Last May, Mayor Campbell signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with AFSCME, the closest thing that a public union can get to a contract under state law. The MOU guarantees AFSCME representation rights and a role in the budget process. And most significantly, it bans privatization.

The Mayor has also signed agreements with the Carpenters and the

Painters to provide job training for housing project residents employed to rehab dilapidated apartments. And when anti-union construction contractors sued to abolish the city's prevailing wage law, the city attorney worked with the national AFL-CIO to mount an aggressive and successful defense.

Of course the relationship between Mayor and labor is not altogether smooth. The national urban crisis and declining city revenues have led to conflicts over wages and benefits for city workers. There will be conflicts because the Mayor and organized labor have different, although overlapping, constituencies. But the relationship forged during the election between the Mayor and the labor council has guaranteed an institutional role for unions in city government and more power for our membership and all working people. ■



“Good evening. Before I arrest the perpetrator, I’ll need payment in advance. Cash or major credit card only.”