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Building Labor's Power in California: Raising Standards and Expanding Capacity Among Central Labor Councils, The State Labor Federation, and Union Affiliates

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Abstract

[Excerpt] For several years, the California Labor Federation has been engaged in a strategic planning process that began with a critical evaluation of a political setback in 2004 – losing an important statewide ballot initiative – and soon evolved into a systematic effort to elevate the performance of all the labor movement's constituent parts. Spearheaded by a statewide Strategic Planning Committee, union leaders throughout the state have struggled to overcome organizational weaknesses, to develop a common and coherent program, to articulate standards and benchmarks to guide and track progress, to establish systems of accountability uncommon in the contemporary labor movement, and to build unity of purpose and action among diverse affiliates.

Despite the many challenges inherent in this enterprise, California unionists have made significant progress and members of the Strategic Planning Committee remain positive, even passionate, about their mission. "To be quite honest, I was reluctant to participate in the committee," admits IBEW Vice President Mike Mowrey. "But this experience has given me a new perspective. I started to see the potency and potential when unions really get together."

This article tells the story of these union leaders and their ongoing efforts to build labor's power across the state of California. As a result of their solid work, and with vitally important support from the national AFL-CIO, California unionists are building organizations – the State Federation, Central Labor Councils, and affiliated unions – that are increasingly capable of shaping and driving a working peoples' agenda in the nation's largest state.

Keywords

California, labor movement, unions, California Labor Federation

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Building Labor’s Power in California:

**Raising Standards and Expanding Capacity
Among Central Labor Councils,
The State Labor Federation, and Union Affiliates**

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Among Central Labor Councils, the State Labor Federation, and Union Affiliates**

Introduction and Overview

For several years, the California Labor Federation has been engaged in a strategic planning process that began with a critical evaluation of a political setback in 2004 – losing an important statewide ballot initiative – and soon evolved into a systematic effort to elevate the performance of all the labor movement’s constituent parts. Spearheaded by a statewide Strategic Planning Committee, union leaders throughout the state have struggled to overcome organizational weaknesses, to develop a common and coherent program, to articulate standards and benchmarks to guide and track progress, to establish systems of accountability uncommon in the contemporary labor movement, and to build unity of purpose and action among diverse affiliates.

Despite the many challenges inherent in this enterprise, California unionists have made significant progress and members of the Strategic Planning Committee remain positive, even passionate, about their mission. “To be quite honest, I was reluctant to participate in the committee,” admits IBEW Vice President Mike Mowrey. “But this experience has given me a new perspective. I started to see the potency and potential when unions really get together.”¹

This article tells the story of these union leaders and their ongoing efforts to build labor’s power across the state of California. As a result of their solid work, and with vitally important support from the national AFL-CIO, California unionists are building organizations – the State Federation, Central Labor Councils, and affiliated unions – that

are increasingly capable of shaping and driving a working peoples' agenda in the nation's largest state.

Two-thousand-and-four may have been a watershed year for the California labor movement. While the rest of the country was consumed by the presidential campaign, California's unions faced another battle raging in their state.² In a California tradition that has plagued the state since the 1978 passage of Proposition 13, and has infected other parts of the country since then, the California labor movement found itself embroiled in yet another defensive referendum fight, this time to preserve a progressive healthcare initiative passed under former Governor Gray Davis and scuttled by current Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.³ Proposition 72 – the Health Care Coverage Requirements ballot initiative – would have required certain employers to provide health insurance for their employees and in some cases their dependents.⁴ With general agreement among California unions that winning the Proposition 72 fight was a strategic priority, labor leaders planned and launched a statewide campaign. Despite a carefully coordinated and generally well-executed effort, Proposition 72 failed by less than 1%, or just 200,000 votes.⁵ “It would be hard to overstate our sense of disappointment in the outcome,” shared California Labor Federation Executive Secretary-Treasurer Art Pulaski. “The loss turned out to be a real impetus for change.”⁶

In the aftermath of this setback, the California Labor Federation (CLF) undertook an unusual and unguarded analysis of the campaign. Voter behavior was systematically analyzed by party, age, ethnicity, and union status. Of particular interest to labor leaders, the research revealed that only 68% of union voters supported Proposition 72, which would have passed if 74% of all union voters had endorsed the ballot measure. This

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caused statewide union leaders to take a more careful and critical look at the performance of the State Federation, Central Labor Councils and individual affiliates.⁷ Leaders discovered that there was a wide range of performance across the labor movement. Among affiliates, only two unions – UFCW and UNITE-HERE – delivered over 74% of their voting members to support Proposition 72, and six other unions – IBEW, AFT, IAM, SEIU, and IBT – carried 68% or better.⁸ Traditionally strong Central Labor Councils performed well, but some CLC’s contributed very little to labor’s turnout, despite the large numbers of union members living in their jurisdictions. A number of labor leaders who had invested considerable resources, staff time, and political capital in the campaign were disturbed by these findings. “Many union leaders felt outraged,” explained San Francisco CLC leader Tim Paulson. “Losing that campaign was a real wake-up call.”⁹

In early 2005, Art Pulaski responded to these concerns by convening a high-level committee of affiliate and central body leaders and initiating an unprecedented strategic planning process designed to evaluate the performance and capacity of the State Federation itself, as well as the state’s 23 Central Labor Councils and 1200 affiliated unions. “It was a ‘come-to-Jesus’ moment,” said one union leader.¹⁰ The committee’s deliberations were injected with a heightened sense of urgency when Governor Schwarzenegger launched another attack on the labor movement in the form of five anti-union ballot initiatives.

After the July, 2005 rupture at the AFL-CIO’s national convention in Chicago, California unionists grew increasingly concerned that the Change to Win split would undermine their ability to mount a unified front against the Schwarzenegger assault.

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Fortunately, the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Charter Program enabled Change to Win unions to remain affiliated with the California Labor Federation and to fully participate in the strategic planning process. While labor's division at the national level disrupted some Central Labor Councils in California and distracted others from the challenges they faced in the field, leaders on the statewide Strategic Planning Committee were able to maintain a functional unity that was critically important to the success of their work.

Originally chaired by UFCW Vice President Sean Harrigan and currently chaired by IBEW V.P Mike Mowrey, the statewide Strategic Planning Committee adopted the national AFL-CIO's Standards and Benchmarks for central bodies, adapted them so they could be applied to union affiliates as well as the State Federation and Central Labor Councils, and has used them to guide the California Labor Federation's continuing efforts to build on the strengths and to overcome the weaknesses in the state's labor movement.¹¹ The Standards and Benchmarks provide clear metrics for a wide-range of capacities that labor organizations must develop if they are to be effective in communicating with and mobilizing an active union membership, engaging in meaningful electoral activity, advancing a worker-friendly legislative agenda, and running high-performance operations with a transparent budget and competent staff. Interestingly, the original impetus to develop these national standards can be traced back to California, where some of the most innovative and progressive Central Labor Councils – in Los Angeles, San Jose, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Alameda County, and elsewhere – have been involved in cutting-edge power building work for many years.

While during the first year of its work the statewide Strategic Planning Committee explored how the Standards and Benchmarks could be applied to all labor organizations,

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its first efforts in the field focused on Central Labor Councils.¹² “We started with the easiest part,” concedes Mowrey.¹³ The committee carefully identified several Central Labor Councils that underperformed during the Proposition 72 campaign and offered them strategic assistance to elevate their operations. This process is ongoing and has already yielded notable results in a number of areas across the state, beginning with Orange County and continuing with Napa Solano and San Joaquin.

The committee is also beginning to deal with the more difficult and delicate question of affiliate accountability. According to Sharon Cornu, leader of the Alameda County CLC, addressing affiliate standards is critically important. “This is the next challenge,” she argues, “to get affiliates to engage in a conversation about their own standards and performance and to transform their own organizations.”¹⁴

The California Context

California has long enjoyed the reputation of being a trend-setting leader in the nation. Its labor movement has earned a similar standing among trade unionists. With almost two-and-a-half million union members, no state in the U.S. has a larger labor movement than California’s. New York is a close second, with just over two million unionists. California is home to many of the nation’s premier labor organizations, including some of the fastest growing American unions, such as SEIU’s state council, which has increased its ranks from 200,000 to 600,000 in last twenty years, and some of the most progressive central bodies, which have been pioneers in power building.

California labor leaders were among the nation’s first to recognize that a region’s “governing regime” is not just confined to elected officials and public administrators. Around the country, many trade unionists have learned to analyze how government

leaders routinely work with private power brokers in formal and informal networks to determine public policies and economic strategies that consistently serve a corporate agenda. In California, labor leaders worked with community allies to expose these regional power structures and to challenge consequential decision-making controlled by and for the governing elite. They helped develop a strategy commonly referred to as “regional power building,” by which labor and its allies develop and exercise sufficient power to help shape a region’s political, economic and social agenda.

The labor movement in California has maintained a relatively stable level of unionization during the last decade. Union density in California’s vast public sector is about 53%, compared with 36.5% in the nation as a whole. And, the percentage of African-American, Latino, Asian-Pacific American, and women workers who are unionized is notably higher in California than in the national economy.¹⁵

But while California’s labor movement may be the nation’s largest, six other states – New York (25.2%), Hawaii (24.2%), Alaska (23.8%), New Jersey (20.6%), Washington (20.2%), and Michigan (19.5%) – are more densely unionized than California (16.7%). Even more troubling is the long-term trend of declining unionization. In the past thirty years, union density in California has dropped by almost half, from about 33% in 1964 to 16.7% today.¹⁶ This erosion tracks with national trends of declining density.

In California and elsewhere, the consequence of declining unionization is profound and irrefutable: it is increasingly difficult to negotiate and enforce good collective bargaining agreements, it is harder to exercise political power and voice, and

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the standards of living and quality of life of working people are more tenuous and insecure than ever in recent memory.

As the results of the Proposition 72 campaign clearly demonstrate, further greasing the California labor movement’s political machinery will likely yield diminishing results if the state’s union density continues to fall. Therefore, a strategy to grow the ranks of organized labor and elevate the level of unionization must be a critical element of any revitalization effort.

While California still remains a relatively strong union state and organized labor continues to enjoy significant presence and power there, many labor leaders believe that their movement is underperforming. With over 2 million members in the state, unionists concede that there is a great deal of unrealized potential and underdeveloped capacity. “We want to make sure,” says Art Pulaski, “that the whole labor movement in California is greater than the sum of its parts.”¹⁷

The California Labor Federation is acutely aware of these challenges. It has felt the sting of more than one losing proposition fight and has been playing defense since Gray Davis’s demise and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s rise. Unlike New York State, where both Democrats and Republicans alike profess to be friends of labor, the labor movement in California faces a steady and fierce threat from right-wing anti-union forces. Because budget and tax legislation requires a two-thirds majority for passage in California, a disciplined and determined Republican minority has often been able to block a progressive legislative agenda. The ballot initiative tradition has been a thorny challenge for California unions. But the steady threat of anti-worker ballot measures has forced California unionists to sharpen their political skills and embrace a culture of mobilization,

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and helps explain why labor leaders have given so much thought to building statewide capacity across the movement.

Some parts of the California labor movement have enjoyed notable success. A number of unions have grown significantly, and several Central Labor Councils have built highly effective organizations that help shape the political, economic, and social agendas in their respective regions. “In California,” observes UCLA’s Kent Wong, “there are many strong models that demonstrate what CLC’s can do.” The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor is one of the nation’s most vibrant and powerful central bodies, in large measure because Miguel Contreras helped transform it, before his death in 2006, into an organization that enthusiastically embraced the energy of southern California’s immigrant population. The South Bay Labor Council is another dynamic central body that helped devise regional power building as a strategy to give working people real voice in consequential decisions that impact their lives. Amy Dean led that council during its formative years and Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins has continued to build it into an organization engaged in cutting edge work.

While much has been written about the Los Angeles and South Bay labor councils, they are not the only high performing or progressive central bodies in California.¹⁸ In fact, there are many others, including Alameda County, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Francisco. For example, the San Francisco Labor Council has consistently been ranked among the best in California in terms of the benchmarks the State Federation uses to evaluate CLC performance. Since 2004, when Tim Paulson became its executive director, the San Francisco CLC has built on the Bay Area labor movement’s traditional strength and increased its capacity to engage in a range of power

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building activities. Like several other California leaders, Paulson participated in the AFL-CIO's Leadership Institute and brought important lessons back to his council.¹⁹ "I made no bones about the need for programmatic revitalization," says Paulson. "We changed the by-laws to hire an executive director. We fixed our budget to hire a political director. We collected a one-month assessment to hire a researcher/organizer." With this expanded capacity, the council established a permanent political program, persuaded fifteen new locals to affiliate, involved growing numbers of unions in its programs, and increased its per capita membership from 75,000 to about 90,000.

"We have used an organizing approach to get affiliates really engaged," explains Paulson. "We start by focusing on what affiliates really want." In the last election cycle, about 50 of the council's 150 local unions participated in the CLC's political program. "But only 13 locals actually surpassed the benchmarks collectively set for our affiliates. So we still have tons of capacity yet to be tapped."²⁰

While Tim Paulson may see how much more needs to be done, one affiliate leader is very proud of the labor council's progress: "Our new leadership team is fabulous. We work well together. And, we have a good relationship with San Francisco's excellent and progressive Building and Construction Trades Council. That's important."²¹

In addition to its new staff and leadership team, the CLC has expanded its capacity by helping its affiliates expand theirs. The CLC sponsored its own rigorous Leadership Institute for about forty participants who learned about member mobilization, power mapping, and organizing techniques. By breaking down the isolation between local unions, the CLC encouraged networking among affiliates. As a result, affiliates learned best practices from one another. For example, OPEIU discovered that the

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Glazier’s Union had an effective mobilization program and used it as a model to set up its own member engagement program, called OPERA (Office and Professional Employees Rapid Action).²²

The CLC has also persuaded even strong local unions that working collectively through the council would advance their own individual agendas while simultaneously elevating the labor movement’s overall effectiveness. “In San Francisco, there are large local unions with very good programs and they still see the value of the CLC,” suggests Paulson. “I approached them and said, ‘You have a good program, but wouldn’t you rather do this work together with other unions. There are things we can do well together and better than you could do on your own.’”²³

As more affiliates embraced that view, the power of the local labor movement grew and the program of the CLC expanded well beyond electoral politics. Today, the council intervenes in land-use issues, seeks project labor agreements, actively supports affiliate organizing campaigns, and fights for card check and neutrality wherever possible. Recently, the council joined with the San Francisco Organizing Project and ACORN to win a landmark community benefits agreement (CBA) for a major development. The CLC decided to support the development project under the terms of the CBA that will:

- Ensure that 32% of housing units built within the project are affordable, at a range of income levels;
- Provide over \$27 million in housing assistance funds targeted to neighborhood residents, including down payment assistance enabling additional units to be sold below market rates;

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- Provide over \$8.5 million in job training funds targeted to neighborhood residents;
- Ensure that all project employers participate in a state-of-the-art local hiring program; and,
- Ensure labor peace in key industries within the project.

The ambitious CLC program cannot be sustained without a deepening engagement from local unions and a higher degree of accountability among the council's affiliates. That remains a vexing challenge. "Sometimes it's very frustrating that we can't have more accountability, even with something as simple as attending meetings," laments OPEIU's Conny Ford.²⁴ "Accountability was a new thing for us," says Paulson. "The only real hammer we have to encourage accountability is the hammer of embarrassment, which we'd like to avoid using." The CLC encourages affiliates to draft written plans that list all the necessary steps for effective campaigns and to commit to one another to deliver. "We began reporting back after an event," Paulson explains. "Affiliates report what they did after committing to do something. That helps with accountability."²⁵

The kind of regional power building that the San Francisco CLC is now driving will enable working families in the Bay Area to shape their political and economic destiny in ways that were previously unimaginable without a strong Central Labor Council. The same kind of work is being done effectively in other councils across the state.²⁶

The presence of all these high performing Central Labor Councils in California created a rather favorable environment for the kind of strategic planning process that the

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State Labor Federation launched. In some areas of the country, union leaders sometimes exhibit disinterest and even disdain for marginally effective CLC's. It can be very difficult to persuade such leaders that investing in a CLC is a worthy choice. "The California experience is different," explains Mike Garcia, president of SEIU Local 1877, "because of LA and the South Bay and other councils. It's easier to have a conversation about why affiliate leaders should build their CLC because there are many positive examples to draw on."²⁷

California's labor movement is filled with many contradictions. It exhibits both significant strengths and serious weaknesses. Its many component parts interact in complex and dynamic ways. And, in the current climate it faces grave perils and great possibilities. The ongoing work of the statewide Strategic Planning Committee should be understood in this larger context.

Analyzing the California Strategic Planning Experience

California is not the first state to have faced the challenge of expanding the labor movement's capacity. Several states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida, have launched New Alliance initiatives to restructure and revitalize their local labor movements. What distinguishes California's experience from others is that its ongoing strategic planning process was initiated and is being driven by the State Labor Federation and its major affiliates.²⁸ In other cases, the national AFL-CIO played a more active and leading role. This was true even in New York State where, in 2005, State Federation president Denis Hughes took real ownership of the process after convincing AFL-CIO president John Sweeney to select New York as the first New Alliance project.²⁹

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Like other states that have engaged in this kind of revitalization process, the California Labor Federation established a statewide Strategic Planning Committee, comprised of top leaders from major affiliates. The state’s fourteen largest unions all sit on the California committee. These leaders appear to be firmly committed and genuinely invested in this process as stakeholders.³⁰ “Getting key leaders together gave this legs and legitimacy,” explains SPC chair Mike Mowrey. “We had real decision-makers from both AFL-CIO and Change to Win affiliates. And, most leaders came with an open mind. We developed a real sense of community among the different unions. Developing trust at the state level has enabled us to spread that trust downward.”³¹

Any true transformation of a central labor body – whether it is a local Central Labor or Building Trades Council, an Area or State Labor Federation, or a national formation (including the AFL-CIO and CTW) – requires genuine affiliate buy-in. While some union leaders may regard these central bodies as “third parties,” in reality, the nature of these organizations is shaped and bound by the character of their affiliates. The program and performance of any federated labor body – at the local, state or national level – largely depend on the willing support and active participation of its member unions. “A Central Labor Council cannot succeed unless affiliates step up to the plate,” argues Bob Balgenorth, President of the California State Building and Construction Trades Council.³² UNITE HERE Vice President Sherri Chiesa agrees: “The bottom line is, it only works with the participation and strength of the locals.”³³

This view has informed the thinking of Strategic Planning Committee members and helps explain much of the success the SPC has achieved. At critical junctures in this process, the authority and stature of influential statewide affiliate leaders like George

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Landers of UFCW, Mike Mowrey of IBEW, Rob Feckner of the California School Employees Association (CSEA), recently retired Dean Tipps of SEIU, and others, have been leveraged to diminish the resistance and calm the concerns of local union leaders who may have initially felt ambivalent about participating in efforts to revitalize their local councils. “If an outside force – like the State Fed or state level union – steps in to help a CLC, that changes the local’s perspective,” explains UFCW’s George Landers. “The involvement from the higher level gives local unions a sense of hope and optimism about improving the CLC. It sends out a signal to all the players that the CLC isn’t functioning the right way and we can fix it.”³⁴

Leaders of major affiliates are not the only important stakeholders in this process. The statewide Strategic Planning Committee recognized the value of including individuals who were well-established central body leaders – like Maria Elena Durazo of the LA County Federation of Labor, Tim Paulson of the San Francisco Central Labor Council, Bob Balgenorth of the State Building and Construction Trades Council, and others – each of whom brought a particular perspective and credibility to the table. Their participation conveyed a spirit of partnership among leaders from both affiliated unions and central labor bodies and affirmed the notion that the success of one set of leaders depended on the success of the other.³⁵

The New Alliance process, especially in New York State, focused on restructuring Central Labor Councils and consolidating them into large Area Labor Federations (ALF’s), each with a membership base of sufficient size – estimated to be about 70,000 – so that these new central bodies could acquire essential resources and hire skilled staff to build their organizational capacity. In California, less attention was

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initially paid to structure – although some CLC by-laws were altered, and a possible restructuring of four or five CLC’s in the central valley is being contemplated – and more immediate attention was paid to program.³⁶ In California, New York and elsewhere, increased labor movement capacity is intended to move unions beyond reactive and defensive fights and toward proactive power building, precisely the kind of work that was pioneered by west coast labor councils years ago. Although the strategic planning process in California was initially launched because of losing Proposition 72 in 2004, it has evolved into a transformative enterprise designed to build labor’s power to wage proactive fights to shape the region’s political and economic agenda. “The Strategic Planning Committee is a change agent,” explains Mike Mowrey. “We too often tend to be reactionary in our work and disperse after elections. But this isn’t just about political cycles. It is about power building.”³⁷

Not surprisingly, as underperforming Central Labor Councils in California were assisted in expanding their capacity, they applied their renewed energy first to political work. This was the case in New York State as well, where newly constructed Area Labor Federations focused on strategically important electoral campaigns in which ALF endorsements and union support turned out to be decisive in winning worker-friendly victories. In both states, higher performing central bodies have also explored ways to assist affiliates in contract fights and organizing campaigns.

Unlike New York, where the State Federation commonly focuses on legislative activity with a skillful “inside game” in Albany and does not frequently engage in statewide campaigns, the California labor movement is routinely entangled in ballot measure fights that demand a statewide mobilization capacity. Because the current

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strategic planning process was initiated in response to just such a statewide battle, the California Labor Federation's efforts are tied to the need for effective grass-roots action across the state. California unions initially focused on building and harnessing capacity at the local level in order to conduct statewide ballot measure campaigns and other political mobilizations. As a result, labor and its allies may have been better prepared and more determined to mount a strong campaign that beat back all of Governor Schwarzenegger's anti-union ballot initiatives in the special election of November, 2005.

In building labor's capacity across the state, union leaders confronted a number of tricky structural questions. For example, as Bob Balgenorth points out, "To be effective in activating members, we have to reach people where they live and where they work."³⁸ But because union members sometimes live in the jurisdiction of one CLC and work in the jurisdiction of another, reaching them requires a high degree of coordination. For some CLC's, their ability to mobilize union members where they live and vote is hampered by limited resources because members' dues go to unions – and through the per capita tax to Central Labor Councils – in the jurisdiction where those members work. According to Marilyn Valenzuela, who heads the Tri-Counties CLC, about sixty percent of the union members who live and hopefully vote in her jurisdiction work and pay dues in the county of Los Angeles. While labor leaders in California have not yet figured out how to address that issue, the problem of underfunded CLC's has been mitigated to some small extent by activities – like statewide mailings to union members – which are conducted and resourced by the State Federation.³⁹

Another interesting structural challenge arises as the geographic jurisdictions of local unions expand – for any number of reasons, including successful growth strategies

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or consolidations with other locals – to encompass more than one Central Labor Council. Under those circumstances it becomes more difficult for the principal officer of such a local to actively participate in the life and work of each CLC within his or her union’s jurisdiction. In New York State, that dilemma was partially solved by consolidating several CLC’s into an Area Labor Federation whose jurisdiction more closely conformed to the jurisdictions of growing local unions. Some version of this organizational strategy is being contemplated in California as well.

Setting Standards and Benchmarks for Central Labor Councils

In the contemporary labor movement, there has been much talk but less action on the question of standards and accountability. It is rare to see leaders held to account for presiding over organizations that continue to shrink in size and stature year after year, for conducting losing electoral campaigns, or for failing to win rising standards for their members. It is even more rare for union leaders of different affiliates to set mutually acceptable standards for one another and then to hold one another accountable for meeting those standards. But that is precisely what the California labor movement is now attempting to do. Beginning with the accounting for the loss of Proposition 72, California union leaders have sought to set transparent benchmarks to guide the work of the statewide labor movement. This effort represents an unusual and courageous step that other labor leaders should study and perhaps emulate in the years to come.

In California, the statewide Strategic Planning Committee took on this challenge of accountability by defining very specific standards and benchmarks for Central Labor Councils, the State Federation, and affiliated unions. That process began with the standards and benchmarks that were originally developed at the national level through the

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State and Local Strategies Committee of the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council. These were slightly adapted by the California labor leaders to be more appropriate for their own particular circumstances and challenges. The California committee also added a set of parallel standards for local unions. Most of the leaders who have been participating in the strategic planning process found the AFL-CIO’s Standards and Benchmarks to be very helpful in framing the California discussion. And, even some leaders who are new to the strategic planning project recognized the inherent value of standards and benchmarks. Teachers president Marty Hittleman thinks “. . . a ‘report card’ helps people perform better.” He is quick to add that “. . . providing assistance to underperformers is also critically important.”⁴⁰

The statewide Strategic Planning Committee initially applied these Standards and Benchmarks to Central Labor Councils and the California Labor Federation. This decision provoked some resentment and resistance on the part of CLC leaders who felt they were being judged – perhaps unfairly – by statewide leaders. “I resent some leaders on the SPC ‘grading’ CLC’s,” concedes Marilyn Valenzuela, of the Tri-Counties CLC. “They should look at the lack of involvement of their own locals and tell them to affiliate so the CLC can hire the staff we need. Internationals should tell their locals, from the top, ‘Get involved in your CLC, pay up, produce volunteers, move your guys!’”⁴¹ Her sentiments were echoed by other central body leaders as well. Bill Camp, the leader of Sacramento’s CLC, which has over 70,000 members, expressed concern about how the national Standards and Benchmarks were adopted by the State Federation: “There wasn’t enough specific attention to our experience in California. There were affiliates on the

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Strategic Planning Committee establishing standards that they weren't meeting themselves."⁴²

Sharon Cornu expressed some concern about the application of the Standards and Benchmarks as a universal tool that did not always adequately account for the particularities of a CLC's program, which might be quite robust and ambitious. As Randy Ghan, Secretary-Treasurer of Fresno, Tulare, Madera, Kings County Central Labor Council, put it: "One size doesn't fit all." For Cornu, Ghan and perhaps a few other CLC leaders, there was some confusion in communicating the details of the benchmarks and a lack of clarity about precisely how CLC's were being evaluated.⁴³

According to Tim Paulson, "Some CLC's saw the [evaluative] process as punitive, but others saw the value of it."⁴⁴ Maria Elena Durazo, of the Los Angeles Federation of Labor, was one of the CLC leaders who welcomed the process, but with some significant qualifications: "It's good to set standards and hold CLC's accountable. But we also need to assist CLC's in building their capacity. And, it's important to remember that our work at the CLC is not just dictated by what the State Fed or national AFL-CIO wants us to do; it is dictated by what our local affiliates want us to do."⁴⁵ The committee was mindful of these feelings as it engaged in discussions with central body leaders and the State Federation committed about \$250,000 to help select CLC's build their capacity.⁴⁶

It is important to note that the Standards and Benchmarks for central bodies predated the California strategic planning process. California's statewide Strategic Planning Committee did embrace the Standards and Benchmarks as a tool to guide its work and eventually implemented an accountability and reporting system to track progress toward

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collectively determined goals.⁴⁷ Three Central Labor Council leaders served on the committee, injected a CLC perspective into the committee’s deliberations, and vetted most committee recommendations with all of California’s Central Labor Councils before they were implemented. In fact, there were several meetings where all CLC’s had an opportunity to review the proposed standards and to recommend modifications. Over time, most union leaders recognized that the focused work with targeted Central Labor Councils was necessary and discovered that it was easier to assist and partner with these CLC’s than one might have expected.⁴⁸

When attempting to elevate the performance of a low functioning central labor body, union leaders inevitably face a circular dilemma. “How do you break the cycle of affiliates not wanting to participate in a [low performing] CLC and the CLC not being able to raise its performance without more active and enthusiastic participation of affiliates?” asks Sharon Cornu.⁴⁹ Unions that are or could be affiliated with a Central Labor Council expect to derive some strategic advantage from that affiliation. Union leaders commonly ask themselves if there is measurable value-added from contributing to and participating in a low performing CLC or if, conversely, their organization’s resources, time and energy could be put to better use on their own individual programs. “When affiliates see that a labor council is weak,” explains Maria Elena Durazo, “they will participate in a minor way and be more passive.”⁵⁰ As Mike Garcia sees it, “Progressive leaders sometimes write off a council because they feel they can’t change it, so let’s focus on the things we can change.”⁵¹ Another affiliate leader describes this dynamic even more bluntly: “The best [union leaders] walk away from lousy CLC’s. ‘Why waste your time and money?’ they ask.”⁵²

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The problem with this line of reasoning is that it is self-fulfilling. Central labor bodies – at every level – do not exist and operate separate and apart from their affiliates. “A state fed or CLC can make great plans, but the bottom line is, it only works with the participation and strength of the locals,” argues Sherri Chiesa.⁵³ A Central Labor Council cannot perform at a high level and deliver strategic value to its constituents unless and until local unions have sufficient capacity to move the CLC program and, most importantly, are genuinely invested in the life and work of the central body.

Local union leaders might not actively participate in their CLC for a number of understandable reasons. They might be relatively new local leaders who feel fairly overwhelmed by pressing demands on their time and attention. They might be veteran union leaders who have not yet “recovered” by a negative past experience with a dysfunctional CLC. They might be focused on immediate crises rather than on the longer-term strategic challenge of building labor’s power. For whatever reason, few observers could disagree with Mike Garcia when he says, “Not all affiliate leaders recognize the potential value of CLC’s.”⁵⁴

Some union leaders, like IBEW Local 441 Business Manager Doug Chappell, think that international unions should follow the example of his union or the AFT and require their locals to participate in central bodies.⁵⁵ But a mandate to “participate” does not necessarily translate into meaningful local engagement in a CLC’s program. That takes a deeper commitment to building the local labor movement and more active involvement on the part of affiliate leaders. “Take [Professional Firefighters President] Lou Paulson,” explains Tri-Counties CLC leader Marilyn Valenzuela, “He tried to personally visit every firehouse and talk about locals getting involved in their CLC’s.

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After that, it was amazing. I've never seen such an outpouring; not one, but eight or ten firefighters at every event! I think they hadn't realized how important their showing up was."⁵⁶ Without the active participation of high performing affiliates, a low performing CLC will probably be consigned to marginal relevance. But if the CLC remains low performing, there is no compelling reason for local unions to affiliate. Revitalizing Central Labor Councils requires resolving that circular dilemma.

Local unions can be persuaded to affiliate and participate in a CLC if they are convinced that it adds strategic value to the local union's program and enables individual locals to achieve goals they could not accomplish on their own. "Affiliates expect to have a responsive CLC leadership," insists UFCW's George Landers. "The CLC can be a unique gathering place where different viewpoints can be examined and aired with respect, and where resources from participants can be marshaled to help move labor's political agenda."⁵⁷ And, while a CLC's political program is often the first cylinder to fire up, affiliates can reasonably expect the council's engine to drive other aspects of labor's agenda as well. "The locals also need support for organizing campaigns and contract fights," explains Sherri Chiesa, "which the CLC can do and should do."⁵⁸

According to some union leaders, Central Labor Councils can assist local affiliates on two different levels. "We can help affiliates deal with short-term challenges and crises, like a strike where the union needs political and community support that we can help deliver," explains Sharon Cornu. "But we can also help change the political dynamics in a longer-term way." Cornu and other leaders acknowledge a tension between short-term transactional politics, aimed at winning immediate fights, and longer-term transformational work, designed to alter the economic and political environment in a

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more fundamental way. “We’ll always need to provide core services in emergency situations,” continues Cornu. “But, we also need to engage in more strategic and visionary work with our affiliates for the long-term. It’s hard to juggle those two tracks.”⁵⁹ Striking the right balance between those two competing tracks lies at the heart of regional power building.

Strategic Assistance to Central Labor Councils: The Case of Orange County

The assistance it offered to the Orange County Central Labor Council beginning in early 2006 illustrates how the statewide Strategic Planning Committee’s work translated into concrete action on the ground. There were several compelling reasons why the committee started with Orange County. Situated between Los Angeles and San Diego and long identified as the heart of California conservatism, Orange County is the state’s second and the nation’s fifth largest county. It is home to 36 cities and 250,000 unionists. While the county ranks fourth in the state in the size of its union membership, it ranked near the bottom among CLC’s in terms of its performance in the Proposition 72 campaign, with just 53% of its members voting “Yes” on the ballot measure.

When the statewide committee decided to get involved, it was not just reflecting back on the Proposition 72 fight; it was also looking forward to new challenges and opportunities that cried out for an effort to build labor’s capacity and power in Orange County. Two upcoming electoral races scheduled for November, 2006 – Senate District 34 and an Anaheim City Council seat – were judged to be winnable if labor successfully confronted a troubling weakness. “A huge number of the County’s union members were not registered and many who were, voted Republican,” explained IBEW Local 441

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Business Manager Doug Chappell. “And, we were not engaging with them on many of labor’s issues.”⁶⁰

The economic and population base of Orange County has been changing in significant ways. Aerospace industry employment has steadily declined while lower paying jobs in health care, tourism and other service sectors have been increasing. Over the past 25 years, the county’s population has grown explosively; between 2000 and 2005 it ranked 11th in population growth in the United States. There are over three million people living in Orange County. In recent years, dramatic demographic shifts are transforming the county from an overwhelmingly white bastion of conservatism to an increasingly immigrant base for a new politics. By 2040, the county is projected to be over 50% Latinos and 20% Asians.⁶¹

A corporate CEO once remarked that if the external environment is changing faster than your company, you are in trouble. That was certainly true for Orange County’s labor movement. Several major unions, including some of the largest in the county, were unaffiliated and uninvolved in the CLC. While the Change to Win split exacerbated some of the tensions among Orange County unions, the core problem was the CLC’s lack of a strategic vision and unifying program to build power in the region. “The Director was a good guy, very nice. But the CLC functioned like a country club,” observed Doug Chappell. “It had no capacity to do anything meaningful in political action. There were no criteria for who could be a V.P. Locals with 75 or 100 people were making decisions for everyone.”⁶²

At the same time, several large unions, including SEIU and UNITE-HERE, were contemplating major organizing initiatives that would require significant support from the

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CLC and the larger community. Many active unionists recognized a profound need to revive the Orange County Central Labor Council.

In the spring of 2006, the statewide Strategic Planning Committee convened a Leadership Summit to which it invited all the major unions in Orange County, many of which were either not engaged or no longer affiliated with the Central Labor Council. State Federation staff, including Campaign Director Susan Sachen and Southern California Political Director Tefere Gebre, as well as several members of the Strategic Planning Committee, reached out to local union leaders, assured them that Art Pulaski and others were prepared to assist the CLC in any way possible, and persuaded them to participate in the summit. “It was very important that Mike Mowrey and other heavy hitters were on the Strategic Planning Committee,” explained Gebre. “They got their Orange County locals invested.”⁶³ Not surprisingly, the planned summit was not greeted with unanimous nor unambiguous excitement. “Some unions were resentful that the Strategic Planning Committee picked Orange County,” conceded IBEW’s Doug Chappell. “Change is hard,” he continued. “Some locals were very satisfied with the old way of doing business, where you don’t plan with others, you don’t have a program, nor much accountability.”⁶⁴

But many honest observers recognized the depth of the challenges facing Orange County unions. “The CLC had been virtually moribund for a number of years and had never played an active role in the life of most unions in the county,” noted one astute analyst.⁶⁵ “Labor didn’t deal with its problems. Some didn’t even think there were problems,” observed Doug Chappell. “Declining market share, not enough organizing, unions fighting each other. And, some leaders didn’t seem to really care! There were too

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many egos, too many prima donnas hanging on to control,” he continued. “We can’t just sit here anymore!”⁶⁶ The California Labor Federation was no longer willing to “just sit there” and neither were some key unionists based in Orange County.

The State Labor Federation enlisted the assistance of Kent Wong, an experienced educator from the UCLA Labor Center, to facilitate the Leadership Summit.

Unconstrained by their current experience with the CLC, summit participants were asked to imagine a central body that would deliver strategic value to the affiliates and would, therefore, be worth joining and supporting. With strong encouragement from members of the statewide Strategic Planning Committee, local union leaders developed clarity and consensus about their expectations of the CLC and their own willingness to participate in its program. With renewed commitments of affiliation, resources and staff from local unions and the State Federation, the Central Labor Council embarked on a path of capacity building and organizational renewal. This process broke the circular dilemma that often dissuades high performing unions from joining low performing councils.

“It was important that we sidestepped some of the existing structures,” explains Kent Wong, “so that we could assemble all the major leaders who were committed to bringing the Orange County CLC back to life.”⁶⁷ Despite the lack of enthusiasm among a few old guard leaders about participating in the initial meeting, about 100 leaders from 60 unions came to that first gathering. From the start, the tone was very positive. “They were very smart in how they had this conversation,” recalls UNITE-HERE’s Sherri Chiesa. “They asked leaders, ‘What do you want from your CLC?’ The conversation was about vision. It wasn’t focused on individual leaders or someone’s failures.”⁶⁸

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According to Kent Wong, “An important guiding principle was to get the key stakeholders around the table to think beyond their own union and to think about what the labor movement could or should be.” Once the assembled leaders had articulated a shared vision and common goal for a revitalized Central Labor Council, they needed to move beyond the rhetoric of change to the reality of transformation. “We needed to put in practice a plan that could prove the efficacy of change,” explained Kent Wong.⁶⁹

To anchor the Summit in real world work, Art Pulaski delivered a PowerPoint presentation to help illuminate where and how the Orange County labor movement fell short during the Proposition 72 campaign. He also highlighted opportunities for building labor’s power in the county and explained the standards and benchmarks that the statewide Strategic Planning Committee had adopted for central bodies. “The focus was on the future,” observed one staff member, “and not on blaming about the past.”⁷⁰ Small group discussions explored what local unions hoped and expected to get from a rejuvenated CLC.

Based on the deliberations at the Leadership Summit, one-on-one meetings with key local leaders, and a survey conducted by State Federation staff, a majority of unions in Orange County confirmed their commitment to rebuilding the Central Labor Council by undertaking the following steps:

- Develop and implement a plan to get locals to re-affiliate and pay full per capita so that the council would have sufficient resources to hire qualified professional staff;
- Hire professional staff, beginning with a political director;
- Upgrade the council’s communications systems and design a website; and,

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- Set short and long-term goals for the Council.

To guide the council's transformation, an Orange County CLC Strategic Planning Committee was established, comprised of the 14 largest affiliates and modeled on the statewide committee. Its members were selected by their respective international unions in order to avoid any hints of favoritism and to encourage greater accountability. Eventually, the CLC changed its by-laws so that twenty vice-presidential seats would be reserved for the largest locals and no international union could hold more than two VP positions. IBEW's Doug Chappell, who now serves as the CLC Secretary-Treasurer, believes that these constitutional changes were important to restoring the integrity of the council.

The national AFL-CIO provided significant financial grants from its Solidarity Fund and the State Federation offered material assistance to support this transformational effort. Additionally, national AFL-CIO staff member Yvonne Wheeler and State Federation Campaign Director Susan Sachen devoted a great deal of time and energy to the Orange County CLC project. In response to a predictable plea from Orange County unionists for additional resources, Pulaski responded, "You are the resources."⁷¹ But he also agreed to assign Tefere Gebre to assist the council where he served as its interim full-time Political Director.⁷² When the former head of the CLC decided to retire, the emerging leadership team accelerated the council's transformation. But this process did not take place in a vacuum. The council was determined to become more effective in waging real world struggles and so it turned its attention to the 2006 elections.

Despite some disappointing electoral results, the revitalized council demonstrated an impressive increase in its political capacity. It jumped to a ranking of sixth from the

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bottom five among California’s 23 CLC’s and exceeded the State Federation’s benchmarks for voter identification, member communication and outreach, and voter contact. The California Labor Federation’s 2006 election summary concludes, “Polling of members and verifiable data show that the program in Orange County has made significant improvements.”⁷³

Coming out of the November electoral cycle, the Orange County CLC began flexing its newly toned political muscle. First, it initiated and won a “Living Wage” campaign in the city of Irvine. Next, it launched an anti-Wal-Mart fight that derailed plans to build a superstore in Garden Grove. That successful struggle involved organizing a “Main Street Coalition” that allied the CLC with 30 other religious and community organizations and that mobilized over 400 labor and community activists.

The CLC’s renewed capacity was also applied to union organizing campaigns. For example, SEIU’s effort to organize St. Joseph’s Hospital was actively supported by CLC affiliates and allies who attended press events and joined midnight candlelight vigils.

The council has also drawn on the economic research and policy expertise of the newly formed Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development (OCCORD), which has advocated for community benefit agreements that tie public subsidies to guarantees of affordable housing, living wage jobs, child care facilities, environmental responsibility, local hiring and training opportunities and accessibility for the disabled. The CLC attempted to apply this approach to a residential and commercial development project on 50 acres of city-owned land near the Anaheim Angels stadium,

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but was unsuccessful in bridging the differences that separated the building trades from other affiliates.

On the other hand, the CLC was instrumental in establishing a non-profit organization called the Orange County Voter Infrastructure Project (VIP) to register new voters in strategically targeted areas. With CLC support, VIP has registered over 10,000 voters throughout the county, helped flip the City Council of Buena Park from Republican to Democratic, and preserved the prevailing wage requirement in that city's charter. That effort entailed major mobilizations of hundreds of activists who effectively pressured the Buena Park mayor to meet with CLC and building trades leaders and reaffirm his support for prevailing wages on publicly-financed construction projects.

In response to an impending fiscal crisis in Orange County that threatened the employment security of public sector workers, the CLC conducted an educational campaign and helped mobilize 5,000 people for a May 15, 2008 rally to support teachers and other school employees fighting against lay-offs.

The elevated capacity of the Orange County Central Labor Council has brought new credibility to the organization. Outside the labor movement, allies and adversaries alike recognize that the CLC is a force to contend with. For example, in 2008 over 60 candidates for political office accepted invitations to attend a CLC-sponsored "Candidate's Academy" to learn about issues of concern to Orange County's working families and to seek the now coveted endorsement of the labor council. And, within the labor movement, local unions have grown to appreciate the strategic value of a high functioning Central Labor Council and re-engaged and/or reaffiliated, thus increasing CLC membership by more than 10,000 members. These are precisely the kinds of

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outcomes that the statewide Strategic Planning Committee hoped for and anticipated when it intervened in Orange County. Based on that ongoing experience of Central Labor Council revitalization, the California Labor Federation has continued its efforts, seeking to support similar transformations elsewhere in the state. In Napa-Solano and San Joaquin, State Federation staff are currently engaged with local leaders in ways that parallel the Orange County model. Leaders from the Valley and Coastal CLC's have been discussing the possibility of consolidating their organizations into an Area Labor Federation and have sought out the assistance of the State Federation.⁷⁴

An Essential Next Step: Setting Affiliate Standards and Benchmarks

In Orange County and elsewhere, once local unions had agreed to affiliate and participate in a CLC and to establish expectations for the CLC's program and performance, the next step was to define standards and benchmarks for individual affiliates. As challenging as it was to establish accountability benchmarks for CLC's, most committee members anticipated that it would probably be even more difficult and delicate to apply these standards to individual affiliates. "The rubber meets the road when we go back to affiliates to ask: 'Have you met your standards?'" insists Sharon Cornu, "It's not clear whether affiliates are prepared for that."⁷⁵ But as tricky as that step may be, it is a necessary one because a CLC can't be high performing without high performing affiliates. "If you have a dysfunctional local union, it doesn't bring much to the table for a struggling CLC," suggests Mike Mowrey. "Of course, no affiliate wants a committee meddling in its internal affairs."⁷⁶

As the statewide committee has more recently begun to focus on the performance of affiliated unions, it has discovered that while some affiliate leaders have welcomed the

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opportunity to take a critical look at their own union’s performance, others have expressed apprehension and even alarm about the prospect of being “evaluated” by their peers on the Strategic Planning Committee. This parallels the dynamic between CLC’s and local union affiliates. “Central Labor Councils are the servants of unions and not the other way around,” argues Marty Hittleman, president of the California Federation of Teachers. “It would be presumptuous of a CLC board to set standards for affiliates. Local unions don’t like to be compared and don’t like to be asked how many members have voted or voted the right way.”⁷⁷

To address these concerns, the SPC framed the conversation in a way that avoided the reality or appearance of a central body setting standards for its affiliates. Rather, it asked affiliates to collectively define expectations and benchmarks for one another. “That’s the tough part,” says UNITE HERE’s Sherri Chiesa. “The CLC can’t push these benchmarks too far – the local is paying the per cap! You have to develop solid relationships with leaders. You have to listen carefully and use persuasion.”⁷⁸ “How do we manage to hold affiliates accountable?” asks Maria Elena Durazo. “It is tricky. We decide which campaigns we want to get involved in and determine what resources it will take to win. Then, we sit down with key unions and agree on what it will take and what they will do. Affiliates make commitments. If we meet our goal, we don’t go back and measure the actual work to the original commitments. We don’t generally do accountability as a group, but with individual unions.”⁷⁹

Veteran labor leaders have struggled with the challenge of affiliate accountability for many years. Bob Balgenorth is one of them. “You can’t tell an affiliate what it’s going do; you can’t say, ‘we’re going to measure you,’” he advises. “How do you bring

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people along voluntarily?” he asks. “You get accountability a few ways. The International says you’re going to do this. The members say you are going to do this. Or, you show them how to do it and encourage them – even embarrass them, carefully. You have to demonstrate the best ways and encourage others to emulate that. I encourage commitment, but I don’t put standards on the board. We reward good performers, we don’t focus on what people failed to do because we are a voluntary association and we can’t piss people off.”⁸⁰

Some leaders have contemplated – but few have implemented – a new and novel way to leverage the expanded capacity of a central labor body to induce affiliates to elevate their own level of performance: If a CLC is in a position to deliver significant and potentially decisive support to unions that need assistance in important fights, the council’s affiliates could collectively establish standards that locals must meet to access the CLC’s support. It is not uncommon for an affiliate to come to a council seeking help in a struggle that has been going on for some time. If the affiliate has not planned or prepared well for the fight, it can be very difficult for a central body to help the local union turn a losing battle into a winning campaign. “This can be very hard and frustrating,” admits Sharon Cornu.⁸¹ But if an affiliate were to elevate its own performance – for example, by building greater internal mobilization capacity, planning winning strategies well in advance, dedicating sufficient resources to its campaigns, training and retaining more competent staff, and seeking CLC support with greater advance notice – a CLC could conceivably offer assistance on a graduated scale. The higher the standard a local union meets, the greater the support it enjoys from the central labor body and its affiliates. “Here’s what we can do for you now, and here’s what we

could have done if you came sooner,” is how one council leader conveyed this concept.⁸² Of course, this would be a tricky proposition, since every union that pays its per capita expects the council to deliver strategic value to the affiliate’s program.

In recent months, the committee has turned its attention to standards and accountability specifically related to the mobilization capacity of individual affiliates. This process, beginning with a preliminary discussion at a March 18, 2008 meeting of principals and continuing with a May 13, 2008 gathering of affiliate staff primarily responsible for political mobilizations, has been somewhat halting because affiliate leaders remain understandably reticent to offend the sensibilities of their peers.

Managing Institutional Relationships

Whenever statewide labor leaders take up the challenge of critically evaluating and systematically elevating the movement’s performance, they must skillfully manage a very complex web of individual and institutional relationships. Because so many different organizations – local unions, statewide affiliates, national unions, Central Labor Councils, building trades councils, the AFL-CIO and CTW – are all likely stakeholders, Art Pulaski and other leaders on the Strategic Planning Committee sought to keep each potential stakeholder engaged in the process, remaining mindful of their particular interests and different identities.

For example, because there is no formal constitutional relationship between the State Federation and the local labor councils, the committee proceeded with patience and respect for the legitimate concerns and understandable sensitivities of CLC leaders who must be responsive to their own affiliates. Some committee members suggested that the process of revitalizing the CLCs could have moved more quickly and efficiently if the

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State Federation had greater authority over the local bodies, including, for example, the ability to trustee and then restructure low performing councils. “It can take six or seven months to transform a Central Labor Council. If the state fed chartered CLC’s and had the constitutional authority to trustee them, it might take much faster,” argues Rob Feckner, President of the California School Employees Association.⁸³

But others see it differently. “Changing the institutional relationship between the state fed and CLC is asking the wrong question,” reasons UCLA’s Kent Wong. “What matters is real world work and real world relationships.”⁸⁴ A number of union leaders acknowledged that the lack of constitutional authority forced the Strategic Planning Committee to avoid heavy-handed interventions and to deploy more diplomatic approaches that ultimately won the support of local affiliates.⁸⁵

One institutional relationship that was particularly challenging to manage was between the State Federation and the national unions. State Federations are chartered by the national AFL-CIO; most national unions – excluding Change to Win unions and some independents – are affiliated with the national AFL-CIO. There is, however, no formal or direct institutional connection between a State Federation and the national unions. If the State Federation attempts to facilitate a revitalization effort at a Central Labor Council and the local affiliates of these national unions are critical stakeholders, it is vitally important that the national affiliate leaders are fully informed, at a minimum, and meaningfully engaged, if at all possible. “You have to get the International Unions to weigh in,” insists UNITE-HERE’s Sherri Chiesa.⁸⁶ Jimmy Williams, IUPAT president and chair of the State and Local Strategies Committee of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, agrees: “The International Unions must be kept in the loop. If they are truly

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involved, they can help move their local affiliates to participate and build the CLC's.”⁸⁷ While Art Pulaski and others sought to involve national union leaders, they received the support of only some of them. “Unfortunately,” laments Tim Paulson, “not enough international unions have been well or systematically involved.”⁸⁸ Figuring out how to more fully engage international union leaders would be an important contribution to this kind of organizational change work.

From Union Leadership to Labor Movement Leadership

Today, growing numbers of labor leaders acknowledge the reality and limitations of what has been characterized as “free market trade unionism.”⁸⁹ This is an approach by which affiliate leaders pursue the particular and sometimes parochial interests of their own individual union with the hope and expectation that if every other union does the same thing, the invisible hand of “free market trade unionism” will somehow advance the general and common interests of the larger labor movement. In both California and New York, where the labor movements are among the strongest in the nation, leaders concede that this approach to union affairs is simply not working: it is becoming more difficult to protect, let alone promote, their individual union agendas, while, at the same time, the power and prestige of organized labor continue to erode.

Central Labor Councils are one of the only places where affiliates can come together and attempt to devise a shared strategy to build power. “I don't think our union understood the power, vision or full value of the CLC,” explains Yolanda Cruz, a relatively new public sector union president. “I came to realize that our union had, by habit or some reluctance to compromise, often acted on our own, sometimes duplicating the efforts of others.”⁹⁰ The leadership of her CLC in San Jose helped open her eyes to

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the strategic role a high performing council can play as a vehicle for building labor’s collective power. Mike Garcia agrees, arguing, “We can’t build labor’s power without building CLC’s.”⁹¹ And, building labor’s power requires developing a common agenda for the labor movement that is more than a laundry list of individual union priorities. “Let’s be honest,” implores SEIU’s Dean Tipps. “We are not a movement with an overarching vision. That is a fundamental problem.”⁹² But most leaders are not intensely interested in embracing a shared vision because it is very likely to require compromise or deferring their own union’s immediate objectives for longer-term collective goals. While that kind of conversation may be vitally important to the future of the labor movement, it is hard to imagine it taking place except in the context of a high performing Central Labor Council that has demonstrated to affiliates that working together makes it possible to achieve goals that are beyond the reach of individual unions acting alone.

As compared to their counterparts in other states, California labor leaders seem to better understand and appreciate the real or potential strategic value of high performing Central Labor Councils. These unionists openly express the need and desire to build the larger movement – and not just their own affiliate – and appear to be quite comfortable and conversant with the language and substance of “power building” as a labor orientation. As suggested earlier, this is probably true because there are so many high performing central labor bodies throughout California and the strategic value of these organizations has been so clearly demonstrated in the real world.

In California, the logic that induces local unions to affiliate and participate in a local central body seems to drive the thinking of progressive statewide labor leaders as well. SEIU is undoubtedly one of the more dynamic and fastest growing unions in

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California. Having tripled its ranks in the last two decades, one might expect SEIU to exhibit disinterest in the state’s central bodies and confidence in advancing its own independent agenda. But before his retirement SEIU’s Dean Tipps consistently played an active and leading role in the State Federation’s Strategic Planning Committee. When asked why SEIU appears to care so much about building the larger labor movement in California, Dean Tipps responded without hesitation: “We may be big. But California is a big state. We have 600,000 members, but there are over 36 million people in the state. We are not big enough to win on our own. There are competing visions of politics in the labor movement. One is a transactional model. In exchange for our support we’ll get something from a politician. Another is a power-building model. We’ll build power to shift the whole political orientation of the state. That’s what we need to do and we can’t do that on our own.”⁹³

Preliminary Conclusions

The California experience presents a wonderful example of unionists who are willing to honestly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations, to learn from their past practice to inform their strategies for the future, and to work together to build the labor movement’s power throughout the state. It is that vision of power building that initially inspired the statewide Strategic Planning Committee and has sustained its work over many months. Because the work of the California Labor Federation’s Strategic Planning Committee is ongoing, only the following preliminary conclusions and recommendations can be fairly offered at this time:

- Labor leaders in California have exhibited an uncommon willingness to critically evaluate the performance of their movement and all its constituent parts. While

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this process has never been easy and not always smooth, it has enabled unionists to build on the many formidable strengths of the California labor movement and to begin to overcome some of its non-trivial weaknesses. The U.S. labor movement could become stronger and more effective if it embraced a similar spirit of appreciative inquiry and critical self-reflection.

- The strategic planning process in California has been guided by a number of principles that have increased its chances of success. The most important of these is a commitment to be as inclusive as possible, engaging all the key stakeholders in an honest and open conversation about the strategic challenges unions face in a changing environment. The quality of the strategic plan that emerges from this kind of process is enhanced by the input of all these stakeholders. The likelihood of successfully implementing the plan is elevated by the authentic sense of ownership affiliates feel about it.
- An inclusive strategic planning process of this kind provides a unique opportunity to build important and durable bridges in the labor movement between AFL-CIO and Change to Win affiliates, between private sector, public sector and building trades unions, and between more and less active unions. Such opportunities are too rare and should be seized upon whenever possible.
- The labor movement desperately needs venues where individual unions can come together to discuss their own respective needs and to explore their common interests. It is time for American unions to disabuse themselves of the false promise that the larger labor movement can be revitalized if individual affiliates continue to pursue their own particular and sometimes parochial agendas without

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at the same time developing a unified and transcendent strategy. That brand of “free market trade unionism” is a recipe for continued decline. It can only be put to rest if there are places where union leaders can engage with one another in spirited debate about the future of their movement. High performing central labor bodies – CLC’s, building trades councils, Area Labor Federations, State Federations of Labor, and national formations – currently represent the only viable venues for that kind of debate. At every level, labor leaders who are appropriately concerned about the future of their movement should devote the same kind of attention and energy to revitalizing these central bodies as the California unionists have recently exhibited.

- Central labor bodies cannot succeed without the enthusiastic support and active participation of a growing number of high performing union affiliates. No individual union – no matter how determined or effective – can survive and thrive as an island of strength in a sea of weakness. In fact, the biggest and most effective unions have a special responsibility to help build more functional and effective central labor bodies. This cannot be achieved without bold leadership at every level, especially among national union presidents whose support, direction and involvement are vitally important.
- Hammering out a common and transcendent agenda for the labor movement will be of little consequence if union leaders cannot establish mutually acceptable standards of organizational performance, hold one another accountable for meeting those standards in a principled and transparent way, and carry out their shared program with a degree of discipline and strategic focus that is uncommon

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in the contemporary labor movement. Labor leaders in California – and elsewhere, of course – have begun to grapple with that challenge in an impressive way. Their example should be honored and emulated.

Some may look at the experience in California and conclude that it is an exceptional case because California’s labor movement is so much bigger than those in other states. They might suggest that the lessons learned there cannot be applied elsewhere. That would be a grave mistake. Unionists in California are incredibly dedicated, hard-working, thoughtful and determined to win. But they are not a different breed than labor leaders elsewhere. There are, no doubt, circumstances in California that are unique, and lessons that are not easily transferable to other states. But any labor leader who is committed to revitalizing the movement in his or her state or region can and should study the California experience and work creatively to customize and apply those lessons that are relevant to the particular challenges he or she faces. The future of the labor movement in the United States may very well depend on it.

* The author wishes to thank the many California labor leaders who agreed to be interviewed for this project. They shared their experience and insights generously and helped shape the analysis offered in this report. Their names appear in the Endnotes. Laurie Kellogg provided invaluable assistance in conducting background research and drafting this report. Finally, California Labor Federation President Art Pulaski and Campaign Director Susan Sachen were enormously helpful in sharing documents, arranging interviews and analyzing the experience captured in this article.

¹ Interview with Mike Mowrey, 3/4/08.

² California’s unions devoted significant resources and staff to the national elections.

³ Proposition 13, officially titled the “People’s Initiative to Limit Property Taxation,” was a ballot initiative that amended the California state constitution and capped real estate taxes.

⁴ Employers with over 50 employees would have been required to either (1) pay a fee to a new state program primarily to purchase private health insurance covers or (2) arrange directly with private health insurance providers for health insurance coverage. Employers with over 200 employee would have been required to cover employees and their dependents. The state would have also established a new program to assist lower-income employee to pay their share of health premiums.

⁵ Final tally: 5,681,863 / 49.1% Yes votes; 5,881,886 / 50.9% No votes.

⁶ Interview with Art Pulaski, 2/6/08.

⁷ The results of this performance review are summarized in the Appendix under the heading: “Review of Labor Performance 2004.”

⁸ LIUNA, AFSCME, IATSE, IUOE and CWA delivered between 60% and 68%, while the average among smaller affiliates was 58%.

⁹ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

¹⁰ Interview with SF CLC Executive Director, Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

¹¹ See Appendix for the Standards and Benchmarks that were adapted and then adopted by the California Labor Federation. These standards were originally developed under the direction of the AFL-CIO Executive Council Committee on State and Local Strategies and were crafted by leaders of State Federations and Central Labor Councils serving on a national advisory committee.

¹² The statewide Strategic Planning Committee added to the Standards and Benchmarks a set of metrics for union affiliates that corresponded with measures used to evaluate central bodies.

¹³ Interview with Mike Mowrey, 3/4/08.

¹⁴ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

¹⁵ Ruth Milkman. Add citation.

¹⁶ Union density data citation. BNA. Add citation.

¹⁷ Interview with Art Pulaski, 8/6/08.

¹⁸ Cite various articles about LA and South Bay.

¹⁹ Sharon Cornu, of the Alameda County CLC, said that her participation in the Leadership Institute helped her to think more strategically about building effective Central Labor Councils. Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

²⁰ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

²¹ Interview with OPEIU Local 3 Secretary-Treasurer, Connie Ford, 3/14/08.

²² Interview with Conny Ford, 3/14/08. The Glazier's Union is part of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades.

²³ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

²⁴ Interview with Connie Ford, 3/14/08.

²⁵ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

²⁶ Several other central labor councils, including those based in Alameda County, Sacramento, and San Diego, are all engaged in similar kinds of regional power building and deserving of case studies themselves.

²⁷ Interview with Mike Garcia, 2/27/08.

²⁸ By the time California was ready to launch its process, the national AFL-CIO field operations had been severely cut following the Change to Win split. As a result, California unionists could not heavily rely on national AFL-CIO staff to support their strategic planning effort. According to AFL-CIO Western Region Director Jerry Acosta, "When I joined the region after Sweeney became president, our region had six or seven staff members and two supervisors. By the time I became regional director we had been cut down to just two people. The reduction in resources at the AFL-CIO forced us to work with the State Fed more closely and cooperatively. We were at the table. But this effort was led by the State Fed and the major affiliates." Interview with Jerry Acosta, 4/3/08.

²⁹ See Jeff Grabelsky, "A New Alliance for New York State: A Progress Report on the Labor Movement's Restructuring, Capacity Building, and Programmatic Work," in *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Volume 10, March 2007..

³⁰ Reference interviews. See list of Strategic Planning Committee members in Appendix.

³¹ Interview with Mike Mowrey, 3/4/08.

³² Interview with Bob Balgenorth, 2/28/08.

³³ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

³⁴ Interview with George Landers, 2/20/08.

³⁵ The composition of the statewide Strategic Planning Committee has changed over time. Shelley Kessler, of the San Mateo CLC, and Jerry Butkiewitz, of the San Diego CLC, were among the original central body leaders on the committee. Tim Paulson, of the San Francisco CLC, Maria Elena Durazo, of the LA Federation of Labor, and Cesar Lara, of the Monterey Bay CLC later joined the committee. See the appendix for the list of past and current committee members.

³⁶ Consolidating small Central Labor Councils into larger Area Labor Federations can also address a structural mismatch in which the expanding geographical jurisdiction of a local union may cover more than one Central Labor Council. Under those increasingly common circumstances, a local union's principal

officer cannot be expected to fully participate in multiple Central Labor Councils. Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

³⁷ Interview with Mike Mowrey, 3/4/08.

³⁸ Interview with Bob Balgenorth, 2/28/08

³⁹ Interview with Bob Balgenorth, 2/28/08.

⁴⁰ Interview with Marty Hittleman, 2/20/08.

⁴¹ Interview with Marilyn Valenzuela, 3/14/08.

⁴² Interview with Bill Camp, 2/26/08.

⁴³ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08. Interview with Randy Ghan, 2/26/08 [confirm interview date].

⁴⁴ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

⁴⁵ Interview with Maria Elena Durazo, 2/29/08.

⁴⁶ Interview with Art Pulaski, 8/6/08.

⁴⁷ Reaching agreement on mutually acceptable goals for the State Federation and for the state's CLC's required about six months of meetings with central body leaders.

⁴⁸ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

⁴⁹ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

⁵⁰ Interview with Maria Elena Durazo, 2/29/08.

⁵¹ Interview with Mike Garcia, 2/27/08.

⁵² Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁵³ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mike Garcia, 2/27/08.

⁵⁵ Interview with Doug Chappell, 4.16/08.

⁵⁶ Interview with Marilyn Valenzuela, 3/14/08.

⁵⁷ Interview with George Landers, 2/20/08.

⁵⁸ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁵⁹ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

⁶⁰ Interview with Doug Chappell, 4/16/08.

⁶¹ UCLA Labor Center, "Empowering Workers and Communities in Orange County." Commissioned by the Orange County Central Labor Council.

⁶² Interview with Doug Chappell, 4/16/08.

⁶³ Interview with Tefere Gebre, 3/20/08.

⁶⁴ Interview with Doug Chappell, 4/16/08.

⁶⁵ Interview with Kent Wong, 2/29/08.

⁶⁶ Interview with Doug Chappell, 4/16/08.

⁶⁷ Interview with Kent Wong, 2/29/08.

⁶⁸ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁶⁹ Interview with Kent Wong, 2/29/08.

⁷⁰ Interview with Tefere Gebre, 3/20/08.

⁷¹ Interview with Tefere Gebre, 4/16/08.

⁷² Tefere was soon hired as the full-time Political Director and was later selected by the Orange County CLC to serve as its first Executive Director.

⁷³ California Labor Federation Post Election Survey, 2006.

⁷⁴ Interview with Art Pulaski, 8/6/08.

⁷⁵ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mike Mowrey, 3/4/08.

⁷⁷ Interview with Marty Hittleman, 2/20/08.

⁷⁸ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁷⁹ Interview with Maria Elena Durazo, 2/29/08.

⁸⁰ Interview with Bob Balgenorth, 2/28/08.

⁸¹ Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

⁸² Interview with Sharon Cornu, 2/28/08.

⁸³ Interview with Rob Feckner, 2/27/08.

⁸⁴ Interview with Kent Wong, 2/29/08.

⁸⁵ In California, New York and perhaps elsewhere, state federation leaders may want more formal authority over local councils, but altering those constitutional relationships would certainly meet stiff resistance from

large and high performing central bodies in places like Los Angeles. Moreover, in states like Colorado, where the state federation's dysfunction resulted in a national trusteeship, giving it authority over a flagship operation like the Denver Area Labor Federation would make little or no sense at all.

⁸⁶ Interview with Sherri Chiesa, 2/27/08.

⁸⁷ Interview with Jimmy Williams, 4/15/08.

⁸⁸ Interview with Tim Paulson, 2/20/08.

⁸⁹ See Jeff Grabelsky, "A New Alliance for New York State: A Progress Report on the Labor Movement's Restructuring, Capacity Building, and Programmatic Work," in *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Volume 10, March 2007.

⁹⁰ Interview with Yolanda Cruz, 2/6/08 [confirm interview date].

⁹¹ Interview with Mike Garcia, 2/27/08.

⁹² Interview with Dean Tipps, 2/22/08.

⁹³ Interview with Dean Tipps, 2/22/08.