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2007

## Two Paths to the High Road: The Dynamics of Coalition Building in Seattle and Buffalo

Ian Greer

*Cornell University*, [i.greer@greenwich.ac.uk](mailto:i.greer@greenwich.ac.uk)

Barbara Byrd

*University of Oregon*, [bbyrd@uoregon.edu](mailto:bbyrd@uoregon.edu)

Lou Jean Fleron

*Cornell University*, [ljf8@cornell.edu](mailto:ljf8@cornell.edu)

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## Two Paths to the High Road: The Dynamics of Coalition Building in Seattle and Buffalo

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Labor-community coalitions are not a new concept. Unions approach such coalitions now, as in the past, as one way to enhance their bargaining power with an employer. Such coalitions are temporary and often issue-based. In recent years, however, some local labor movements have begun to look at coalitions in a broader way – as a means of improving their public image and building power in the political arena. This broad-based approach requires the development of coalitions for the longer run, not just for temporary expediency. This paper develops the notion of a high road social infrastructure as a way to understand how union leaders develop and sustain coalitions over time and find the resources they need to succeed in shaping economic development priorities for the region.

### Keywords

ILR, Cornell University, Seattle, Buffalo, coalition, labor, employer, movement, union, union leader, political arena, economic development

### Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Labor Economics | Unions

### Comments

#### Suggested Citation

Greer, I., Byrd, B., & Fleron, L. J. (2007). Two paths to the high road: The dynamics of coalition building in Seattle and Buffalo. In L. Turner & D. B. Cornfield (Eds.), *Labor in the new urban battlegrounds: Local solidarity in a global economy* (pp. 111-128). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

## Two Paths to the High Road:

### The Dynamics of Coalition Building in Seattle and Buffalo

By Ian Greer, Barbara Byrd and Lou Jean Fleron

[icg2@cornell.edu](mailto:icg2@cornell.edu), [bbyrd@uoregon.edu](mailto:bbyrd@uoregon.edu), [ljf8@cornell.edu](mailto:ljf8@cornell.edu)

The final paper will be published in **Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy**, (Frank W. Pierce Memorial Lectureship and Conference Series) by Peter Evans, Lowell Turner, and Daniel B. Cornfield (forthcoming 2007), ILR Press.

## **Union revitalization, coalition building and the high road**

Labor-community coalitions are not a new concept. Unions approach such coalitions now, as in the past, as one way to enhance their bargaining power with an employer. Such coalitions are temporary and often issue-based. In recent years, however, some local labor movements have begun to look at coalitions in a broader way – as a means of improving their public image and building power in the political arena. This broad-based approach requires the development of coalitions for the longer run, not just for temporary expediency. This paper develops the notion of a high road social infrastructure as a way to understand how union leaders develop and sustain coalitions over time and find the resources they need to succeed in shaping economic development priorities for the region.

We define the “high road” in terms of a path of economic development that provides a high level of worker rights, skill investment, wages and benefits. Ideally, high-road businesses thrive by producing high-quality products and services. In exchange for high productivity and a commitment to innovation, employers have to pay high wages, provide good benefits and invest in training. The low road, by contrast, is a pattern of employer behavior that seeks competitiveness by lowering wages and shifting costs and risks onto workers. Because businesses do not usually pursue high road strategies their own, unions and public policy have to establish a framework of rules and organizational structures to regulate economic development in a way that closes off the low road and builds the high road.

Case study evidence suggests that union efforts to promote high road regional economic development are widespread in the global north. David Reynolds, for example, draws on the

European experience to make sense of labor's high-road projects in U.S. urban regions (2002). Bruce Nissen (2004) takes the concept further in his discussion of the politics of coalition building, with an argument that unions should establish independent structures to carry out local high-road projects that, to some extent, allow the community to take the lead. Others have discussed central labor councils (Ness and Eimer 2001) and labor educators (Fricke and Totterdill 2004) as advocates of the high road. These studies emphasize the importance of organization building outside the structures of local unions as helpful in using coalitions to shape economic development.

Individual unionists acting as political entrepreneurs play a central role in most stories of coalition building. Fred Rose (2000) calls the leaders that stitch together coalitions "bridge-builders." These leaders are comfortable in activist situations outside of the union's organizational boundaries and, in many cases, have personal histories in other social movements. Coalition work does not require a "natural" community of interest; instead, it requires that leaders reframe issues and strengthen their personal relationships with activists in other social movements, in order to build coalitions across class lines. This process depends on the "strategic choice" of union leaders (see Turner's introduction to this volume).

Union leaders, however, tend to move on, and coalitions are too often only temporary. Typically, the shared work of social action in committees or joint campaigns is the glue that holds coalitions together, and thus these coalitions survive only as long as all sides perceive the need to work together on concrete on-going issues. Labor's lasting contribution to a region, however, can be sustainable when coalition work becomes institutionalized – a matter of "business as usual." This is more likely to occur when unions and their partners set up organizations with paid staff to develop and administer projects to coordinate the shared work.

Such semi-autonomous organizations work outside the structure of unions and can therefore carry out projects that would be impossible if a single union were in charge. The common work of steering the organization through a governing board and carrying out the organization's ongoing projects provides the glue that keeps labor together with its community allies.

Institutionalizing coalition activity is important, because it creates a basis for further work, through what Lowell Turner calls "spillovers" (2004). Observers of social movements have shown that campaigns, revolutions and other popular mobilizations occur in causally connected sequences (Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly 2001). For example, the 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization brought activists together in new ways, who then organized a series of international demonstrations and domestic campaigns in the following few years. In local politics, different events or campaigns are likewise interrelated. Individual protests or campaigns can have spillovers on their own; but organizations, with full-time staff managing projects, carrying out research, writing grants, lobbying and maintaining community ties, can create spillovers over a long period by launching projects and carrying out long-term relationship-building. This cycle of organization building and spillovers, catalyzed by individual union leaders, is the process through which high-road social infrastructures emerge.

Can sustained coalitions save the labor movement? Can they overcome well-known problems of uninspiring leadership, lack of concern for new organizing and blindness to broad community concerns? The literature on union revitalization has documented exceptions to the rule, where unions have reoriented themselves around organizing (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000; Bronfenbrenner, Friedman, Hurd, Oswald and Seeber 1998) or broad community concerns (Frege, Heery and Turner 2004; Milkman 2002). Although these studies pose the problem well, they have either lacked a normative dimension (revitalization *for* what?)

or treated coalitions as part of the intuitively powerful, but hard-to-define, phenomenon of revitalization. We find unions building infrastructures to engage with the economic development problems of their regions, in a way, however, that does not address the problem of declining membership.

The rest of this paper will examine this process in two very different cities: Seattle, Washington and Buffalo, New York. Seattle is an affluent, politically progressive city struggling with the contradictions of growth; Buffalo is a politically paralyzed city facing deindustrialization and population decline. Barriers to success, such as a past of labor-community conflict, a one-sided pro-business orientation in local government and the problems of racial segregation and deindustrialization, exist in both cities. Nevertheless, unionists, with an eye to coalitions and organization building, have reframed these barriers as problems to be solved. Drawing on cases from our earlier work (Greer and Fleron 2005; Byrd and Greer 2005), we conclude by discussing the parallels of infrastructure building in the two cities. The Seattle-Buffalo comparison shows that infrastructure building can work as a response to very different economic development challenges in very different political contexts.

## **Seattle**

Seattle is a growing urban region with major concentrations of aerospace, transportation and research-related jobs. The metropolitan area has added about 200,000 jobs during the past 10 years, mainly in service and transportation industries, spurring an explosion in non-union work. The University of Washington, the Port of Seattle, Boeing and Microsoft have been the central hubs of economic activity, serving as employers and attracting other firms. The largest unions

are the building trades, teamsters, Boeing unions (IAM and SPEEA), public sector unions (NEA, AFSME, SEIU and IFPTE), construction and service unions (SEIU, UFCW and UNITE HERE). In recent years, new locals have emerged to organize the growing precarious workforce, including graduate employees (UAW), homecare workers (SEIU) and technology workers (CWA-WashTech).

Although the economy as a whole has grown substantially in recent years, manufacturing industries – especially waterfront-oriented industries like shipbuilding – have struggled. In many of the growing industries, temporary, part-time and low wage work has replaced unionized full-time middle-income jobs. The challenge for unions has been primarily to retain “good” jobs and to organize the new work that employers have created. They have been doing so primarily through a revitalized central labor council, the King County Labor Council (KCLC), which has engaged in coalitions around immediate union fights (initially via Jobs with Justice and eventually via its own internal Union Cities program), around economic development policy (via the Worker Center), around global justice issues (via the WTO protests and subsequent fair trade efforts) and around local elections (in coalition with environmental and other groups). Although the effect on union density has been modest at best, the effect on politics and policymaking has been dramatic (Byrd and Greer 2005).

Seattle is historically an AFL town, with both strong conservative and progressive currents. Old AFL unions continue their predominance in service, construction, transport and manufacturing industries. Progressivism stretches back to the Seattle Central Labor Council of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which operated a daily newspaper and organized the 1919 general strike. Despite heroic moments, the events played into the hands of a right-wing populist mayor and left the labor movement deeply divided between progressivism and a rising tide of business



unionism. During the 1920's, Seattle native Dave Beck began to organize workers in transport and related sectors into Teamsters locals throughout the west, using control over deliveries to win recognition. Beck formed close ties to the business community to "stabilize" sectors where union members worked and distributed the proceeds of the local monopolies as higher wages. Conservatism continued to dominate through the civil rights era, as AFL-CIO leaders joined the building trades to resist demands for racial equality in hiring (from the community, from federal judges and from the Republican governor and county executive).

The waves of union defeats and plant closures of the 1970s and 1980s, however, created political will for change. Slowly, non-profits, organizing around environmental and civil rights issues emerged, engaging unions as adversaries or setting up worker organizations outside the unions. In 1993, Ron Judd assumed leadership of the KCLC. Having served as an organizer for the local electricians union (IBEW Local 46) and then head of the building trades, Judd already had experience dealing with difficult issues through coalitions. At Local 46, for example, he had worked with environmentalists to halt a major nonunion factory construction project.

As head of the building trades, Judd worked to heal relations with the minority community and participate in economic development using the mechanism of the Project Labor Agreement (PLA). By building a coalition involving owners of projects, community groups and unions, supported over time by the KCLC, he began to engage the minority community – mainly blacks, Asians and pacific islanders – in issues of job access. With support from the Port of Seattle, a long process began, in which the building trades council built cooperation between community groups, craft unions, governments and employers to desegregate the trades. Public owners of projects, like the Port and the City of Seattle found that the new regulations – built into the PLA – allowed them to connect public works to raising purchasing power in low-income

neighborhoods. The hiring rules in the PLA provided employment opportunities for unionized workers, shut out contractors without apprentices, while making exceptions for non-union minority contractors (and, they claimed, to organize these contractors). By the early 2000's, Project Labor Agreements requiring minimum levels of apprenticeship labor and setting targets for female and minority hiring were common on large public and private projects. The same activists who had sued the building trades in the 1970s over discrimination were now working with the trades to enforce apprenticeship and diversity standards.

Within a year of joining the KCLC, Judd personally took part in a series of high-profile actions in conjunction with Jobs with Justice. In May 1993, Judd led a demonstration at the local NLRB office against the board's ineffectiveness in enforcing labor law, in which he was arrested. Soon thereafter, the council threw its weight behind a contract battle at Alaska Airlines using CHAOS (Create Havoc in Our System) sickouts, which resulted in the arrests of 25 activists at the firm's Seattle headquarters. The council's attention then turned to US Senator Slade Gorton, who supported legislation making it easier for companies to replace striking workers permanently. One hundred activists, including several "permanently replaced" flight attendants, disrupted the opening ceremony of his new local office. In March 1994, the council cemented its reputation by organizing 200 activists to invade a business-sponsored celebration of NAFTA. Jobs with Justice and KCLC continued this pattern of "street heat" throughout the 1990s, by supporting a pair of enormous strikes at Boeing, a musicians' strike and the WTO protests (Rosenblum, 2001).

Judd also incorporated the Worker Center (WC) into the KCLC, which came to serve a lobbying and policy development function. The WC had been organized in 1986 by a coalition of labor, religious and other community groups to fight plant closures and layoffs in the wood

products and shipbuilding industries. Judd saw it as a vehicle for policy development and research on issues of economic and workforce development. Promoting a vision for giving economically disadvantaged workers increased opportunities in the unionized sector, Judd won support from existing WC funders and the national AFL-CIO. With the building trades, the WC has helped to develop apprenticeship utilization and project labor agreements at the Port of Seattle and elsewhere. More recently, the WC helped a coalition of port unions respond to the port's threat to end a decades-long policy of multi-employer collective bargaining covering 900 HERE members. The WC produced a study arguing for an employment policy for the 6,740 employees of subcontracted service providers at the airport, including expedited organizing campaigns, job security, stable contracting relations, wage minimums, training and career ladders. The port eventually agreed to retain collective bargaining. Clean energy has also been on the WC's agenda, and it has supported Washington State's Apollo Alliance, a coalition of unions and environmental organizations to promote job-friendly ecological energy policies.

Perhaps the high point of the Judd years came with the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests, conducted by a massive coalition dealing with much bigger issues than the previous campaigns (Levi and Olson 2000). The coalition included the full spectrum of organizations critical of the one-sided business orientation of the world's trade regime. Rather than taking on a specific employer, politician or public agency, these protests targeted the WTO as a symbol and agent of globalization. The KCLC's decision to push for massive labor involvement in the protests grew out of on-going concern of the WC and the KCLC about the impact of international trade on jobs and working conditions in the highly trade dependent Seattle area. In a strategic move that won practical assistance as well as credibility from the national labor movement, Judd convinced AFL-CIO leadership in Washington, DC to commit

substantial staff and financial resources to the effort. To do so, he had to convince the AFL-CIO that the community coalition itself was a legitimate organization in Seattle and worth supporting, even though at times labor would have to bend to the will of the larger group.

The opportunity to work with other organizations in preparing for the protest was seen by Judd and others as a way to solidify pre-existing coalition-building activities. Beginning in early summer of 1999, meetings of interested organizations took place at the KCLC's headquarters building. The Direct Action Network, the Ruckus Society, the Sierra Club, the Citizen's Trade Campaign, the Labor and Employment Law Office (LELO) and the Church Council of Greater Seattle all worked together in the months leading up to the meeting. They honed the message and organized the logistics for a 50,000-person demonstration, which eventually turned out almost 100,000 demonstrators from the Western U.S. and Canada.

Despite disagreements over tactics, the anti-WTO coalition made a lasting difference for the KCLC. The planning and the tension-filled week of the protests created durable and long-lasting personal relationships between labor activists and their partners. Involvement in the WTO led the KCLC, for example, to support Jubilee 2000, as a way to deepen ties with activist leaders from the faith community and their congregations. It set the stage for a future blue-green political effort at the Port of Seattle. The KCLC's involvement also strengthened its ability to do internal education, to educate its affiliates on trade issues, to mobilize large numbers of activists, and to build leadership skills among its staff.

After Judd's departure, Steve Williamson became the KCLC's leader; Williamson refocused the council's coalition activities around political campaigns. Williamson had been an organizer for SEIU and the Teamsters prior to becoming active in the KCLC during the WTO protests. Although the labor council had been politically active during the 1990s, and supported

such initiatives as the 1998 statewide minimum wage increase, Williamson refined the council's candidate endorsement and member mobilization practices to involve more members. He hired a political director, first from the Nevada AFL-CIO, then from Washington Conservation Voters. The KCLC's new approach, developed together with the state labor council, emphasized more systematic member mobilization for voter turnout, targeting of union members in canvassing, alliances with environmental groups in political campaigns and more accountability for endorsed candidates.

The KCLC first tried out the new political strategy in the Port Commission and mayoral races of 2001. Tensions between labor and the Port had become apparent over organizing rights and outsourcing fights. At the same time, environmental groups were coming into conflict with the Port over its construction practices. As a labor-management partnership unraveled, the Port Commission began to oppose labor's initiatives on a regular basis. The KCLC responded by targeting normally uncontested port commissioner races. Using a new approach designed to develop a consensus of affiliates, KCLC held candidate interviews with rank and file union members, who unanimously rejected the incumbents. Lawrence Molloy from Washington Conservation Voters won labor's support with his advocacy of a new airport runway as part of his sustainability platform. Molloy won the KCLC endorsement and, with the support of unions and environmentalists, beat his opponent by a narrow margin. Molloy became the first reliable labor vote on the Commission, and the KCLC's support for him reinvigorated labor's ties with the environmental community. In 2003 the council repeated this performance, electing Alec Fiskien. In 2005, in an effort to win a third seat on the Commission and therefore exercise a majority, the president of the Building Trades Council, Peter Coates, sought one of three open slots. Unfortunately, Coates was eliminated in the primary, demonstrating that political progress

may be two steps forward, one step back.

The 2001 mayor's race was a clear victory for KCLC and its allies. In the primary, the council endorsed challenger Greg Nickels for mayor over incumbent Paul Schell and City Attorney Mark Sidran. This endorsement lacked the consensus within the house of labor that had characterized the Port Commission race, since unions of city workers had good relations with Schell. After Schell lost in the primary, leaders of these unions viewed Sidran as more likely to carry on Schell's cooperative labor relations approach. Other KCLC affiliates opposed Sidran, who as City Attorney had carried out prosecutions of anti-WTO protestors and had allegedly ignored claims of unfair treatment by women workers in the City Attorney's office. The KCLC thus threw its muscle into the race behind Nickels, who won the runoff election by a razor-thin margin, which he credited to labor. Nickels subsequently began pushing initiatives in cooperation with the KCLC and its affiliates, including promotion of affordable housing, cooperation with the immigrant workers' freedom ride, advocacy of Project Labor Agreements and a letter of support for striking grocery store workers.

As of mid-2005, Seattle's economy seems, once again, to be booming. Due to years of reforms and the electoral success of the Democrats in 2004, labor now has unprecedented access to public officials at the city, county and state levels. It remains to be seen, however, how unions will take advantage of their new channels of insider access at the Port of Seattle, the monorail board, the state legislature, and county and city councils. Furthermore, it is unclear how this new power will translate into a region-wide strategy, with the national AFL-CIO – as is currently planned – slashing its budget, combining county-sized labor councils into larger area labor federations and potentially losing dues from Change to Win affiliates. Lastly, the political gains are hardly a sure thing, even when the infrastructure is in place; labor's third candidate for the

port commission was defeated in the primary in 2005 amid a backlash from the business community.

The biggest limitation of these efforts, however, has been the link to organizing. Judd and Williamson tried to connect their coalition-building work of the KCLC, Worker Center and Jobs with Justice to organizing new workers. In 1997, the national AFL-CIO created the Union Cities program, and Seattle found itself a center of the new organizing push. Leaders identified the role of the KCLC in supporting organizing as mobilizing members to support affiliate campaigns, as well as research and training. The KCLC Executive Board hired a full-time Union Cities organizer who worked with affiliates to build their capacity to turn out allies and union members in support of campaigns. It also created a multi-union organizing body called Seattle Union Now, which lasted a bit over 2 years, but folded amidst inter-union squabbles, around the time Judd left. Despite the many successes, such as the stronger ties to the broader community and the improved access to local government, as well as Judd's personal role in advocating a shift of resources to organizing, the CLC and its associated structures never spurred any push into the new economy that attracted many members, with the exception of a few specific worker groups like graduate students at the University of Washington.

Seattle's high-road infrastructure is a case of organized labor coming to terms with the local politics associated with the globalization of manufacturing, services and distribution. The KCLC has played a central role by connecting to these substantive issues and thereby winning new channels of influence in the region. In workforce development, unions used the building boom to heal their relations with the minority community and innovate in neighborhood economic development policy. In electoral politics, unions have strengthened both membership involvement and community cooperation; the successful outcomes have created new channels of

insider influence. These coalition-building efforts are not merely ad-hoc marriages of convenience, but are part of an overall growth of organizations and relationships that, because of ongoing spillover effects from one project to another, has lasted nearly two decades. With no end in sight to Seattle's development boom and a string of visible payoffs from coalition work, organized labor is positioned to play a role in shaping the city's future.

## **Buffalo**

Buffalo is union town facing a much deeper crisis in terms of job loss, social polarization and population decline. Between 1956 and 2000, Buffalo lost 125,000 out of more than 200,000 manufacturing jobs, including the region's largest private employer, Bethlehem Steel, which employed 20,000 workers at its peak. The machinists, steel, textile, printing and chemical unions were hit especially hard. With these industries gone, the most important employers are in the public sector, health care and several large auto plants. The largest unions are thus in these sectors: AFSCME, AFT, CWA, SEIU, Teamsters and UAW, plus the building trades.

In response to failed economic development policies, unions have stepped in and built several organizations to fill the vacuum. Buffalo's unions have pursued both community coalitions and labor-management partnerships to deal with economic decline. Mobilizing against plant closures and cooperating with management to keep plants competitive are the two dominant union strategies, at times used simultaneously by the same unions. The new initiatives discussed here emerged, not through the central labor council, but largely as a spillover from social movement unionist and labor-management partnership initiatives.



Most of Buffalo's major unions were organized during the CIO upsurge of the 1930s. Before the decade of the Wagner Act and sit-down strikes, Buffalo had a reputation as a non-union town. The weakness of AFL unions outside of the skilled trades and transport sectors helped attract major employers like Bethlehem Steel, Westinghouse, Ford, and General Motors. After a tumultuous period of organizing marked by violent clashes between employers and workers (McDonnell 1970), Buffalo became one of the most strongly unionized cities in the country. The 1949 Bell Aircraft strike was a victory of nationwide importance in labor's drive for employer-provided pension benefits, and by the 1970s, Buffalo was also one of the most strike-prone cities. During the 1980s, Buffalo's union leaders played a leading role in the national "Solidarity Day" protests against the Reagan administration.

Buffalo's chief problems are deindustrialization and population decline, and neither politics nor free enterprise has served Buffalo very well in dealing with them. The "Queen City of the Great Lakes," once an economic powerhouse and the country's 10<sup>th</sup> biggest city, is reeling from global competition, shifts of population and jobs to the Sunbelt and state policies that fail to stop the hemorrhage. Since 1970, the Buffalo-Niagara region has lost 200,000 residents and since 1950, the city of Buffalo's population has declined by more than half. In the public sector, a declining tax base has forced the city and county governments to lay off thousands of workers, despite a growing need for public services and good jobs. As the population has dispersed into the suburbs, social inequality has deepened. A racially diverse urban core with high unemployment and poverty rates has emerged, as the relatively affluent and overwhelmingly white suburbs have grown. This polarization and decline (Goldman 1983; Taylor 1990) have led to a search for public investment from the state and federal governments and a colorful local politics of Rockefeller republicanism, tax revolts and economic nationalism.

Union-driven high-road economic development projects have a different flavor in Buffalo than in Seattle. Rather than emerging from a vibrant CLC interested in challenging corporate globalization, Buffalo's projects are driven by a network of pragmatic activists fighting for jobs. Job retention has involved contentious campaigns, such as the one in the late 1980s to prevent auto parts maker Trico from moving its auto parts assembly jobs to Mexico, a campaign that led to the creation of the local Jobs with Justice affiliate. Nevertheless, Buffalo also played a pioneering role in the growth of labor-management cooperation. The Buffalo Area Labor-Management Committee, Western New York Employee Involvement Council, and Cornell ILR extension have played a role in promoting labor-management partnership locally, especially in large local factories. By the late 1990s, Buffalo had unusually cooperative labor-management relations (Fleron, Stanger and Patton, 2000).

The leaders who have pushed Buffalo's economic development projects have come out of these community and labor-management initiatives. For example, Kevin Donovan had led a union at a local GM-owned forge (UAW Local 646). After threats of closure, GM sold the forge, along with several other axle-related plants to a newly formed company, American Axle and Manufacturing. Donovan worked with local managers to make production more efficient, increase local employment and establish a new facility (albeit under a somewhat lower wage scheme). Another key bridge-builder is Richard Lipsitz, Jr., who came from a family of social activists. Involved in anti-war and civil rights activism, he had worked for several local unions, including health care workers and Teamsters. He had helped create a local multi-union initiative to provide low-cost health insurance and coordinated an international campaign of the Teamsters to fight job losses in the warehousing sector.

Around the same time, the business community announced a new regional marketing initiative, known as the Buffalo Niagara Enterprise. Along with several other labor leaders, Lipsitz and Donovan helped to initiate labor's response, a union-governed economic development organization, the Economic Development Group (EDG). By 2000, the EDG had a full-time coordinator, Phil Wilcox (with a utility IBEW local), who proposed a series of projects with ambitious goals, big budgets and multi-year timelines. The projects addressed energy, housing, brownfields restoration and workforce development issues, and required several years of proposing, planning and coalition building before implementation. In 2002, the EDG became a chartered nonprofit corporation, hired a professional grant-writer as its executive director, and by 2004 was successfully launching projects.

After the formation of EDG, Donovan and Wilcox became involved in a local committee to rework the rules of electricity provision in the region. The New York Power Authority (NYPA) had operated a hydroelectric power plant in Niagara Falls for nearly 50 years. Under the terms of a federally issued license, NYPA had been required to provide inexpensive power to local industry. The authority announced its intention to renew its license in a consensual way, in order to avoid legal fees, sparking a complex set of negotiations. As co-chair of the committee, Donovan worked to build agreement among a wide range of stakeholders (mainly city and county governments, Indian tribes, environmentalists and business and union interests). At stake were maintaining the flow of cheap power to the region's key employers and distributing NYPA's surplus revenues from the dam (amounting to \$500m a year) into community development projects and cash-strapped local governments.

Another of EDG's projects, District Energy, addresses energy issues through a new downtown heating scheme, which aims to reduce costs and pollution, while creating new local

jobs. In April 2001, the city government announced its intention to develop a district energy system modeled on a new biomass heat plant in St. Paul, Minnesota and facilities common in European cities. Buffalo's city council named EDG as the developer of choice for the project. Organizers estimated energy cost reductions by as much as 40% for downtown businesses, hospitals, government agencies, the public schools and housing projects.

Under the new scheme, local farmers will produce energy crops to fuel the plant, which will pollute less than the current system. The new facility will create a handful of skilled jobs downtown employed by a new nonprofit corporation. Despite some early difficulties in finding a company to provide technical expertise, the project raised \$27 million by issuing bonds. Under phase one, involving an existing energy loop downtown, district energy will go online in late 2005.

Training has also been on the EDG agenda. The local building trades unions established an urban construction training program under the terms of a PLA for a new billion-dollar state-funded project of the Buffalo Public Schools. The PLA mandated contributions from contractors on the project into a preapprenticeship program that would bring minority youth into building trades' apprenticeship programs. After a high-profile start, the complexity of the training project proved to be beyond the capability of the building trades. EDG took over the preapprenticeship funding attached to the school PLA and renamed the effort the Buffalo Niagara Jobs Initiative (BNJI). Rather than focusing exclusively on the construction industry, the BNJI works as a network, connecting training providers to trainees in minority communities (mainly black and Latino), in response to broader labor market demands. The craft unions provide on-the-job training in urban residential housing rehabilitation for trainees who then go on to union apprenticeship programs, higher education or residential construction jobs. The building trades

have been pushed by their local community – including other unionists – to change their hiring practices and the racial profile of their membership, in order to boost wages in low-income communities.

Through the EDG, unions have their own organization to undertake development projects directly. There is, however, a second aspect of the strategy. Buffalo's unions follow a "two-lane high road" strategy that includes collaboration with willing progressive employers in the region through the Champions Network (Fleron and Applegate, 2004). The network emerged from the 2000 report, *Champions at Work*, and is organized around specific development projects. The staff of the local Cornell ILR office and two recently retired union officials provide organizational support to the network, which is directed by a volunteer steering committee of labor and management representatives.

Organized by the local ILR office, the *Champions* report presented original survey results and case studies on local employers to augment the BNE's regional marketing activities. The representative survey supported claims that the region's highly skilled, unionized workforce had advantages for potential investors in terms of labor peace and innovative work practices. The report's fifteen case studies were based on extensive taped and transcribed interviews with business owners, human resource managers and union officials undertaken by a team of labor and management volunteers under the direction of Cornell ILR researchers (Fleron, Stanger and Patton 2000). The interview process and supplemental research to complete the case studies created relationships among the employer, union and university participants, formed the basis of the Champions Network. Funded by the region's delegation to the state legislature, the report was released at a public event attended by civic, business and union leaders.

In 2003, Cornell ILR staff revived the Champions Network, conducting separate labor and business focus groups to identify common concerns with local economic development strategies. In a subsequent joint meeting, union and business leaders established three areas in which they thought they should work together on the region's challenges. One focus area, headed by an official from the CWA and a manager from a health insurer, concerns economic development policy. They have consulted with heads of the region's Industrial Development Agencies about how to improve economic development incentives. A second project, chaired by a local beverage distributor and the head of the teachers union (NYSUT), promotes voter registration and civic involvement, and uses the workplace as a forum to get out the vote and focus political attention on the shared needs of companies and workers. The third arena, on "regional image," is co-chaired by a retired representative from the office and professional workers' union (OPEIU) and a manager from a large telecommunications firm. They provide support for the "Believe in Buffalo Niagara" campaign to collect 100,000 signatures on a letter touting the region's virtues and dynamism. Once collected, organizers plan to send the letter to several hundred consultants and CEOs responsible for investment decisions, and to get supporting letters from high-level politicians. This project has broad support: local unions, businesses, schools and civil society organizations (ranging from realtors and the BNE to unions and the Coalition for Economic Justice) have donated services and turned out volunteers.

The Champions Network continues to generate new projects. It continues to publicize examples of high-road job creation and retention through local in-plant partnership and issues an annual "Champions @ Work Award." The first recipient, in 2004, was the local Ford plant and UAW Local 897, whose jointly governed production improvements brought representatives from all of Ford's North American plants to the area for a meeting of the Lean Implementation

Network. The 2005 prize goes to a local cap manufacturer, New Era Cap, and CWA Local 14177, which, after a nearly year-long strike and boycott, turned the business around with a labor-management partnership that has improved productivity, developed high-value niche market products and secured corporate compliance with international labor rights accords. The network's latest project, an economic development trade show planned for 2007, is driven by the regional chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association and supported by Cornell ILR and EDG staff.

In partnership with Cornell ILR, the network also plays an educational role, teaching the business community the value of organized labor and promoting a better understanding of mutual concerns. The resulting change in attitude has led, for example, to BNE officials referring prospective investors worried about unionization to union leaders involved in the Network. In February of 2004, Cornell and the Champions Network hosted a "high-road economics" conference attended by 160 union, community and business leaders and featuring presentations by union leaders from San Jose, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh as well as the CWA's national president, Morton Bahr. Participants exchanged best practice ideas from around the country, prompting further debate and enthusiasm, and strengthening the relationships with community organizations beyond labor and management.

Alongside the dialogue between labor and business leaders, another channel of influence has emerged to promote mobilization and social justice. The Coalition for Economic Justice (CEJ) originally formed in the Trico campaign of the late 1980s, and later affiliated with Jobs with Justice. CEJ organizes community support for union struggles, workers rights and progressive public policies like the living wage. Governed by a board of union and religious leaders, its young staff connects unions with the region's broader forces of progressivism.

In recent years, CEJ and its Workers Rights Board (WRB) have supported local and national struggles, including several local strikes. Grievances from local hospitals and from national targets Wal-Mart and textile services firm Cintas were aired in the first WRB reception in 2004. They have also assisted in rally turnout, most recently, for city workers, nurses and Adelphia workers. They also supported workers at an Oregon dairy farm owned by Buffalo-based Sorrento Lactalis. The WRB awarded Sorrento the “Grinch of the Year” award for refusing to negotiate with workers. CEJ also supported New Era Cap strikers in 2001-2, in conjunction with a nationwide network of student labor activists, United Students Against Sweatshops.

The CEJ led the living wage campaign by building broad support for the measure and getting help from local union activists. In 1999, the Buffalo city council passed an ordinance mandating that government contractors pay a living wage (now \$9.03 an hour with health insurance or \$10.15 without). Because of fiscal problems, however, the city never enforced the ordinance. CEJ sued the city and, in 2003, won new language to delegate enforcement to a Living Wage Commission comprised of representatives from labor, business, religion, community organizations and Cornell ILR. With assistance from University of Buffalo law student interns and pro bono attorneys, the commission has won wage increases for over 160 workers of contractors at city owned parking lots through voluntary compliance agreements with employers. The commission is also reviewing all city contracts for compliance and promoting improved contracting procedures within the city administration.

Unlike the EDG or Champions Network, the CEJ confronts low-road employers in a public and visible way. In the minds of union leaders, the CEJ fits into the overall scheme of labor’s local development initiatives, because strike support, living wage enforcement and



mobilizations around plant closures also aim to preserve good jobs. It operates alongside, and in cooperation with, other active coalitions in the region, including Champions and other single-issue coalitions devoted to occupational safety, child care and “economic self-sufficiency.” In addition, it links local activists to national campaigns, such as Wal-Mart, Cintas and Sorrento. CEJ is an example of social movement unionism, in the sense that it mobilizes broad community support for the struggles of workers and their unions.

As Buffalo’s problems persist, union capacities to address them are growing. Although the population and some of the key manufacturing industries have stabilized in the region as a whole, suburbanization and public sector retrenchment continue. Cuts to city and local government services are especially painful, since they eliminate thousands of middle-income jobs and make it difficult for local government to address persistent social needs. At the same time, the CLC leadership, which until 2005 was not deeply involved in coalition work, has changed. The new leader, unlike the former one, has been involved both in EDG and the Champions Network, and has begun to give the CLC a more active role in carrying out local coalition work.

Buffalo’s high road infrastructure is a case of unions coming to terms with the policy concerns associated with the globalization of manufacturing and the decline of a region. Despite differences in the problems unions face and the key actors building community partnership, Buffalo’s unionists, like those in Seattle, have found ways to institutionalize their partnerships with the broader community. Champions, EDG and CEJ are three faces of this development, organizing regional partnerships, development projects and contentious mobilization. While social movement unionism may seem inconsistent with labor-management partnership, the same individuals push both approaches. As Buffalo’s chronic job crisis deepens and moves to the

public sector, support within the local labor movement for the high road infrastructure grows. Labor's coalition work continues to spill over into ever more ambitious initiatives.

## High Road Social Infrastructures

Although Seattle and Buffalo have different industrial structures, face different policy challenges and have different labor histories, unions in both have built a high-road social infrastructure. We have depicted two paths to the high road: Seattle's, where unions work to redistribute the gains of vigorous economic growth, and Buffalo's, where they seek new solutions where economic development policy has proven ineffective. In Seattle, unions have used economic growth as a lever for addressing problems of inequality, unstable work relations and threats to manufacturing jobs. Buffalo's unions, by contrast, have built local political will to reverse the course of economic decline.

Differences in local politics matter. Seattle's unions have participated in a progressive local political scene and developed a strategic relationship with local Democratic politicians. Buffalo's unions, by contrast, have worked, not only with Democrats and community groups, but also with the local business establishment and moderate Republicans. While progressive elements in local government, like the mayor's office, have been central to high-road policymaking in Seattle, Buffalo's financially bankrupt city and county governments have played, with few exceptions, a passive role.

Nevertheless, these infrastructures have much in common. Unions set up a series of organizations to design policies, administer programs, seek funding, lobby, mobilize and maintain relations with partners. The infrastructures grow from project to project, and each

project sets up relationships and raises issues that can lead to more coalition work. In both cities, the policies involve integrating minority workers into middle-income construction jobs in the name of connecting building to a more egalitarian form of economic development. Labor faces the same kinds of opponents in both cities – anti-union contractors’ associations opposed to the building trades’ market stabilization efforts, organized companies where strikes occur, and non-union companies where organizing drives take place. While these businesses take on the unions as opponents, others ally themselves with unions. Unionized contractors implementing new workforce development programs (and winning contracts in the process) and the broad labor-management partnership sponsored by the Champions Network are two examples. Individual union leaders play a key role in both cases by finding partners and cementing cooperation by setting up new organizations with staff.

Organizing of new workers remains missing from the form of union revitalization discussed here, even if being “part of the solution” improves unions’ chances of winning the hearts and minds of unorganized workers. While Seattle is home to many organizing unions, the KCLC has managed to support, though not to initiate organizing drives. During the 1990s, the KCLC’s attempt to create a more pro-active multi-union approach to expanding organizing efforts failed. Similarly, in Buffalo, organizing unions exist. At the EDG, however, the link to organizing is absent even in theory, and CEJ activists bemoan the lack of requests to support new organizing. In practice, the infrastructure cannot support organizing if (1) local unions are not organizing new workers, (2) local unions do not approach these organizations for help, or (3) local unions as a whole do not reach a consensus that it makes sense for the infrastructure to support organizing more directly. These, at least, are the obstacles in Seattle and Buffalo.

High road economic development strategies have emerged in an AFL town on the Pacific Rim and a CIO town on the Great Lakes. They amount not merely to single initiatives, but two infrastructures that have supported a series of initiatives over a decade or more. Along with weight of evidence in this volume, these two case studies suggest that community-minded unions can build these structures in a wide range of urban environments, and that, with political will and organizational skills, urban labor movements can learn from one another.

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