

# **Starting on the Road to Regional Power: Community Labor United and the Greater Boston Labor Council**

*Monica Bielski Boris, University of Illinois  
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In 2004 the Greater Boston Labor Council, with the help of the national AFL-CIO, launched Community Labor United. The new non-profit organization provides an anchor for new ongoing work to build the kinds of alliances between labor and community groups that establish real power for working people in the greater Boston region. This paper examines how labor and community leaders have set out on the road to building regional power.

## **Background: Greater Boston Labor Council**

The Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC) represents 140 local unions and district councils in Boston and twenty-three surrounding communities. The building trades play an extremely important role in Boston's labor movement and in the GBLC, but there are also a number of unions that represent public sector employees as well as workers in the health care and other service industries. GBLC has three executive officers and twenty-nine people who serve on its Executive Board. Of the three elected officers only the Executive Secretary-Treasurer is full time. In 2003, Rich Rogers, a longtime member of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1459 and a member of Painters Local 391, became Executive Secretary Treasurer of the GBLC. President Louis Mandarinini is a Laborers business manager and Vice President Patricia Armstrong is Political Director for the Boston Teachers Union.

Following his election, Rogers set out to strengthen the labor council through increasing the affiliation rate. The GBLC, with Rich

Rogers' leadership, has an ongoing affiliation plan and has worked to increase affiliation by targeting small unions who had never been affiliated. The affiliation rate for the GBLC has gone from 75% to 90% over the past two years. In addition to increasing affiliation, Rogers was also open to the idea increasing the labor council's strength by creating a permanent organization to bring together labor unions and community group.

## **Launching Community Labor United (CLU)**

The national AFL-CIO targeted Boston as a possible site for a labor-community coalition organization because of the strength of the GBLC and the large number of active community organizations in the greater Boston area. The GBLC has a strong history of engaging in political work, organizing and community outreach. There is also a strong progressive element in Boston that was made evident when Boston became one of the first cities to pass a living wage ordinance, through a campaign that brought together labor unions and community groups. Despite the success campaigns such as for the living wage, labor unions and community groups needed a mechanism for fostering ongoing relationships that would build power for both types of partners. Historically, the relationships between labor unions and community organizations had been only temporary with no sustained relationship between specific campaigns.

Responding to this opportunity, the AFL-CIO and the Greater Boston Labor Council (GBLC)

formed Community Labor United (CLU) in the summer of 2004. CLU is a nonprofit or tax-exempt organization (a 501c3) that works to promote the interests of low and moderate-income working families in the greater Boston area by bringing together community-based organizations and labor unions for joint research and organizing campaigns. CLU works to promote basic issues shared among these groups involving the creation of quality union jobs, affordable housing, secure healthcare and environmental justice. Funding for CLU comes partially from unions but primarily comes from philanthropic grants. Although CLU was founded by labor, it was developed in collaboration with community organizations that continue to be active and equal participants.

CLU's organizational structure reflects this collaboration between community and labor organizations. In 2007, members of the Strategy Committee, the organizational body that makes decisions about CLU's choice of campaigns, contained nine community groups: ACE, ACORN, Brazilian Immigrant Center, Chelsea Collaborative, Chinese Progressive Association, City Life/Vida Urbana, MAHA, Project RIGHT and Sociedad Latina, along with eight labor organizations: Boston Teachers Union, Greater Boston Labor Council, New England Council of Carpenters, Painter & Allied Trades DC 35, SEIU Local 615, 1199 SEIU, UFCW Local 1455 and UNITE HERE. The community organization members of CLU all have an active base of members and are campaign-driven, as opposed to community organizations that primarily provide services. CLU's labor union members are all actively organizing workers, and are engaged in community issues so they already had familiarity with the type of coalition work that CLU represented. Both labor and community members must commit a senior level staff person to the Strategy Committee as a requirement for membership.

During early phases of building CLU organizers spent a considerable amount of time with leaders from all of the partner organizations discussing how CLU would be structured and the type of work that the organization would do. According to Sandy Felder, AFL-CIO Northeast Regional Director, who was actively involved in forming CLU, it was important to create "permanent solidarity and not just a front for the labor movement."

The selection of the CLU's executive director was also a key component to ensure that the organization prove to be balanced and effective. Lisa Clauson brought to the position of executive director thirteen years experience as a community organizer who had been the lead organizer for ACORN during the living wage campaign in Boston. Rich Rogers cites the importance of selecting a director who was rooted in the community and who was also willing to work closely with the labor council. (Rogers also chairs the CLU's Board and maintains the labor council's active involvement in CLU.) Because of Clauson's prior work, she knew all of the community organizations in the Boston-area well and was trusted by these organizations. For six months Clauson conducted systematic one-on-one discussions with leaders of mainly community groups to discuss the formation of CLU and to solicit their participation.

## **Mounting a First Campaign and Building Capacity**

The CLU's first major campaign, in 2006, used the political leverage of labor (including the Painters Union and GBLC) along with community organizations to require that the Boston Public Schools use union contractors and local hiring to repaint the schools in the city. Previously this multi-million dollar work went to non-union contractors. This campaign led to one hundred and twenty-three people receiving union wages and benefits. The win

not only generated work for the unions but also created opportunities for community members to learn painting skills and become Painters Union's apprentices. The school repainting project provided fifty-one Boston residents with high-wage work, seventeen of whom were recruited by community organizations to become apprentices.

In choosing campaigns CLU explores many possibilities, only a few of which are chosen by the Strategy Committee as a CLU project. The choice of the school repainting effort as CLU's first campaign grew out of several considerations. The campaign symbolized the broader long-term alliances that CLU hopes to foster by intertwining "labor" and "community" issues on an equal basis. It grew grassroots capacity by increasing the membership of the Painters Union. It also addressed a central community concern – the need for good paying jobs for local residents. The school campaign also promised a clear campaign with the potential for early success. By contrast an economic development campaign, such as the undertaking now being considered for the Chelsea area (covered below), could have proven to be a three to four year undertaking.

The school repainting campaign flowed from two capacities that CLU had put into place. In 2006, CLU launched its first annual Civic Network Leadership Institute. This by invitation only program brings together community, labor, and political leaders to investigate the region's changing political and economic landscape for economic and neighborhood development. The curriculum is designed to help participants identify promising strategies for building labor-community power to influence decisions affecting jobs and economic development. These institutes strengthen the bonds between organizations and gives the GBLC an opportunity to increase its connection to the community. This leadership

networking and development feeds into CLU's concrete campaigns.

The repainting campaign also used CLU's capacity to engage in research. CLU, with its staff of two fulltime researchers, provides research that is both policy-oriented and campaign-driven. For the Boston Public School repainting project CLU researched the contracting practices of the district to reveal the nonunion and low wage status of the painting contract work.

CLU's first major research report, *The Hourglass Challenge: Creating a More Equitable Economy for Greater Boston*, provided extensive information about the transitioning Boston economy with attention to changing demographics and wage and employment inequality. The report also discussed the positive impact of union and community organizing and the role that CLU and its partner organizations could play in creating a better future for low and moderate income residents. This type of "framing report" provides a concrete tool for media and campaign work to shift the terms of public debate. The material is also used in the Civic Network Leadership Institute and in popular education outreach in the community.

Framing reports set the stage for more focused research, such as the CLU's "Nonprofit City" project to analyze the impact of the region's dense network of nonprofit institutions, such as hospitals and universities, on the greater Boston community. These research reports provide valuable information for beginning union and community organizing drives and for initiating lobbying efforts to create policy change to meet the needs of union and community members. Organizations like CLU enable labor councils to pursue research activities that they otherwise are normally unable to do because of limited staffing and expertise.

## **Growing the Capacity of Participant Groups**

While CLU develops its activities in ways that build relationships and begin to influence public policy it also works to grow the capacities of its grassroots partners. CLU work has fed directly into worker organizing. CLU and the GBLC, for example, have taken an active role in assisting SEIU Local 615's campaign to organize the 2,000 low-wage security officers working in downtown Boston's office buildings, most of whom are African American and immigrant workers. Their assistance involved recruiting community members to work alongside union member organizers as they went out in the community to conduct home and worksite visits in an effort to get union cards signed. Capacity building also applies to the community side. Strategy Committee member City Life/Vida Urbana has developed a Tenant Organizing Program that creates "unions" of tenants who collectively bargain with their landlord. As the sub-prime mortgage finance crisis hit shortly after CLU's creation City Life/Vida Urbana also began to organize direct actions to block home foreclosures. CLU and the GBLC have worked to build labor support for the actions.

CLU's current campaign, the "Secure Jobs, Secure Communities" (SJSC) campaign, links SEIU 615's security officer organizing with City Life/Viva Urbana's foreclosure work. The SJSC campaign is targeting Boston's largest commercial building owners for investing both in their workers (through a union contract for security officers) and in their workers (through program funding for foreclosure prevention work and youth programming). Job access ties connecting community members with access to the security officer jobs and criminal background check reform for these jobs are also part of the campaign. CLU's work on these organizing campaigns has enabled the GBLC to

have a central role in union organizing in the Boston area.

CLU's work also feeds into the GBLC's efforts to strengthen labor's regional political program. Framing reports, policy campaigns, and the Civic Network Leadership Institute all help create a concrete agenda that feeds into labor's endorsement process and prepares the ground for holding officeholders accountable. By including existing and would-be elected officials as participants in the Leadership Institute CLU helps develop such people's perspectives and builds concrete relationships among them and labor and community groups.

## **Potential Future Campaigns**

With research and organizing capacity, campaign success, and the Civic Network Leadership Institute, CLU and the GBLC had a number of different campaigns in the planning stages at the time of this writing. One was a coalition between labor unions, community partners and Community Development Corporations (CDCs) to create long-term affordable housing and unionized building maintenance jobs with large property owners (such as the Mayo Group that owes 1 million square feet of commercial space and 1,700 units of residential property). This campaign would generate union jobs in the service industry, leading to better wages and benefits for workers and an increase in union members. The goal remains not only to create union jobs but also to push building owners to be accountable to the community by committing to provide housing that would be accessible for lower and middle income individuals and families.

A second campaign in the planning stages involves pursuing community benefits and economic development policies that would improve the standards of living in the city of Chelsea, a lower income area. Again, this

campaign would positively impact the people in Chelsea through job creation, responsible development and affordable housing; it could also lead to organizing opportunities for unions. The final campaign being considered explores job opportunities involving ecological building or green industries in the Boston area. Popular Science Magazine names Boston the third greenest city in America and Mayor Menino has announced large scale initiatives in this arena. Raising social justice concerns into the region's green initiatives promises to increase work for the unionized building trades, provide more quality jobs for the community, improve the quality of life in low-income neighborhoods, and more possible members for the unions.

## **Conclusion**

By founding CLU the GBLC has established an active bridge between labor unions and community groups. The GBLC has made particularly great strides in its mobilization program through its work on CLU's campaigns that are specifically designed to build power for both labor and the community. CLU and the GBLC are also both actively engaged in assisting organizing campaigns that utilize innovative tactics involving the inclusion of community benefits into the workers' demands. Finally, CLU has assisted the GBLC in building community alliances that involve deep relationships between labor unions and community groups – ones that look toward the ultimate goal of growing lasting and shared power in the greater Boston region.