

Building Power on the Texas Gulf Coast

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Executive Summary

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The Texas Gulf Coast's Potential

Since the failure of Operation Dixie in the 1950s the American labor movement has not put great time and energy into organizing in the South. Yet, the South's central role in the current restructuring of the U.S. economy makes it crucial for the future of organized labor. Three key developments illustrated by the Texas Gulf Coast points towards new opportunities:

1. Economic and population growth: the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is the fastest growing urban area in the country, ranking fifth in overall size.
2. The Houston MSA has gone from majority white in 1990 to majority people of color – with steadily growing Latino and Asian populations. Overall in Texas, Latinos are 40% of the population -- almost as numerous as whites at 42%. Seven of the ten U.S. Congressional Districts in the Gulf Coast region are represented by Republicans. However, in all but two of these Latinos, African-Americans, and Asians combined either equal or outnumber the white population. As many interviewees argued, “Texas is not so much a conservative state as a non-voting state.” If Latinos alone voted at the same rate as whites and blacks the region, and Texas as a whole, would be political transformed.
3. Growing inequality: The region's economic growth has brought prosperity for the few, but low-wage, low-quality jobs for the many, especially for people of color. The Texas Gulf Coast has a substantial and diverse working class whose future is only going to improve through collective action.

The Creation of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO

The formal change process in greater Houston began with a national AFL-CIO facilitated process in the second half of 2014 and ended with the coming on board of area labor federation (ALF) director Hany Khalil in March 2016. The new federation was formed from the five central labor councils that encompassed the thirteen county Gulf Coast Region. The ALF took over finances, administration, and the Harris County CLC's staffing. The labor councils have been reimagined as labor assemblies focused on giving union members a way to be engaged in the greater labor movement as volunteers. The full-time top staff position is not the ALF president – who functions as a volunteer – but an Executive Director. The ALF also hired an Organizing Director, a part-time faith organizer, and has begun to reimagine the electoral director's role.

The ALF's birth benefited from the support from the leadership team of retiring Harris County CLC Secretary-Treasurer Richard Shaw and the work they had done electorally and around immigrant communities. It enjoyed several key community allies – especially the Texas Organizing Project (TOP).

The ALF also received great support from a Texas AFL-CIO that had evolved to promoting a grass-roots mobilization-based politics driven by an economic-justice “Fair Shot” agenda.

Key Elements of the Regional Program

Electoral Politics:

Even before the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO was fully launched the revamped electoral program between labor and such allies as TOP delivered success by providing the decisive margin of victory for Sylvester Turner to become Houston’s new mayor in a very close race. Labor mounted an aggressive independent expenditure campaign and changed its endorsement process to require candidates to attend a Candidate’s Academy in which unions and their allies educated politicians on their issues and shared agenda.

In 2016, an even larger electoral program delivered wins in the three targeted races for county-level offices (Sherriff, District Attorney, and Tax-Assessor). All three candidates ran on strong progressive positions around immigrant protections, reducing mass incarceration, and voting rights. Increased voter turnout saw the Democratic Presidential vote jump from a victory margin of 585 for Obama in 2012 to 161,511 for Clinton in Harris County. Neighboring Fort Bend County went from a 7-point Obama loss to a 7-points Clinton win.

In 2017, the ALF continued to grow its political program through a Candidates Academy and mobilization program in suburban working class Pasadena. It also launched a Mobilization Action Team program to train union members to knock on doors for state and local legislative issues.

Overall, affiliate locals have stepped their electoral efforts by growing their political fundraising, turning out more members, and embracing an issue-driven focus. In turn, the coordination by the area labor federation has built on the sense of momentum that fosters greater electoral unity within the house of labor – further enhancing labor’s impact.

Economic Development:

The ALF fosters an expanding legislative policy program that maintains activism between elections and seeks to deliver real change from electoral wins. Newly elect Mayor Turner placed several labor and allied leaders on his various transition teams. The ALF is currently pursuing new city economic development standards that would require clear commitments on subsidized projects for living and sustainable wages, use of accredited apprenticeship programs, job training, a second chance for former offenders, and community benefits. It is also supporting the Houston Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades Council’s Responsible Bidder Ordinance that would help level the playing field between union contractors and low-road bidders on public construction work.

Building the Rainbow Coalition:

Many labor leaders and activists across the country have come to realize that organized labor cannot “go it alone” but needs to develop alliances with the community. As a natural leader for such work, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has developed several avenues for growing a diverse and community-connected labor movement.

Immigrant Rights and Building the Resistance Movement: Immigrant communities are key to the future of organized labor in the Texas Gulf Coast both politically and for new member organizing. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has continued the immigrant rights work begun by the Harris County Labor Council. With the election of Donald Trump this immigrant rights agenda has broadened into more

general “resistance” work. Working with the Texas Organizing Project, the labor federation anchors the Houston Unido/Houston United coalition. The coalition mounted a counter-inauguration to protest the election of Donald Trump, and mobilized for the May 1st national day of action by immigrant workers.

Faith Organizing: The area labor federation brought on part-time a sixty-four-year-old minister who has spent his career organizing for civil rights and social and economic justice to build its Clergy and Laity United for Economic Advancement and Renewal.

Young Workers: Using a solidarity grant from the national AFL-CIO, the Texas AFL-CIO brought on a young field organizer Kara Sheehan who helped establish Young Active Labor Leaders (YALL) in 2014. The YALL Houston group works closely with the ALF.

Fostering Women Leaders: Federation staff have strived to identify and develop women worker volunteers and activist and to celebrate the contributions of women leaders to the labor movement.

Worker Defense Comes to Houston: This Austin and Dallas based worker center has begun an effort working with the construction trades unions to improve conditions in the industry by pursuing wage claims, organizing direct action by workers, and enacting Better Builder policies in the greater Houston area.

Worker Organizing:

As internationals give greater attention to organizing in Texas the number of area labor federation affiliates with organizing plans grows. The ALF supports organizing in several ways. It has convened labor leaders around such multi-union organizing opportunities as the area’s airports. Most of the union organizing work in the region links in one way or another to public authority – making a more unified and successful shared political program crucial to membership growth. The work of the ALF also links to organizing in a more general way of building a favorable awareness of organized labor in various working class communities. Since Texas is a Right-to-Work the ALF’s support for organizing similarly applies to the internal organizing that affiliates must do to maintain membership.

Lessons and Challenges

The Conditions Are Ripe for Organizing: In the one and a half years of its existence the federation, affiliates, and allies have established a credible and growing political program, begun to shift the conversation around economic development, supported significant union and worker organizing, and fostered relationships that are pulling the Houston progressive community together. Conditions are in place to do significant and meaningful organizing in the Gulf Coast Region, in Texas, and in cities in the American South.

Growing into a Thirteen County Movement: The Texas Gulf Coast region is huge. Building a strong labor-community program in and around the core city first makes sense. However, to realize decisive political change the project must grow out into the other twelve counties.

More Resources: While its geographic area and population are quite large, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO operates with an affiliate per capita base of 46,000. The leadership and affiliates of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has certainly made the most of its current resource bases. More resources, however, would translate into greater gains. Immediate staffing needs include greater ability to aid affiliates in engaging their membership in the regional work, developing a more sophisticated and extensive communication program using social media, and fostering active labor assemblies. The last element is

particularly important since these bodies are a mechanism for rank and file leaders and activists to participate in regional power building.

A Think and Act Tank: Regional power building elsewhere has not simply relied on growing the direct staff of the central labor body, but has also raised significant foundation funds through an allied non-profit “think and act tank.” The capacities provided by the think and act tank are particularly relevant to The Texas Gulf Coast in three areas in which the federation will need to build upon its success. These are the next three outlined below.

Grappling with Regional Economic Development: The governmental role in regional economic development in the United States typically takes place in a manner that is secretive, lacks accountability, and often involves a significant commitment of public funds and other assets. While these limitations offer tremendous opportunities for organizing they often require a significant investment of staff time to unearth, publicize, and organize around.

From Access to Governing: In many ways changing who gets into elected office is the easy part. Using regional government to make real change requires translating campaign goals into concrete policies, fighting for their enactment and implementation, and developing people for appointed and staff positions within local administrations to change the governing culture. All of this requires resources.

Building a Transformative Vision: There is a difference between seeing political gains as translating into transactional goals that help with a union’s organizing or bargaining (which are certainly important) and seeing ultimate union success in a transformed regional economy and society. Key leaders interviewed in Houston can readily articulate a transformative vision. For other interviewees, however, such possibilities seem beyond the traditional horizons which organized labor is used to contemplating.

Keeping Ahead of the Backlash: across the country the right-wing has attempted to use state level power to counter progressive momentum at the local level. Although Texas has been a conservative state, the rise of the tea party and alt-right currents has meant that in recent years the legislature has become much more aggressively anti-union. The lesson for national sources of funding and resources is clear: better to jump in quicker and larger than tentative steps to gradually invest in Texas over time.

Conclusion: Transforming a Region, State, and Nation

Being “dangerous enough to try to outlaw” underlines the strength of the opportunities present in the greater Houston area and Texas more generally. Indeed, all the above challenges are the kinds of “advanced” issues that represent the significant raising of possibilities and ambitions that have grown out of the power-building project encompassed by the Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO.

The Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO has existed as an area labor federation with an executive director for only a year. During this time, it has successfully built off the momentum of its founding to establish a credible starting program for building regional power. While the tasks ahead are large the author was greatly impressed by the sense of momentum and optimism expressed by nearly all interviewees. Labor and its allies are clearly moving forward in the Gulf Coast and in the state of Texas. History is likely being written now.