

# Starting Down the Road to Power: The Denver Area Labor Federation

*Stephanie Luce and Mark Nelson (2004), Revisions by David Reynolds (February 2006)*

*The growing influence of an anti-labor Republican party placed organized labor in Denver under siege. In the last several years, led by the revitalized Denver Area Labor Federation, unions are challenging aggressive efforts by the state political establishment. The article examines the historical trajectory of labor's fall and how the labor council today is combating the efforts to crush unions in the city. Since the mid-1990s, the Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF) has undergone striking changes. This article examines the historical background of the DALF and the broader Denver area labor movement, and analyzes the labor movement's efforts to revive local labor power. In this essay, we review the work of DALF, and analyze the efforts to build power at the local level. In particular, we assess DALF according to six criteria: (1) coalition building; (2) preparing for governance; (3) shifting the public debate; (4) leadership development; (5) tangible victories; and (6) new organizing. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of some of the challenges DALF has faced in meeting their goals and the lessons we can draw from DALF's experience.*<sup>1</sup>

On the surface Denver and Colorado hardly seems ideal terrain for labor movement revival. Republicans have long dominated state politics. Colorado has no state public employee collective bargaining rights and ever since a Democratic Governor lost reelection by half a percent of the vote in 1998 unions have only barely fended off outright Right to Work legislation. In Denver roughly half the union locals have no staff. Neither the locals nor the central labor council have been much on the radar screen of national union leaders. Yet, in November 2004 labor activists and their community allies celebrated stunning electoral success with the Democrats taking control of their state legislature for the first time in forty years as well as winning two previously Republican U.S. House and Senate seats. Most significantly, these victories reflected a growing power building agenda begun by the Denver Area Labor Federation and, in 2004, furthered by the Colorado AFL-CIO. How did they do it and what are the lessons for activists in Colorado and elsewhere in the nation?

## The Context

### Denver

Denver itself has only over half a million residents, while the metro area has over two million (the metro area population increased by 30 percent in the 1990s). While the downtown never saw the extreme deterioration found in many other cities, recent population trends have resulted in more affluent whites moving into the city, resulting in the gentrification of certain neighborhoods. Meanwhile, some of the city's<sup>2</sup> Latino population has moved to the suburbs.

Denver has a consolidated government for the city and county and is run by a mayor and city council, with a "powerful mayor" structure. The council has 11 districted seats and 2 at-large seats. The city has been governed by Democratic administrations for the last several decades. In 1983, Federico Pena was elected as the first Latino mayor. He had an ambitious agenda, including bringing a new airport, convention center, and major league baseball team to the city. After easily winning a second term, he

chose not to run again in 1991.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Wellington Webb won the mayor's seat, becoming the city's first African-American mayor. Webb was a prominent member of the Democratic Party, and his administration is referred to by many as "old-style, Democratic Party machine politics." Webb was very popular, easily winning a second and third term in office. He may have won a fourth term, were it not for the term limits that prevented him from running again.

John Hickenlooper is the current mayor of Denver. Hickenlooper was elected in 2003 and is a Democrat, but he ran as a political outsider. Hickenlooper, a former geologist, made a personal fortune through investments in Denver area restaurants. Many refer to him as a fiscal conservative, socially liberal, Democratic Leadership Council-style mayor. Although all three of these mayors have been relatively friendly to labor in terms of their rhetoric, most observers agree that labor has never had a solid foothold in city politics. As one interviewee put it, "labor has not been in the smoke-filled rooms."

### **Colorado State Politics**

It is important to situate Denver politics within the framework of the state of Colorado. Denver is the largest city in the state, and it is the geographic home to the state capital. For this reason, Denver politics are important to the state. At the same time, the dominant political viewpoint of Denver residents is not mirrored by the rest of the state. While just under 50 percent of Denver voters are registered Democrats (24 percent are Republicans and 28 percent are unaffiliated), Republicans outnumber Democrats at the state level. Statewide, only 30 percent of voters are Democrats, while 35 percent are registered Republicans, and 34 percent are not affiliated with any party.<sup>4</sup>

Colorado is what some call a modified right-to-work state: representation elections are won with the standard 50 percent plus 1 votes, but a union must prevail in a second election with 75 percent of the vote in order to bargain a union security clause. Right to work legislation has been proposed in nearly every legislative session for decades, with a Democratic governor preventing its passage through 1998, when this seat was lost by one-half percent of the vote. The Democrats won a majority of the state legislature in 2000, which helped prevent a complete conversion to Right to Work. In 2002, the state lost its Democratic majority, but according to DALF president Leslie Moody, labor "still had five Republican swing votes for labor friendly positions." Two of those five seats were lost in 2004 because of term limits. Moody states, "The battle is really ideological now—the Republicans in the state are totally anti-union."

### **The Denver Labor Movement and DALF Leadership**

It is difficult to get firm numbers on union density (statewide union density is about 8%), but most people agree that the Denver area labor movement has seen hard times in recent years because of plant closings, downsizing, and layoffs. According to DALF, there are just over 50,000 union members in DALF affiliates in 2003. The largest union in the state, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) has 20,000 members statewide, and 12,544 in the Denver area. Other large affiliates include the Communication Workers of America (CWA), with almost 5,000 members; Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with approximately 3,500; and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), International Association of Machinists (IAM), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), with 2,000 to 3,000 members each. The ten largest affiliates account for 71 percent of DALF's total membership.

The resource base that most affiliates draw on is modest. Half of affiliates have no staff and most Denver locals are not well connected to their national unions. Left to fend for themselves in geographical isolation locals were placed in a situation of having to look toward the central labor council and the state AFL-CIO for aid. Yet, traditionally the Denver Area Labor Federation was not seen as a strongly active organization.

In 1998, a group of reform-minded union leaders, many of whom had been involved in building Jobs with Justice (JwJ) in Colorado, decided to support JwJ staff person Leslie Moody and a reform slate for leadership positions at DALF. Moody noted that the group of labor leaders involved in JwJ “looked at the situation and realized they were all paying \$100 per month to keep JwJ staffed, but \$150–\$1,000 per month to the Central Labor Council (CLC) and getting little in return. They decided they wanted more out of the CLC, and tried to find someone else to become president.” According to Mitch Ackerman, organizing director of SEIU Local 105 at that time, “DALF was moribund at the time.”

Moody came to Denver from San Francisco where she worked on development and grant-writing for grass roots community organizations, including the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). In Denver, Moody was involved in leadership and fund development for CTWO’s local organizing project. Two years after moving to Denver, she was hired as the first paid staff person at Colorado Jobs with Justice. They had received her resume from Larry Cohen of CWA.<sup>5</sup>

Leaders Mary Blue (CWA), Bruce Meachum of The Newspaper Guild (TNG), and Mike Garcia (SEIU) had founded JwJ in Colorado in 1987. Many additional organizations contributed to JwJ activism in the early 1990s, most notably

the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) and the National Lawyers Guild. While Blue and Meachum were still in Colorado in 1998, they had moved on from local union leadership to other positions. The new leaders of these locals, particularly then JwJ co-chairs Mike Wilzoch (SEIU) and Jana Smith-Carr (CWA), spurred the change in labor council leadership. They were joined by Tony Mulligan at the TNG, Ernie Duran at UFCW, and Bob Mason at International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) 111.

Moody had cultivated union support by revitalizing the JwJ chapter in the mid-1990s. JwJ had played a large role in the Justice for Janitors campaign, and it ran almost all solidarity support in the region, hosting Union Summer for two years, building support for the United Farm Worker (UFW) Strawberry Campaign, and raising funds and awareness around the Detroit Newspaper Strike, the Staley strike, and others. According to a 1996 Knight-Ridder article, JwJ was “revitalizing unions in Colorado.”<sup>6</sup> The activity in JwJ helped build a group of supporters who were ready to make DALF a more activist organization. This, of course, was not easy. There was resistance from several places, including the Building Trades Council (BTC), who saw a more activist DALF as perhaps infringing on their turf. In addition, a number of labor leaders were not ready to convert their servicing model to an organizing one.

Currently, the only paid leadership position in DALF is the president. There are three other paid positions: a part-time office manager/bookkeeper, a political director, and an organizing director that splits his time with the Front Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC), the DALF initiated 501(c)(3)<sup>7</sup> research, policy, and organizing center. Entering office in 1998 along with Moody was Tim Marquez (CWA) as Vice President, and Derene Armelin (UFCW) as Recording

Secretary. The executive board is comprised of 27 members, but not all seats are always filled. Currently, there are 21 members on the e-board, including 4 from public sector unions, 11 from industrial, and 6 from the building trades. There are 5 people of color on the board (plus one in elected leadership). There are 6 women on the executive board.

## **Building a Strategy for Building Power**

Most sources agree that the DALF has been very active in recent years, engaging in electoral mobilization, labor–community work, labor organizing and strike support work, and creating FRESC, a new policy/research organization. The following provides more detail on those projects, presented in chronological order.

### **Political Action**

#### *Living Wage*

In 1996, Denver labor and community activists supported a ballot initiative to set a local minimum wage. That campaign was defeated, but DALF and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) led an effort to revive a city-council-ordinance-based living wage campaign in 1998. In February 2000, after two years of organizing, the Denver City Council voted 12–1 in favor of a living-wage ordinance. According to the AFL-CIO’s weekly newsletter “Work in Progress,” the ordinance required companies with Denver city contracts in excess of \$2,000 to pay employees enough to keep a family of four above the poverty line. Initially that amount was \$8.20 an hour and the ordinance called for an annual adjustment to wages to keep up with the cost of living. Joining the struggle for the living-wage ordinance were JwJ, CWA 7777, SEIU 105, 9 to

5, the National Association for Working Women, and several area clergy.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Electoral Work at the State Level*

Starting in 1998, DALF changed its electoral strategy in a number of ways. For example, for the Governor’s race in 1998, DALF asked its affiliates to participate in a “lost-time-program,” wherein participating affiliates would pay staff to work on election campaigns under the direction and leadership of the DALF. This program put DALF at the center of the campaigns with staff and rank-and-file activists taking direction from and reporting to the labor movement rather than the political candidate in each campaign.

The candidate DALF supported for Governor lost by the slimmest of margins in 1998. But DALF’s ability to engage in the electoral arena was enhanced as staff, union activists, and volunteers from a variety of different unions learned to work together and move this new style of work forward. Because DALF was no longer content with nor financially able to simply give money to candidates claiming to be “pro-labor,” they put together a candidate briefing program, asking candidates seeking labor’s endorsement to sit through an educational session on matters of interest and concern to labor such as organizing, apprenticeships, and local development projects. DALF began to make it clear to candidates that their contribution to electoral politics was going to be an activist, rubber-meets-the-road, door-to-door kind of contribution. Rather than money, for example, candidates could expect union members to walk voter districts with campaign literature or staff phone banks during the push to get out the vote (GOTV).<sup>9</sup>

In November 2000, the State AFL-CIO and DALF were able to make the winning difference in seven of ten contested state senate seats, enabling labor to claim that it had retaken the state legislature in what the AFL-CIO called the

“Colorado Miracle.” DALF played a key role in the election. Six of the seven targeted seats, all in districts where Republican and independent voters outnumbered Democrats, were in metro Denver. DALF ran a major voter registration, education, and GOTV program targeting union households. More than 7,000 voters were registered, and exit polling revealed that 80 percent of union Republicans swung their vote on the state senate candidate. This change in the balance of power in the legislature prevented that body from passing a “Right-to-Work” bill lending a degree of credibility to labor’s claim. Adding further credence to the claim was the fact that the 2,000 elections broke 24 years of Republican hegemony in the Colorado senate.

The 2000 success did not carry into the 2002 mid-term elections. From a report in the *Denver Post*, it appears that the Democratic Party, its base, and its activist organizations were in a state of confusion and disarray, resulting in major defeat and loss of the majority in the state legislature.<sup>10</sup> According to the Colorado-based research and consulting group, Ciruli Associates:

The 2002 mid-term elections were very good to Colorado Republicans. They held Wayne Allard’s vulnerable U.S. Senate seat, won a new congressional district, re-elected Bill Owens, a popular governor with national aspirations, and won back control of the State Senate—re-establishing 24 years of legislative hegemony that had been briefly broken<sup>11</sup> in the 2000 election.

Those interviewees questioned about Labor 2002 indicated that Colorado unions had a difficult time agreeing on candidates and coordinating resources for campaigns. One interviewee stated flatly his belief that, “In 2002 they [the State Fed and DALF] got out-organized.” In his view, the Right mobilized its electorate and organized successfully in

response to Colorado labor’s enlivened and dominant showing in 2000. When interviewed in early 2004, Leslie Moody saw DALF’s capacity to create progressive policy change at the state level was least four years away.

### *Electoral Work at the Municipal Level*

After many years of small successes at city council, school board, and fire district elections throughout DALF’s five-county area, DALF saw a tremendous opportunity in the 2003 Denver city and county elections. In early 2003, DALF held a strategic planning session with community allies, which allowed them to lay out a plan for the next several months, building to the May primaries and June election. In 2002, DALF had already made an early endorsement of Don Mares for mayor. DALF also endorsed nine candidates for city council races. The two main candidates for the mayoral seat—Mares and Hickenlooper—were both Democrats (the race is officially nonpartisan).

The Building Trades were strong Mares supporters because the office he held under Webb was responsible for enforcing the city and county prevailing wage ordinance. This ordinance also included the requirement of fixed apprenticeship to journeyman ratios on public works projects. Mares’ office was also responsible for building code enforcement on city and county public works projects. Along with plumbers and electricians who must be licensed by the state, pipe fitters and sheet metal workers who work on heating and cooling systems must be licensed to work in Denver. Don Mares’ office aggressively enforced these building regulations, apprenticeship ratios, and licensing requirements over the years. Mares was even willing to take on the mayor in some cases in order to get these laws enforced.<sup>12</sup> Others in the labor movement supported Mares as well, stating that he was a long-time friend of labor.

The Mares mayoral campaign hit a few stumbling blocks along the way, and his rival Hickenlooper ran a strong campaign. Mares was also unable to secure the endorsement of outgoing Mayor Wellington Webb, who chose not to endorse anyone in the race. Many believe that Webb appointees worked with the press early in the campaign to undo Mares' credibility by highlighting budget issues and personal conflicts with the mayor. The press was beginning to paint the Mares campaign as in trouble. By mid-May Hickenlooper led in the polls. Hickenlooper picked up the formal endorsement of the police, sheriff's, and firefighters unions. In the end, Hickenlooper won in a landslide. Throughout the campaign, DALF coordinated the work of rank-and-file members and "lost-time staff" who knocked on doors, did literature drops, staffed phone banks, and worked to get out the vote. And, while in the end Mares did not win on June 5, 2003, five of six DALF-supported city council candidates did.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Denver School Board*

With lessons learned from the 1998 Governor's race, DALF, along with its participating affiliates, made a significant contribution to the organizing campaign among service workers at Denver Public Schools conducted by Communications Workers of America local 7777. Standing in the way of a successful organizing campaign and the desire of the workers to achieve union representation was the seven-member school board. In order to overcome this obstacle, DALF partnered with JwJ, the Ministerial Alliance, and other faith-based and community groups to hold a workers' rights board hearing on the issue. In November 1999, DALF and its allies, particularly the National Education Association (NEA) affiliated Denver Classroom Teachers' Association, embarked on an intensive "labor-neighbor" education and GOTV program. They were able to elect two new school board members willing

to convince other board members that granting organizing rights to the service workers was the right thing to do. In spring of 2000, 125 part-time custodians were granted the right to join CWA.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Labor 2004*

DALF aggressive electoral work has been done in coordination with a reinvigorated state AFL-CIO. An evolving leadership, a New Alliance Process, and leadership training over the past several years have helped the state federation develop a sense of mission and focus. Operating with a small staff (the President, political director, and a political organizer are the only full time non-office personnel) the Colorado AFL-CIO has, like DALF, built an increasing capacity to build alliances and to mobilize affiliates.

For the 2004 elections the Colorado AFL-CIO put together a 527 that brought labor into coalition with the Colorado Education Association, trial lawyers, environmentalists, NARAL, and a handful of liberal millionaires whose past political engagement had been to back a few ballot initiatives. Eventually, the Coalition for a Better Colorado (CBC) would raise \$1.6 million. In addition, there were 527's set up for the Senate and the House to handle mail and other expenses. Labor also played a big role in hard money donations to targeted candidates and accounted for over 50% of the hard dollar donations in 5 targeted Senate races and 10 targeted House races, raising over \$400,000 in what are called small donor committees that are unique to Colorado.

The 2004 field campaign drew on the grassroots work that DALF and the state federation has pursued in earlier elections. Affiliates were fully engaged in the campaign, conducting intensive member-to-member work. A detailed plan was initiated to deepen involvement at the local union level and dramatically increase the

number of activists. State Federation, DALF, other CLC and national staff attended local meetings and recruited activists on cards, whose names were entered into a data base by desired function and activated regularly. Of the 2,774 activists from 189 locals that worked the campaign, 1,193 were new, 332 became Labor Neighbors and 1,225 volunteered on Election Day. Thirty local unions released 50 staff and, with the new activists, made 75,356 door contacts and 200,000 phone calls. 341,357 pieces of mail were sent, 10 by the State Fed, 7 by local unions and 5 by the Republican Labor Caucus or ARA. Over 40,000 worksite flyers were distributed, and 95 unions and 147 local leaders utilized the Working Families Toolkit. Strategy Group meetings were held with local leaders monthly beginning in December of 2003 and became weekly by the end of the campaign. Eighty-one percent of members in targeted districts were registered to vote, 35% voted by mail and 10% voted at early vote locations.

During the last 4 days of the campaign, union leaders and activists were asked to donate those days of their time to the effort, working side-by-side with CBC, which was running the targeted public field program, and many did. In the end, labor won. They took a majority in both houses of the State Legislature as well as the U.S. Senate seat and one additional Congressional seat. Bush took Colorado, though by a much smaller margin than predicted.

## **Economic Development Work**

### *The Colorado Convention Center Hotel*<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1990s, the city of Denver entertained a proposal, put forward by Denver developer Bruce Berger, to build a Colorado Convention Center in downtown Denver. The developer requested the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and City Council to approve a \$55-million tax increment financing (TIF) agreement to assist in

the building of the Convention Center.<sup>16</sup> The hotel was an entirely private development venture. According to the *Denver Post*, the TIF would “defray a portion of the expense of the 1,100-room, \$217 million hotel.”<sup>17</sup> Even though four City Council members opposed the deal, in the end, the Council approved the TIF agreement.<sup>18</sup>

The first overt labor challenge to the hotel and its TIF came from DALF and the Hotel Employee and Restaurant Employees union (HERE), which threatened to petition Denver voters to bring the TIF to a referendum. This move would have effectively killed the hotel at the Convention Center, according to the *Denver Business Journal*.<sup>19</sup> Eventually Denver District Judge Warren Martin ruled TIF decisions could not be legally referred to the voters, and that ended the HERE challenge. Despite this decision, HERE negotiated a comprehensive labor peace agreement (card check and neutrality)<sup>20</sup> on future hotel worker organizing.

The next labor challenge to the hotel project came from the BTC. The issue mounted was the city’s plan to set up a quasi-public entity to run the hotel construction. By challenging this plan, the BTC hoped to win satisfactory apprentice-to-journeyman ratios, union-affiliated inspectors, and a project labor agreement on hotel construction. When negotiations between the BTC, the mayor, and the city council broke down, the BTC threatened a petition drive to put the quasi-public construction authority to a public vote.<sup>21</sup> They withdrew this threat after reaching an agreement with the mayor creating a debarment ordinance and on-site inspector at the Convention Center.<sup>22</sup>

Soon after, the Western Mountain Regional Council of Carpenters (WMRCC) circulated petitions in an effort to force negotiations on a Project Labor Agreement (PLA), frustrating

other parties interested in seeing the hotel project move forward even under conditions less than wholly favorable to labor. According to the Carpenter's analysis, the Building Trades "caved in" during the PLA negotiations with the mayor and the city council. Mayor Webb, whom the Building Trades had supported for twelve years, engineered the creation of the quasi-public entity, and then had the hotel project transferred to this entity in order to remove the project from the scope of Denver's prevailing wage and apprentice-ratio requirements. It also appeared at the time that a virulently antiunion general contractor was about to win the bid for the hotel construction. In other words, according to Eddie Canales of the WMRCC, the Carpenters concluded they had nothing to lose.<sup>23</sup>

In the wake of the resistance met on the hotel project, the Carpenters began to craft a city ordinance requiring the city council to include "responsible contractor," "best practices," or "best value" contracting language on Denver construction contracts. DALF and FRESC had been crafting a similar ordinance and a multi-union campaign to cover all city contracts, subsidy projects, properties, and special districts—for both service and construction dollars. DALF initiated negotiation with the Carpenters and the BTC, and they agreed to fold their efforts into one campaign. Negotiations with the mayor and city council concerning the future of this ordinance are ongoing.

### *Front-Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC)*

Partly through her work in the AFL-CIO Central Labor Council leadership Advisory Committee, Leslie Moody saw how labor councils in other regions had had success with building non-profit policy and research organizations to support their work. In 2001, looking especially to models in California (such as Working Partnerships, LAANE, CPI, and EBASE), Moody and DALF political director Carmen

Rhodes began to lay the groundwork to create a similar organization in Denver. According to Moody, the impetus for FRESC was the turnover in elected officials that would face the city in 2003. "We wanted the progressive movement positioned to frame a new vision for the city," said Moody. These changes presented a historic opportunity to push the city in a progressive direction, "but nobody was organizing to make that happen."

The Front-Range Economic Strategy Center (FRESC) was launched in the beginning of 2002, with Chris Nevitt as the first staff person. According to DALF, FRESC was intended as a "coalition-building, research, and policy-development enterprise to build and sustain a long-term strategic partnership between area unions and the region's policy, community, and accountable development organizations."

The organization was launched with \$20,000 in seed money that DALF had saved for the purpose, along with donations from two national unions, SEIU and the Laborers. This provided Nevitt with a starting salary and budget, from which he went to work writing grants. Office space and resources were provided by DALF. FRESC was established as a 501(c)3 organization, with a board of community and labor leaders chaired by Moody.<sup>24</sup> According to the DALF web page, the goal of FRESC is to "enable Metro Area working families to marshal the power and expertise necessary to hold local governments accountable for the creation of quality family-supporting jobs, affordable housing, and secure health care."

In its earliest days, FRESC concentrated on bringing in new grants to sustain and grow the organization. By 2004, the FRESC budget has grown to slightly less than \$450,000, and the organization now has six staff members. The main project of the organization has been the establishment of the Campaign for Responsible Development (CRD). This is a labor-community

coalition set up to do work around local economic development projects. The first major campaign focused on the large scale Gates Rubber Factory Redevelopment.

### *Gates Rubber Factory Redevelopment*

The Gates Rubber Factory was a landmark in Denver for over 85 years. Founded in 1911, the company grew into a multinational giant in the world of automotive-related parts such as belts and hoses. However, Gates slowly began moving production overseas and abandoning its facilities in Denver. In December 2001, Cherokee Denver LLC purchased the 50-acre site of the Gates Rubber Factory situated on Broadway near the light rail line and I-25.<sup>25</sup>

According to the *Denver Post* reporter Mark Couch, Cherokee Investments, the parent of Cherokee Denver, announced plans to tear down most of the abandoned Gates Factory and build a “\$750 million village of offices, stores and apartments” on the site south of downtown<sup>26</sup> converting the area into a transit hub. At the time, Couch reported city officials to have said that the site Cherokee planned to develop was “one of the most important links to the light rail network connecting southeast and southwest metro Denver to downtown.” Demonstrating the centrality of this development project, Cherokee executives held roughly 50 meetings with environmental officials, Denver land planners, officials from the Regional Transportation District, and residents of the neighborhoods in proximity to the site before unveiling the project to the general public. Cherokee needed zoning approval for the project, but it also wanted \$150 million in tax breaks from the city, in the form of TIF and other subsidies.

DALF and FRESC began a campaign to mobilize around the Gates development in 2003. The plan was to establish a coalition of labor and community groups that would fight for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) that

would accompany the development. The CBA would contain a range of provisions, such as a PLA, affordable housing,<sup>27</sup> living wage jobs with benefits,<sup>28</sup> neighborhood parks and beautification,<sup>28</sup> and an on-site child care center for up to 100 children. Chris Nevitt of FRESC remarked, “Public investments in private projects should yield solid and verifiable public returns.”<sup>29</sup> To win the Agreement, FRESC helped establish a coalition called the Campaign for Responsible Development (CRD).

In May 2003, the Denver Planning Board held a meeting to determine whether to approve the creation of a special “urban renewal district” at the site of the old Gates Rubber Factory.<sup>30</sup> According to Eddie Canales, organizing director for the Mountain West Region Council of Carpenters and long-time Denver unionist, urban redevelopment plans and TIF money had historically been rubber-stamped by the Denver City Council.<sup>31</sup> In its continuing effort to shift the Denver and Colorado power regime toward more human-centered policy outcomes, members of the growing CRD, including FRESC staff, raised objections to the Gates redevelopment plan at the May meeting because of its lack of a clearly expressed commitment to “affordable housing, high paying jobs and investments in neighborhoods and parks.”<sup>32</sup> Chris Nevitt said after the meeting, “The return to the public remains insufficiently defined.”<sup>33</sup> At the end of the meeting, the Planning Board criticized the city’s economic development officials for their slowness in sharing information on the redevelopment project with the public. Nevertheless, the Board sent the Gates plan to City Council with its approval.

Having introduced its demands to the public at the City Planning Board, the campaign focused on getting the city council to deny the urban renewal district zoning requests if the redevelopment plan failed to include a CBA. In

response, Tracy Huggins, executive director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA), argued that it would not be fair to Cherokee Denver to ask them to meet the CRD demands. “That puts this developer at a disadvantage,” said Huggins. “The group’s list of demands adds costs that are impossible to calculate at this point.”<sup>34</sup> Needless to say, the DURA recommended that the City Council approve the redevelopment project and TIF funding for it, knowing that the environmental cleanup costs “have yet to be determined.”<sup>35</sup>

Steve Moyski, president of Cherokee Denver LLC, was on record as willing to negotiate with the CRD but not over the whole package of demands, and not until it was clear how much TIF money the city was going to make available. Moyski wanted the city to agree to reimburse Cherokee for development work currently underway, even though the City Council had not approved the DURA zoning recommendation. Moyski commented to the CRD, “They want 50 acres of labor utopia.”<sup>36</sup>

City Councilwoman Kathleen MacKenzie led in bringing the Gates redevelopment project together in its earliest stages, as the development is located in her district. At the June 16, 2003 City Council meeting, the Council approved the special urban renewal district zoning for Gates by a vote of 11 to 1, opening the way for Cherokee Denver to return to the City Council at a future date to secure taxpayer funding for the project. CRD supported the zoning changes, but attended the Council meeting and demonstrated for their demands for community benefits on the steps of City Hall.<sup>37</sup> Although she had been supported by labor, relations between MacKenzie and DALF have become strained over the Gates project.

As part of the CRD campaign for a CBA and at the impetus of UFCW, FRESC initiated work to negotiate an agreement to prevent any big box

stores from being built on the Gates property.<sup>38</sup> “When you come to a negotiation,” said Neal Hall, “you have to lay what you’ve got on the table.”<sup>39</sup> According to Hall, at a CRD steering committee meeting in April 2003, UFCW asked Cherokee Denver that no commercial building should go into Gates with more than 80,000 square feet of floor space. Moyski, the Cherokee’s representative at the meeting, agreed to this restriction.

Since the June 2003 City Council meeting, the CRD moved forward with planning on how to negotiate a community benefits agreement directly with the developer. The CRD planned a meeting for January 29, 2004 to invite the developer, Steve Moyski in order to show him the breadth of the Campaign. Moyski initially agreed to attend but backed out when he heard that media sources might be there. The CRD went ahead with the meeting, drawing about 300 people. A few days later, Moyski resigned his position with Cherokee Denver. As of March 2004, no one had been appointed to replace Moyski.

As in other cities, the focus of the community benefits agreement campaigns and the priorities of the building trades, while not necessarily conflicting, are not identical. Neal Hall and Eddie Canales both agree that a PLA is the central concern of the BTC in any negotiated CBA with Cherokee. According to Moody, “while a PLA is on the table, the fact that [the BTC] generally receives none of this work has made all of us a little more realistic about what a first step would be. Initially they just wanted open bidding, and that has been significantly beefed up to include prevailing wage and responsible/best value language at the minimum.”<sup>40</sup>

Three years of hard work paid off in January 2006 when the campaign secured a community benefits agreement with the developer. The next

month the Denver city council approved \$126 million in direct public subsidies for the project whose plan included the CBA's framework. Under the agreement low-road big box retail chains, such as Wal mart, will be excluded from the project. Denver's Living Wage Ordinance will be extended to include parking lot attendants and security personnel. For the building trades the agreement provides prevailing wages and benefits in the publicly-funded construction and the choice of a union construction manager and general contractor. Cherokee agreed to include 20 percent of rental units for lower-income working families. The CBA also enhanced a "First Source" local hiring system that promotes the recruitment of local residents to fill new positions and, for the first time, prioritizes immediately adjacent low-income neighborhoods. Most important, the victory sets a precedent for negotiating tangible and binding community benefits on future publicly-supported development in the city of Denver.

## **Pulling Together Six Power Elements**

Clearly, DALF and its allies have had a full schedule of work over the past years. According to Chris Nevitt, the organizations are to some degree overextended, because of the large amount of work to be done. But how would one evaluate that work? What are the successes and what are the challenges? In order to evaluate the impact of the work described above, we rely on the six measures of power building: (1) coalition building; (2) preparing for governance; (3) shifting the public debate; (4) leadership development; (5) tangible victories; and (6) new organizing.

We should note at the outset that DALF's work is ongoing, which means that it may be too early to accurately assess outcomes. In addition, there are many actors in the Denver area labor

movement, and almost as many opinions on the state of the labor movement. We have attempted to triangulate sources in order to develop the most accurate picture of the work. However, getting the "real story" is not always possible as the evaluation may be subjective. Given these caveats, we now turn to an examination of DALF's power building.

## **Coalition Building**

To successfully build power over the long term revitalized central labor councils need to establish partnerships with groups that move beyond issue-by-issue support to include relationships built around ongoing mutual agendas. DALF has managed to begin such links at several levels.

DALF has built strong ties with a handful of community partners, particularly through the work of FRESC on the Campaign for Responsible Development. The groups most active on the CRD include ACORN, 9 to 5, and the Save Our Section 8 (SOS8)—a housing advocacy group. DALF worked with these groups in its Living Wage campaign in 1999 and 2000. ACORN organizer Brett Erikson commented on the effectiveness of the CRD, and on the role that FRESC has played: "FRESC is a wonderful organization. They have really been good. The coalition meetings are pretty diverse—everyone from Jobs with Justice to the trades. They have done leadership trainings on campaigns. Labor and ACORN have sometimes come at things from different ways, so the coalition has really been great at making that work."

Linda Meric of 9 to 5 notes that in some ways, the weaknesses of the Denver area are also its strengths: because there is not a large progressive community, and because union density is not high, labor and community have more incentive to work together than they might in other cities. Meric sees a natural connection

between the agenda of the CRD and the work of 9 to 5. In part, this is aided by the fact that Meric herself comes from a labor background—she had been an SEIU organizer and worked on the Justice for Janitors campaign in the 1990s.

A more recent community partner for the DALF is the immigrant rights group, Rights for All People (RAP). RAP leader Lisa Duran worked closely with several labor leaders in the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride (IWFR) work. Duran comments that while labor community coalitions are always delicate and difficult, in Denver, they have been “not so much problematic as nonexistent.” However, Duran sees the IWFR as a positive step: “It was a great experience. We worked together very well, and were even told by some of the bus riders at the follow-up meeting in LA that our stop was the best in the country.” The common work on the Freedom Ride has already started a new project in motion: Duran and Moody will attempt to raise funds to launch a Worker Organizing Project, focused on making sure that immigrant workers are paid for their work.

Coalition work always presents challenges. DALF’s current president, Leslie Moody, came to DALF directly from her position at Jobs with Justice. Indeed, some of the main individuals and unions active in reviving JwJ proved instrumental in getting Moody elected. This would suggest a natural connection between DALF and JwJ under Moody’s leadership. The two groups have worked together closely on some issues, such as the 2000 campaign to pass a city living wage ordinance. However, the relationship between DALF and JwJ has had to contend with challenges experienced in other cases where JwJ provided leadership for reviving a central labor council. The division of labor between an activist JwJ chapter and a more traditional labor council becomes far less clear once new leadership transforms the council into a new center for progressive activism. Similarly, the California “think-and-do” non-

profit model used in inspiring FRESC also includes organizing work typically done by JwJ in many cities. Chris Nevitt of FRESC suggests that in another city, JwJ might be the natural organization to fulfill some of the tasks that FRESC eventually took on, but at the time, JwJ was in a “bit of a funk” that kept them from doing more work.<sup>41</sup> Today, Nevitt states that relations between FRESC, DALF, and JwJ are strong. However, other observers note that in a climate of tight resources, there may often be a tense boundary between organizations that share similar work and share some potential funding sources.

To date Denver has less involvement from faith-based organizations than some other cities. Although some clergy members participate in local labor events, it does not appear that there is an active labor-oriented faith group in the Denver area at this time. Starting and building such a labor–religious network requires resources at a time when DALF has already stretched its energy. Indeed, in cities such as San Jose and Los Angeles effective ongoing interfaith committees grew out of efforts by labor-related non-profit staff dedicated to build such groups.

While coalitions building is typically thought of in terms of unions connecting to community groups arguably DALF’s greatest achievement has come from its coalition work among affiliate unions. As Moody argues, she and DALF could not have achieved anywhere near the scale of activities and success they have enjoyed without extensive participation from key affiliates. The transformation has not simply involved locals contributing more resources such as staff time, volunteers, and lost timers – although this is important. There has also been a process by which locals have internalized the DAFL-led power building agenda. In other words, power-building campaigns have moved from nice external projects which locals support to internal

priorities that become part of the leadership's own strategic planning and resource allocation.

### **Preparing for Governance**

It seems clear that DALF has had success in electing people to office. But to what extent have the organization and its allies been able to develop a broad vision of regional power? Do the specific policy campaigns of DALF and FRESC tie into a larger vision of labor-led governance? And has DALF developed the infrastructure to hold the labor-backed candidates accountable to the DALF platform, turn out activists for events and rallies, and elect more labor candidates next time around? These questions point to the difference between simply influencing elections and gaining access to the halls of government, and more comprehensively governing a region.

Many observers agree that DALF has been very successful in turning around the labor movement's electoral mobilization. DALF developed an innovative approach for candidate endorsement, requiring candidates to attend DALF information sessions in order to get endorsed. In addition, DALF is quite effective in mobilizing union activists around election work. According to the DALF Annual Report, in the 2003 election: "over 7,000 Denver unionists received a direct mailing from us; union activists made over 50,000 phone calls to other union members; nearly 5,000 were phone calls made during the November General Election; 120 union activists dropped 20,000 pieces of literature to union households; nearly 700 new union voters were registered; and 215 volunteers spent election day on GOTV." This suggests that DALF has learned the mechanics of mobilizing voters and performed them well.

DALF states that in elections, they were able to increase voter registration from a 50 percent average to 80 percent in their targeted districts, and increase union voter turnout from 20 to 40

percent to over 80 percent. DALF has also put work into developing a strategic plan for getting local policy initiatives passed and attempting to lay the groundwork for connecting local policy work with organizing victories. DALF sees that in future election cycles, electing a greater majority of labor-backed council members, along with a labor-backed mayor, could prove a huge step forward. DALF also hopes to groom member candidates, knowing that endorsed candidates are not the same as those who share the values of labor from inside the movement.

As in many cities where labor has begun to revive politically, DALF needs to move to a new level in which it strengthens its ability to hold the politicians it helps elect accountable. DALF has no formal mechanism for punishing Councilors who do not support their agenda. One way DALF might be able to achieve accountability is by getting their candidates to meet regularly and frequently as a caucus, with DALF and FRESC representatives in attendance. This would ensure better communication between the elected officials and DALF/FRESC, better coordination of work within the Council caucus and between the Councilors and labor, and stronger accountability. Experiments with such methods are beginning to emerge in other cities.

The DALF- and FRESC-led economic development campaigns have begun to assert a visible progressive voice in regional policy debates. When interviewed in 2004 labor leaders involved in the establishment of FRESC and in the struggle for the CBA at Gates agree that what they need now is to win. Power building strategies require leaders to take risks. DALF leadership is elected leadership. It has asked much from its affiliates over the last few years. While DALF had much to show for its efforts, it spent a lot of financial resources and political capital on the CRD/CBA strategy.

The win at the Gates Redevelopment in early 2006 provided a critical step in rewarding three of risk taking. The victory will help solidify the economic development strategy and open the door for DALF and FRESC to accumulate more power and political capital. The win will also likely further boost DALF's electoral work and establish its credentials in effecting worker- and community-friendly public policy in metro-Denver.

### **Shifting the Public Debate**

Governing a region also means redefining the issues that frame the public debate. At the municipal level current economic policy debates typically revolve around attracting business investment through tax breaks and other subsidy deals with individual companies. Rarely are wage levels and other job quality questions part of the discussion. Even when such issues are raised municipalities often fail to obtain legal binding investor commitments. By contrast, labor offers a vision of more pro-active and targeted public investments to support quality and sustainable jobs. To what extent has power building in Denver begun to shift this debate?

Even before the Gates victory, labor's community allies in particular agree that the work led by DALF and FRESC seem to have shifted the public debate around community development. In fact, Brett Erikson of ACORN states that the CRD has already seen success: "I would say that we have already won. A few years ago, no one was talking about stuff like CBAs, responsible development. Now, that has really moved to the forefront. We've been above the fold a few times in the *Denver Post*." Heidi Zwicker-Barrett of Jobs with Justice agrees: "I do think CRD has had an impact on shifting the public debate around this issue—people do seem concerned with responsible development now."

The struggles mounted by DALF and other elements of the labor and community

movements over TIFs for the Colorado Convention Center Hotel and at the Gates redevelopment have also been noticed by Denver business concerns. Noting that historically, "unions have applied most of their influence to state and federal policy issues,"<sup>42</sup> the *Denver Business Journal* stressed that the DALF is leading the way in a "national movement by organized labor to force prevailing wage and family-friendly policies on publicly subsidized construction projects."<sup>43</sup> In the same article, Bill Miller, vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, remarked on the weakening of labor's position on the national level and offered the possibility that "Maybe from [labor's] perspective, there's more emphasis on where they have control."<sup>44</sup>

### **Leadership Development**

Since regional power building is a long-term strategy it must include mechanisms for broadening the leadership and developing a new generations of leaders. After the initial transition of leadership at the DALF, it appeared that Denver had managed to cultivate a core of solid leaders. Leslie Moody was only 32 years old when she took over the DALF reins. She brought fresh new life into a labor movement most often dominated by older men. Other union leaders were instrumental not only in reviving JwJ, but in bringing new energy to the DALF.

However, according to Moody, the success of DALF and FRESC began to change the nature of the organizations from volunteer to staff-driven. With this change came a drop off in leadership from volunteers. But DALF is working hard to respond to this by offering leadership training programs attended by 30 to 50 volunteers on a regular basis. During the 2000 and 2002 elections, 60 labor-neighbor coordinators were trained and many were part of the 2004 elections. DALF is trying to give volunteers skills so they can take on more

responsibility. According to Moody, “For many years it was just me and the political director here—other work was done by volunteer labor. Then FRESC was started, and more staff came on. Now there is a big emphasis on staff doing everything. We see the need to bring volunteer leadership back in.” Kevin Mulligan of CWA agrees. For him, this aspect is the greatest weakness of the DALF and the general Denver area labor movement: “The movement needs to do a better job of conscious leadership development.”

Another way in which DALF and FRESC have enhanced its leadership development training program is with a grant from the Ms. Foundation to focus on developing women leaders. The grant allowed FRESC to hire an organizer to work on this. The program will start with a retreat for women elected leaders and staff. Women will then be partnered with women mentors.

In the fall of 2004, FRESC and DALF piloted a seven-session leadership institute based in part on the model developed by Working Partnerships. Components include an analysis of the regional power structure, economic development and subsidies, public finances, regional power building strategies, working in coalitions, and organizing. Denver is one of three sites chosen to pilot the Civic Leadership Institute sponsored by the national Building Partnerships project.

### **Real Victories**

Power building work represents a long-term effort to gradually shift the balance of power in a region. To sustain such work over time requires tangible wins that demonstrate the utility of new strategies, provided a concrete sense of accomplishment, and which point toward greater possibilities as the effort is sustained. The DALF, FRESC, and allies have won some concrete achievements in the past several years.

These can be divided into two categories: electoral work and state and local policy.

At the electoral level, many would characterize the efforts of DALF in 2000 and 2003 as a victory. As mentioned above, Labor was able to elect seven state senators in non-Democratic targets in 2000. Former state AFL-CIO political director Tyler Chafee says that he sees Labor 2000 as the “first victory for DALF.” While the campaign work was a joint effort between the state AFL-CIO and DALF, “it was then that the DALF field campaign really got going,” according to Chafee.

In 2003, DALF took their electoral mobilization skills and converted them into victory at the local level. Some argue that the loss of the mayoral seat was a major blow that outweighs the other outcomes of the race. Others also argue that the city council victories should not necessarily be attributed to DALF, as it was a few locals and their rank-and-file members that did the hard work. But others point out that the success in city council races had at least two significant impacts. First, it put a whole slate of pro-labor candidates into office. With the DALF endorsement process, these candidates had to listen to and take seriously local labor issues. This support on the council has, and can, translate into major victories for labor. Second, the city council victories had a psychological impact. According to Chafee, local politicians “now know that labor cares what the City Council does.” Leslie Moody adds that the 2003 races also indicate a shift from a defensive battle (in 2000 and 2002) to an offensive one.

Certainly the seeds of previous electoral work came together in 2004 with the clear victory in moving the state legislature to Democratic control and in electing to new Democratic members of Congress.

In terms of local policy, the Community Benefits Agreement at the Gates Redevelopment

has provided a pioneering precedent for redefining how public-supported development occurs in the region. Since this breakthrough took three years of hard work, smaller gains by the CRD were important to bolstering a sense of momentum.

For example, on the heels of the summer 2003 CRD activities, FRESC became involved in helping halt city subsidies and abuse of eminent domain for a proposed Wal-Mart in one of Denver's stagnant urban renewal zones. Supporting a group of Asian small businesses already established in the zone, FRESC coordinated research and publication of two reports revealing how the deal would be a "lose-lose" for the city and current leaseholders on the property. After months of negative press, the city declared the deal dead in the spring of 2004, and other anti-Wal-Mart communities have used FRESC's reports in their efforts to keep the mega-retailer out.

The CRD efforts at Gates also produced smaller accomplishments along the way. The environmental remediation focus of the campaign, spawned by the illness and hospitalization of an operating engineer exposed to trichloroethylene (TCE) while digging just north of the Gates site, bore fruit in 2004. After uncovering a series of "smoking gun" documents revealing that the state department of health and polluters had been evading improving cleanup recommendations on TCE for two years, FRESC engaged academic, environmental, and community leaders to push for action. In August, the state released new guidelines and has tentatively agreed to strengthen groundwater action levels to 40 times more protective than previous guidelines. This victory dramatically improved the cleanup both on and around the site for future workers and residents.

## **Organizing**

For power building to sustain itself over the long-term it needs to grow the organization capacity of key partners. More ACORN members, for example, mean more progressive voters and strong grassroots mobilization. Since unions represent critical institutions for providing financial and people resources power building must actively support worker organizing.

How to measure this impact, however? To date, DALF's work has not translated into immediate large-scale organizing victories. Yet, very few places around the country have witnessed large-scale organizing success. Such victories arguably involve long-term work to shift the cultural and political environment for organizing. As in many parts of the country, DALF leaders realize the difficulties of organizing workers through traditional elections of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). In response, they have decided to try to change the prospects for organizing through regional power building. The hope is that by electing labor-friendly candidates and helping redefine economic policy debates, unions can negotiate CBAs and other legislation that will offer large-scale opportunities for organizing. A labor-friendly municipal government could also assist organizing public sector workers. The coalitions built through power building work can also provide community allies to aid worker organizing.

While several unions, including the Roofers, UNITE, HERE, SEIU, and the Ironworkers have seen a small up tick in organizing, as with the labor movement as a whole, foster the opportunities for a large scale upsurge remain the challenge.

## **Challenges**

As an infant work in progress in a difficult environment, DALF's power-building effort

offers an excellent window into the challenges that many labor leaders might face when starting down this path. Our interviewees suggested a number of challenges that DALF has had to face in its efforts to build power in Denver. These include the following issues (not necessarily listed in order of importance).

### **Resources.**

Most labor councils are struggling for resources in general, but those who preside over areas facing heavy job loss have a particularly hard time. Denver has seen a rapid decline in union density in recent years, resulting in even fewer resources to go around. Some observers noted that work in Denver is particularly difficult, as no one—foundations, international unions, or the national AFL-CIO—sees the state as a priority. This means DALF has to work hard for any support it gets. Adding to these difficulties, JwJ looks to the same funding sources as FRESC.

## Conservative State Politics

As noted above, the Republicans have dominated the state legislature in Colorado in recent history, reflecting the conservative and rural interests of most areas outside the Denver metro area. Power building work challenges this simply this Republican power structure, but also the dominance of centrist, corporate interests with the Democratic Party. “That is a challenge,” according to Mitch Ackerman, “because [through DALF] we are trying to change the corporate culture.”<sup>45</sup>

Because the DALF strategy is to challenge the corporate-dominated policy regime, this very strategy may increasingly put DALF and labor in the open field beyond the shelter of the Democratic Party, its traditional redoubt in Denver politics. In this light, DALF seems to be making a robust effort to hold the city council accountable by attending weekly city council meetings and mobilizing the CRD to pressure the council on key points.

In 2003, all of the Denver mayoral candidates were Democrats. Some observers believe that the 2003 mayoral race in Denver brought to light a significant shift to the right among Denver voters and Democratic Party supporters based on the changing demographics of the city. On June 5, 2003 the *Denver Post* reported that experts believed the traditional base of the party with its labor and Hispanic constituencies “can’t deliver victories like they once did in Denver. A longtime Democratic stronghold.”<sup>46</sup> Speaking to this possible class shift in Denver politics in the same article, Leslie Moody is quoted as saying “What we’re seeing is the Jesse Ventura,<sup>47</sup> Michael Bloomberg-ization of Denver.” Widespread disillusionment with conventional politics can be seen across the country. DALF and the labor movement I general face the challenges of how to guide voter dissatisfaction in a progressive direction.

## Managing Relations With Affiliates

Central labor councils are coalitions of affiliate unions. Inevitably the leadership of individual locals will differ greatly on how they view power-building work. Thus, council leaders that pursue innovative work may receive cheers from locals ready for new strategies but experience indifference and even hostility from others. As noted above, the internalization of power-building work by key affiliate unions has been a major DALF accomplishment. Yet, not all area unions are on the same page.

Since the founding of the AFL-CIO local labor councils have traditionally operated in a secondary role with the main source of regional leadership coming from the larger affiliates. Power building work breaks with this tradition to build a strong leadership role for the central labor body itself. How quickly can innovative councils break with the past? Tyler Chaffee, formerly of the State AFL-CIO, remarked:

There is always tension from the affiliates. The tension is whether to jump out and do stuff and wait for the Locals to catch up, and sit back and wait for the Locals to get stuff going. You can’t just say, ‘We have to do this.’ For example, if you just go out and win neutrality, there has to be a Local there ready to follow up on it, take advantage of it. It is wasted work otherwise. We’re always asking that—how do we walk that line? How to not get too far ahead in front that the affiliates can’t catch up?

Both with affiliate relations and labor–community coalitions generally tensions can arise over a move toward more confrontational tactics. Many of the new or revived grassroots mobilizing tactics used by community groups and an increasing number of unions select targets (whether an employer or politician) and engage in escalating tactics that apply pressure in order to achieve the goal. In

contrast, many union leaders are used to working in a non-confrontational approach. They may attempt to pass legislation by having lunch with city leaders, just as they may bargain contracts through relatively calm negotiations. While this is a caricature that does not always hold, it is a common outcome in a number of settings.

In Denver, it appears that DALF and FRESC tend to have a more confrontational style than some of the affiliate leaders. This makes sense given the background of the DALF and FRESC leadership. But it can lead to a different approach than some affiliates might choose. According to Neal Hall, “From the Building Trades perspective, it’s a business relationship with the contractor or the developer. From the CLC side: They say we need to demand things and lay down in the street until we get it.”

This difference may be more than just a different choice of tactics. For years, there has been internal debate among labor activists about the political goals of the labor movement. Some believe it is possible to work within current economic relationships, and that unions are better off when cooperating with bosses to make that system work as well as possible. Others argue that in order for unions to make significant improvements for their members, major structural economic and political change is necessary. This larger structural change will only come about through confrontational politics.

In political action in particular, power-building councils like DALF seek to enhance the impact of union resources and activities by bringing them under the council’s common direction. With weak authority traditionally granted to central labor councils, innovative leadership has to negotiate often delicate relationships with local unions used to running their own show. There are a number of unions within DALF’s jurisdiction and on the Colorado labor scene that

are willing to chart an independent course. The Carpenters pursued their own agenda at times, such as with their petition drive for the purposes of negotiating card check neutrality at the Colorado Convention Center Hotel. The Building Trades also used tactics that do not have the support of the broader labor coalition. As the experience in several cities demonstrates economic development work, such as Community Benefits Agreements, can come across as something to strength project labor agreements and other traditional Trade strategies by embedding them in a larger effort or they can be seen as something which infringes such strategies. In the not too distant past, the leadership of the UFCW has threatened to sever its DALF and State Federation affiliations. UFCW bought its own phone-banking equipment after the 2002 state senate elections, and the leadership there is highly critical of the AFL-CIO’s and DALF’s ability to organize effective voter district door-to-door and phone-banking campaigns.<sup>48</sup> And while some Teamsters locals contribute financially to DALF’s electoral efforts, according to interviewees, the Teamsters feel capable of running their own programs, and therefore remain outside of DALF. According to interviewees, politicians and the business community are aware of the tensions and interest conflicts existing in and between the unions and their coalitions in Denver, and exploit these to no end.

Part of the solution to the above tensions involves a continuous process of building trust. DALF and the Building Trades, including the Carpenters, have developed ways to work together. They are collaborating on a Responsible Contractor Ordinance. All are members of the Campaign for Responsible Development. Such coalition work has the potential to deepen the shared sense of understanding and solidarity between these groups. The experience in Denver offers a reminder that for organized labor coalition

building is not simply something that happens between labor and community groups but also which has to occur within the ranks of labor.

## Conclusion

In the context of hostile environment and seemingly weak resources, a group of labor leaders have pushed forth with an experiment to rebuild labor's political power in Denver. The approach involves several prongs. First, DALF is leading the way in changing the way labor relates to municipal politics. Rather than giving out quick endorsements and big checks to politicians, DALF now requires candidates to undergo a more rigorous process in order to get an endorsement. The endorsement now also means more, as it comes with a sophisticated voter-mobilization strategy. On top of this, DALF and FRESC are making their presence known in the city. They attend city council meetings, lobby representatives, and make sure elected representatives know they are being watched.

The second prong of the strategy is the creation of a non-profit wing of the labor council. FRESC was set up to do research and policy work that is meant to provide a bigger-picture framework for the work of the labor movement. It is not enough to try to organize existing jobs in Denver: labor must go on the offensive and get involved in determining what kinds of jobs are created. FRESC's role is to argue for more responsible public investment—that city dollars go into economic development that creates living wage, unionized jobs. To this end, FRESC has established the Campaign for Responsible Development. This effort is building a labor-community coalition that can intervene in local economic development. CRD has been involved in work to stop the building of Wal-Marts in the Denver areas and successfully negotiated a Community Benefits Agreement for

the multimillion-dollar Gates/Cherokee Redevelopment project.

Labor's victories in the 2004 elections provide one sign of the space for progressive change that the power building work pursued by DALF has begun to carve out. While this work has not been without controversy, it has begun to put organized labor in Colorado in the limelight. The challenge is to grow these new seeds into a powerful movement for progressive change.

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*This article was updated by David Reynolds November 2005.*

## Notes

1. In-person and telephone interviews were conducted with 18 union leaders and informed parties in the Denver area, including members of the Denver Area Labor Federation leadership, community organization representatives, national and state AFL-CIO staff, union staff members, and a local journalist. These interviews were conducted in December 2003 through March 2004. Materials gathered through interviews are attributed to the respondents except in a few cases where sources wished to remain anonymous. In addition to interviews, we collected information on Denver and DALF from an extensive LexisNexis search of articles from the past decade.
2. However, the overall Latino population (identified as Hispanic of any race) in the city grew from 23 percent in 1990 to 32 percent in 2000. The black population went from 13 percent in 1990 to 11 percent in 2000.
3. Pena was appointed Secretary of Transportation by Bill Clinton in 1993.
4. Susan Greene, "Economy, Voters Deserve Credit for City's Renewal Bond Issues," *The Denver Post*, B-01, November 26, 1999.
5. Phone interview with Kevin Mulligan.
6. Lisa Duran, "New Unionism Gives Workers Hope," *Knight Ridder/Tribune*, October 31, 1996.
7. FRESC will be discussed in detail below.
8. Work in Progress, <http://www.afl-cio.org>.
9. Phone interviews with Leslie Moody and Kevin Mulligan, and <http://www.ua.org/bobyong.htm>.
10. We could find no press on the DALF's or the Colorado AFL-CIO's role in the 2002 Democratic Party loss in Colorado. In general, our interviewees also had little comment on the 2002 elections.
11. Ciruli Associates, <http://www.ciruli.com/archives/CO-election02.htm>.
12. Interviews with Eddie Canales and Neil Hall.
13. According to Mitch Ackerman, Leslie Moody, and Carmen Rhodes, because of the way DALF targets districts and ranks candidates, labor can claim to have won 11 of the 13 council seats in June 2003. There is some disagreement among union leaders about the role of DALF versus the affiliates in this election. In particular, Ernie Duran of UFCW states that his members did the lion's share of the work on the campaigns.
14. Moody and Mulligan interviews.
15. Given the level of conflict and sense of betrayal felt by members of DALF, the BTC, and the Carpenters concerning a policy agenda and strategy for the Convention Center Hotel, the participants do not have a shared narrative of these events. Hence, our research reflects a contested story.
16. John Rebchook, "Developers Agree On Hotel Plans \$217 Million Project Will Enable Expansion Of Convention Center," *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, May 11, 2000.
17. Jeffrey Leib and J. Sebastian Sinisi, "Split Council Approves Hotel Plan, Subsidy," *The Denver Post*, January 9, 2001.
18. Kevin Flynn, "4 On Council Oppose Hotel Subsidy," *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, June 2, 2000.
19. Erin Johanson, "Unions Making Their Presence Felt," *Denver Business Journal*, June 20, 2003. The article claims that the threat of a public vote on the project would have scared off bond insurers. It is exactly at this point that the BTC felt betrayed by HERE and DALF. The BTC saw the DALF/HERE strategy as jeopardizing their work and an intrusion to their traditional and jurisdictional turf. According to Moody "The trades council sold-out HERE publicly for a back-room deal with the mayor on construction."
20. Interview with Eddie Canales.
21. At this point, HERE/DALF saw the BTC strategy as placing the construction of a union hotel in jeopardy. On the other hand, BTC did not regard the neutrality agreement won by HERE in the same light. According to Neil Hall, it still remained to be seen whether or not HERE would organize the hotel in the future, and the BTC still had a responsibility to go after the hotel work for its members.
22. The BTC negotiated the "Debarment Ordinance" with the city when it became clear they would not get a PLA on the hotel. According to Neal Hall, Secretary-Treasurer of the BTC, "The Debarment Ordinance is a "three strikes and you're out" ordinance debarring any contractor working on public works who violates apprenticeship ratios and/or licensing requirements from bidding for three years. At the same time, the BTC also negotiated with the city to hire an inspector who would work through the city auditor's office to check on licenses and apprentice ratios at the Convention Center Hotel. The auditor's office—run by Don Mares—hired a retired United Association Local 208 long-time member and business agent for the job.
23. Interview with Eddie Canales.
24. <http://www.denverlabor.org/>], February 8, 2004.
25. Cherokee Denver website: [www.cherokeedenver.com/project/index.htm](http://www.cherokeedenver.com/project/index.htm), February 1, 2004.
26. Mark P. Couch, "Developer Plans to Raze Old Gates Plant," *The Denver Post*, June 27, 2002.
27. Specifically, setting aside 20 percent of the housing units for people earning 50 percent of the median income in Denver.

28. Upgrading neighborhood alleys and street lighting.
29. Mark P. Couch, "Invest in Area, Group Urges Gates Redevelopers," *The Denver Post*, April 18, 2003.
30. The plan was submitted to the Denver Planning Board by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and would declare the property blighted.
31. Interview with Eddie Canales.
32. Mark P. Couch, "Urban Renewal Status for Gates Site Backed," *The Denver Post*, May 8, 2003.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Mark P. Couch, "City OKs Break for Gates Site But Developer Must Submit Details Before Getting Cash," *The Denver Post*, June 17, 2003.
38. This is the way Ernie Duran and Neal Hall tell the story. Leslie Moody asserts, "FRESC actually researched the language and precedence and approached UFCW with this, since they had not had a successful 'stop Wal-Mart' strategy on past projects."
39. Interview with Neal Hall.
40. It is not clear if the parties are hearing one another or if they are fully communicating their issues and concerns.
41. At the same time, others disagree that Jobs with Justice was in a funk and suggest that FRESC was unwilling to work with JwJ for various reasons. We were not able to interview former JwJ staff-person Felicia Hilton for this article.
42. Erin Johanson, "Unions Making Their Presence Felt" *Denver Business Journal*, June 20, 2003.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Interview with Mitch Ackerman.
46. Susan Greene and Jeffrey A. Roberts, "Whites Solid Behind Hickenlooper, Some See Landslide as Class Shift," *The Denver Post*, June 5, 2003.

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