

The King County Labor Council: Building Power in a Pacific Rim City

Preface

In 1919, at the end of World War I, the Seattle Central Labor Council organized a general strike to protest the layoff of 35,000 shipyard workers. Eighty years later, in 1999, the King County Labor Council led the organizing of massive protests against the World Trade Organization, which was convening in Seattle. The general strike was short-lived and controversial; the WTO protests lasted slightly longer and had a much greater impact on world opinion and progressive activism, bring the Seattle labor movement into the national spotlight. Today, the King County Labor Council leadership is working to leverage its historical progressivism and present-day mobilization capacity and community connections into the much more complex activity of regional power building.

Background

The King County Labor Council (KCLC) serves 167 affiliates with a combined membership of 150,000, or one third of the state's union members. The much smaller Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap County CLCs serve the rest of the metropolitan area. The KCLC has a full-time staff of 5, including an Executive Secretary (Steve Williamson), a Union Cities Organizer (Verlene Jones), and a Political Organizer (Karen Deal). The Council also has a research and policy arm, the Worker Center, AFL-CIO, with a staff of 7 and a budget of \$400,000.

The KCLC's affiliates reflect the sectoral diversity of the region. Local unions in construction, health care, government, and among Boeing's white-collar employees are gaining members, mainly through new organizing. Traditional blue-collar manufacturing and transportation unions are declining, due to deindustrialization, outsourcing and union busting. The metropolitan area has added about 200,000 jobs during the past 10 years, spurring an explosion in unregulated, non-union work. Casualization of the workforce has been a major issue for organizers of high tech, construction, service and transportation workers. In some of these cases, temporary, part-time and low wage work has replaced unionized full-time middle-income jobs. Although the economy as a whole has grown substantially in recent years, manufacturing industries – especially waterfront-oriented industries like shipbuilding – have struggled. The challenge for unions has been primarily to retain “good” jobs and to organize the new work that employers have created.

Transformation and Mobilization

In 1993, Ron Judd was elected Executive Secretary of the KCLC. Having served as an organizer for IBEW Local #46 and then President of the Seattle Building and Construction Trades Council (SBCTC), Judd already had experience dealing with difficult issues through coalitions. At Local #46, he had worked with environmentalists in an organizing campaign, to halt construction of a large factory due to the social and environmental costs of the project. As

head of the SBCTC, he had helped to heal strained relations with the minority community over job access. With funding from the Port of Seattle, buttressed by Project Labor Agreements, a long process began, in which the building trades slowly worked with the community, individual craft unions, local governments and employers to find ways to desegregate the trades.

Within a year of Judd's assuming office, change at the council became evident. In a series of well-publicized and creative actions, Judd encouraged affiliates to mobilize their members to support each other's struggles and to press for more effective organizing laws. They took on a US Senator, demonstrated at the NLRB and in a number of other actions added "street heat" tactics to the KCLC's repertoire. These militant and colorful protests were organized in conjunction with labor's community supporters and the recently formed Jobs with Justice (JwJ) chapter.

At the same time, Judd's approach also involved a major dose of practical organization building, by bringing in new staff and funding. To that end, Judd worked to bring under the KCLC umbrella an existing research and advocacy organization, the Worker Center (WC). Originally part of the Fremont Public Association, the WC was organized in 1986 by labor, religious and other community groups to fight plant closures and layoffs in manufacturing industries, such as wood products and shipbuilding. Judd saw it as a vehicle for policy development and research on broader issues of economic and workforce development and as a base from which raise funds for those activities. Promoting a vision for giving economically disadvantaged workers increased opportunities in the unionized sector, Judd won support from existing WC funders as well as the national AFL-CIO. Over the years, the WC has worked to solidify the support of affiliates by providing assistance on a variety of projects. With the building trades, the WC has helped to develop apprenticeship utilization and project labor agreements at the Port of Seattle and elsewhere. The WC has worked with the hotel and restaurant workers (HERE Local #8) to improve training opportunities for hospitality workers. The WC has also become the lobbying, research and policy development arm for the KCLC on economic development issues with the City of Seattle and the Port.

In 1997, the Union Cities program was created, and Seattle found itself a center of the "change to organize" push. The KCLC Executive Board identified the role of the KCLC to be providing support for organizing by mobilizing members to support affiliate campaigns, as well as conducting research and training. The KCLC Executive Board hired Verlene (Wilder) Jones as its full-time Union Cities organizer. Jones, who had been a rank-and-file activist and then a staff representative for the OPEIU local in Seattle, worked with affiliates to build their capacity to turn out members in support of labor council and other union campaigns, coordinated an active education program, and promoted coalition-building activities.

One example of the way in which Union Cities helped build the KCLC as well as aided affiliates was the "no nerds, no birds" strike of white-collar workers at Boeing. In 2000, the KCLC coordinated support for the 40-day strike of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA). The relationship with SPEEA and the mobilization conducted by the KCLC was significant in terms of enhancing an affiliate's capacity to take action against a recalcitrant employer. Before the strike, SPEEA had been an independent Boeing-specific association of around 10,000 engineers and other white-collar workers that had

never been on strike. SPEEA had only affiliated with the IFPTE (and thus the national AFL-CIO) the year before. The union requested the council's assistance with preparing for the strike. KCLC staff met regularly with SPEEA's leadership, advising them on sources of assistance, police relations, how to train picket captains, how to write picket line chants and how to administer its strike fund. As the largest white-collar strike in US history, SPEEA's action attracted international attention. The strike was crucial to the KCLC – it led to the formal affiliation of SPEEA and the forging of a strong connection with a large affiliate in a crucial Seattle industry. After the strike, an energized SPEEA embarked on an ambitious organizing program that nearly doubled its membership between the strike and the post 9-11 airline crisis.

Building Organizing Capacity: The Creation of S.U.N.

Along with other progressive leaders in the AFL-CIO at the time, Judd turned his attention to the question of how a CLC could encourage affiliate organizing

Under his leadership, the KCLC Organizing Committee put together an ambitious plan, which the national AFL-CIO funded, called Seattle Union Now (SUN). As described by its director, Jonathan Rosenblum, the council created “a new central organizing body” and gave assistance to “core unions” with a demonstrated commitment to organizing. Five unions composed the “core” – service employees (SEIU District 925), teamsters (IBT Local 174), stagehands (IATSE Local 174), inland boatmen (IBU Puget Sound), and HERE Local 8. Core unions were expected to run their own field operations, and SUN would assist with building internal mobilization capacity, along with providing research, media and community outreach assistance. Judd originally won two year a commitment from the AFL-CIO to fund the project, with the understanding that it would operate semi-independently, but in cooperation with the KCLC until the Executive Board voted to take over financial responsibility. At SUN's height, it had a director and 6 staff.

SUN, however, was not to develop as its founders envisioned. Resistance developed among some affiliates to the notion of a “core union.” Unions that were not considered part of the “core” felt that they, too, were entitled to assistance. SUN altered its strategy and eventually assisted with 14 individual organizing campaigns. However, consensus among individual affiliates necessary for a multi-union organizing project never materialized. The notion of “core unions” was difficult to justify to some affiliates who had no systematic organizing program but needed case-by-case assistance. SUN continued to operate outside of official KCLC auspices, and conflict developed with KCLC staff over the appropriate division of labor. It folded after 3 years of operation, shortly after Judd's departure.

WTO Protest

Perhaps the high point of the Judd years came with the preparations for the 1999 WTO protests. The KCLC had set about strengthening existing coalitions and building new ones with neighborhood, church, student, and other organizations beyond the immediate goals of winning strikes, organizing and retaining jobs. The protest against the World Trade Organization, perhaps the best-documented event in local labor history, is the most dramatic example of coalition building during the Judd years. The KCLC's awareness of the WTO meetings and the

decision to push for massive labor involvement grew out of on-going concern of the WC and the KCLC about international trade and its impact on jobs and working conditions in the highly trade-dependent Seattle area. Judd convinced the national AFL-CIO to commit substantial staff and financial resources to the effort. The opportunity to work with other organizations in preparing for the protest was seen by Judd, Rich Feldman of the WC and others as a way to solidify coalition-building activities. Beginning in early summer of 1999, meetings of interested organizations took place at the Labor Temple. Organizations as diverse as the Direct Action Network, the Ruckus Society, the Sierra Club, the Citizen's Trade Campaign, LELO and the Church Council of Greater Seattle worked together in those early months to hone the message and work the logistics for what was targeted to be a 50,000 person demonstration, and would in the end turn out almost 100,000 from the Western U.S. and Canada.

Despite disagreements over tactics, the coalition made a lasting difference for the KCLC. The planning and the tension-filled week of the protests created durable and long-lasting personal relationships between labor activists and their partners. Involvement in the WTO led the KCLC, for example, to support Jubilee 2000, as a way to deepen ties with activist leaders from the faith community and their congregations. The KCLC's involvement also strengthened its ability to do internal education, to educate its affiliates on trade issues, to mobilize large numbers of activists, and to build leadership skills among its staff. Ultimately, it enabled labor to experience the feeling of power that comes from the ability to mobilize from the ground up and to win the attention of the national and international community.

New Leadership, New Directions

In Spring of 2000, Judd left to take a position as Regional AFL-CIO Director, Steve Williamson was elected to fill the Executive Secretary position. Williamson, with a BA in religious studies from Pennsylvania State University, had chosen to enter the bricklayers apprenticeship program in Denver, where he worked for 6 years as a bricklayer and marble mason. In 1988, he began working as an organizer for SEIU and IAM in Denver, and, after 1995, at Seattle's Teamsters Local 174. He first became deeply involved with the KCLC during the WTO protests.

On taking office, he faced enormous challenges:

1) The KCLC had little in the way of a systematic and strategic political program. The Washington State Labor Council would soon initiate the Labor-Neighbor program, but the KCLC had no candidate recruitment or accountability program in place. The Mayor of Seattle, though acceptable to city unions, was disliked by most of the rest of the KCLC affiliates, and labor lacked a majority of supporters on the City Council.

2) At the Port of Seattle, a major union employer in the region, a functioning labor-management partnership (that had played a leading role in early PLA work), had begun to unravel, as port officials sought to rework the food service contracting rules at the airports, threatening the jobs of hundreds of concessions workers. In addition, an airport organizing drive had been launched by a coalition of port unions, including teamsters, machinists, food service, and other unions, to win an agreement regulating worker retention, training and other issues for all contracted food

service workers, regardless of their employer, and to establish a positive environment for workers to organize unions at the airport. The Port Commission unanimously opposed the unions' positions. Though one of the 5 members of the Port Commission had roots in organized labor, even that Commissioner opposed labor on its issues and efforts. Washington Conservation Voters, an environmental organization, was planning to run one of its own members for a seat on the Commission in 2001.

3) SUN was still operating, but the Executive Board had not proved willing to commit the financial resources necessary to keep it running, and the AFL-CIO was unwilling to continue its subsidy. Nevertheless, unions still needed help with their campaigns. One of the first groups to approach Williamson with a request after he took office was the University of Washington's Graduate Student Employees Union/UAW. The GSEU/UAW had little in the way of an organizing plan, and Washington State had at the time no provision for collective bargaining by higher education employees.

4) Connections with community groups that had grown out of the WTO protests had not been systematically pursued. Ties existed with the faith community through organizations like the Church Council of Greater Seattle, but connections to Seattle's important African-American community were limited.

The job ahead for Williamson, his staff, and the KCLC Executive Board was a big one.

Epilogue: What Happened

In 2001, the KCLC hired a full-time political director, who helped to implement changes to the endorsement and membership mobilization process. The KCLC joined in the Washington State Labor Council's Labor-Neighbor program. For the first time, union volunteers canvassed only other union members; after yielding a ringing success, the program expanded in subsequent years. The council also established new procedures to endorse candidates, where the candidates not only filled out questionnaires and were interviewed privately, but also appeared on a panel to face questioning from rank-and-file representatives of affected unions. Accountability measures have also been introduced.

The Port of Seattle was the first test for the KCLC's new political program. A functioning labor-management partnership (including a leading role in early PLA work) had begun to unravel, The KCLC responded by targeting usually uncontested port commissioner races. Using a new approach designed to develop a consensus of affiliates, KCLC held candidate interviews with rank and file union members. At the endorsement meeting, participants rejected all the incumbents. Lawrence Molloy, from Washington Conservation Voters, on the other hand, was willing to meet labor halfway, supporting a new runway at the airport as part of his sustainability platform. Molloy was endorsed by the KCLC, and beat his opponent by a margin of 1% of the votes.

In the 2003 election, the KCLC endorsed a second Port challenger, who won, giving labor 2 of the 5 Port seats. In 2005, the plan is to run a candidate for the 3rd seat, giving labor a majority of votes.

Also in 2003, KCLC-supported candidates won a majority on the Seattle City Council. The Labor-Neighbor program operated effectively, increasing the number of affiliate volunteers from 175 in 2001 to 400. The political program was becoming more sophisticated in terms of its message as well: from particular issues like light rail, the message changed to focus on childcare, good jobs, and working families.

The 2001 mayor's race was another clear KCLC victory. Challenger Greg Nickels' endorsement lacked the consensus that had characterized the Port Commission race (since unions of city workers had good relations with the incumbent), but Nickels eventually won the election. For his 2,000-vote margin, he gave credit to the KCLC's endorsement and campaign assistance.

Nickles has assisted in pushing a labor-friendly agenda. At labor's urging, he took up issues of living wages, particularly for low-paid and immigrant workers in Seattle, making calls to building owners and developers urging them to negotiate over medical benefits with janitors' union SEIU Local 6. During recent negotiations between UFCW Local 1001 and area grocery stores, he published an editorial in the *Puget Sound Business Journal*, urging Safeway and others to negotiate fairly with their union. He spoke out on behalf of locked-out longshore workers in 2002, vetoed a major development subsidy because of the developer's excessive public assistance demands and lack of support from HERE #8. He is a strong advocate of Project Labor Agreements. He even raised \$5,000 for the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride. Labor in turn has supported the mayor in his efforts to pass an affordable housing levy.

Organizing and Coalition-Building

The KCLC continues to provide support for organizing on a case-by-case basis. For example, in 2000, the graduate students at the University of Washington approached the KCLC for help with a public forum. The KCLC was able to work with the group to transform its organizing into a community-based struggle with a significant political focus, a model, as Williamson explains, for what CLCs can offer affiliates in their attempts to organize. After over 4 years of organizing and political activity in coordination the KCLC and the Washington State Labor Council, the 4600 graduate students at UW finally achieved recognition and a contract in 2004. The KCLC assisted HERE Local #8 to win recognition at the newly constructed SeaHawks stadium. KCLC staff helped coordinate community and labor support for organizing by homecare workers by SEIU Local #6, for research and technical workers at the University of Washington by SEIU #925, and by King Col. Library workers by AFSCME Council 2.

Coalition work has continued under Williamson's leadership. The Blue-Green Coalition of labor and environmentalists was strengthened by coordinated efforts to support Port Commission candidates. In conjunction with the Apollo Project, the Washington State Labor Council and state building trades unions, the WC has begun the establishment of a statewide coalition of unions and environmental organizations to pursue energy independence initiatives. The KCLC played a major role, with Hate Free Zone and various other community groups and affiliated unions, in building for the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. Verlene Jones continued to build connections with the faith community, serving as Chair of the governing board of the Church Council of Greater Seattle.

Work to build stronger relationships with African-American community organizations continues. Recently, these relationships were put to the test. An SEIU local, bent on winning a neutrality agreement at the state's largest private sector home-care agency, was waging an intense public campaign against the agency's owner, an African-American woman. Feeling under attack, she took her case to the Urban League and other African-American organizations, complaining about the union's racism in targeting her agency and her, personally. Fortunately, the head of the Urban League had gotten to know Williamson during preparation for the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. A conversation between the two headed off a public explosion. The hope is that, eventually, the KCLC will be able to help mediate the creation of a neutrality agreement at the agency. Though there is still much work to be done, the efforts of Williamson and Jones are helping to move the relationship-building forward.

Summary, and What's Next?

The KCLC has made enormous strides since 1993, first in building an effective and consistently creative and militant base of affiliate members who support their union brothers and sisters on strike, locked out, in negotiations, and during organizing campaigns. The ultimately unsuccessful attempt to create a citywide organizing effort (SUN) was nonetheless a bold effort to assert a proactive role for a labor council in growing the labor movement. Coalition work, though not a new activity, has blossomed since the 1990's. And the KCLC's political program has moved from "supporting our friends" to identifying, working with, and holding accountable

candidates who support labor's vision and objectives. The KCLC is in the middle, now, of an active political effort to win that 3rd Port Commission seat, to hold its City Council majority, and to influence other races.

Challenges remain. The KCLC has made only limited gains in attempting to move a regional labor agenda, and has so far not found the key to building a regional coalition of labor councils – a necessary step if it is to address regional issues like transportation. The Worker Center is under-resourced and is thus unable to maximize its potential impact. In many cases, work with coalition partners is issue-based rather than integrated into an on-going plan. Not all key affiliates participate actively on the Executive Board and in KCLC activities. And the KCLC continues to search for ways to build a more proactive organizing role for itself.