

Race, Regionalism, and the Future of Organized Labor

By Greg LeRoy

As America's labor movement organizes to recover its strength in numbers, race and regionalism are central to its coalition-building needs. The movement has come to realize that suburban sprawl, with its discriminatory patterns of economic opportunity, is anti-union, and progressive smart growth is the public policy menu that goes hand-in-hand with new member organizing.

Forward-looking labor leaders are embracing America's urban residents of color who are denied economic opportunity when sprawl drives jobs to the fringe. By advocating for progressive regional smart growth policies that intentionally benefit urban families—such as affordable housing, better transit and schools, and the clean up of brownfields—unions can win the loyalty of workers central to their rebuilding strategy. At the level of specific development projects, coalitions can help win good jobs and new bargaining units for urban residents by advocating for community benefits—such as living wages, local hiring, and anti-displacement safeguards. Rising energy prices and a growing awareness of climate change are the newest wildcards in urban development patterns. Will the wealthy return to transit-rich cities and massively displace working families, especially those of color? How can unionized workplaces become more energy-efficient and competitive? And will the new movement for “green jobs” and greener workplaces enable unions to finally defeat the “no smoke, no jobs” ideology that has often divided unions from environmentalists?

The bottom line: if labor expects to rebuild its political strength and influence for working families in the state capitols and in Washington D.C., it must first recover and build upon its urban roots. It can do that by building a more diverse labor movement.

Restoring the Legal Right to Organize

With union density in the United States' private sector teetering at less than eight percent—by far the

lowest of any industrial democracy—the labor movement is advocating the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) to replace the National Labor Relations Act. (The low union membership is attributable to the anti-union climate that has evolved since the Reagan administration. How that hostility came about is a complicated story. Sprawl is one underlying cause.)

The EFCA would provide majority sign-up rights and other safeguards to allow workers to decide, free from corporate coercion, whether they want a union. Endorsing the EFCA has for years been the litmus test for politicians seeking labor's support, and groups like American Rights at Work have been educating the public on the need for reform. Indeed, the law passed the United States House of Representatives in 2007, but was killed by a filibuster in the Senate. Advocates hope that EFCA will become law, especially if the Democratic majority in the United States Senate grows to a filibuster-proof 60.

Sprawl Creates Less Opportunity, Weaker Unions

Studies by Good Jobs First show that suburban sprawl is a broadly anti-union phenomenon. While each industry has its particulars, across the board, as jobs thin out geographically, away from cities, they also tend to de-unionize. At the same time, urban residents without a car, disproportionately people of color, lose access to jobs as growth occurs on the fringe beyond the transit lines.¹

Beyond Wal-Mart's effect on the United Food and Commercial Workers, transit jobs are undermined

because commuters have to use cars. Unionized inner-city hospitals are stressed, forced to serve a disproportionate number of families without private insurance as sprawl concentrates poverty in urban cores. Similar patterns are evident in hospitality, construction, manufacturing, building services, and trucking.

In grocery retailing, non-union companies, such as Wal-Mart, Food Lion, and Food Shoppers Warehouse, penetrate metro areas starting in the exurbs. Typically accessible only by auto, they undermine transit accessible stores in cities and older suburbs, while denying access to fresh food and food-price competition to people without cars.

The rapidly growing hospitality industry, while rich in job opportunity, is notorious for low wages except when unionized, which is limited to some urban cores, airport areas, gaming centers, and amusement parks. Similarly, cleaning and maintenance work in office buildings is unionized in many urban cores, but not in most “edge cities.”

Manufacturers migrate outward for the same “push” reasons as other businesses, and for factory-specific reasons, such as production systems that require “large footprint” single-story plants; some also seek to avoid unions. A few foreign-owned auto assembly plants have even been charged with discriminatory practices, such as recruitment territories that exclude urban areas with minority populations.

In construction, “rat” or non-union contractors typically enter a metro area by building sprawl at the fringe and nibbling inward.

In the public sector, sprawl undermines the tax bases of older areas, so public school teachers and other government employees suffer lower pay, tougher working conditions, and the increasing pressure for privatization schemes, such as school vouchers. Indeed, a chronic decline in the tax base creates a systemic web of problems for urban governments and public employees.²

CLCs: Advocates for Smart Growth

Central Labor Councils (CLCs) are metro federations of local unions whose leaders have unwittingly become smart growth activists. A 2003 survey reveals that all of them see serious problems in suburban sprawl and have advocated for urban reinvestment policies, collectively known as smart growth.

More than three in four CLC leaders believe:

- a. that there is a geographic mismatch between the creation of new jobs and the location of affordable housing and the dispersion of jobs is undermining union density;
- b. that the health of someone in their family has been harmed by environmental pollution;
- c. that some suburbs use exclusionary zoning against low- or middle-income families and the growing political power of new suburbs is undermining the political clout of working families;
- d. that regional infrastructure systems do not treat older areas fairly;
- e. that regional transportation authorities should have more flexibility in allocating dollars between highways and transit; and
- f. that some cities are pushing privatization because they have lost a lot of their tax base.³

As legislative advocates, between two thirds and four fifths of the CLC leaders have lobbied state or local legislatures for funding to repair and rehabilitate existing schools; to stop a factory shutdown in an older area; against a “big box” retail project; to preserve or expand mass transit operating budgets; and to increase funding for the rebuilding of aging infrastructure. Half or more have sponsored or participated in affordable housing construction, joined coalitions on pollution issues, or worked on political campaigns with environmental groups.

A growing number of CLC leaders are sponsoring new alliances to weigh in on economic development issues, often to promote community benefits agreements. These project-specific agreements between coalitions and private developers typically embody smart growth basics, such as density, mixed use, mixed income housing, and transit-oriented development.

Under the leadership of the Partnership for Working Families, CLC leaders in cities as varied as San Jose, Milwaukee, Atlanta, and Boston, have launched new coalitions with sophisticated research capacity to intervene early, leverage the power of job subsidies for accountability, and win living wages, local hiring, affordable housing, fair treatment for locally owned small businesses, and open space and environmental improvements. These benefits can favor unionized employers and may foster new member organizing. They also intentionally build new labor-community coalitions.

Building Trades: Active on Development Issues

Because they are politically active on development projects, the Building Trades are a key labor constituency. In the past, some have opposed smart growth initiatives backed by environmentalists, suspecting that smart growth is no growth in sheep's clothing. However, research by Good Jobs First finds that smart growth policies create more construction jobs—and more union jobs—than does sprawl. Buildings that use less land but are more complex, a “fix it first” highway policy, and growth management policies that encourage labor-intensive rehabilitation, all create more work hours and correlate with higher unionization rates.⁴

The construction industry has been plagued by enduring allegations of racial bias in some metro areas, but forward-looking union leaders in Seattle/King County have used Project Labor Agreements (PLA)—an umbrella contract that ensures a project will be built with union labor and have no work stoppages—at the Seattle-Tacoma airport expansion to win large shares of work for apprenticeship labor and achieve strong affirmative results. Similarly, the highway construction set-asides won by affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation in Kansas City and Michigan, and the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency's Construction Careers program all use the leverage of public dollars to help construction crews more closely resemble local workforces.⁵

Winning Regionalism and Rebuilding Unions

Unions have a unique opportunity now to help rebuild America's urban centers and regain their numerical strength. To do so, they must intentionally cast their lot with city residents, disproportionately of color, who endured the darkest years before “empty nest” Baby Boomers and “Gen Xers” and “Gen Yers” started to rediscover the appeals of urban life. Union members bring a unique strength to this cause: they live all over the metro areas (although disproportionately in older areas), so they are free of the “turf” definitions that constrain the organizing visions of many community groups.

Beginning in 2009, the debate to reauthorize the

Surface Transportation Act will begin. The so-called “highway bill” is also the main source of federal support for mass transit, and a broad coalition of transit and smart growth advocates is coming together as Transportation for America to seek a more progressive outcome. With gasoline tax revenues down (people are driving less), road-building costs way up (soaring material prices), and an urgency about climate change, experts foresee a sharp debate over more support for transit.

It is a debate that every union should weigh in on because unionized employers are disproportionately located in areas that have public transportation, so union jobs would benefit from better transit service. Union members are also more likely to reside in transit-served areas and would benefit from having more choices on how to commute.

The enormous interest in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and other “green economy” opportunities is prompting a new wave of corporate tax breaks and training grants, but there is no guarantee that urban residents will benefit from them. Fortunately, a new coalition, Green for All, is pushing to make the green jobs movement an intentional anti-urban poverty strategy. As well, the two oldest national advocacy networks for green jobs, the Apollo Alliance and the Blue-Green Alliance, are largely rooted in organized labor and many of their strongest coalitions are in urban areas and with urban elected officials.

Advocates should also expand the demand to include “greener workplaces.” That is, job subsidies should be reformed (as four states have begun to do) to explicitly encourage employers to locate jobs along public transit routes. It would mean more job opportunities for carless workers, a greener commuting choice for all workers, and more unionized transit jobs! ■

Endnotes

1. LeRoy, Greg. *Talking to Union Leaders About Smart Growth*, Good Jobs First, 2001.
2. On tax-base harm of sprawl, see Orfield, Myron. *American Metropolitcs: New Suburban Reality*, Brookings, 2002.
3. LeRoy, Greg. *Labor Leaders as Smart Growth Advocates: How Unions See Suburban Sprawl and Work for Smart Growth Solutions*, Good Jobs First, 2003.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

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