

EAST Jobs Coalition:

Workers of Color Challenge Barriers Inside, Outside Organized Labor

Some of the most dynamic union organizing drives in the country are now taking place among workers of color, women, and immigrant workers. But while organized labor represents one of the strongest forces for progressive social change, it — like every other institution in America — reflects the racism and sexism of the dominant culture. At the same time as the AFL-CIO and affiliated unions are providing increasing support for this organizing, full acceptance of the new leadership and membership — and the changes they will demand — is an ongoing struggle.

This interview with Seattle's Northwest Labor and Employment Law Office (LELO) describes how one community-based workers' organization is fighting for justice both inside and outside the unions. Founded in 1972 by working class people of color, LELO's work during the Reagan years shifted from legal strategies to their current "inside-outside" organizing focus. During the past two years, LELO's Family Wage Jobs Organizing Project used a massive public works project as a forum to demand economic benefits for all members of the community. Organizer Michael Woo talks with *Views* about why they targeted a pending Project Labor Agreement (in which union labor is guaranteed work in exchange for no-strike agreements), how they won, and what they learned.

LELO started the Family Wage Jobs Organizing Project in 1998 when the economy was supposedly thriving and unemployment at a record low. Why? What was the need for the Project and what are its goals?

In contrast to mainstream observations about the economy, we found that people of color and low income communities still faced three times the unemployment rate and multiple barriers to moving into the workforce. The reality for most people in low income and people of color communities was that times were tough and getting worse.

Our experience as people of color in the construction trades over the last thirty years demonstrates that for communities without much access to post-secondary education, apprenticeship programs offer the best alternative: they're free and give you a marketable skill for life.

The goal in our first year was to consolidate a base of workers of color and progressive whites within the construction industry that would support policy changes. Most of our prior organizing had been within individual trade unions, without an organizing vehicle across trade lines. The Family Wage Jobs Organizing Project worked within existing caucuses and consolidated supporters into a steering committee. The committee used on-the-ground feedback from

other workers of color, research groups, and social service agencies to identify specific barriers keeping our communities out of the industry. We then articulated the barriers and solutions through voluntary industry panels, but it led to very little change. We saw that we needed to shift the power through external organizing.

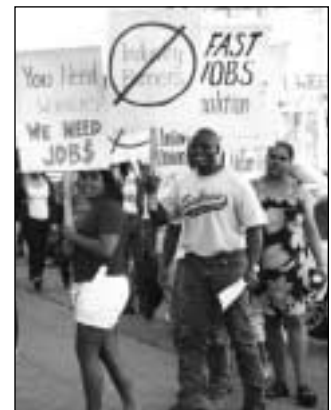
Sound Transit is the regional transportation planning and development authority. Why did you decide to target their Project Labor Agreement?

Community organizers used the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 1999 as an opportunity to focus attention on the impact of Sound Transit's plans in southeast Seattle. These communities — mostly low income, the most diverse in the city, and the most directly affected by the plans — were voicing serious opposition to the transit project.

At LELO, we knew we weren't experts in most of the issues being raised (displacement, environmental impacts, etc.) but we did have experience in organizing for jobs and training. Sound Transit had already begun meeting with organized labor about who would build the project. We saw this as an opportunity to challenge organized labor to bring more people in, not keep them out.

Most of the barriers used to keep new workers out of the trades are artificial, an extension of

By Holly Pruett



Credit: LELO

continued on page 18

FAST Jobs Coalition

continued from page 11

management's image of what the ideal employee should look like. It might be a requirement for a Washington state drivers' license, inappropriate English-only testing, or proof of education including algebra and geometry. We've seen first hand that our members can succeed as journey level workers without these requirements at the time they enter apprenticeship. Our position is that these standards should be incorporated into the program and considered "exit" requirements. If there's a need for a certain skill, it can be taught.

What steps were taken to build the FAST (Fairness and Access to Sound Transit) Jobs Coalition? Who else is in the Coalition?

We started by organizing a large community meeting where major employers and elected officials listened to community members testify about the employment barriers they faced: child care issues, unfair testing, language skills being subjectively evaluated.

Following the meeting, a small group of volunteers contacted lots of people in the community to broaden the base of support. We met with community groups and low income service providers; we had a presence at housing projects, alternative school programs, employment agencies, and community events. We ended up with 22 organizations signing on to the FAST Jobs Coalition, including immigrant, working poor, and GLBT advocacy groups. Organized labor, particularly the Building Trades, was not a supporter, which is one reason why the progressive religious community proceeded very carefully and only joined our coalition late in the game.

You were advocating for workers' rights. Why was organized labor opposed?

Low-income and workers of color are natural allies with white male union workers: we have more in common than not. But the leadership in many unions underestimates what their predominantly white, male rank and file will support. Our experience is that once we're working side by side, we can break down stereotypes. The problem is, the artificial barriers created by union requirements keep us from having that chance.

The FAST Jobs Coalition was one of the first community-based workers organizations in the U.S. to win a seat at the negotiating table on a Project Labor Agreement. To what do you attribute this historic victory?

In our forums and community meetings, ordinary folks — not just leaders, but especially individuals who told their stories in testimony — connected with elected officials. Our message was simple: the Sound Transit project should benefit everyone in the community, including low income members. No one could debate that. The counter arguments were indefensible.

Sound Transit was going to be competing for its workforce in a tight labor market. We showed them that lots of people from the community wanted to be trained and to work.

How did the victory affect LELO and your constituencies?

We were very excited and pleased that we won the right to enter negotiations. As one of the negotiators, privy to the ups and downs of discussions, I came out disappointed with what we didn't get, but the FAST Jobs Coalition felt the language we won wouldn't have been achieved if our organizing hadn't happened.

Winning a more formal and rightful place at the table has brought more recognition to LELO. We're hopeful that this could pave the way for more non-traditional involvement of community groups in partnership with organized labor.

What are the strengths and weakness of what you achieved in negotiations?

It yielded significant language; only time will tell if it will be implemented. The agreement promised one third of all work hours performed and half of all new slots in apprenticeship programs to people of color and women. It designated \$.05 for every hour worked — approximately \$900,000 — for support services such as child care and language classes and assured access to job sites for Coalition members to monitor and enforce the agreement.

But that \$900,000 is just a drop in the bucket towards addressing all of the job readiness gaps

"Most barriers used to keep new workers out are an extension of management's image of what the ideal employee should look like."

low-income workers face. The typical pre-apprenticeship training cost is \$5 - 10,000 per worker. We estimated child care alone — the number one concern for families on public assistance — would cost \$5 - 8 million for the workers entering training programs for this project.

We call ourselves the "FAST" Jobs Coalition. It's a catchy name — but what we're doing is not fast. Delays in the project mean that we have yet to see any direct jobs in this immediate community. In Tacoma, however, the first work under the Project Labor Agreement had at one check 40% people of color in its workforce, due primarily to the main subcontractor being a minority-owned firm. This is extraordinary, and promises some benefit to our communities here.

What's happened since the agreement?

It took a full year after the PLA negotiations were complete for the agreement to be formally signed by individual labor unions and Sound Transit. The Building Trades leadership blocked the FAST Jobs Coalition from being a full signatory. Both are an indication of the difficulty that union leaders had digesting our demands for inclusion.

Sound Transit now has to contend with whether to continue a project that's billions of dollars over budget and three years delayed. The project has many opponents. It leaves us in limbo.

What's next?

When we started this campaign, we thought the owner (Sound Transit) had the power to remove barriers for workers on their project. But they don't. They see their partnership with organized labor as primary. Their commitment to people of color is secondary — at best.

We now need to challenge the body that has the power: the JATCs — the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee in each union, made up of half labor and half management. We need to organize rank and file support within each union to call for change, and then publicly expose or embarrass the JATCs for their unjust practices.

We also plan to continue external grassroots organizing in the community to identify a barrier we can



Credit: ILEO

win on. An example is the drivers' license/transportation requirement that ignores the realities of racial profiling, incomes too low for car ownership, and families with only one vehicle shared among many.

What lessons can other organizers draw from your experience to date?

First: timing is crucial. From the first community meeting in February 1999, we were able to win a seat in negotiations that concluded in November that same year. We packed every Sound Transit meeting during that time with at least 25 community members, and about 50 staged a demonstration outside the negotiations themselves. It didn't take thousands of people, but they had to be mobilized quickly. Our long-term credibility in the community aided us there. On the downside, our victory was followed by a full year of waiting for the agreement to be signed. It caused a huge drop in momentum that we're still struggling to overcome.

Second lesson: know who your target is. Our target was off. There's benefit in having a major employer like Sound Transit committed, but the JATCs are the ones who make day to day decisions about who enters apprenticeship training programs.

What are the possibilities for replication? Are you in touch with other community-based workers organizations?

We're in touch with other organizers through the Transportation Equity Network, and have been

“Low income and workers of color are natural allies with white male union workers... once we're working side by side, we can break down stereotypes.”

continued on page 20

FAST Jobs Coalition

continued from page 19

helped a great deal, especially in the formation of our demands and arguments. We've replicated pieces of the Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition's work in Los Angeles, where they also won groundbreaking agreements.

Like LELO, organizations focusing on family wages and job access should attempt to bridge the gap between organized labor and low income communities. LELO's been criticized for promoting organized labor by people who believe that the unions only want to use, and not truly benefit, people of color and low income communities.

But because of LELO, a whole generation of labor leaders in our region have been exposed to a multi-racial, multi-gender workforce. We're proud to be

active trade unionists who are operating inside these "democratic" organizations to bring attention to what needs changing.

Those of us retiring from the trade unions have pensions, assets. But we have so many friends who refused to support and work in union jobs, who now lack long-term security. We're just trying to get people from our communities in the position to reap the biggest long-term benefit.

We were right thirty years ago when we said the best jobs are the union jobs. But it's all a matter of who can get them.



Contact LELO: (206) 860-1400 or www.lelo.org.

AN ALLY MAKES THE CONNECTIONS

Geneva Tien Witzleben is a recent college grad with no experience in construction trades and a world of issues vying for her attention. Why would she choose LELO?

"My previous experience was in Seattle's Asian Pacific Islander community, which was not overtly political," says Witzleben. "I was attracted to LELO's systematic approach to building solidarity among people of color domestically and internationally."

She selected LELO as her service learning project in a labor studies class and Michael Woo immediately put her to work organizing community meetings and mobilizing people in the FAST Jobs Coalition.

"Working with LELO helped me solidify my vision of organizing, my beliefs and ideology," she says. "The people most affected by the issues are the ones who determine the direction we take."

As an ally not directly involved in the trades, Witzleben has stayed involved because of the concrete issues LELO addresses that directly affect the API community. Having hit a wall with the Family Wage Jobs Organizing Project, Woo and lead members like Witzleben are now developing a house visit program and outreach plan to "get the core together again."

During the peak of the campaign, Witzleben saw community members take on leadership roles who wouldn't have stepped forward without the FAST Jobs Coalition. She's invested, now, in helping to organize the next steps to recapture the momentum.

What keep her going? Witzleben says, "It's really powerful to see people saying, 'It's time we have a say.'"



Credit: Courtesy of Geneva Tien Witzleben