

BLUEPRINT

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I have been an activist since the mid-1960s. I remember reading, and being inspired by, biographies written for young people called Landmark Books. I probably read 50 of those books. Often, they were abridged versions of famous biographies, and some were written specifically for a teenage audience. During that time, I was acutely aware of the civil rights struggles against Jim Crow in the Deep South. One of my earliest teachers was a Freedom Rider, and his experiences affected me greatly. Having grown up in Buffalo, which was, and still is, an important manufacturing center of this country, I was also aware of the role and significance of the labor movement. From an early age, I was conscious of the link between the civil rights and the labor struggles.

I went to college just as the anti-war activity was peaking, and the struggle against the Vietnam War was at the center of a great movement. We questioned many aspects of the social and cultural fabric of society, but I always came back to the same point. The working people, in their great masses, must be at the center of any movement for change. Without the active involvement of the working class and broad masses of ordinary people, no real and lasting change can take place. Only this path will lead to a fairer and more just society. The labor movement provides this vehicle, because it is the self-conscious driver of the spontaneous aspirations of tens of millions of people.

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This is the cause to which I have devoted my entire adult life. As an elected and an appointed leader of three separate unions over 35-plus years, I have done my best to advance the great cause of working people.

The document that follows is entitled “Blueprint for a New Western New York,” and represents my values. I wrote it, but it is the product of three years of activity of the Western New York Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO (WNYALF). It was adopted as a programmatic “working document” by our executive board in November of 2014. The concepts and theory outlined signify a synthesis of my hopes and a number of projects and policy initiatives of the years 2011-14.

While I am the author of this document, nothing at all could be put on paper and then used as a guide to our work without the active participation and sanction of the executive board and staff of the WNYALF, and as such, I simply wrote down what had been in operation for the period noted. The questions and positions taken may or may not be appropriate to other regions and areas of the state or country; actually, for the world. That is a question for others to consider. What it does signify is an attempt to answer certain vexing questions facing our labor movement.

There is no question that our economic, political, and social systems are in flux, and that real crises exist in all areas of life. The labor movement represents the best and most efficient form of organizational struggle of the working masses. This has been true for thousands of years. The division of society between rich and poor is the actual driving force behind most historical developments. In this country, the real struggle for the working masses has been to defend and extend economic and political rights. This holds true today, just as it has at other historical junctures. The struggle to end chattel slavery concluded in a bloody civil war, and continues today in the fight against racial discrimination, bigotry, and white supremacy. We are still fighting that battle. The fight for economic rights did not end with the industrial workers gaining union organization and the passage of the Wagner Act in the 1930s. We are still fighting it

today; only, under changed and complicated circumstances. Other examples abound.

Today, our unions only make up about 11% of the total workforce, yet we actually have greater influence than those numbers indicate. The broad struggle for higher wages is an example of that influence. This issue is not just for those in unions; it extends way beyond to all those whose earnings have stagnated or been reduced during 35 years of trickle-down, “race to the bottom” economics. Organized labor must be champions of this fight; it is an imperative of the movement.

Further, our role does not stop with the question of wages, or wage disparity. The “Blueprint” is an attempt to analyze and lead a movement of ordinary people toward economic democracy. It is in the best traditions of the labor movement to do so.

Over my 35-plus years of activism in the labor movement, most recently as a Teamster leader and as the President of the Western New York Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO, I have tried to provide a theoretical perspective. My interest in theoretical questions is not for academic purposes alone, although I suppose any time one delves into the realm of theory an academic angle goes with the territory. No, for me the real issue is not simply to understand the world, it is to change that same world. If this “Blueprint” helps in that pursuit, and provides for more and greater experimentation in pro-worker programs and policies, it will be for a very good cause indeed.

Blueprint for a New Western New York.

The region is changing in dramatic ways. There is economic expansion, new industrial development, new occupations, expanded opportunity, and more wealth being created than at any time in over 40 years. This is not hyperbole. The population of Erie County and the City of Buffalo is actually increasing. There are thousands of people living in the extended downtown region, and unemployment is down while per capita income is showing signs of growth.

How is such a thing possible? After all, it was just six years ago that the economy went into a massive decline. The Great Recession,

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brought on by unprecedented and unwarranted speculation in the housing market, led to a crash, the likes of which the country had not seen since 1929. This region was hit hard, although not as hard as other parts of the country. Yet, here we are with real expansion, on a high-road basis. Seven years ago, forces that included various community groups and numerous unions defeated the Bass Pro project. It was replaced by the build-out of the inner harbor (including Harbor Place and other related projects), UB 2020 (University of Buffalo) and the medical school moving to the corridor, the expansion at Chevy Tonawanda, the expansion at Ford, the dramatic growth of the medical corridor, the industrial projects at the old Bethlehem Steel site, the SolarCity project, and many others. Further, the number of old buildings downtown being reused for housing and hotels is in the multiple dozens.

What confronts the labor movement and allied community-based organizations is, how can we participate in this growth without becoming “giddy with success”, and without forgetting that our goals in this economy are not always necessarily in line with those of the business community? Clearly put, we have our own independent thinking and plan of action to ensure that this prosperity works for the broad masses of the laboring people.

What We Believe

1. A Steadfast Defense of the Economic Rights of the Working People

The basis of unity and the core mission of our Labor Federation are standing as one against the shifting of the burden of the economic problems of society onto the backs of the working people. The issues of the stagnation of wages, worsening health and safety conditions, and healthcare and pension concerns are at the center of fighting for and maintaining a prosperous working class. We see the WNY Worker Center, a project of the Western New York Center for Occupational Health (WNYCOSH) as providing a crucial link to that part of the labor movement that is outside the formal structure of our affiliated unions. Further, we must aid those unions that are

organizing new bargaining units in whatever manner is appropriate to those campaigns.

2. High-Road Economics

The WNYALF has consistently put forward a program geared to the development of high-road economics and good jobs. We support initiatives that are the opposite of the “race to the bottom” that has plagued this country for decades. We support jobs that pay a living wage, have benefits, seniority, and positive labor relations, whether they are union or not.

3. Subsidy Reform

Similarly, we are in favor of incentives that pursue high-road jobs, and have transparency and accountability. We are opposed to incentives that lead to a dead end, including most retail, doctors’ and lawyers’ offices, and any other schemes to put taxpayer dollars into the hands of developers, without real community improvements. The Coalition for Economic Justice has played a key role in this effort. For a decade, they have been fighting against the “race to the bottom” in economic development by demanding that government subsidies to business are accountable to real high-road economic growth.

4. Community Benefits

We want to make sure those communities, especially in the national minority neighborhoods, are not left out of this new economy. Community benefits must take into consideration people who have been consistently left out of positive economic growth.

We push for living wages, fair housing policies, and programs that address chronic and high levels of imprisonment. As part of this effort, we have worked to establish the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine (COEM), in collaboration with Erie County Medical Center (ECMC). COEM will serve the needs of the working population by providing needed services for those afflicted with debilitating diseases caused by pollution and other related industrial hazards. We look forward to continuing to work with the WNY Worker Center and the Coalition for Economic Justice to ensure that economic development works for the ordinary people. Further, we applaud and hope to strengthen ties with the VOICE-Buffalo organi-

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zation, which has an active program aimed at keeping working-class youth out of prison.

5. Just Transitions

The reality of global warming is here. The polar ice caps are melting and the ocean levels are rising. Greenhouse gases have warmed up the planet, and the results are increasingly severe. This is a product of an economic crisis brought on by the interests of the oil and gas monopolies. It is a very serious threat to the health of the planet.

We are in favor of fighting this phenomenon without wiping out the jobs and livelihood of literally millions of workers. We are in favor of working with community groups to save jobs and make a transition to a non-fossil-based energy source, one that is paid for not by shifting the burden onto the workers and their communities but by a collaborative movement to find solutions. The opportunity for this work is ever-present, and with partners such as The Clean Air Coalition, we strive to form a bridge to the affected communities.

6. Progressive Political and Legislative Program

The forming of tactical alliances to achieve concrete legislative and political goals is an essential part of the economic and social concerns cited above. The alliance with political and governmental leaders as part of a united front to defend the working conditions and living standards of the great masses of the American people is not up for debate. The forces of the right wing of the Republican Party are on a path that could lead to an authoritarian political system, where the rights of the working people are trampled.

7. Social and Cultural Issues

A working-class culture cannot, almost by definition, be one dominated or heavily influenced by bigotry, racism, white supremacy, or any other forms of exploitation and oppression. Finding the means and methods to promote working-class solidarity with cultural and social programming is a valuable component of our movement. As part of this program, we will continue to promote positive, life-affirming values such as working-class solidarity, volunteerism, and service to the broad community.

Blueprint

Pursuing this program will contribute to the building of the new Buffalo in a way that will make us proud. We should redouble our efforts in this direction and put this region in the national spotlight.

My values became clear growing up; reading the biographies of leaders, observing Buffalo's troubles, and learning about the Civil Rights Movement, protesting the war in Vietnam, and identifying labor as the engine of progress, so I am grateful to have been able to contribute to economic and social justice through my professional life. I am especially proud to be working with the Western New York Area Labor Federation and our strategic partners to develop this Blueprint, to share it, and be using it to build a stronger community.