

# Building Power on the Texas Gulf Coast

By David Reynolds

Today we think of a city like Detroit as a staunch union town. Yet in the 1920s, business leaders promoted the expanding Motor City as one of the nation's premier open shop, union-free metropolitan areas. In 1924, the Klu Klux Klan nearly elected Detroit's Mayor. By 1941, however, an immigrant-based, multi-racial labor movement with deep interconnections with the community had unionized the region's core industries, helped elect a pro-labor, pro-New Deal Michigan Governor, and sparked off a sit-down strike wave that swept the nation.

Today, the greater Houston area has experienced demographic changes as profound as Detroit in the early twentieth century. In the nine-county metropolitan area, Latinos and African-Americans combined outnumber whites – including in staunchly “conservative” state and Congressional election districts. With a growing population of 6.7 million residents, metropolitan Houston is the fifth largest urban area in the country, just behind Dallas-Fort Worth at 7.2 million.<sup>1</sup> Together these two regions encompass the majority of Texas' 27 million residents. The potentially decisive implications of a “blue” Texas for the nation's politics are obvious. In many ways Houston is emblematic of the demographic and economic changes transforming the South and the United States. Expanding the labor movement in a large growing urban area central to the U.S. economy reminds us of the impact of Detroit's unionization eighty years ago.

These trends help explain why Houston was chosen as one of five cities for the initial round of a new national AFL-CIO labor council revitalization effort led by Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre. Detroit's transformation came from a labor-community movement made possible by the strategic rethinking and new resources that grew out of the national Congress of Industrial Organizations. The creation of the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation marks the immediate outcome of the change process in Houston. Can this new structure, new pooling of resources, and new strategic orientation transform this critically important region?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harris County, in which Houston is located, is the third most populous county in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The research for this article was conducted between February and May 2017 through phone and in person interviews. The author spent over a week in Houston in March to conduct interviews and attend meetings of the area labor federation and the Harris County Labor Assembly. I would like to thank all the interviewees for giving generously of their time and enthusiasm. They are listed at the end of this article. Thanks especially to the staff of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO for the warm welcome into their offices.

# **Building Power on the Texas Gulf Coast Executive Summary**

## **The Texas Gulf Coast's Potential**

Since the failure of Operation Dixie in the 1950s the American labor movement has not put great time and energy into organizing in the South. Yet the South's central role in the current restructuring of the U.S. economy makes it crucial for the future of organized labor. Three key developments illustrated by the Texas Gulf Coasts points towards new opportunities:

1. Economic and population growth: the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is the fastest growing urban area in the country, ranking fifth in overall size.
2. The Houston MSA has gone from majority white in 1990 to majority people of color – with steadily growing Latino and Asian populations. Overall in Texas, Latinos are 40% of the population -- almost as numerous as whites at 42%. Seven of the ten U.S. Congressional Districts in the Gulf Coast region are represented by Republicans. However, in all but two of these Latinos, African-Americans, and Asians combined either equal or outnumber the white population. As many interviewees argued, “Texas is not so much a conservative state as a non-voting state.” If Latinos alone voted at the same rate as whites and blacks the region, and Texas as a whole, would be political transformed.
3. Growing inequality: The region's economic growth has brought prosperity for the few, but low-wage, low-quality jobs for the many, especially for people of color. The Texas Gulf Coast has a substantial and diverse working class whose future is only going to improve through collective action.

## **The Creation of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO**

The formal change process in greater Houston began with a national AFL-CIO facilitated process in the second half of 2014 and ended with the coming on board of area labor federation (ALF) director Hany Khalil in March 2016. The new federation was formed from the five central labor councils that encompassed the thirteen county Gulf Coast Region. The ALF took over finances, administration, and the Harris County CLC's staffing. The labor councils have been reimagined as labor assemblies focused on giving union members a way to be engaged in the greater labor movement as volunteers. The full-time top staff position is not the ALF president – who functions as a volunteer – but an Executive Director. The ALF also hired an Organizing Director, a part-time faith organizer, and has begun to reimagine the electoral director's role.

The ALF's birth benefited from the support from the leadership team of retiring Harris County CLC Secretary-Treasurer Richard Shaw and the work they had done electorally and around immigrant communities. It enjoyed several key community allies – especially the Texas Organizing Project (TOP). The ALF also received great support from a Texas AFL-CIO that had evolved to promoting a grass-roots mobilization-based politics driven by an economic-justice “Fair Shot” agenda.

## **Key Elements of the Regional Program**

### ***Electoral Politics:***

Even before the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO was fully launched the revamped electoral program between labor and such allies as TOP delivered success by providing the decisive margin of victory for Sylvester Turner to become Houston's new mayor in a very close race. Labor mounted an aggressive independent expenditure campaign and changed its endorsement process to require candidates to attend a Candidate's Academy in which unions and their allies educated politicians on their issues and shared agenda.

In 2016, an even larger electoral program delivered wins in the three targeted races for county-level offices (Sheriff, District Attorney, and Tax-Assessor). All three candidates ran on strong progressive positions around immigrant protections, reducing mass incarceration, and voting rights. Increased voter turnout saw the Democratic Presidential vote jump from a victory margin of 585 for Obama in 2012 to 161,511 for Clinton in Harris County. Neighboring Fort Bend County went from a 7-point Obama loss to a 7-points Clinton win.

In 2017, the ALF continued to grow its political program through a Candidates Academy and mobilization program in suburban working class Pasadena. It also launched a Mobilization Action Team program to train union members to knock on doors for state and local legislative issues.

Overall, affiliate locals have stepped their electoral efforts by growing their political fundraising, turning out more members, and embracing an issue-driven focus. In turn, the coordination by the area labor federation has built on the sense of momentum that fosters greater electoral unity within the house of labor – further enhancing labor's impact.

### ***Economic Development:***

The ALF fosters an expanding legislative policy program that maintains activism between elections and seeks to deliver real change from electoral wins. Newly elect Mayor Turner placed several labor and allied leaders on his various transition teams. The ALF is currently pursuing new city economic development standards that would require clear commitments on subsidized projects for living and sustainable wages, use of accredited apprenticeship programs, job training, a second chance for former offenders, and community benefits. It is also supporting the Houston Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades Council's Responsible Bidder Ordinance that would help level the playing field between union contractors and low-road bidders on public construction work.

### ***Building the Rainbow Coalition:***

Many labor leaders and activists across the country have come to realize that organized labor cannot "go it alone" but needs to develop alliances with the community. As a natural leader for such work, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has developed several avenues for growing a diverse and community-connected labor movement.

*Immigrant Rights and Building the Resistance Movement:* Immigrant communities are key to the future of organized labor in the Texas Gulf Coast both politically and for new member organizing. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has continued the immigrant rights work begun by the Harris County Labor Council. With the election of Donald Trump this immigrant rights agenda has broadened into more general "resistance" work. Working with the Texas Organizing Project, the labor federation anchors the Houston Unido/Houston United coalition. The coalition mounted a counter-inauguration to protest the election of Donald Trump, and mobilized for the May 1<sup>st</sup> national day of action by immigrant workers.

*Faith Organizing:* The area labor federation brought on part-time a sixty-four-year-old minister who has spent his career organizing for civil rights and social and economic justice to build its Clergy and Laity United for Economic Advancement and Renewal.

*Young Workers:* Using a solidarity grant from the national AFL-CIO, the Texas AFL-CIO brought on a young field organizer Kara Sheehan who helped establish Young Active Labor Leaders (YALL) in 2014. The YALL Houston group works closely with the ALF.

*Fostering Women Leaders:* Federation staff have strived to identify and develop women worker volunteers and activist and to celebrate the contributions of women leaders to the labor movement.

*Worker Defense Comes to Houston:* This Austin and Dallas based worker center has begun an effort working with the construction trades unions to improve conditions in the industry by pursuing wage claims, organizing direct action by workers, and enacting Better Builder policies in the greater Houston area.

### **Worker Organizing:**

As internationals give greater attention to organizing in Texas the number of area labor federation affiliates with organizing plans grows. The ALF supports organizing in several ways. It has convened labor leaders around such multi-union organizing opportunities as the area's airports. Most of the union organizing work in the region links in one way or another to public authority – making a more unified and successful shared political program crucial to membership growth. The work of the ALF also links to organizing in a more general way of building a favorable awareness of organized labor in various working class communities. Since Texas is a Right-to-Work the ALF's support for organizing similarly applies to the internal organizing that affiliates must do to maintain membership.

## **Lessons and Challenges**

**The Conditions Are Ripe for Organizing:** In the one and a half years of its existence the federation, affiliates, and allies have established a credible and growing political program, begun to shift the conversation around economic development, supported significant union and worker organizing, and fostered relationships that are pulling the Houston progressive community together. Conditions are in place to do significant and meaningful organizing in the Gulf Coast Region, in Texas, and in cities in the American South.

**Growing into a Thirteen County Movement:** The Texas Gulf Coast region is huge. Building a strong labor-community program in and around the core city first makes sense. However, to realize decisive political change the project must grow out into the other twelve counties.

**More Resources:** While its geographic area and population are quite large, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO operates with an affiliate per capita base of 46,000. The leadership and affiliates of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has certainly made the most of its current resource bases. More resources, however, would translate into greater gains. Immediate staffing needs include greater ability to aid affiliates in engaging their membership in the regional work, developing a more sophisticated and extensive communication program using social media, and fostering active labor assemblies. The last element is particularly important since these bodies are a mechanism for rank and file leaders and activists to participate in regional power building.

**A Think and Act Tank:** Regional power building elsewhere has not simply relied on growing the direct staff of the central labor body, but has also raised significant foundation funds through an allied non-profit “think and act tank.” The capacities provided by the think and act tank are particularly relevant to The Texas Gulf Coast in three areas in which the federation will need to build upon its success. These are the next three outlined below.

**Grappling with Regional Economic Development:** The governmental role in regional economic development in the United States typically takes place in a manner that is secretive, lacks accountability, and often involves a significant commitment of public funds and other assets. While these limitations offer tremendous opportunities for organizing they often require a significant investment of staff time to unearth, publicize, and organize around.

**From Access to Governing:** In many ways changing who gets into elected office is the easy part. Using regional government to make real change requires translating campaign goals into concrete policies, fighting for their enactment and implementation, and developing people for appointed and staff positions within local administrations to change the governing culture. All of this requires resources.

**Building a Transformative Vision:** There is a difference between seeing political gains as translating into transactional goals that help with a union’s organizing or bargaining (which are certainly important) and seeing ultimate union success in a transformed regional economy and society. Key leaders interviewed in Houston can readily articulate a transformative vision. For other interviewees, however, such possibilities seem beyond the traditional horizons which organized labor is used to contemplating.

**Keeping Ahead of the Backlash:** across the country the right-wing has attempted to use state level power to counter progressive momentum at the local level. Although Texas has been a conservative state, the rise of the tea party and alt-right currents has meant that in recent years the legislature has become much more aggressively anti-union. The lesson for national sources of funding and resources is clear: better to jump in quicker and larger than tentative steps to gradually invest in Texas over time.

## **Conclusion: Transforming a Region, State, and Nation**

Being “dangerous enough to try to outlaw” underlines the strength of the opportunities present in the greater Houston area and Texas more generally. Indeed, all the above challenges are the kinds of “advanced” issues that represent the significant raising of possibilities and ambitions that have grown out of the power-building project encompassed by the Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO.

The Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO has existed as an area labor federation with an executive director for only a year. During this time, it has successfully built off the momentum of its founding to establish a credible starting program for building regional power. While the tasks ahead are large the author was greatly impressed by the sense of momentum and optimism expressed by nearly all interviewees. Labor and its allies are clearly moving forward in the Gulf Coast and in the state of Texas. History is likely being written now.

## Building Power on the Texas Gulf Coast Full Report

### **Demographic Change and Economic Growth – The Texas Gulf Coast’s Progressive Potential**

After the Second World War the Congress of Industrial Organizations attempted to organize the American South. Operation Dixie largely failed amid Jim Crow laws, racial division and terror, and the red-scare hysteria of the Cold War. Since then the labor movement has not invested greatly in the South with its Right-To-Work laws, hostile political environment, and anti-union culture. With low-union density but increased corporate investment the South has been a laboratory for the overall corporate restructuring of U.S. economy, society, and politics. Where once Michigan-based unionized General Motors was the nation’s largest employer and trendsetter, today this mantle goes to low-wage WalMart headquartered in Arkansas.

Today, union organizing in the American South is not only crucial for the future of the overall labor movement, but is also increasingly possible due to important changes that metropolitan Houston illustrate. Opportunity comes from three key dimensions: the region’s overall economic and population growth, it’s changing demographics, and its core economic contradictions. Adding 736,531 residents between 2010 and 2015, the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area is the fastest growing urban area in the country – ahead of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and even the rapidly expanding Dallas. By 2016, Houston employment numbers had grown by 25% from 2006 to a workforce of over three million. Despite the well-known presence of the oil and gas industry (with a seemingly endless vista of refineries stretching along the ship channel) 21% of the region’s workforce is in education and healthcare with another 21% in trade, transportation, and utilities – the two largest sectors.<sup>3</sup>

In 1990, the Houston MSA was majority white with Anglos making up 57.9 percent of the population. That fell to 39.7 percent by 2010. Meanwhile the Latino population had grown from 20.8 to 35.3 percent. Adding a stable African-American population of roughly 17 percent and a growing Asian-American population of 6.5 percent by 2010 the region was a clear “minority” majority area.<sup>4</sup> As the graph below illustrates, Harris County, where the city of Houston is located, is the most diverse with the surrounding Fort Bend and Waller Counties also “minority” majority. This diversification is projected to continue. One in three residents of the City of Houston is foreign-born. In addition to Latinos, the region is home to large numbers of immigrants from East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and west and central Africa.<sup>5</sup>

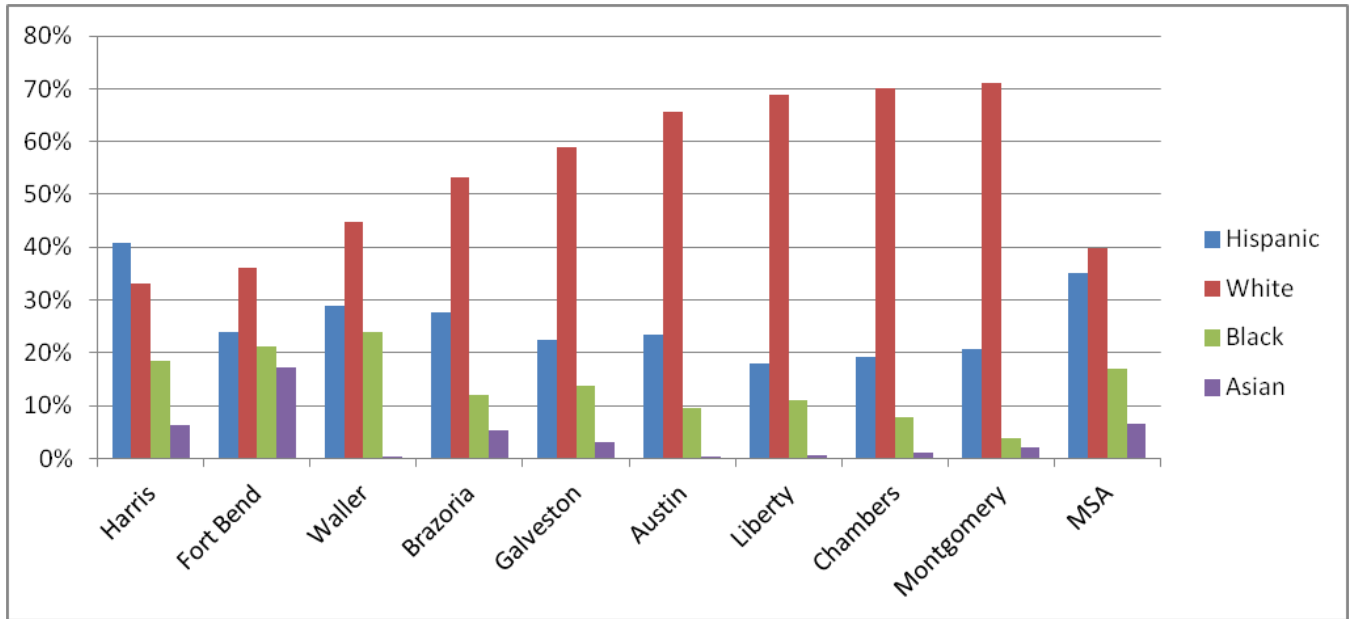
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<sup>3</sup> All figures compiled by the Houston Planning and Development Department. See <http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/>

<sup>4</sup> Data from Michael O. Emerson, Jenifer Bratter, Junia Howell, P. Wilner Jeanty, and Mike Cline “Houston Region Grows More Racially/Ethnically Diverse, With Small Declines in Segregation: A Joint Report Analyzing Census Data from 1990, 2000, and 2010” Kinder Institute for Urban Research & the Hobby Center for the Study of Texas.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/Infographics/HWC\\_Social.html](http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/Infographics/HWC_Social.html)

## Population by Race – Nine County Houston MSA



*Graphic created by the Partnership for Working Families using 2010 census data.*

Tefere Gebre was familiar with the political implications of such demographic changes. In 2008, he took over as Executive Director of a largely moribund Orange County AFL-CIO in a county that was the home of California conservatism. Yet Orange County had been changing. Between 1990 and 2010 the white population fell by 15 percent while the Hispanic population grew by 80 percent and the Asian population by 120 percent.<sup>6</sup> According to U.S. Census estimates the population in 2015 was 41% white, 34% Hispanic and 20% Asian. By mobilizing the growing communities of color, organized labor and its allies turned staunchly Republican Orange County into contested terrain in ways that greatly contributed to the Republican Party’s generally declining fortunes in California.

The political possibilities in the Texas Gulf Coast region appear similarly promising. Overall in Texas, Latinos are 40% of the population -- almost as numerous as whites at 42%. Adding just the African-American population of 11.45% demonstrates a “minority” majority state.<sup>7</sup> In the Gulf Coast region, gerrymandering is clear from the shape of the ten Congressional Districts in and around the greater Houston area. The three districts represented by Democrats are overwhelmingly communities of color – with whites as low as 1.5% of the population. The Republican-represented districts have interesting demographics, however. For example, the Texas 7<sup>th</sup> Congressional District is a relatively affluent area of western Harris County. Republican John Culberson has represented the district since 2001. In 2012, 2014, and 2016 he won against the same Democratic challenger with between 56% to 63% of the vote. Yet according to U.S. Census estimates, the population of the district in 2015 was only 38% white and 31% Hispanic, 12% African-American, and 10% Asian. Republican Pete Olson has represented the suburban south and central 22<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District since 2008 having won the last three elections with 59.5% to 66% of the vote. This district is 36% white, 25% Hispanic, 14% black, and 18% Asian. The below chart gives the demographics by race for all seven Republican-represented districts. In all but two, whites are not a majority. Even in the coastal 14<sup>th</sup> district – which was represented by Ron Paul

<sup>6</sup> By [Doug Irving](#), [Peggy Lowe](#) and [Ronald Campbell](#) “O.C. lost whites, gained Hispanics and Asians, census shows” *Orange County Register* March 10, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Portions are from 2015 U.S. Census estimates.

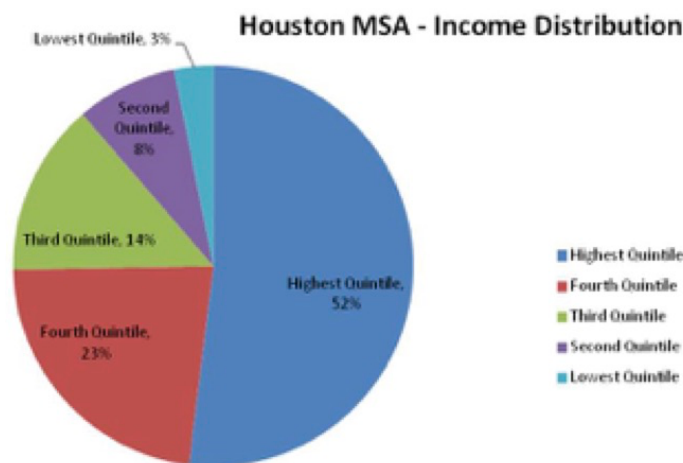
from 1997 to 2013 – the Hispanic, black and Asian populations together equal the white population at 47% each.<sup>8</sup>

### 2015 Population by Race in Republican Represented Congressional Districts

	2 <sup>nd</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	14 <sup>th</sup>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	36 <sup>th</sup>
White	37	38	59	45	47	36	59
Hispanic	30	31	22	29	24	25	24
Black	12	12	8	11	20	14	10
Asian	8	10	3	6	3	18	2
Hispanic, Black, Asian Combined	50	53	33	46	47	57	36

Over the past several Presidential election cycles, Texas has ranked near the bottom among states in voter turnout. With a voting rate of 51.6% in 2016, Texas was third lowest. However, Texas voting splits between relatively high white and African-American voting and low Latino and Asian turnout. For example, in 2012, 63% of blacks and 61% of eligible whites voted but only 42% of Asians and 39% of Hispanics. Nationwide 48% of Hispanics voted. Indeed, Texas consistently experiences particularly low Latino voting.<sup>9</sup> Yet Texas Latinos have become increasingly Democratic. Challenging early reported exit polls, the polling firm Latino Decisions determined that 80% of Texas Latino voters chose Hillary Clinton.<sup>10</sup> This data confirms the argument frequently mentioned by the leaders interviewed for this study that Texas is not so much a conservative state as it is a non-voting state.

In addition to the favorable demographic shifts, the economic contradictions of metro Houston’s growth point towards a potentially increasing constituency for a change agenda. As the pie chart shows income distribution in the Houston MSA reflects considerable inequality. If current trends persist this inequality will continue to grow as the fastest growing jobs in the area concentrate around such low-wage service occupations as retail sales, office clerks, food preparation, and cashiers. Race plays an important role in the distribution of income as shown below. However, while the Occupation by Race and Median Overall Income below



further confirms the concentration of Latinos and African-Americans in many low-wage occupations, it also suggests that the ranks of the working poor include many whites as well.

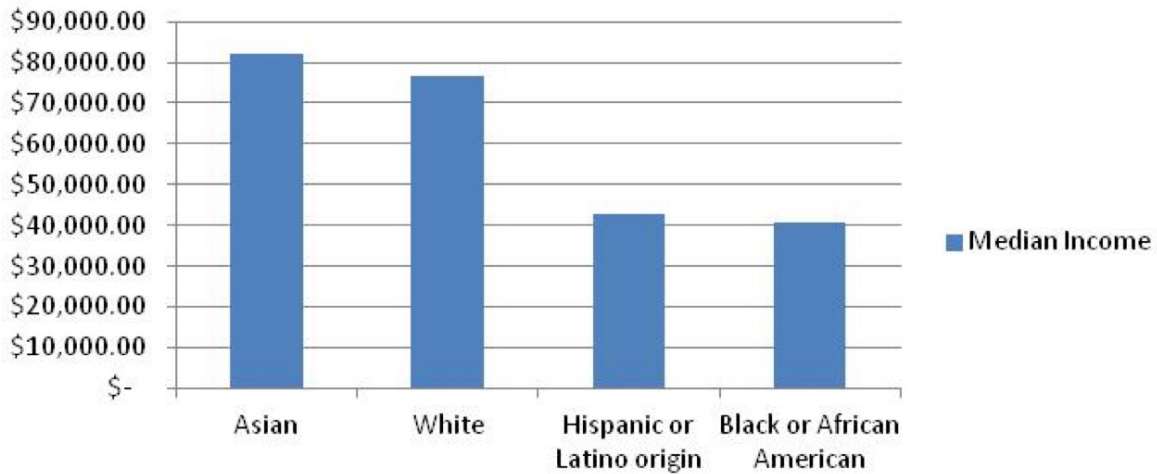
<sup>8</sup> The figures do not add up to 100% due to multi-race and other categories. Figures come from the 2015 U.S. Census estimates.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Li “A Look at Texas Voter Turnout by Ethnicity” May 9, 2013 *Burnt Orange Report*; Corrie MacLaggan “Report: Texas Lags in Hispanic Voter Turnout” Feb. 26, 2014 *The Texas Tribune*; George Pillsbury with Julian Johannesen *AMERICA GOES TO THE POLLS 2016: A Report on Voter Turnout in the 2016 Election* a report for Nonprofit Vote and U.S. Elections Project; Justin Gross “Latino Electorate On Track For Historic Turnout In 2016” Latino Decisions 11/3/2016.

<sup>10</sup> Latino Decisions 2016 LATINO ELECTION ANALYSIS November 30, 2016

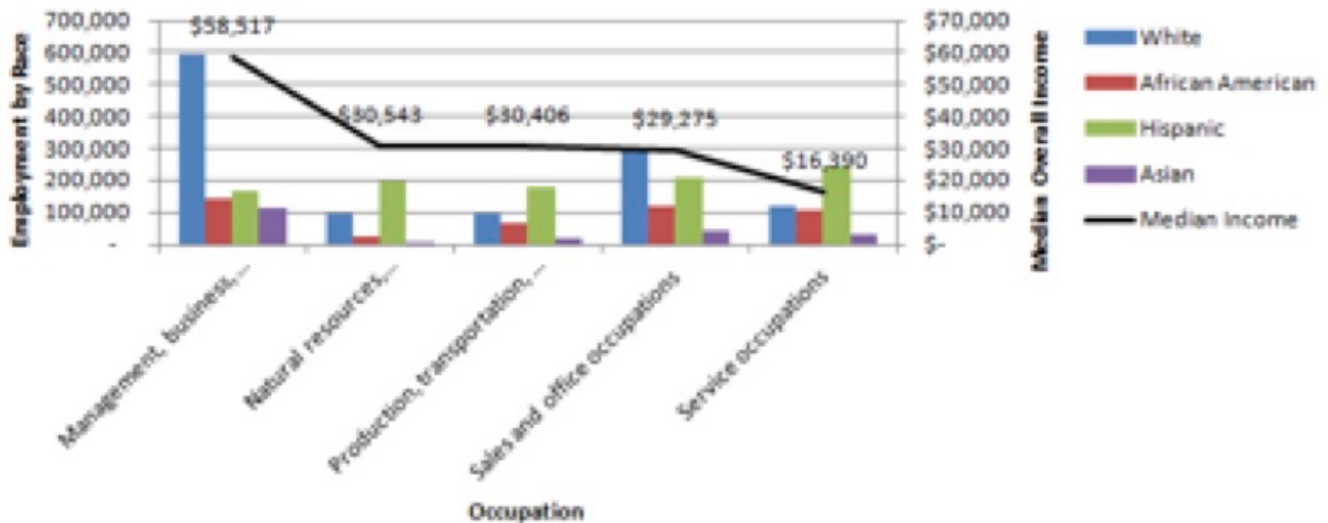


## Houston MSA - Median Income by Race



Graphic created by the Partnership for Working Families

## Occupation by Race and Median Overall Income



Graphic created by the Partnership for Working Families

In short, metropolitan Houston has a substantial and diverse working class that if mobilized to vote has the potential to reshape the region, and in conjunction with Dallas-Fort Worth, ultimately the state's balance of political power.

## From Central Labor Councils to Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation

Prior to 2015 the AFL-CIO in the thirteen county Texas Gulf Coast region consisted of five central labor councils. Only one, the Harris County AFL-CIO (centered in Houston) had the resource base for full time staff. The coastal Galveston AFL-CIO functioned at a basic level typical of modest-sized volunteer-driven labor councils with limited ability to mobilize union members, win elections, and improve conditions for working people. The other three were relatively small with no staff capacity and some were in danger of trouble with the IRS due to failure to file routine paper work.

### Seeds Planted by the Harris County AFL-CIO

Since taking office in 1995, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Shaw and President Dale Wortham worked to take the Harris County AFL-CIO in a progressive direction. With the traditional labor movement heavily Anglo, the council made a concerted effort to engage with the immigrant community. The council played a key role in creating a Justice and Equality in the Workplace Partnership that extended legal protections to immigrant workers through coordination between federal agencies and foreign consulates. It also worked with immigrant advocates to establish the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs. This office has been maintained through four mayors. The labor council and its allies also created an immigrant-based worker center, Fe Y Justicia, which is still in Houston today. An annual Justice Bus program gave activists and allies an opportunity show solidarity at labor and economic justice causes in the community. The Harris County AFL-CIO also had an active Labor Neighbor Program that maintained a door-knocking list of union members not simply in Houston, but in support of areas within the other central labor councils. Within the city of Houston, especially in recent years, the council exercised a noteworthy degree of political access and influence.<sup>11</sup> During his later years as Secretary-Treasurer Richard Shaw had good relations with the last four mayors.

The individual projects were significant. The leadership demonstrated skill at leveraging relations and certainly its efforts paved the way for what is happening now. Together, however, the work never grew into a fully integrated program for building regional power along the lines seen in California and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Richard Shaw sat on the national AFL-CIO's Central Labor Council Advisory Committee and was familiar with and supportive of power-building models. Texas is certainly much more hostile terrain than a state like California. A big limitation, however, was also resources. Even today, with an increased affiliation and amalgamation from five labor councils, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has a per capita base of just over 48,000 members. Only 17 affiliated locals pay a per capita of over one thousand members. The more modest Harris County affiliate base supported only three full-time staff: the Secretary-Treasurer, a VIP coordinator, and a bookkeeper/office manager. In an age of paper door-knocking lists this latter position involved a substantial amount of work simply to enter data and maintain the lists. Key unions which today are part of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO had not been affiliated or did not feel fully engaged with the Harris County central labor council. Mayoral politics proved controversial within the labor community. From 2010 to 2016 Houston boasted one of the first openly Lesbian mayors of a major U.S. city. Richard Shaw had a good working relationship with Mayor Annise Parker and some affiliates continued to see her as an important ally who delivered concrete gains. Others felt disrespected by Parker when she did not deliver on promises or lend her support.

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<sup>11</sup> The early innovations and efforts of the Harris County AFL-CIO under Shaw and Wortham were documented by Tom Karson in "Confronting Houston's Demographic Shift" *Working USA* Volume 8, Number 2, December 2004, pp 207-228.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed description of the power building model see Amy Dean and David Reynolds *A New New Deal: How Regional Activism Will Reshape the American Labor Movement* Cornell University Press, 2009.

## **Towards a New Model**

By 2014 several factors had come together that favored bold change. Paralleling the evolving structure of their industry, the construction trades affiliates had adopted regional structures as large, and often larger, than the thirteen county Gulf Coast region. For leaders within these unions, moving to a regional structure made sense. In some cases, individual trades leaders were attending multiple central labor council meetings every month since they were affiliated with each separate body. In addition, the non-affiliated unions included locals with a progressive leadership whose internal and external organizing plans would benefit from an even stronger political program. Finally, Richard Shaw's retirement created a twin opportunity. On the one hand, it provided a natural leadership transition point which changed not just personnel, but also allowed for a change of structure to move from a full-time officer to a full-time executive director model. On the other hand, Shaw and his key allies actively supported change and the process of regionalization and innovation. Indeed, Shaw's team had previously tried with only partial success to foster greater coordination among the area's five central labor councils. Shaw retired in February of 2016, meaning that he had helped lead the strategic planning process and the inspiring 2015 electoral program.

Change in metropolitan Houston came within a larger evolution of the labor movement in Texas. A peer study to this report examines the transformation in Dallas. The relationship between the national AFL-CIO and the Texas state federation had also evolved into a positive one based around mutual understanding and a shared agenda. Given the hostility to labor in the state, the Texas AFL-CIO and its affiliates have always had to over perform beyond what low union density would suggest. The thinking and program of the Texas AFL-CIO has evolved to place much greater emphasis on coalition building with other progressive groups (especially immigrant communities) and to political action focused far more on grassroots organizing, strategic targeting, long-range planning, and a pro-active economic justice agenda and less on traditional candidate campaign contributions. Today, state federation leaders speak in terms of a Texas transformation built by mobilizing millions of non-voters around their economic concerns and daily struggles. International unions have also made large scale organizing investments in Texas. For example, the American Federation of Teachers launched a multi-million dollar organizing campaign informed by the potential for legislative and electoral change.

The reorganization process in greater Houston began in May 2014 when the national AFL-CIO held a Texas Community Labor Leadership Institute in San Antonio that included both labor and community allies from the Gulf Coast region. National AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre then led two strategic planning retreats among union and labor council leaders to create a vision and plan for the future. Three aspects contributed to success. First, the process was broadly inclusive and participatory. Previous regional efforts at coordination had gathered just central labor council leaders. This process, however, pulled in many of the region's affiliate and non-affiliate union leaders as well as allies. Second, the national AFL-CIO had "skin into the game" by committing solidarity funds and matches for resources raised locally, as well as providing extensive technical support. Third, Tefere Gebre's experience in Orange County provided an inspiring example and the national AFL-CIO brought several key leaders to California or linked them up with their union colleagues elsewhere who had experience with a power building model.

The reorganization process produced a new organization, The Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation (TXGCALF). The federation formally launched in September 2015 and brought its executive director in on in March 2016. Its governing board consists of one representative from each of the ten largest affiliates plus a seat for each of the five labor assemblies. The creation of the area labor federation did not do away with the central labor councils, but reimagined them as labor assemblies. Per capita and

other funding goes to the labor federation thus pooling resources to support a staff capable of pursuing a regional power building agenda. The hope was that this change would free the labor assemblies of administrative work allowing them to focus on being a vehicle for grassroots participation and activism. The area labor federation needs such sub-regional structures. In contrast to a labor council delegate assembly meeting, its board is a much more executive body. Furthermore, even without Houston's chronic traffic congestion, it can take two hours to cross the federation's thirteen county area from north to south. Located near downtown Houston the federation's offices are centrally located in the region. Yet someone coming from any of the outlying area could easily drive an hour to get to a meeting. Sub-regional bodies with regular meetings thus provide an accessible opportunity for rank and file activists and leaders to participate and have a voice in the overall program. Such labor assemblies in turn benefit from the action opportunities, staff, and other supports provided by a centralized and coordinated area labor federation.

The reorganization was not without controversy. Throughout the country, the creation of area labor federations has been resisted by some labor council leaders and activists who see such change as a loss of autonomy. The hardest cases can be those bodies that are functioning and fulfilling the standards of what traditionally has defined the work of a labor council. They may, for example, have a Labor Day parade, organize some basic electoral action, pursue community service work, and so forth. Yet the power building needs of today's labor movement require a level of activity that is much more transformative and well beyond the capacity of a largely volunteer body. Metropolitan Houston had the added challenge that any concentration of resources around a new power building program would, in the short term, naturally build off the opportunities provided by the geographic areas of relative strength, i.e. Houston and Harris County. The long-term promise is that success builds momentum and capacity to engage in transformative work in the more challenging outlying areas with lower union density and more conservative politics. In the immediate future, however, such strategic priorities could fulfill the suspicions of skeptics. Indeed, the research on the New Alliance process in New York State, where 25 labor councils were merged into five area labor federations, found that greater controversy tended to come in areas that had relatively larger cities with a strong central labor council than those that lacked a dominant city-based council.<sup>13</sup>

While the area labor federation made efforts to offset this dynamic some tensions existed. In particular, the former president of one of the labor councils came to see the process as a "resource grab." While other councils were derelict, his council had been operating at a basic level in increasingly more difficult tea-party-dominated political terrain. His frustrations seemed centered more on the national AFL-CIO than with people in the region.

Among those who had questions about the new structure the far more common issue was not the overall concept, which they supported, but rather details and simple confusion over how the new structure would operate. While the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation has a new constitution that lays out the division of labor between federation and labor assembly, and how board members, officers, and delegates to these bodies are selected, a new structure does not become real for people until it actually functions. While the area labor federation launched in September of 2015, its time and energy went into immediate action opportunities which have paid off in providing enormous credibility for the new undertaking. In the short term, however, it delayed full implementation of the constitutional procedures until the spring of 2017. Thus, it is only now that the labor federation and functioning assemblies have

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<sup>13</sup> Jeff Grabelsky "A New Alliance In New York State: A Progress Report On The Labor Movement's Restructuring, Capacity Building, and Programmatic Work" in Working USA March 2007, Vol 10, No 1, p 13.

gone through a full organizational process of leadership selection under the new structure. Over time the confusion over roles and process may work itself out as each body functions.

Some questioned how much what they were doing in the reorganization was in fact “new” and how much there was a pre-set template. The area labor federation model dates back to the New Alliance reorganization in New York State at the turn of the millennium. “If there was a template, that’s OK, just tell us,” is how one interviewee put this issue.

## **Factors Favoring Success**

Despite some controversy, the overall experience of the new area labor federation as expressed by those interviewed for this study is overwhelmingly positive. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has drawn from and benefited from important ground work. Previous immigration work, labor’s and allies’ previous electoral programs, and already existing relationships among key labor’ and community leaders has all meant that the area labor federation “hit the ground running” and enjoyed immediate success. We will detail this experience below. Overall, electoral victory in particular has provided a pervasive sense of accomplishment that points towards possibilities for even greater success as the federation’s new program grows.

## **Hiring the Right People**

Also contributing to success, federation leaders hired the right people for the new staff positions. Executive Director Hany Khalil came out of the teachers’ union with a rich background in labor and community activism. His collaborative leadership style gives people a sense of being listened to and involved. Even the interviewee who was most upset about the reorganization had nothing but good things to say about Hany’s leadership and the support Hany showed to him. Similarly, Organizing Director Linda Morales brought with her an extensive background in labor organizing and community activism that gave her ample credibility and connections to a wide range of leaders and activists.

## **Key Partnerships**

Finally, the new federation has benefited from several key partners. On the community side, the Houston area does not have a particularly rich history of community activism. However, the federation inherited and has strengthened good relationship with such organizations as Mi Familia Vota, Fe Y Justicia, and the Texas Organizing Project (TOP). The local Mi Familia Vota is part of a national non-partisan project that has been effective at expanding Latino civic engagement through community organizing, citizenship drives, voter registration, voter education and Get-Out-the-Vote programs. Fe Y Justicia is the worker center started with the Richard Shaw’s help. It organizes workers, the faith community and coalitions to combat wage theft and workplace abuse. It also runs a Domestic Workers Program to organize housecleaners, nannies, and caregivers.

The area labor federation’s most important community partner is the Texas Organizing Project. With 24 staff statewide, TOP is the organizational successor to Texas ACORN with an active programs in Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Antonio. Its membership is mostly African-American and Latino. Key labor leaders had supported TOP during its transition from ACORN. Having ramped up its overall electoral efforts by 2010, TOP’s door-knocking canvas in Houston is larger than labor’s current efforts. Furthermore, TOP treats electoral campaigns the same as their other organizing meaning that they focus on issues and mobilize low-income residents to remain active in those issues after the election season passes. TOP’s then Executive Director, Ginny Goldman, was a key figure in pulling together the joint

labor-community electoral effort around the 2015 Houston Mayoral campaign. Several TOP staff continue to work closely with the federation's staff. In Houston, TOP's focus includes three major program areas: criminal justice reform, economic justice around economic development, and immigrant rights/resistance work. TOP partners directly with the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO on the latter two programs. The criminal justice work connects with the area labor federation through the shared 2016 electoral efforts in Harris County for District Attorney and Sheriff.

While the organization relationships are the most visible, we should note that the area labor federation benefits from the personal relationships that had developed among key labor and community leaders. The strength of these relationships was clear from the 2015 mayoral campaign which ran full force while the area labor federation was still in the process of forming. Leaders not only know one another, but have developed a certain level of openness and trust crucial for not simply coming together in joint cause, but remaining together when the stresses and strains of a campaign threaten divisions.

### ***Texas AFL-CIO***

The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has also benefited, especially in its electoral program, from support it receives from the Texas AFL-CIO. With low union density and an increasingly aggressive conservative movement in Texas, the state federation has always had to try to over perform and evolve. While it historically has had at times a rocky relationship with the national AFL-CIO, good communication between leaders on both sides has led to a shared vision and mutual support. The current Texas AFL-CIO leadership has been very supportive of the reorganization process.

The state federation has reevaluated what it will take to transform Texas politically. While the demographic changes we explored above create a potential, alone they do not create more voters. Polling and focus groups done by the AFL-CIO revealed widespread sentiment among non-voters that politicians do not speak to their core issues, which are economic justice concerns. Non-voters need to see candidates campaigning on a real agenda of change. They need direct contact with volunteers and they need to see real policy changes after elections. To revamp the way labor politics is done in the state the Texas AFL-CIO and several key affiliates have formed a Fair Shot Texas coalition of labor and community groups that also allows individuals to sign up for actions. Its Texas Fair Shot Agenda speaks directly to non-voters' [and many voters] economic justice concerns:

- Fully Fund Neighborhood Public Schools
- Raise the Minimum Wage
- Protect Workers' Economic Freedom & Worker Safety
- Make College More Affordable
- Pass Equal Pay for Equal Work
- Crack Down on Businesses That Ship Jobs Overseas
- Protect Our Retirement Security

Using the Fair Shot Agenda the Texas AFL-CIO has evolved its electoral action to focus more on door-knocking and less candidate campaign contributions. The federation has used strategic research to better coordinate and target labor's electoral work. It has also prioritized building coalitions with community groups. In particular, the federation has joined the fight against the anti-immigrant wave –seeing immigrant communities as a core part of what organized labor is about in Texas and a key to its future. With help from the national AFL-CIO, the state federation has expanded its staff capacity to include a new field organizer, a digital strategist, and a campaign director Jeff Rotkoff. During the election seasons, staff at the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO were in almost daily contact with Rotkoff.

In 2017 Secretary-Treasurer Richard Levy became President of the Texas AFL-CIO. The choice of Montserrat Garibay as the new Secretary-Treasurer says a great deal about the transformation of organized labor in Texas. Garibay served as Vice President for Certified Employees with Education Austin. An activist on education and immigration issues, Garibay came to the U.S. from Mexico City as an undocumented immigrant and became a citizen 20 years later. She has been instrumental in promoting opportunities for all students, including those from immigrant families. She promoted passage of the Texas version of the DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform.

## **Building Regional Power in the Texas Gulf Coast**

The creation of the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation produced a sense of unity and established pooled resources to pursue a regional power building program. The area labor federation supports three and half programmatic staff. Unlike many staffed central labor councils, the federation president is not a full-time officer. President Zeph Capo serves in a voluntary capacity as kind of “chair of the board” and remains full-time President of the Houston Federation of Teachers. A full-time Executive Director, Hany Khalil, leads area labor federation’s operations. Hiring an executive director rather than electing a President who is full-time allows for a different emphasis in the skills and qualifications of this most key staff person. In hiring Khalil the federation chose someone who did not simply know his way around the labor movement – as would a typical labor council president – but also had strong connections to community activism. The federation retains the direct experience of being an elected leader through its president position and the larger board which works closely with the executive director. Linda Morales’ position as Organizing Director encompasses a range of responsibilities including driving the federation’s coalition work and economic development program. From the Harris County AFL-CIO the federation kept VIP Director Norma Villanueva, the daughter of migrant farmworkers. New technology has allowed the federation to rethink this position as tablet-driven door knocking no longer requires long hours of data entry. Finally, the federation has hired part-time a seasoned activist African-American pastor, Rev. Ronnie Lister, as its faith organizer. The staffing of the federation matches the increasing diversity of the metropolitan area.

## **Electoral Program**

Even before the area labor federation officially launched labor and its allies plunged into the 2015 Houston Mayoral race. Houston has a very mayor-driven form of government. With the incumbent term-limited key affiliates and community groups, such as the Texas Organizing Project, saw an opportunity. Unlike traditional political action, organized labor focused less on donating funds directly to candidates and more on grassroots mobilization through an independent expenditure campaign. In addition to AFSCME, whose members work for the city, other public sector unions such as the American Federation of Teachers and the Communication Workers of America (which represents state employees), also went in big as an opportunity to demonstrate what labor and its allies could accomplish. Furthermore, labor went beyond the traditional candidate screening process -- in which candidates fill out questionnaires and may be interviewed by a political action committee. Under the rubric of Communities United for a Greater Houston unions, the Texas Organizing Project, and other allies held a “candidates’ academy” of a half day in which labor and community leaders educated the candidates on their issues. In addition to each group’s particular concerns the allies came together to present a unified common platform summarized in the box below. Subsequent to the academy the electoral coalition also demanded that candidates show in person to support key labor and community actions happening in the

city. The process of organizing and running the candidates academy also built relationships among labor and the allied groups that participate.

The coalition ended up supporting Sylvester Turner for Mayor. A twenty-five-year veteran of the Texas House of Representatives, Turner had a long-standing pro-labor and liberal voting record. His campaign raised issues of wealth inequality. With 32% of the vote Turner came in first among thirteen candidates ahead of Republican Bill King with 25%. In the run-off election Turner beat King 108,389 to 104,307 -- a narrow margin of 4,085 votes. With this margin labor and its allies could justifiably claim to have helped put Turner “over the top.” Indeed, through grassroots organizing the coalition had added 5,965 voters to the roles who likely voted overwhelmingly for Turner.<sup>14</sup> While the general election turnout was only 26%, union members and households turned out 44%. The newly elected Mayor appointed roughly a dozen representatives from labor and its allies to various transition teams, including the economic opportunity committee which was chaired by TOP Executive Director Ginny Goldman and included Houston Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades President Paul Puente. Over the course of several months these teams developed recommendations for the new regime.

### **Candidate’s Academy for Houston Municipal Candidates**

#### **Our collective priorities:**

- Fostering the creation of good, safe jobs and respecting workers’ right to form a union
- Supporting healthy residents and safe, vibrant neighborhoods
- Championing the full inclusive integration of our City’s diverse immigrant community
- Advocating for accountability and transparency of how public tax dollars are spent
- Supporting responsible contracting of public works projects
- Supporting a good contract/ retirement for Municipal Employees

The 2015 mayoral election marked a turning point. Labor and its allies showed a new level of unity, on-the-ground effort, and expectations for candidates. As several leaders explained, “we went big.” Many leaders interviewed for this study emphasized how the 2015 effort illustrated the emerging opportunities for real political change in Texas. As one leader commented, for the 2015 race organized labor “went in much bigger with a larger labor mobilization and deeper community alliances. We realized that talking to our own members alone was not enough.” “The coordinated 2015 campaign woke us up that this how we need to be doing electoral politics all the time,” is how another leader put it. The impact was felt not just in Houston, but inspired labor and progressive leaders elsewhere in the state.

Success breeds success. While organized labor in many parts of the country bemoaned the 2016 elections, the Texas Gulf Coast ALF-CIO and its allies had room to celebrate. As in 2015 labor built unity among itself and joined with key allies to mount another large-scale and grassroots-focused electoral program. The joint effort endorsed three Harris County candidates: District Attorney, Tax-Assessor, and Sherriff. The later contest saw former police officer and Houston city councilor Ed Gonzales beat incumbent Ron Hickman by 8 points on a platform that included reversing the county’s cooperation with federal authorities over immigrant detention. In the D.A. race Kim Hogg – running on a pledge to reduce mass incarceration – overcame a previous defeat against the incumbent two years earlier to win the race by a 6-point margin. Labor’s endorsed tax-assessor won by under one point. This office oversees voter registration in a state in which voter suppression efforts are quite active. These 2016 results reflected a voting shift in which Harris County turned solidly blue. In 2012, Obama beat

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<sup>14</sup> These are people who did not vote in either 2011 or 2013.



Romney by only 585 voters out of over a million cast (in 2008, he won by 1.6 points). Four years later Clinton won the county by 161,511 margin – a spread of 12 points. The results were equally dramatic in neighboring Fort Bend county. Obama had lost to Romney by 7 points in 2012, but Clinton won the county by 7 points.<sup>15</sup>

Labor and its allies can some take credit for the change. The “bluing” of Harris and Fort Bend Counties has seen increased voter turnout. For the 2016 election organized labor mounted its largest field mobilizations in recent memory, including a massive Independent Expenditure program. CWA, AFSCME, and AFT together contributed more than \$1 million to fund the program. The Steelworkers, Bricklayers, Transport Workers, and Insulators together contributed seven release time or weekly support staff. Seventeen affiliates met their shared goal of mobilizing two percent of their membership for phone banks and block walking. Volunteer turnout came from such unions as the AFGE, American Federation of Teachers, APWU, Communication Workers, HOPE-AFSCME, IBEW, Insulators, Painters, Pipefitters, Plumbers, Seafarers, Sheet Metal Workers, Steelworkers, Transit Workers, and UNITE-HERE. AFSCME and the AFL-CIO also loaned staff.

Results in Galveston and Chambers Counties along the Gulf Coast showed both progress and the need for a regional effort to invest in the long-term. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO had recruited union members from the metro area to volunteer in the Texas State House District race which spanned both counties. This district is 51% white, 26% Latino, and 19% African American. The labor-endorsed candidate lost to the incumbent by 18 points overall. However, in Galveston County, where three quarters of the votes were cast, the incumbent won by only 1 point. The decisive difference came in the less diverse Chambers County which went 83% for the incumbent.

In early 2017, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO turned its electoral operations to the Houston suburb of Pasadena. With a population of just under 150,000 Pasadena is the second largest city in Harris County and the seventh largest in Texas. With an economy built around petroleum refining and petrochemical processing Pasadena is working class and today sixty percent Latino. The city appoints a representative to the regional Port Authority board of five members. Since previous political work had gotten two pro-labor members on the board, the Pasadena appointment could set the board majority. The Port of Houston involves 54,000 direct jobs, 21,000 shippers, 9,300 truckers, and 2,000 warehouses. The eight-member city council elections provided an opportunity for the area labor federation and its allies to mount another candidates’ academy. The full coalition platform is provided in appendix 1. It covered civic engagement and voting rights, good jobs, public transportation, welcoming to immigrants, and environmental justice. The federation endorsed eight candidates and prioritized three races – supporting the efforts of a Pasadena-based group called Area 5 Democrats.

Along with its allies, labor has also been heavily involved in the Houston school board races which often overlap with city and county-wide campaigns. Although these efforts have seen some losses, mobilization over several cycles has produced a majority vote on the Houston ISD school board.

The area labor federation has also launched a Mobilization Action Team program to increase in-district pressure from union members on state and local policymakers. The program provides an additional way for members to remain active between elections. Through a one-day training the federation prepares affiliate members to talk to legislators and volunteer as political activists. The program allows affiliates to develop their members’ skills while also building a direct volunteer base for the federation. The

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<sup>15</sup> Election data comes primarily from internal TXGCAFL-CIO sources supplemented by such online-sources as Politico.com, city-data.com, statisticalatlas.com, and *The Texas Tribune*.

right-wing control of the Texas legislature provides continual opportunities during the legislative session to mobilize members to lobby in person in Austin or to door knock in state legislative districts. In March 2017, for example, the federation worked with the state AFL-CIO to bring people to Austin to successfully fight so-called pay check protection legislation that would strip away dues check off in the public sector. The area labor federation also organized an afternoon of door knocking in the legislative district of State Senator Joan Hoffman who introduced this legislation as well as a school voucher bill and a controversial reform of retired teacher healthcare. Fifty volunteers generated over 130 electronic letters to the senator. Such actions build a base that is relevant not simply to that state senate seat, but within the majority “minority” 7<sup>th</sup> Texas Congressional District.

The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO’s electoral program has benefited enormously from labor’s increased electoral coordination state wide. The “Fair Shot” agenda provides an overall frame that speaks to the economic concerns of a wide section of the population. The state federation facilitates increasingly sophisticated analysis of the state’s political map that allows for careful targeting and long-range planning. The coordination between the state federation and the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO is not confined to the election season, but is also quite active for state legislative action.

Overall, affiliate locals have stepped their electoral efforts by growing their political fundraising, turning out more members, and embracing an issue-driven focus. Those who coordinate the volunteer actions have seen a clear expansion in the number of unions from which participants come. In turn, the coordination by the area labor federation has built on the sense of momentum that fosters greater electoral unity within the house of labor – further enhancing labor’s impact.

## **Community Benefits and Economic Justice on Economic Development**

In creating the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO labor leaders sought to grow the ongoing activism of union members as well as deepen relationships with community partners. Electoral politics is limited in that it is episodic. Campaigns build organizations only to disband them after the election. Growing real power, however, requires building year-round, year after year. Placing new people into elected office by itself can lead to disillusionment if the election mobilization is not accompanied by a long-term vision of local government making real change and an ongoing program to push for that change. A multifaceted program can feed back into electoral activism by developing structures that do not have to be rebuilt from scratch with each election.

Below we examine the federation’s efforts to mobilize around economic development, build alliances with community groups and develop diverse networks of activist members. We also explore the links between the federation’s work and affiliate organizing plans.

In August 2015 -- a month before the area labor federation’s official launch – organizers ran a Missed Opportunities Tour and released a visioning report on how public dollars should be spent in Houston. The steady growth in the urban area has included literally billions of dollars of public subsidies for development through tax abatements, redevelopment zones, grants and loans. As is common around the country, while in theory such public investments go for public benefits, in practice job creation and job quality standards are weak and even basic reporting and accountability largely absent. Indeed, work done by Fey Y Justicia and allies found that companies found guilty of wage theft went on to receive tax abatements and other subsidies from public bodies.

Following Sylvester Turner's election TOP and the area labor federation secured a basic requirement for subsidy applicants to report job numbers in terms of full-time and part-time; permanent and temporary work. Partnering with the Texas Organizing Project the federation then set out to insert public standards into the economic development policy section of a much broader city Financial Ordinance Policy. The standards would require clear commitments on subsidized project for living and sustainable wages, use of accredited apprenticeship programs, job training, a second chance for former offenders, and community benefits. Helping elect a liberal mayor, however, has not meant easy passage of such economic development standards. Turner spent his first year as mayor prioritizing negotiations over the underfunded city employee pension plans. Houston also currently operates under a revenue cap that has strained city finances and which the new mayor would like to have repealed.<sup>16</sup> The former administration's economic development director who does not actively support these economic development reforms remains in place. As of March 2017, it appears that the economic development policy had been separated from the broader legislation. Clearly, significant development policy reform will involve serious mobilization and accountability efforts by the federation, TOP, and other allies. Indeed, the federation's faith organizer was building awareness among the faith communities for economic development reforms. With the effort now anchored by TOP, the area labor federation and its allies are just getting started. Elsewhere in the country, meaningful economic development reform has taken years – indeed just a single community benefits agreement campaign can take far more time than the year and a half that the federation has had to get started.

## **Building the Rainbow Coalition**

Organized labor in the United States has only ever grown as part of a broader impulse of progressive social and economic change. As cross-union labor bodies AFL-CIO structures are a natural vehicle for building connection with the broader working-class communities. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO is pursuing several avenues for growing a diverse and community-connected labor movement.

### *Immigrant Rights and Building the Resistance Movement*

The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has continued the immigrant rights work begun by the Harris County Labor Council. Core allies include the Texas Organizing Project, Mi Familia Vota, and the workers center. In early 2017, the federation, TOP, and others held a Know Your Rights training at a local IBEW hall to prepare immigrant families for what to do if a loved-one is detained by immigration authorities. A previous training had been held at the Ironworkers' hall. Working with allies the federation was also developing a training to help sanctuary churches better understand their role.

With the election of Donald Trump this immigrant rights agenda has broadened into more general "resistance" work. Working with the Texas Organizing Project, the labor federation anchors the Houston Unido/Houston United coalition. The box below gives a sample of the coalition's participants. It includes both close allies, such as TOP and Mi Familia Vota, as well as groups that represent newer relationships.

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<sup>16</sup> Passed by voters in 2004 the city charter amendment limits overall property tax revenue growth to the combined rates of inflation and population growth. Since property values in the city have gone up faster than this rate the city has had to lower its property tax rate by 8.2 percent since the cap came into effect. See Mike Morris "City Council to consider property tax rate cut, Turner seeks to end revenue cap leaders say strains coffers" *Houston Chronicle* September 13, 2016.

Houston Unido started with organizing around President Trump’s inauguration. It also mobilized for the May 1<sup>st</sup> national day of action by immigrant workers. In a press conference with United We Dream the federation announced an evening program of music and a march to city hall. The ALF also helped galvanized opposition to SB4, a anti-immigrant racial profiling law akin to Arizona’s SB1070.

*Faith Organizing*

The area labor federation brought on as part-time a sixty-four-year-old minister who has spent his entire career organize for civil rights and social and economic justice. Reverend Lister is tasked with growing an interfaith worker justice network modeled after Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice in Los Angeles and Orange County. Begun by the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy and with support from the Los Angeles Federation of Labor today CLUE bring together roughly 600 clergy and 1200 lay leaders of all faiths to join low-wage workers and other economically-disadvantaged communities in their struggles for justice. In Houston, the precursor for a regional CLUE grew, in part, out of public school interfaith organizing connected with the Houston Federation of Teachers. Such organizing fought for adequate state funding for schools, opposed state-imposed testing, and successfully changed the names of almost a dozen schools away from Confederate war heroes.

The Houston CLEAR (Clergy and Laity for Economic Advancement and Renewal) Justice currently networks about 50 pastors, mostly African-American, but also including Latino clergy. Reverend. Lister is also attempting to build relationships with another progressive largely Anglo ministerial organization and with Muslim organizations. According to Lister, the greater Houston area has over one hundred Mosques. In general terms, CLEAR Justice and the area labor federation aims to foster greater communication between faith and labor leaders so that clergy understand how unions operate and labor leaders appreciate the conditions under which clergy work. Given the role of building trades unions in developing the labor force, the construction industry is especially important in this regard. In February 2017, CLEAR Justice sponsored a gathering of faith leaders to discuss with Building Trades Council Executive Secretary Paul Puente and other trades leaders the operations of union apprentice programs and how especially African Americans, Latinos, and those with a prison record can get into them. In conjunction with this effort CLEAR Justice is building support for the Responsible Bidder Ordinance among faith leaders.

*Young Workers*

Using a solidarity grant from the national AFL-CIO, the Texas AFL-CIO brought on a young field organizer Kara Sheehan who helped establish Young Active Labor Leaders (YALL) in 2014. While

- Sample Houston Unido Participant List**
- Texas AFT
  - Battleground Texas
  - Council on American-Islamic Relations
  - Democratic Socialists of America
  - EMERGE USA
  - Fight for \$15
  - Gulf Coast AFL-CIO
  - Houston Area Progressives
  - Houston Federation of Teachers
  - Houston Gulf Coast Building & Construction Trades Council / IBEW 716
  - IAM Local 811
  - Interfaith Justice Coalition
  - Mi Familia Vota
  - NARAL
  - New Leaders Council
  - Our Revolution
  - PACIFICA KPFT 90.1
  - Planned Parenthood of Gulf Coast
  - SEIU-TX
  - TEJAS
  - TOP
  - UNITE HERE
  - United We Dream
  - Young Active Labor Leaders
  - Young Invincibles

most active in Austin, YALL has chapters in Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Antonio. In the January 2017, it gathered over one hundred activists from throughout the state for its first Step Up Summit in Houston. The topics covered in three-day event reflect a clear merging of traditional labor and broader progressive movement concerns including worker organizing, environmental justice, salting, reproductive justice, policy, political action, immigration, social and race justice.

The nascent YALL Houston group involves roughly two dozen regular activists who are mostly young workers of color. YALL members are clearly connected to the area labor federations activities. They took part, for example, in the door-knocking in State Senator Hoffman's district, attended the second annual Working Families Awards Dinner, and were active in the fight against the anti-sanctuary city SB4 bill.

The area labor federation's ally Mi Familia Vota has developed a program for mobilizing mostly Latino high school and university students to develop their leadership skills by joining in actions and campaigns organized by other groups. Working with schools the organization has also raised voter registration among students and provided opportunities for education on issues and candidates. By working with young people Mi Familia Vota does not simply get them voting and active, but the students then impact their families and communities.

### *Fostering Women Leaders*

The federation has also taken first steps to foster women's leadership within the labor movement. In September 2016, the federation and allies did a salute to women in leadership positions breakfast to highlight the contributions of women in the regional labor movement. Federation staff have worked to identify and develop women worker volunteers. The TOP has begun an effort to bring together diverse women's organizations around a women's economic justice forum. The TOP has also begun a leadership institute to train women to serve on public boards and commissions. Labor federation staff have identified and recruited women union members to participate in the program.

### *Worker Defense Comes to Houston.*

Founded in 2002 the Worker Defense Project (WDP) is a membership-based worker center that organizes among low-income workers to achieve fair employment through education, direct services, organizing and strategic partnerships. While based in Austin and Dallas, the WDP has recently launched an organizing effort in Houston as part of its Build It Better campaign. The construction industry in Texas relies heavily on immigrant, often undocumented, labor. A report of construction in six southern cities – including Houston – found that one in seven workers have been injured during their construction career, one in ten have experienced wage theft, and over half are paid under \$15 an hour. One-third of workers do not have drinking water provided on their worksite, a basic necessity that employers are required to provide under federal law.<sup>17</sup>

Working with the construction trades unions, the Worker Defense Project aims to improve conditions in the industry by pursuing wage claims, organizing direct action by workers, and enacting Better Builder policies. Through conversations with construction workers the project has established standards for certifying a Better Builder. Standards include a living wage, local hire, use of a Department of Labor registered apprentice program, safety training, following federal, state, and local laws, and independent monitoring. Begun in 2012, the project has secured Better Builder commitments on individual projects

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<sup>17</sup> See *Build a Better South* by the Worker Defense Project and the Partnership for Working Families, May 2017.

involving more than 14,000 workers. In Austin, the project seeks a fast-track permitting process for builders who are Better Builder certified. In both Austin and Dallas it has sought Better Builder standards on projects directly linked to public funds such as school construction and public improvement districts.

The project's entrance into Houston embodies the link between immigrant communities and organized labor that is core to the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO's program. It will build off the connections which the area labor federation and others have already fostered. Just as with other forms of worker organizing the project's success is also directly connected to public authority and labor's shared program to elect officials responsive to the needs of working families

### *Growing Relationships of Trust*

Many labor leaders and activists across the country have come to realize that organized labor cannot "go it alone" but needs to develop alliances with the community. While some unions may have the capacity to forge such relationships on their own, most do not. "We work full time just representing our members," is how one leader of a union known for community-linked organizing put it. He added, that "when the connection is about moving my community and society forward we [in organized labor] are so much stronger."

Thus, aside from the outcomes of specific campaigns and actions, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO is building organized labor's power by forging and strengthening relationships. When leaders and activists work together they get to know one another and develop over time relationships of trust. Mutual understanding and trust is crucial when faced with a power structure skilled in pitting one group against another.

## **Worker Organizing**

Electoral action, the fight for economic development to actually benefit working residents, and all of the coalition efforts tie into the organizing efforts of affiliate unions. As internationals give greater attention to organizing in Texas the number of area labor federation affiliates with organizing plans grows. Below is a sample based upon the leaders interviewed for this study.

The strategic planning for the labor federation included a July 2015 first meeting of six unions to coordinate work at and around the region's three airports. The airports involve 47,000 direct jobs and ongoing expansion construction. One of the unions involved at the airport, UNITE-HERE Local 23 covers nine states, including Texas. In 2009, it had 1,500 members in the state. Now it has 4,000 with 1,000 more being organized. The majority are immigrant women of color. Roughly half its membership is in Houston where the union represents workers at the two largest hotels and concessions at the international airport. The political connections forged by the Harris County AFL-CIO helped the union win hotel organizing agreements and a worker retention policy at the airport.<sup>18</sup> Its growth plans include significant organizing at Houston's airports.

The SEIU's Justice for Janitors Campaign established collective bargaining covering 5,000 mostly Latino, female, and immigrant cleaning workers in downtown Houston. Much of the membership work

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<sup>18</sup> Worker retention policies require new concession operators to retain the existing workforce when such contracts change hands.

part-time second jobs done after a full-time day job, making membership development particularly difficult. As a way of stabilizing its membership the union looks toward organizing the approximately 600 full-time workers at the city-owned performing arts and convention facilities. These are controlled by a public corporation whose board is appointed by the Mayor. One of the twelve appointees is Paul Puentes for the Building Trades Council. SEIU also sees organizing publically-linked security officers as a way of building a broader security industry campaign. SEIU has fostered relationships with many of the same groups that the area labor federation is building connections among as well as an active Fight For \$15 campaign.

While Longshoremen have most container work under union contract at the extensive port facilities running from Houston to Galveston, at least half the non-container work is unorganized. The workforce has become increasingly black, Hispanic, immigrant, and female. However, security measures at the larger number of privately-run docks and terminals combines with insecure low-wage conditions to make organizing challenging. While the terminals are privately owned, the Port Authorities can set standards – such as a prevailing wage – that could significantly level the playfield for the union in obtaining work. The newly affiliated Teamster local 988 seeks to generate organizing opportunities through port authority reforms for truck drivers currently classified as independent contractors. Inspired by the waste campaign in Los Angeles the local looks toward expanding union work in Houston’s waste collection system, including the possibilities of establishing a recycling program.

With little local prevailing wage standards in place the construction trades unions generally do not get a great deal of public-linked construction work. Low-wage and often law-breaking contractors often underbid union or more responsible firms. Led by a young Latino leader out of the IBEW, the regional Building Trades Council has developed a proposed Responsible Bidder Ordinance as a way of beginning to level the playing field between high-road and low-road contractors. The RBO would set minimum requirements for contractors and subcontractors bidding on publicly funded projects. The standards include compliance with Equal Opportunity Employer requirements and other laws, participation in a US Department of Labor approved apprentice program, family-sustaining living wages and benefits, local hire, veteran hire, second-chance hire of those with criminal records, and hiring from high unemployment, low income areas. Those bidders who meet such standards would get a “credit” on their specific project bid -- offsetting the low bids from destructive low-road contractors. Such standards allow local government to get a double benefit from public investments: the project is done well while additional benefits go the community. ALF staff have been collaborating with the BCT to develop a campaign plan and merge the work with the Better Builder campaign run by the Workers Defense Project, which recently opened an office in Houston.

Five years ago, the national American Federation of Teachers increased its long-standing commitment to organizing in Texas by funding a long-term multi-million-dollar effort. Although there are specific exceptions, collective bargaining is generally illegal in the public sector in Texas. Teacher union locals such as the Houston Federation of Teachers have achieved a robust consultation policy with the school district. They must do so in competition with several non-union teacher associations that offer lower dues for state-based services rather than local organization. AFT organizing goes through the stages of securing low-dues associate memberships to building a local organizing committee to launching an actual union local to winning some kind of consultation policy with one or multiple districts. The union aims to both increase overall membership and to do so especially in politically important parts of the state. The organizing work has produced two new locals spanning several school districts in the metro-Houston area. In addition to its K-12 organizing plans, Texas AFT recently began a campaign to organize further in higher education in and around Houston. While the nascent adjunct faculty campaign is currently focused on internal organizing and leadership development, its ultimate success will need to

utilize the vulnerability of higher education institutions to bad publicity from workers, students, and the general public.

All these examples link in one way or another to government authority and thus can enjoy clear payoffs from a united and growing labor political program. By seizing the electoral opportunities, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO is directly contributing to the possibilities for union growth. In some cases, a public entity directly hires the workforce or the main contractor. In other cases, the organizing links may be more complicated. At the airports, for example, the airlines may control work that they then contract out to a main contractor who subcontracts to other firms. However, at facilities such as airports and shipping ports a public body can still set rules. The organizing link may also come through public subsidies and development regulations.

The area labor federation's work also connects to organizing in a more diffuse but quite important manner. To paraphrase comments Richard Shaw made back in 2004: "The Central Labor Council is not going to go into a workplace and organize workers, but because of the work we do, that worker will know what organized labor is for and why the organizer is there." As one interviewee whose union has a large immigrant membership described: "I might be undocumented or my brother or neighbor might be. When I see organized labor fighting for immigrant rights I see them fighting for me."

Since Texas is a Right-to-Work state the link between political and community action and membership also applies to the internal organizing that must go on to maintain membership. This is especially true in the public sector where workers do not have collective bargaining rights. Formed in 2005, HOPE/AFSCME Local 123 is the union of most city workers. Even after the city agreed to a collective bargaining relationship, the largely Africa-American and Latino membership has had to fight to demand the same respect from the city as shown to the police and firefighters unions. Pay rates offer an insight in to the scale of change that workers have won through the union. While wages ran as low as \$7 an hour before collective bargaining the floor in 2018 will be \$15 an hour. The Houston Federation of Teachers also has had to mobilize not simply to maintain membership, but to face down one of the most aggressive charter-school and privatization efforts in the country. Both unions are core active affiliates of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO. Their interests directly intertwine with the area labor federation's power-building political program, but also benefit from the more general effect of publically identifying organized labor and its allies as the force for improving the lives of working people generally.

Indeed, when the area labor federation pushes community and worker benefits on economic development, helps labor join in the fight for immigrant rights, or pushes candidates to champion a Fair Shot agenda it frames organized labor as a movement which brings working people together to build a better life for all. Such a transformative vision of the labor movement can only serve to strengthen each worker's commitment to his/her union regardless of sector.



## **Lessons and Challenges**

### **The Conditions Are Ripe for Organizing**

At the time of this research the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO had officially been in existence for a year and a half. Executive Director Hany Khalil had been on the job for only a year. Yet the sense of momentum expressed by interviewees confirms the tremendous potential raised at the beginning of this report. In this short period of time the federation, affiliates, and allies have established a credible and growing political program, begun to shift the conversation around economic development, supported significant union and worker organizing, and fostered relationships that are pulling the Houston progressive community together. The biggest lesson to come out of this experience is that the conditions are in place to do significant and meaningful organizing in Houston, in Texas, and in cities in the American South. Although the ultimate levels of success cannot be predicted in advance, clearly time and resources invested in Houston – and southern cities with similar conditions -- will translate into building the blocks of a genuine movement for progressive change.

### **Growing into a Thirteen County Movement**

The Texas Gulf Coast region is huge – both geographically and in population. Building a strong labor-community program in and around the core city first makes sense. The regional effort starts where the terrain is most favorable and the resources and allies most concentrated. However, to realize decisive political change the project must grow out into the other twelve counties.

The 2016 electoral program and gains in Fort Bend County and the current door-knocking there demonstrates that the area labor federation's political program is not simply restricted to Harris County. The region covered by the Galveston labor assembly illustrates the long-term political challenges for the entire thirteen county region. The Texas 23<sup>rd</sup> state house district includes Galveston city and county. In 2014, Susan Criss lost 45% to 55% to Republican Wayne Faircloth (who had failed to defeat the Democratic incumbent Craig Eiland in 2012). The Galveston and Harris County Labor Councils has made a big effort, mobilizing well over 100 volunteers. Lloyd Criss – Susan's father and state representative from 1978 to 1990 -- ran against Faircloth in 2016. The Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO organized to bring a significant number of volunteers from Harris County to knock on doors in Galveston. When it became clear that Criss was not going to win (he lost 41% to 59%) the federation and the state AFL-CIO had to make the difficult decision to deemphasized the race. Changing the political balance of power in the state and Congressional districts in and around Galveston clearly requires a more sustained program to build power than a single election campaign.

Power building in outlying counties requires translating the program for the larger urban center into the conditions of smaller cities and suburbs. It starts with a Fair Shot/economic justice type agenda that can articulated not just during elections, but fought for through concrete local public policy reforms. It requires building alliances with community activism. This may involve working with partners from the urban core to organize among constituencies that are far less organized than in the main city. An active program must develop local political candidates from among activists involved in the grassroots campaigns and grow progressive-minded local politicians into state and national offices. A volunteer pool needs to grow over time through issue and election campaigns. Finally, to be sustainable a power building program must grow the resource base through a virtuous cycle with union organizing (and organizing by community groups that have a grassroots membership). All of this requires resources.

## **More Resources**

While its geographic area and population are quite large, the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO operates with an affiliate per capita base of 48,000. This compares to the roughly 200,000 union members that the Orange County labor council revitalized around. New York State leaders aimed at area labor federations of 100,000 members as the minimum necessary base. The leadership and affiliates of the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO has certainly made the most of its current resource bases. In March 2017, for example, they held a well-attended second annual Working Families Awards dinner that raised \$100,000, including national AFL-CIO matching funds. However, the federation has likely reached the limit of its current affiliate base. New or increased affiliation can provide some gains. Furthermore, some affiliates do have organizing plans that promise membership gains in the thousands. However, the rising ambitions which come from continued success points to greater resource needs.

When asked about immediate needs if the federation were to gain the capacity for one additional staff person the interviewed leadership pointed to internal mobilization. Specifically, they could use a staff person who could aid affiliates in engaging their membership in the work, develop a more sophisticated and extensive communication program using social media, and foster active labor assemblies. The last element is particularly important. The labor assemblies provide the location where grassroots leaders and rank and file workers can come together and be active in their part of the metropolitan area. A frequently internal critique of the labor movement's traditional political action is that workers get mobilized for an election only to have nothing to remain active between elections. The labor assemblies can provide such as mechanism. Yet to live up to their potential the assemblies need organizing attention. While the Harris County assembly remains active, the controversy over the move to an area labor federation led to a leadership turnover in another, another operates at only a very basic level, and the other two are inactive. Even Harris County assembly leaders and activist are working to develop active committee structures.

The issue of greater resources points to the need for more direct investments in the power building project. It also underlines the importance of more international unions committing to major organizing plans in Texas. "Organized labor is not going to prevail as they have in California unless more unions commit to organizing," argued one labor leader. "Increasing membership gives you the money and volunteer base to be able to do things."

## **A Think and Act Tank**

Regional power building elsewhere has not simply relied on growing the direct staff of the central labor body, but has also raised significant foundation funds through an allied non-profit "think and act tank." Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development, which works closely with the Orange County AFL-CIO, has a staff of eight. It supports three projects: a citizenship program for lawful permanent residents, a successful move to district-based elections for the Anaheim City Council, and an Equity for All Santa Ana campaign focused on government transparency, a community-driven city budget, and protecting and using public lands for community needs. With an affiliate base of 50,000 the Denver Area Labor Federation is much closer to the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO in membership size. In 2002, the labor federation established FRESA. Today this non-profit's staff of nine support an active interfaith worker justice network; policy campaigns, research, and coalition building around raising wages; and a long-standing equitable growth project to promote community benefits and reform the way in which economic development happens within the region. The later effort involves significant community organizing.

The national Partnership for Working Families networks seventeen such think and act bodies. While the specific program work within these bodies varies considerably they all combine significant capacity around regional research, coalition-building, policy work, and various grassroots organizing.<sup>19</sup> The think and act tank allows labor and its allies to develop and pursue an aggressive agenda around economic justice and an economy that works for all while the central labor body leads the political action that places progressive champions in office and holds them accountable for supporting the regional agenda.

The capacities provided by the think and act tank are particularly relevant to Houston in three areas in which the federation will need to build upon its success. These are outlined in the next three sections.

## **Grappling with Regional Economic Development**

The governmental role in regional economic development in the United States typically takes place in a manner that is secretive, lacks accountability, and often involves a significant commitment of public funds and other assets. While these limitations offer tremendous opportunities for organizing and real meaningful change they often require a significant investment of staff time to unearth, publicize, and organize around. Currently, the economic development organizing in Houston is driven by the time and energy of one staff person at the area federation and another at the TOP's Houston office. Both have other responsibilities. Labor's, TOP's and their allies' role in helping elect Mayor Turner has created an opportunity to push development reform policies. This is an arena, however, in which more capacity would directly translate into more program on the ground.

## **From Access to Governing**

That the first year of the Turner regime did not result in the main economic development reforms pushed by labor and TOP points to the more general issue of reforming regional government. In many ways changing who gets elected to office is the relatively easy part. Major governmental reform requires translating campaign goals into concrete policies and bringing in people to staff key positions within the city administration to implement them. In providing the likely decisive margin for Turner's mayoral victory, labor and its allies gained significant access to the top levels of local government. The appointment of labor and other allied figures to the mayor's transition teams reflected increased access. With area unions linked to city government through collective bargaining, city-owned or influenced facilities, and specific possible city policy measures the importance of such access is real and can result in major gains. However, the fact that labor's and allies' voices on the transition teams were in each case a minority of members reflects the influence of the broader and more corporate-oriented power structure. Furthermore, a year into governing the Turner administration operates with roughly two-thirds of the staff from the previous administration. This includes the head of economic development who is not a supporter of labor and its allies reform agenda. Staffing questions created enough of a tension within the new administration that the Mayor's long-time chief of staff while he was a state representative resigned from her new position as city chief of staff.

The think and act tanks found elsewhere do the research and development work to translate a progressive agenda into concrete policy. Such policy reflects broad economic justice goals yet translates into specific measures that can be put into practice by local government. Many think and act tanks also engage in leadership development programs -- such as a civic leadership institute or values-based

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed examination of this model see the previously sighted *A New New Deal* especially chapters 3 and 4.

leadership training -- that brings together labor and community allies to discuss regional development, unite behind a common reform vision, and learn concrete governing skills that prepare them to sit on public boards and commissions, run for elected office, or possibly fill government staffing positions.

## **Building a Transformative Vision**

When asked to describe what success looks like five years from now everyone interviewed for this study could articulate the progressive electoral possibilities. The prospects of transforming more parts of the region from “red” to “blue” electorally are clear – even to the point of seeing this regional change as part of a more general transformation of state and national politics. Such a shared vision can sustain the area labor federation’s regional project for a considerable time.

However, ultimately an electoral transformation is not about developing Democratic majorities who simply pursue a relatively liberal version of the corporate agenda. Rather labor and its allies need to roll back the neo-liberal agenda with its vision of limited government, austerity, “market-driven” development, and low expectations about future living standards. The contrasting progressive vision imagines an economy of heightened prosperity built through gains that are broadly shared. Economic progress comes from raising living standards for the vast majority of the population which in turn supports business success rather than the false neo-liberal promise that increased corporate success will somehow trickle down. A progressive vision sees government institutions and grassroots organizations such as unions and active community groups as the natural counter to corporate power and profit-making’s single-minded logic. Progressives emphasize the wealth that already exists which give the ability of our communities to invest in a better future when the priorities are set right.

Key leaders interviewed in Houston can readily articulate something like such a vision. For other interviewees, however, such possibilities seem beyond the traditional horizons which organized labor is used to contemplating. There is a difference between seeing electoral wins as translating into transactional goals that help with a union’s organizing or bargaining (which are certainly important) and seeing ultimate union success in a transformed regional economy and society.

A broader vision can place specific controversial issues in a new context. There has been, for example, some pushback by a handful of affiliate leaders on the energy the labor federation puts into immigrant rights work. These leaders tend to have a more traditional view of labor’s success. They can see the moral value of supporting immigrant workers but may see such activism as outside labor’s core needs. When placed in the context in which the labor movement only fully prospers when it is part of a broad transformative progressive movement, however, empowering the most vulnerable workers within the region becomes a natural core part of building lasting power. Among the interviewees were certainly those who could articulate this link. Some come from unions with a large Latino membership. Others simply realize with a large Latino and immigrant population in Texas organized labor’s future is tied to these communities.

Questions of immigrant rights activism connect to a larger complaint from some interviewees that too much work focuses on social issues (immigration, abortion, gun rights, gay rights) and not enough on labor or job issues (wages benefits job conditions organizing). This is not simply or even mainly a questioning of the area labor federation’s priorities. Since electoral politics is such an important part of the federations work this criticism seems more a critique of the Democratic Party. Nationally, the Democratic Party establishment has shied away from economic justice issues. Hillary Clinton’s campaign emphasized tolerance and diversity without a credible critique of the economic pressures facing working families, the corporate power structure which produced them and bold initiatives to

address them. As a result, union leaders saw some of their working-class members – especially white workers – support Trump as the only candidate to raise class issues and point to working-class pain.

The Fair Shot agenda articulated by the state federation and the shared platform expressed by labor and its allies in the candidates forums link an economic justice agenda into Texas politics that has been picked up by some politicians and begun to serve notice to others that labor and its allies will not support candidates who do not champion such. Articulating a working class progressive agenda in electoral politics is one step. It becomes all more real for people when it has been translated into action on the ground. This points back to the importance of weaving research, policy work, education, campaign development, coalition-building and mobilization together so that the sum becomes far greater than the parts.

## **Keeping Ahead of the Backlash**

In the spring of 2017, labor was fighting several bills in the state legislature including so-called paycheck protection which would ban union dues from being deducted from workers' paycheck in the public sector, SB 4 making sanctuary cities illegal, the outsourcing of child protective services, a ban on state-funded Project Labor Agreements, and a bill that would require parental permission for minors to join a union (UFCW Local 1000 had, for example, 1,500-2,000 such member baggers and clerks). When labor and its allies attempted a minimum wage referendum in Houston in 1999, the legislature banned municipalities from enacting minimum wage laws the following year. In 2015, newly elected Governor Abbot pointed to the threat that local regulations pose to Texas' business-friendly development model. "Large cities that represent about 75 percent of the population in this state are doing this to us. Unchecked overregulation by cities will turn the Texas miracle into the California nightmare," said Abbot.<sup>20</sup>

Power building efforts in greater Houston, as well as peer efforts in Dallas-Fort Worth and elsewhere, are in a sort race. Progressive organizing within urban areas can create a base to contest for power at the state and even national level. Yet across the country in conservative states the right-wing has attempted to use state power to counter progressive momentum at the local level. States have blocked the ability of local governments to set a minimum wage, require paid sick leave, and more generally regulate the worker-employer relationship. While there are limits to what a state legislature can do, a hostile state government does put pressure on local efforts to translate regional success into state electoral results. Although Texas has been a conservative state, the rise of the tea party and alt-right currents has meant that in recent years the legislature has become much more aggressively anti-union. The lesson for national sources of funding and resources is clear: better to jump in quicker and larger than tentative steps to more gradually invest in Texas over time.

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<sup>20</sup> Shaila Dewanfeb "States Are Blocking Local Regulations, Often at Industry's Behest" *New York Times* Feb. 23, 2015.

## **Conclusion: Transforming a Region, State, and Nation**

Being “dangerous enough to try to outlaw” underlines the strength of the opportunities present in the greater Houston area and Texas more generally. Indeed, all the above challenges are the kinds of “advanced” issues that represent the significant raising of possibilities and ambitions that have grown out of the power-building project encompassed by the Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO. Questions such as moving from access to governing, for example, are relevant only in a situation in which activists first have a serious electoral program that promises actual access. A transformative vision is only relevant in a context where a sizable constituency for such a vision exists and where mobilizing this constituency promises meaningful, large scale and decisive change.

The Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO has existed as an area labor federation with an executive director for only a year. During this time, it has successfully built off the momentum of its founding to establish a credible starting program for building regional power. While the tasks ahead are large the author was greatly impressed by the sense of momentum and optimism expressed by nearly all interviewees. Labor and its allies are clearly moving forward in the greater Houston area and in the state of Texas. History is likely being written now.

## Appendix 1

# Pasadena Candidates Academy Coalition Platform

### **Civic Engagement and Voting Rights Protections**

- Early vote and election day poll sites geographically more accessible to voters and coordination with Pasadena, San Jacinto Community College and PISD elections to have them all the same day and at the same location
- Public education campaign promoting voter participation, including voter registration (e.g. billboards, free or reduced bus rides on election day, robo-call from new Mayor saying, “I am Mayor A. Join me and our Pasadena community in exercising our right to vote.”)

### **Good Jobs**

- Publicly support a living sustainable wage
- Publicly support the right of all workers to organize unions free from intimidation or interference
- Require community benefits like good wages and benefits for developers, use of DOL-approved apprenticeship programs, hiring local, or affordable housing for subsidized development of the City of Pasadena

### **Public Transportation**

- Work to provide mobility choices in and out of Pasadena to make employment, education, health care, and other resources more accessible to all communities, including extending Metro bus service to Pasadena

### **Welcoming to Immigrants**

- Make public declaration that the city welcomes Immigrants in conjunction with civic organizations
- Pasadena Police Department adopts enforcement guidelines that focus on genuine public safety threats rather than wasting resources on federal immigration enforcement

### **Environmental Justice**

- Publicly support the value of EPA regulations to protect the health of Pasadena employees and communities
- Support an ordinance to limit engine idling for diesel trucks
- Convene meetings with stakeholders (unions, environmental justice organizations) to explore opportunities for developing infrastructure to sustain port-related economic growth without negatively impacting low-income communities, such as preventing siting of radioactive facilities in low-income communities, increasing energy efficiency, reducing the impact of port-related traffic on neighborhoods, etc.)
- Support plan to alert residents of toxic releases in timely manner

## Appendix 2 – Affiliated Unions

Below are the unions affiliated with the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO. Each local is not listed out. Rather this list provides a sense of the unions participating in the area labor federation. The information comes from a March 2017 voting eligible per capita list.

AFGE  
AFSCME  
AFT  
APWU  
Bakery, Confectionary...  
Boiler Makers  
COPS  
CWA  
California Nurses  
Cement Masons/Plasterers  
Chemical Workers  
COM - Unity  
Elevator Construction  
HOPE/ AFSCME  
IUPAT  
IAM&AW  
IBEW  
ILA  
Insulators  
Ironworkers  
Laborers  
MEBA  
Masters, Mates, Pilots  
Musicians  
NALC  
NFL  
OPEIU  
Operating Engineers  
Pipefitters  
Plumbers  
Screen Actors Guild  
Seafarers  
SEIU  
Sheet Metal Workers  
Teamsters  
Transport Workers  
UNITE-HERE  
UFCW  
USW



### **Appendix 3 -- Interviewee List**

Laura Perez Boston: Texas Organizing Project  
Zeph Capo: President Houston Federation of Teachers  
Eloy Cortez: ILA Atlantic-Gulf Coast District  
Bo Delp: Worker Defense Project  
Carlos Duarte: Mi Familia Vota  
Ginny Goldman: Former Executive Director Texas Organizing Project  
William Gonzales: State President UNITE-HERE Local 23  
Amanda Hart: Organizer American Federation of Teachers/Young Active Labor Leaders  
Mike Henderson: Business Manager/Financial Secretary IBEW Local 527  
Melvin Hughes: President HOPE/AFSCME Local 123  
Hany Khalil: Executive Director Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO  
Bill Kenyon: Business Manager/Financial Secretary Sheet Metal Workers Local 54  
Jeffrey LaBroski: Business Agent Plumbers Local 68  
Rick Levy: Secretary Treasurer Texas AFL-CIO  
Robert "Wayne" Lord: Business Manager Plumbers Local 68  
Rev. Ronnie Lister: Texas Gulf-Coast AFL-CIO Faith Organizer  
Eli Magaña: SEIU Texas  
Louis Malfaro: President Texas AFT  
Ginny McDavid: CWA-AFA LEC 64, Harris County Labor Assembly President  
Robert Mele: President/Business Manager Teamsters Local 988  
Linda Morales: Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO Organizing Director  
John Patrick: President Texas AFL-CIO  
Paul Puente: Executive Secretary Houston Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades Council  
Bill Ragen: SEIU Texas  
Richard Shaw: Retired Secretary-Treasurer Harris County AFL-CIO  
Calvin Speight: Retired Business Manager Plumbers Local 68  
Norma Villanueva: Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO VIP Director  
Lacy Wolf: Business Manager Insulators & Allied Workers Local 22