

# *REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*

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## **Preview**

### **At the Epicenter of an Economic Earthquake:**

*New York Confronts the Great Recession*

*by Gregory DeFreitas*

### **Latest Trends in Key Labor Market Indicators: 2008**

*by Bhaswati Sengupta*

### **ACORN's Fair Housing Fight in Working Class Communities:**

*A Conversation with ACORN CEO Bertha Lewis*

*by Niev Duffy*

### **The Broad Benefits of a Higher Minimum Wage:**

*Interstate Impacts along Wage Contours*

*by Oren Levin Waldman*

### **Slave Labor in the Modern American Economy**

*Book Review, by Russell Harrison*

### **Construction Workers Can Police Industry For Safety**

*Correspondence from Herman Benson*

### **Snapshots of Local Labor Activities in the Past Year**

## **Calendar**

### *Preview*

With this issue, we begin our second decade of publishing the *Regional Labor Review*. When *RLR* first appeared in the autumn of 1998, the country was in the sixth year of what would prove to be the longest economic boom in U.S. history. The national unemployment rate – just 4.6% that September – had steadily fallen from 7.8% in mid-1992. By year-end 1998, it had remained below 5% for 18 consecutive months, with no signs of the inflationary pressures that many economists had predicted.

The welcome tandem of low unemployment-low inflation moved Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve, to declare at the time that: "The current economic performance, with its combination of strong growth and low inflation, is as impressive as any I have witnessed in my near half-century of daily observation of the American economy." Greenspan was given much of the credit for this performance by mainstream economists and, when he retired in 2006, was hailed as one of the greatest Fed chiefs of all time.

What a difference a decade makes! The recession that exploded in 2008 has, by many measures, deepened into the worst national economic decline since the Great Depression. As we document in this issue's opening article, the financial crisis has so far resulted in the loss of over five million jobs nationwide and widespread pay and benefits cuts. And even though the brunt of the recession only hit New York City and its environs last September, the number of unemployed New Yorkers had leapt 41% by year's end.

We should not forget that the late 1990s was also a time of crisis as well as prosperity. The costly collapse of over one thousand savings and loan banks from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s was soon followed by the 1997–98 global financial crisis originating in East Asia. Soon thereafter, the dot.com speculative bubble burst, pushing the U.S. economy into recession by 2001. The recovery that officially began the following year led to another massive, much more dangerous speculative bubble and soaring Wall Street profits and executive bonuses. But even before the housing bubble burst in 2006, the average working person saw precious little real wage growth. In fact, for the typical worker, the median weekly wage (after adjustment for inflation) was no higher in 2008 than it had been in 2000. Coupled with soaring costs of health insurance, higher education and housing, wage stagnation has left many millions of Americans highly indebted and vulnerable to foreclosure.

The main reasons for most Americans' wage stagnation are hotly contested. But few economists doubt that the sinking wage floor represented by the federal minimum wage has played a part. For the decade from 1997 through mid-year 2007, opponents blocked any increase in the minimum wage, resulting in a 20% drop in its purchasing power. This summer brings the last increase (to \$7.25) in the federal minimum wage that was authorized by Congress shortly after the 2006 elections. A new legislative battle to increase the minimum next year promises to again be hard fought on all sides. In this issue, Oren Levin Waldman conducts a statistical analysis of the important question whether higher minimum wages might serve the interests of a broader constituency than the lowest-wage workers. The middle class may also gain because a minimum wage increase is likely to affect the wages of those workers earning more than the minimum. Moreover, he finds that wage inequality appears to be reduced and unemployment does not appear to be increased as a result of higher wage floors.

This issue also features an interview with Bertha Lewis, the leader of ACORN. This is one of the first full-length interviews for publication that Ms. Lewis has given since ACORN found itself the target of almost daily Republican criticisms during the 2008 campaign for the White House. Given the centrality of housing to both the economic crisis and to ACORN's organizing and self-help agenda among working class families, the interview is unusually timely and thought-provoking.

The ACORN interview is by Niev Duffy. No one among the founding editors of *Regional Labor Review* was more important than Niev to the original conception, design, and production of this journal. From her earliest days as an economics professor at Hofstra, she devoted herself tirelessly to the most fundamental matters of graphical design, intellectual content, planning of future issues, building the readership and subscriptions, fundraising, and organizing conferences and other events focused on related labor issues. When she wasn't conducting interviews or writing her own articles for *RLR*, she was soliciting original pieces by others, at Hofstra and well beyond. And even after leaving the University for senior research positions elsewhere, Niev has continued to play an indispensable role on our editorial board and to contribute in many ways to each issue.

Clearly, we begin our second decade of *Regional Labor Review* at an historic moment. The United States has broken sharply with the past in electing its first African American President, a pro-labor Northern Democrat who replaces a conservative Southern Republican. And it has done so at a time of spreading economic turmoil and record-challenging job losses. As we struggle to come to grips with a global recession, clear thinking about its main causes, full dimensions, and most effective remedies will be vitally important in shaping solutions with broadly shared benefits. The power shift in Washington, the economic crisis, and government responses to it have already succeeded in reinvigorating and broadening public debate over the proper balance of the public and private sectors' respective roles in the economy. It is our hope in planning upcoming issues of *RLR* that it might make its own modest contribution toward that debate.

Our goal has been from the start to offer a unique journal of original research and features focused on important labor issues in the New York Metropolitan Area. *RLR* is designed to achieve that goal through writing that is widely accessible to a broad audience. Each issue is distributed to thousands of labor and community activists, students, educators, journalists, businesses, nonprofits, and policymakers. We have been most fortunate to receive the generous financial support of Hofstra University and its Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy (CLD). Founded by Bert Silverman, now Emeritus Professor of Economics at Hofstra, CLD provided the initial funding and institutional base that proved so vital to assembling the staff and research resources needed for such a new and ambitious publication.

None of our accomplishments so far would have been possible without the generous contributions of the University, the *RLR* Editorial Board, our eminent Board of Advisors, and our thousands of readers. We are deeply grateful to all of you for your continued interest and support.

*The Editor*

## *ACORN's Fair Housing Fight in Working Class Communities:* A Conversation with ACORN CEO Bertha Lewis

by Niev Duffy

Until the 2008 election campaign threw it into the national spotlight, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) was well known among its 400,000 member families and other grassroots organizations as a leader in community organizing around social and economic justice issues. But it had little presence on the national political scene. During the run-up to the 2008 election, however, Republicans and conservative media outlets attempted to belittle Barack Obama's prior experience as a community organizer by embarking on an intensive campaign to disparage grassroots organizing, choosing ACORN as its principal target. In the media storm that followed, ACORN was accused of a variety of illegal practices including voter registration fraud and predatory subprime mortgage lending, arguments that were quickly debunked by a variety of sources.<sup>1</sup> Though Republicans have continued to attack ACORN publicly, even demanding that the 2009 stimulus package specifically prohibit it from receiving any public funds, such efforts have fallen short of their goal. And ACORN may well ultimately benefit from the national publicity.

Over its 38 years, ACORN has had notable success with its comprehensive organizing campaigns that involve canvassing, surveys and research, public education and trainings, voter registration, legislative advocacy, and carefully orchestrated civic action. Its campaigns target issues important to low- and moderate-income Americans, including: affordable housing, foreclosure and predatory lending prevention, paid sick leave, fair tax reform, immigration reform, living wage and school funding, etc. ACORN also offers a variety of free services to its members including tax preparation, eligibility screening for federal and state funded programs, mortgage counseling and foreclosure prevention, and low-income housing development.

Bertha Lewis was chosen as ACORN's national CEO and Chief Organizer in October 2008. Originally from Philadelphia, Ms. Lewis became a tenant and community activist in New York after a protracted dispute with a landlord in the South Bronx. She has worked with New York ACORN for over 15 years and has been its Executive Director for the last five. In a separate capacity, Ms. Lewis is also a co-chair of the Working Families Party in New York.

We interviewed Ms. Lewis on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2009.

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**Q: When President Obama was inaugurated, he called for Americans to contribute some form of national service. Have you seen signs of that? Are you getting more people to work with ACORN since then already?**

**BL:** I think having Obama, with a national bully pulpit, actually say the words, "Service, volunteer, do something," and to use the word "organize" is tremendous. Because the Right was making fun of those words. People had said organizing was passe, you know? They would confuse organizing with mobilizing. They would confuse doing service with just handing out food at a soup kitchen or something like that. So him being a community organizer and taking the poison off of those concepts and those words is tremendous.

And we are being recognized as the premier organizing group. We stuck to our guns and stuck to organizing all of this time. President Obama was an organizer and he thinks like an organizer.

I have to tell you about the attacks on us from the Right. You know, nobody likes to be attacked and called names. But I do have to say that at the end, it's been a net good for us. After 38 years and all of the work that we've done, we're finally a household name across the country.

**Q: That's for sure. How do you try to persuade young people -- also, immigrants, many of whom are young -- to get involved with ACORN?**

**BL:** Well, many methods. You do it the old-fashioned way, right? You go out into our neighborhoods. Our organizers still do the labor-intensive door-knocking and canvassing, finding out what's on people's minds, what it is that they want to see changed and whether they want to fight for it. And so we sign up whole families. When you join ACORN, your whole family joins. So we talk to the adults in the family, but then we also talk to the teenagers and to the kids, too.

Then, of course, we do a lot of education organizing. We don't just organize parents. We organize the kids around their issue, whether it is moving the bus stop, police picking them up, their school building and facilities, or the fact that they have ROTC people on their campus. And from the tiny issues that young people have we go to the bigger issues that young people have.

Now we've learned to use the Internet a little bit better, because we had to start texting folks and getting into networks where young people are. We, of course, recruit on college campuses. If you don't want to work for ACORN, just see what ACORN activities are so that we can be a little bit more effective. Because we work so hard, nose is to the grindstone, that you don't take the opportunity to tell your story, you know? You're working hard, but you're not working smart. So we've begun to have a much more robust college program.

You've got to go where the constituents are. We have a whole immigrant chapter. Immigrant members work on the comprehensive immigration reform issue, as well as local immigration reform issues. We will go after local folks who scam immigrants, go after the local INS center that has people's paperwork clogged up, go after the local grocery store that's ripping off immigrants. So you've got to go to where the young people are, organize campaigns based on what they want to fight for. It's elementary.

I think as we move forward, I have a different vision than the former chief, to say the least. So I'm far more interested in expanding how and what kind of campaigns, what kind of issues we work on based on reaching out to certain groups of constituents and young people. I mean, just having in our internal leadership and board, having more diversity. When people talk about diversity, they used to talk about race and class. You've got to talk about gender diversity. You can't have an organization that's going to be powerful and that's going to last another 38 years if you're not cultivating younger folks to take leadership positions.

**Q: What do you ask of your members in ACORN? Do you ask that they pay dues or --**

**BL:** Yes. We're a membership organization. We're like a community union. Our dues are \$120 a year. That's \$10 a month, per family.

So, one, you've got to pay your dues. Two, you've got to be active in some kind of way. You go to at least one meeting, one action, one something. You can do something, you know? Three, you need to build the organization. So if you're a new member, we want you to help sign up another member. You know, you may have someone in your building, your job, your family that's interested in the fight, right? And then finally, you must participate in politics. You've got to vote. You've got to register to vote if you can. If you cannot register to vote, if you cannot vote, you can still be active politically. You've got to know who your representatives are. You've got to know how politics affects your lives. So even on the back of our little membership card, it's like, "Yes, I will vote in elections. Yes, I will pay my dues. Yes, I will be active."

**Q: How would you describe ACORN's relationship with the union movement, or with the labor movement in general, workers' centers and unions? Is it just an active, permanent, ongoing relationship? Does it have its stresses?**

**BL:** We've always been pro-labor. We certainly are accused of being in labor's pocket. But, like I say, we model ourselves like a community union. Now, is that to say that we agree with all our brothers and sisters in the labor movement? No. Is that to say that we're not critical? We definitely support the right-to-organize movement that they have, and workers' rights, and the right of household workers to choose to be in a union. We think America is better if it has stronger unions. We think any worker -- any worker -- should be organized in some way. So we are very pro-union.

The union movement is changing. I think a lot of our brothers and sisters in the labor movement see that they fell away from organizing, you know? Instead of having organizers, they had business managers. We've been forming partnerships, labor-community partnerships, because there are some in labor who know that they need to use community organizations and community folks, grassroots folks, to get into the neighborhoods. And to get their rank and file into more issues than just workplace issues. So the labor movement in practice -- and this is changing -- they understand that they will die. They needed to turn themselves around. We've always been there, and now I think the partnership is just deepening. They used to treat us as little brothers and little sisters. Now they see us as equals.



**Q: ACORN's use of surveys is really interesting. What would you say about the role of research in aiding your efforts?**

**BL:** Critical. I think that's the difference between organizing and mobilizing and advocacy. I don't think we get enough credit (and it may be our own fault) for doing research and intellectual work. Because as an organizer, if you're going to map out a campaign you've been out there knocking on doors, and a majority of people keep coming up with pretty much the same issue, and they're saying, "We want to fight, and we want to see change on this particular issue."

When you work with your members, the first thing you do is lay out a campaign plan, and one of the first things that you do when you're laying out a campaign plan is ask: what is the research we need to do? We may assume that X is true, but we need to be able to find out whether X is really true. And we need to know this particular area.

So research is always one of the first things, you know. Then you figure out, how many other people does this affect? What other people? Who are your allies? Who are your opponents? What kind of media strategy? What kind of legal strategy? What is your street strategy? In your research, did you publish something? Do you do a survey? Has somebody already done this? So this is the bricks and mortar of a campaign, and I don't think we always get enough credit for doing it, but it is critical to us. We never, ever do any kind of campaign without doing some research.

**Q: Do you do the research in house, or do you also reach out to other groups to do it for you?**

**BL:** We do it both ways. You know, we've worked with the Brennan Center [at NYU Law School] a lot, because we may not have the in-house expertise and resources to do it ourselves. Some people do it better, you know? You've got to sit down with folks and say, "Here's what we're thinking about," and we might outsource the research, or we might partner up, and we'll do part and they'll do part, and we'll put it together. So we do both.

**Q: I know that you have on your website the results of a national survey of yours that found three-fourths of low-wage employees don't get any sick days. Have you taken that on now as a major new campaign, trying to get legislation on sick day pay?**

**BL:** Oh, yeah. I mean, we have paid sick day campaigns. You know, several states, cities here in New York, of course, Missouri, Florida, Texas, California are part of our national campaigns. We have also, as you know -- For years we have fought for minimum wage and living wage, and have led living wage campaigns, and state-to-state minimum wage campaigns. We do it legislatively wherever we can, as well as trying to force concessions, again, to make it through CBAs [Community Benefit Agreements].<sup>ii</sup> So absolutely, paid sick days is one, is in our 2009 basket of national campaigns -- part of our ACORN agenda.

Now we're getting ready to launch our Home Defender campaign. Rather than squatting, we are actually going to have people stay in their homes that have been foreclosed on and do civil disobedience, refuse to leave and move. We will have volunteers putting their bodies on the line to defend those homes against the sheriff and the police.

We had our folks actually come out and work in ACORN neighborhoods to door-knock folks and finding people who might be facing foreclosure and mortgage problems. So we did that on our Day of Action. We flied neighborhoods and actually did phone banking and used the Internet to say, "Join ACORN if you want to do service. Here's all the stuff that we work on."

**Q: Is the Home Defender campaign national or is it just in New York?**

**BL:** The national campaign launches February 19th. In New York, we're having the first home defender training tonight. We'll have about 100 people with a mix of families that are facing foreclosure that are going to get the first home defender training here in New York. Trainings are going on around the country so that on the 19th, next week, when we launch in about 15 cities, folks will be ready. Rapid response teams, people coming together to say: "Enough is enough. We're not leaving. We're staying."

**Q: Have you gotten partners, like politicians and religious groups involved?**

**BL:** We've been building the coalition. All of the above. Homeless organizations, sheriffs. Do you believe it? Sheriffs saying, "We're with you. This might be our job, but morally we're not going to do it." Incredible!

Politicians, you know? Governors, senators, state lawmakers who are saying, "Yeah, stay in your home. Don't move." I mean, Barney Frank just the other day had said that he had been skeptical, because we'd been calling for a moratorium. And he was like, "No, no. That's not necessary." Barney Frank stood up on the House floor and said, "That's it. You know, we're not moving fast enough. We're not doing enough. These banks aren't doing enough. I'm calling for a moratorium."

**Q: Can you say something about the current Atlantic Yards project<sup>iii</sup> in Brooklyn?**

**BL:** Sure. Atlantic Yards is an example of what's going on across the country in urban environments, inner-ring suburbs. During the big heyday, when it was all boom, everywhere you looked, big arenas, big stadiums, big luxury housing was everywhere. The use of eminent domain is just everywhere. This has been going on for at least a decade. So what do you do? How do you come at this stuff? In the majority of instances, being unable to stop it, how do you in fact affect it?

We started in Brooklyn 27 years ago. Downtown Brooklyn actually was a vast wasteland. It was the Wild West. People that lived on the periphery, in Crown Heights, what they now call Prospect Heights, but it was always Crown Heights. Once they start changing the name of a neighborhood, that's when you know gentrification is coming. But the marching prior to gentrification was coming. And our neighborhoods and people always were left out. And since there was no built-in commitment to affordable housing and no commitment to jobs or to hiring from the neighborhood, politicians would make their deals and run. Developers would come in, do what they wanted, and they would run away. And the next thing you know, thousands and thousands of people are displaced.

So when the Atlantic Yards project first came up, it was a notion. And we're always doing stuff 24/7. So then people began to talk about the idea of this thing happening. They were like, "Whoa. What the hell?" And here we were, once again. We've been doing housing campaigns since our first breath of existence, back in Little Rock, Arkansas, where we started in 1970. And housing has always been a basic plank of ours, affordable housing.

So you fight these battles, and we have been crying about gentrification of our neighborhoods, developers not dealing with the community. So this was nothing new to us. So now we see this Atlantic Yards coming up, and this guy is saying he's going to build 4,500 units of luxury housing and an arena and shopping and all the basic grab bag of these developers.

So we said, "You know what? We're just sick of this." But we had no illusions, either, because other development had been going on in downtown Brooklyn. We had been talking about all of the development that was going on in downtown Brooklyn, but nobody seemed to pay any attention to us. We kept pointing the finger. You know, "This project, that project." We kept doing actions on these developers, and eminent domain was being used. "They're tearing down public housing." And we tried to save a whole public housing complex in downtown Brooklyn. Nobody wanted to pay any attention.

But in comes sexy, sexy, sexy Atlantic Yards. But we're saying Atlantic Yards is the same as any other development. We had met with developers, and they would laugh in our face. Basically, they said, "It's not about us losing money, but if we make one penny less in profit than we could make, we don't want to hear anything. We don't have to do it. We can do the absolute minimum. The government's on our side. Back up, community group. Back up, crazy ACORN. We don't have to listen to you. Get out of our face. Can't you see that capitalism and the market is what reigns?"

So we were expecting disappointment. But the one thing about us is this: We are developers also. We've built and rehabbed over 1,000 units of housing. So we know how this stuff works. We're not just advocates who say what should happen. We can actually show people how to make it happen.

So when we went, we did -- the first thing we did was we talked to our members, and we have about 30,000 members here in New York, in the city, and we have about 20,000 here in Brooklyn alone. So we said, "What have you heard about this thing? What do you think about it?" Some people liked the idea, some people thought the idea was horrible. So first we told the members, "What do you think?" Then we said to the members, "What should they be doing?" I mean, right off the bat, "Housing, housing, housing. Why aren't they building housing for us? Housing, housing, housing."



So then we sat down and said, “What, if you made a demand and you did a campaign, what would you demand?” “We demand 50% of the housing that’s being built be low and moderate income and affordable. We demand that there will be a community benefits agreement, where there will actually be real jobs, a real system.”

So the membership came up with demands: a real CBA with a lot of different components. But for ACORN, our main thing was housing. So we said, “Okay, we’re going to go in there and we’re going to see if we can meet with this guy and see what he says.” We fully expected to be rebuffed. You know, you’re so used to getting kicked that, the first time we sat down and met with these folks, and they said, “Well, let’s talk about it,” we didn’t really hear it. We just kept wailing. They’re like, “No. Let’s talk about it. Show us how to do this.” And it was amazing.

Now, politically, we are who we are. We’ve built up a reputation. You know, we’re strong, we’re a political group, we’re a housing group, and people pay attention to us. I mean, these folks wanted to not have us as their enemy. But we came in and actually got a CBA, got a 50/50 housing deal, were able to shape the affordable piece of the housing. I was able to show these folks who had never done affordable housing. They didn’t have a clue about how to do it and brought in other folks to deal with this. Tied it down by having subsidies for the whole project tied to making certain deliverables in the community as well as housing.

We believe nationally that the community benefits agreement movement and strategy is a way for small cities, especially small cities and inner-ring suburbs and other groups to actually be able to wring something out of these developers. And other cities have -- You know, there is a CBA movement, as small as it may be, in the country, and are using CBAs to wrest concessions and not have the government negotiate for you.

So that’s the Atlantic Yards story. They brought their bean counters. We brought our bean counters. They brought their lawyers, we brought our lawyers. It took about a year to hammer out a CBA and an agreement around the affordable housing.

**Q: Bottom line, why do you think it worked?**

**BL:** I think it worked because, one, we were very clear on what we wanted and we had solutions to what we wanted. We had a way to show this developer by spreadsheets and other stuff, we spoke development language. We actually understood what we were talking about, and we had a concrete proposal. Two, we were value-added: one, in expertise; two, in political cover – let’s face it – and political might and our ability to fight them.

You know, you make an analysis as if you’re going to lose. But we would have put up a hell of a fight, and they didn’t want to fight with us. So you have to be big enough, deep enough, have the expertise, have a real plan. You can’t come to these folks with vagaries. You know, “We want affordable housing.” “When do you want it?” “Now.” “What does it look like?” “We don’t know. You figure it out.” You can’t do that. You really have to know your shit.

So that’s why I think it worked. I think we were the right group at the right time with the right stuff in the right place, and finally you have to have a willing partner. As I said, we’ve met with developers for 30 years, and they just have contempt. I’m going to give the devil his due. Forest City was willing to sit down, like I say, bring their bean counters, bring their lawyers, bring their experts and actually sit at the table with us and not talk to us like we were children, actually have real conversations. They wanted to find a way to do this. If you don’t have a willing partner, if you have people who only do it begrudgingly or because they’re forced to or they’re put into a shotgun relationship, it never works. But you have to have that willing partner, and you need to be big enough and have the strength and have enough expertise and be able to bring the political capital to the table.

**Q: What do you see as the main causes of the current housing crisis in the United States?**

**BL:** Greed and lack of real housing policies and regulation. For instance, on the home ownership front, banks and mortgage companies have just been able to run wild, make up rules, be totally unregulated. Subprime and predatory loans have been exploding to the point where no one was held accountable. So the lack of regulation on the home ownership front with mortgages is clear. I think there's been a lot of discussion about that.

For instance, here in New York, the absence of real regulation that actually seeks to preserve affordable housing on the rental front is a problem. And this problem is not assessed in different ways throughout the country. We are fighting right now to get the repeal of vacancy decontrol. That's the law that says: once an apartment reaches a \$2,000 rental level, it is totally out of any regulatory purview, it's out of the rent stabilization program. And therefore tenants are unprotected. It's completely at the whims of the market. Landlords can do what they wish whenever they wish.

Here in New York, unless we repeal vacancy decontrol, one million rent-stabilized apartments will be lost. That's a million families, you know? It's not just units. So, not having real clear federal, state or city programs that actually protect real people, having a curb on the market through real regulations and protection – I suggest that brought us to the point where we are now nationally.

Not to be egotistical about it, but we've been talking about these issues, ACORN has, as well as other housing groups and advocates across the country, have been talking about these issues, making proposals, talking about how the sky was getting ready to fall, for decades. And neither elected officials, government agencies, nor those in power chose to do anything on what groups like ACORN and others were saying. So, not listening to the folks that represent the people that would be affected, unbridled greed, no check and balance in the system or check and balance on the market through regulation or oversight, all worked to create a perfect storm.

**Q: Are you finding Albany any more receptive now because of the recession?**

**BL:** No. We find a lot of rhetoric, but we don't find any resolve. There was one bright moment in the Assembly. The Assembly, under Sheldon Silver's leadership in January, immediately coming back into session, passed a whole plethora of tenant and housing bills. So they kept their word. They listened. They said, "This is it. Enough is enough." The Senate, however, even though it is now Democratically led, could have done the same thing. They could have done it jointly with the Assembly, or they could have immediately followed the Assembly's lead, because it's not like the Assembly just pulled stuff out of the sky. But the Senate didn't, and the Senate, even though it is now Democratically controlled, is acting in the same ways as when it was Republican controlled. And they keep saying, "Oh, we're going to do it." Well, when?

Every 13 seconds, every 13 seconds in this country, another home is foreclosed on and another family is thrown into the streets. Every 24 hours in New York State, another apartment is lost and another family is thrown out into the streets. So when are you going to do it?

**Q: If you had to pinpoint, let's say, four other areas in the United States that have a housing crisis or affordable housing crisis as serious as that in New York City, where would they be?**

**BL:** Well, actually, take any large city. It's not just four. Pick any large city, and you have the exact same problem. This is an epidemic across the country. I don't care where you go – Newark, Chicago, Orlando, Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Dallas, New Orleans – which is really appalling. After (Hurricane) Katrina you would think they would want to get people back. But there, in New Orleans, they're talking about tearing down the only public housing that there was. And that housing was largely unscathed by Katrina, it was on higher ground. But there has been a sense in this country of not wanting to take care of anything that accrues to the well-being of low- and moderate-income folks. So this is an epidemic. You take any urban environment, you take any inner-ring suburb, and it's across the board.

**Q: So affordable housing is really a national crisis?**

**BL:** It absolutely is. One of the reasons that we embarked here in New York on the fight to save Starrett City was because Starrett City was the largest federally funded housing complex in the country. Public housing projects had been blown up, torn down all through the HOPE VI program through HUD for years. You know, that was a national disgrace. Public housing is the housing of last resort. So there's a lack of funding and commitment to public housing nationally and they're using the HOPE VI program to tear down and blow up public housing. We wanted to fight for Starrett City not to go on the auction block in the market, and to keep it affordable. There's no commitment to having permanent affordability. It's really disgraceful.

**Q: What do you think about President Obama's economic stimulus package?**

**BL:** Oh, did you see what Vitter did on the floor of the Senate the other night?<sup>iv</sup>

**Q: No, I missed that.**

**BL:** Well, Friday night, when the bill was being debated in the Senate, Vitter – who shouldn't cast any stones from his glass house at all – gets up on the floor of the Senate and says, "I want to offer an amendment to this bill, that no funds that have anything to do with this bill can go directly or indirectly to ACORN. We know that they're guilty of causing the home mortgage crisis because they're guilty of pushing people into subprime loans. And we all know that they're guilty of massive voter fraud."

I mean, two of the biggest lies. But that's one thing you've got to admire about these Republicans. When they lie, they lie big. I mean, to single us out of the thousands, hundreds of thousands of organizations in this country, to single us out, that's it. Not the Ku Klux Klan, just us. Fortunately, it was defeated along party lines. But that was pretty, pretty damn incredible.

I think it's incredible that the stimulus bill finally wound up passing. I think there was too much sausage-making. I think it's great, because, damn it, we need it. You know, we needed this thing. It really was obscene that they passed very quickly a \$700 billion bank bailout package (in 2008) and half of the money was spent and nobody knows where it went. "Oops. Oh, well, give me the other half. It's mine."

And then, you know, when (Secretary of the Treasury Timothy) Geithner put strings and conditions on it, it's like, "Oooh, the market crashed because of that." "They don't like it. Well, too bad. It should have been restricted in the first half."

I think the stimulus -- It's not that -- We're not just trying to say everything's ducky and rosy. But we're also not saying everything is a horror. I think the Republicans taking this strategy of just voting against it is going to be their death knell. I think it's an extraordinary package. I think it's much needed. I would have liked to have seen something stay in there, more help to the states, because that's just going to have a trickle-down effect, and the states really did need it.

I would have liked to have seen more tax cuts for the middle class and have the taxes that Bush cut for the wealthy restored, you know? They had a long line for eight years. But, all in all, I think it was probably the most extraordinary thing that we could do in this quick a time.

**Q: I'd also like to ask you a few questions regarding your role as Co-Chair of the Working Families Party in New York. You had a tremendous increase in votes in the November election on the Working Families line. Even in Connecticut, I understand. Do you expect to see the Working Families Party continuing to grow in the future?**

**BL:** It's truly phenomenal that in the short lifespan when we were all thinking about this ten years ago. It's truly phenomenal, what we've been able to do here in New York and Connecticut. We believe in fusion. We believe that it is a political strategy

We called it Working Families Party for a reason. You know me, I'm always saying, "Don't get lost when the Democrats tell us." You need a piece of real estate: a party that's not afraid to just go straight to working people's issues and community people's issues.

They can see if there's a Working Families Party candidate, it has an imprimatur, you know? It's the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval. Imagine if you had a Working Families Party in all eight states where fusion is legal. Now you have a force that really can affect national and local politics, and it gives community people, poor people, working people, union people a place where their vote actually counts and stands out. And I also, quite frankly, believe that a third-party fusion strategy is the strategy for black and brown people in this country. It's just my belief.

**Q: Do you see the WFP model expanding into all eight states any time soon?**

**BL:** If I have anything to do with it, it will. That's our goal. Our current goal is to slug it through. We had to build here, then we went to Connecticut, and we are going on. We don't care. We're going to slug it out. You know, we've got to do California, Mississippi. Yes, that's our goal, and I think that is what we want to happen over the next five to ten years, absolutely.

**Q: Both Governor Paterson and Mayor Bloomberg have released their budget proposals with service cuts and so on. Could you say a word about the local scene? And also, could you say a word about the income tax proposal of the WFP?**

**BL:** We're for the Fair Share Tax proposal. It is outrageous that either one of them should not even consider having people pay their fair share.

You can label it the "millionaire's tax" all you want to, but we're talking about a handful of people who got a truckload of benefit all these years. Come on. "Ooh, they're going to move away." Good. Get the hell out of here, so that real people can live. Like they're going to just leave. Remember all of the subsidies that companies were getting to encourage them to stay in New York because they could always leave?

**Q: The "retention deals."**

**BL:** False premise, number one. They never challenged those folks, because there is a certain thing called location, location, location. And if Wall Street was going to move and be a virtual Wall Street, they would have done it. Remember what the head of CBS said back then, when someone asked "Well, why did you take this money?" He said, "I didn't really need it. Everybody else was getting it, so why not me?"

So at a certain point you have to call people's bluff. I do believe in giving people incentives to do the right thing, not to give them incentives to do whatever the hell they want and to do the wrong thing. We were told constantly that we can't mess with Wall Street. We can't mess with the banks. We can't regulate them. We've got to have corporate welfare, because they're the engine. Don't mess with them. Well, guess what they did to us.

So, I don't know what David Paterson is drinking. I really don't understand, because it's the same old mantra, and there's no more justification for it. They can't even explain it, except for some tired old excuses of not antagonizing the rich. They'll move away from us.

**Q: Well, the Working Families Party helped elect him in the past. Do you have any access to him at all? Does he listen to you, do you think, at WFP?**

**BL:** We have access to him. Because, believe me, David is a friend. We've had a relationship with him for years. It seems some things have changed. So the first change was when we got him to be the minority leader. Things began to change a little bit. Now that he's the governor, things have changed a lot. But let me not put him in the same category as Pataki, okay?

Don't mistake me here. You know, we have high standards, because we believe that he actually does have some ideology and he actually does have progressive bones in his body. Certainly, when you get into high office, there are things that you find out that maybe us average folks don't know. Must be. Because that's the only explanation I could have for why people change: that somehow or other they get into office and there's some box or some room where the secrets are, and so it forces them to take different actions from what they did before. And because we're not privy to all of that information, we just don't understand. Now, I say: open up the door and let everybody look in.

So I think all of this cutting is ridiculous, especially when you cut the highest-income people's taxes. You know, any time I'm making \$40,000 and I'm paying the same rate as somebody making \$4 million, what's wrong with that picture?

I disagree with the service cuts that they're making. I just disagree with them not listening to folks, because Working Families Party, the unions, other groups — none of us are irresponsible. We know that there has to be revenue. We're not stupid. And when we come in and we actually offer alternatives, I don't think we get as much heft and weight as, dare I say, a campaign contributor business, capitalists in general, and more right-wing people. We just don't. But we're the ones that they run to when it's a mess, to help clean it up.

**Q: Are you hopeful for the Fair Share Tax proposal? Do you think that there is momentum in the community behind it?**

**BL:** Yes. You know, we've been at this for a while. I mean, we were at this last year. We knew there was no way it was going to pass last year. However, we are far more optimistic about the fair tax proposal than we ever were, because the public is behind it. It makes sense. Both Bloomberg and David are two guys that have a bit of stubborn streak in them. So hopefully we can break them down. We're under no illusion, however, that we're that powerful. But at least they are going to have to explain why not, and they're going to have to come up with a little bit better explanation than, "The millionaires will disappear."

**Q: Anything we haven't covered that you'd like to say a word about?**

**BL:** I don't know. Hooray for organizing! I think that organizing has its opportunity for new life, a new chance in the community as well as in labor. I think we've really got to make the distinction between organizing, advocacy, social service and economic development. I think all of those are necessary, but the engine is organizing.

So, hooray for organizing and organizers! We've got one in the White House. Let's see if the culture of organizing actually permeates the country. I'm very hopeful. I'm hopeful about the politics of the country. I'm hopeful about actually being able to pass progressive legislation. I'm very hopeful about the economy. Because people now recognize that organizing is it.

And I always like to support the work that Hofstra does and the magazine and things that you publish, because it's important. It's absolutely important.

I just want to say that ACORN's working on health care, immigration, housing, education and jobs. I'm just happy that you gave ACORN the opportunity to speak. A lot of people don't.

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*Niev Duffy is President of Eastern Economics Research, Inc., a Research Associate of the Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, and a founding editor of Regional Labor Review.*

NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Media Matters, *Conservative Media Consistently Scapegoat Undocumented Immigrants*, ACORN (4/7/09): <[www.mediamatters.org](http://www.mediamatters.org)>

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<sup>ii</sup> A Community Benefit Agreement (or CBA) is a binding contract between developer(s) and the community in and around the site where the planned development is to be built. CBAs vary from area to area, but often contain one or more of the following general principles: neighborhood clean-up and environmental safeguards, relocation assistance to displaced residents, guaranteed employment and training of some local residents during and/or after construction, and living wage and health care benefits on such jobs.

<sup>iii</sup> The Atlantic Avenue Rail Yards in downtown Brooklyn is the site of a \$1.2 billion residential and commercial center proposed by developer Bruce Ratner. In a legally binding Community Benefits Agreement with ACORN and other local organizations, Ratner pledged to reserve half of the 4,500 apartments for low- and moderate-income residents. Ten percent of these apartments will be reserved for seniors and residents currently living at the site who will be displaced. The CBA also includes programs that will train locals for construction and retail jobs at the sports arena and a deal to allocate at least 30% of pre- and post-construction contracts to minority- and women-owned businesses.

<sup>iv</sup> David Vitter is a Republican U.S. Senator from Louisiana.

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