

## *A Labor Movement of Social Justice Activism: The Legacy of Hector Figueroa*

by Gregory DeFreitas

One of the most influential and widely admired labor leaders in the country died suddenly on July 11th.

Hector Figueroa, president of the New York-based 170,000-member Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), passed away of a heart attack at his family home in Queens at age 57. Among the first public reactions: Sen. Elizabeth Warren said: 'I'm honored to have known him.' And Sen. Bernie Sanders said: 'Hector's legacy will live on forever.'<sup>1</sup> At his memorial service two weeks later, over 3,000 building cleaners security guards, airport workers filled Riverside Church alongside other union and community activists and elected officials. In the words of NYC Mayor Bill deBlasio:

“He did so much for so many. He touched every corner of this city. His impact was felt all over this nation. I offer my personal condolences but I also offer my condolences to 8.6 million New Yorkers because the city became a better place the moment Héctor became a leader here, the moment we felt his passion, his belief.”

Hector was a labor activist, intellectual and strategist as well as an inspiring leader who played a decisive role in the Justice for Janitors campaign and other immigrant organizing drives that dramatically increased the size, power and influence of what had long been a dormant union of low-wage building service workers. As other unions withered under anti-worker assaults by corporations and governments, 32BJ members committed to an organizing culture in which at least one-fifth of all spending had to go to organizing new union members. In his years at the helm, 32BJ attracted another 50,000 new members in new industries, markedly improved all members' pay and benefits, and took a leading role in a host of far-reaching campaigns. These included coalitions battling for immigrant rights and against climate change, as well as successful campaigns to win a \$15 statewide minimum wage and collective bargaining rights for farmworkers.

I first met Hector Figueroa in late May 2001 at Local 32BJ's headquarters, then on lower Sixth Avenue in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood. It was an interview unlike any I have ever done. He had just turned 39, but still radiated the enthusiasm, articulateness and intellectual vigor of a brilliant young activist. While dozens of young union staffers swirled around us for over an hour and a half, periodically if politely interrupting him for brief bits of guidance, Hector was the embodiment of a modest, witty, calm, focused and fully engaged conversationalist. He replied to my brief questions with lengthy, deeply informed and analytical answers always presented in a clear, well-organized, broadly accessible style. His intellectual curiosity was as evident as his ongoing search for creative strategies to expand the union's membership and mobilization efforts to meet the many challenges it faced.

Hector had accepted my request for an interview in part to help spread the word that the union was launching its famed "Justice For Janitors" (J4J) organizing campaign on Long Island. At that point, Local 32BJ represented over 70,000 building cleaners, maintenance workers, doormen, and other service employees. The J4J campaign was of great interest to us at *Regional Labor Review* because it focused on low-wage, often undocumented immigrant workers and because it had the ambitious goal to pursue a novel, region-wide strategy -- to organize the entire industry of over 15,000 nonunion building service workers in the New York metropolitan area. In its first 2 months, the campaign won union recognition for over 1000 workers in "Wall Street West," the growing concentration of New Jersey office complexes across the river from Manhattan. By mid-summer, the union achieved what the *New York Times* described as a "breakthrough:" it won a countywide agreement with 25 Hudson County cleaning contractors, employing over half of all the county's building service workers. They pledged to raise wages sharply to then-record levels of at least \$9.75 an hour.

Born in Puerto Rico, Hector was raised by parents who were both active in the teachers' union. As a college student there, he participated in the student strike of 1980-81, for which he was banned from the university. He completed his college education in economics at NYU and the New School. In 1989 he began work as both a researcher and an organizer for ACTWU (later UNITE). In his more than five years with that union, he helped organize textile workers at Fieldcrest Cannon in North Carolina and was also very involved in

the campaign against NAFTA. In 1995, he joined SEIU as research director of the Justice for Janitors campaign. In late 1997 and 1998, he went back to Puerto Rico as SEIU Organizing Director for the island. He helped lead the successful effort to win a collective bargaining law for public sector employees. In February 1999, he was asked to serve as deputy trustee for Local 32BJ when it was put into trusteeship. In August 2000, he was elected as the union's Secretary-Treasurer – somehow serving simultaneously as both Political Director and Education Director. He was first elected union president in 2012 and was re-elected last year.

**Interview with Hector Figueroa (2001).<sup>2</sup>**

**Q: What do you find are the main problems on the job that are driving more and more workers to want to join a union?**

**HF:** Obviously pay is a big issue, because most of these workers are getting minimum wage. Even if the cost of living is increasing just 3%, that takes a lot out of their pockets. So what happens is that workers are working 2 or 3 jobs. The other big issue is overtime, the extra work that low-wage service workers are obliged to do. For example, many of our workers have said that they would rather lose a minimum wage job than continue to have 3 of them, just to sustain their families. So, there's the combination of having to work many hours in a number of jobs and also the intensity of the work. A janitor in New Jersey cleans the equivalent of 6 houses in just one night shift, or 40,000 square feet over an 8-hour period. This is a tremendous workload compared with Chicago or Manhattan or San Francisco where most of the work is unionized. So those are the driving factors. There is also the sense that the union can be the only mechanism for them to have a degree of job security and some health benefits, training benefits. The janitors are doing it for their children too. It also helps that our union has taken a very strong position on immigrant rights. So they see the union as a vehicle for them to assert not only their rights in the workplace, but also their rights in society. The janitors felt motivated to take part in the campaign when they saw the union marching alongside immigrant advocacy groups, clergy, and elected officers demanding more rights for immigrant workers. So I think it's a combination of the kind of campaign we're running: very grounded in the community and in the specific demands of this workforce. And also the unbelievable amounts of exploitation and low pay that the janitors are suffering.



**Hector Figueroa** (Photo credit: SEIU32BJ)

**Q: Do the women janitors with small children have an especially hard time? Since many must work night shifts cleaning these office buildings, how do they manage to arrange childcare with this kind of pay?**

**HF:** Those who don't have relatives who can do childcare bring the children to work. This is one of the issues that we raised when meeting with the contractors. Many of them realized that it's true and shameful that many of the women bring their kids to work and even have them work alongside them to complete their shift. This is basically child labor. We are raising this as an important issue with the industry that we are prepared to litigate if it doesn't get solved through this organizing campaign. But in many sites we have found at least a few workers in a crew of about 15 who either bring their children to work for some time or have them wait near the work area. These are workers who have great difficulty going from work to home and vice-versa at night.

**Q: What are the most common violations of union organizing rights that you see being committed by these cleaning firms when they hear that there is interest in a union?**

**HF:** The most common ones are threats of being fired for union activity or for wearing union buttons or are distributed flyers. Another threat is in promotion: someone in line for promotion to foreman or forelady may not be promoted because of her sympathy for a union. Another one is moving people's shifts: if you have a day shift and are sympathetic to the union, all of a sudden you are put on the night shift with no real justification. So it goes from firings to making your work more difficult.

**Q: Have you been relying mainly on “salts” in these drives or have you been able to get current employees to organize?**

**HF:** We have been using a combination of techniques. In some cases we have used “salts,” workers in the industry who are unionized come to take jobs. More often what we do is have union members in firms in Manhattan or New Jersey take a leave of absence from their regular jobs for 6 weeks. Then they go and meet the workers when they come outside to start a shift or at the end of a shift. These are techniques used many times by Justice for Janitors: worker-to-worker organizing. It proves to be very effective. We also organize meetings of workers on Saturdays or at night near the buildings. We invite the workers from the buildings and they can hear from nonunion workers who have joined the campaign about what they can do to win. It's really a very strong member-driven campaign. We only have 6 to 8 paid organizers, all but 1 of whom came from the ranks, and all but 1 of whom are bilingual and Latino. We have members coming from all over. You need to understand that many of these janitors work for the same contractors that the union members work for in New York. So they can see organizing is in their self interest, since if these contractors can get away with paying \$6 an hour in Jersey, then it's just a matter of time before they start bidding for work in Manhattan at low wages too. So that is a tremendous factor in the recruitment and training of our members who are already in the union to go out there and organize.

**Q: Given what you have said about how often some of these firms violate labor law, what do you say to workers who have a genuine fear that if they get involved with a union they'll be fired?**

**HF:** The question always comes up in the first organizing meeting. We do organizing through committees. Research shows that it works, if you have committed members. One of the very first things we go over with the committee members is that possibility. We don't hide it from them. We say we will fight it. We have a battery

of lawyers and supporters who fight for the workers, and we have been very successful in retaining people in our campaigns. But it is a cost of a campaign. So we tell people this happens, we need to be prepared. And when it does happen, we fight back very hard to right the wrong. We make sure that they understand that the more workers involved and the more we have a multi-employer kind of activity out in the open, like a strike or rally, then in the end the better off we are. The stakes are much higher for the company when the campaign is very public, when we tell people exactly what we are going to do, and when people already express in writing and verbally exactly what they are going to do, it's better than trying to have a secretive campaign where it would be hard to prove that people were actually involved because nobody knows that they have been part of the effort.

Part of the success of J4J is having the workers in motion. The time between a worker first saying, "OK, I'd like to join the union" and taking an action like a strike is very short in our campaigns. It requires a tremendous amount of effort. Strikes are the method that we organize through. No campaign in J4J has been done without committing workers to strike. The strikes are against unfair labor practices, which unfortunately these contractors are too prone to do. As soon as people express interest in the union, managers and supervisors commit these violations, and that's when the workers have the opportunity to strike and to be able to go public with their demands. These are not economic strikes.

**Q: The SEIU has gained a reputation as being one of the unions most successful at adopting an "organizing perspective." About what share of Local 32BJ's budget actually goes to organizing today?**

**HF:** Nationwide, it's about 30% and I believe that the last convention set a goal of 40%. In 32BJ, there was no organizing department before the new leadership came in. So for the last 3 years we have been building that organizing department. Last year we spent 15%. The mandated share for all the locals to reach is 20%. So we are almost there. The SEIU strongly urges all locals to spend 20% of its budget in organizing, if the local is to qualify for organizing subsidies from the international union. So we are pretty much there now, finally, and we think that we are going to commit even more. Last April 2000 we had our convention in Pittsburgh and there was a strong discussion about how can we increase resources for organizing because, despite the success of SEIU, we feel that we have to organize more people. For example, in building services, we have organized over

50,000 people in J4J, but we represent several percentage points less janitors nationwide than 10 years ago because the industry has grown so much. The same thing in health care. So the issue is whether we can catch up or even supersede the rate of growth in the service sector. There was a mandated dues increase of \$20 per month over 5 years for our members and that money is to go primarily to organizing. Our members were willing to accept that increase because they know that the only way we can sustain our standards is by organizing. We don't want SEIU to go through what happened to the auto workers or to other unions. Once they got a critical density, they stopped making organizing a priority, and soon the industry was nonunion again. We don't want that to happen. So there is a tremendous effort in the union at the top of the agenda in terms of personnel, commitment, and obviously money. We ask the members to contribute even more to that, because we don't want other services of the union program to be weakened by organizing. So it calls for more resources.

**Q: What kind of training do you give your organizers?**

**HF:** It varies across the SEIU. At the moment in building services, we feel that we have a model that's adequate to the needs of our industry. What we do is get members out from their jobs either on a leave of absence or on volunteer time, and we formally train them. We offer them a seminar about the industry, we teach them about the cleaning contractors in the area, how the market works. We go through the lesson of how the industry is structured around tenants, owners, and contractors. Once the members understand that, they can then focus on what's next in the training: community outreach, strike activity that we do. Because then they understand that organizing in our industry is not simply about an election that's being held and the majority of workers expressing their desire to join the union. It's about making sure that the building owners will actually respond to the workers' demands to have a living wage and for a contractor to provide that living wage. If we don't engage the owners and managers into accepting their social responsibility over what the contractors do, our organizing does not succeed.

The members learn that both through formal training and in practice, by participating on the street in the various activities of a campaign. It usually lasts about 6 weeks. The whole member organizing program is an opportunity to learn by doing things. We have had about 120 workers in 32BJ pass through the member organizing brigade. It depends on the capacity of each local. We have had the ability to take members on leave

of absence for 6 weeks. Sometimes 20, 40, or 50 at a time, but other locals don't have that capacity. And that's why the international is trying to pull together the big and small locals to be able to contribute percentage-wise to a common solidarity fund. The bigger locals have a responsibility to help small local with resources to enable them to bring members on a leave of absence for the same programs, or for the big locals to develop members who can be sent to the small locals to build their organizing capacity. That's just starting now. For example, the East Coast janitors campaign is from Baltimore to Philadelphia to New Jersey. We have organizers going from New Jersey to Philadelphia and Baltimore, as well as organizers coming from Baltimore and Philadelphia to New Jersey. And, as a big local, we bear the responsibility to make sure that the whole campaign succeeds.

***“What we do is try to create a crisis --to create a situation in which the urgency of these workers having to earn a living wage now or having health benefits now becomes very apparent to everybody in the community. These are invisible workers.”***

**Q: The regional nature of this organizing drive is really distinctive. Why has the union adopted a broad regional, rather than a more local, strategy?**

**HF:** When J4J started it was a local effort. Even though it was a national campaign with a national theme, it was really a local campaign. Denver, Seattle, Washington, D.C. — all were done as local campaigns. Over 10 years, that's how it was conducted. This new strategy was really imposed on us by the industry. As we were doing local campaigns, more and more of our cleaning contractors grew to regional, national, and even international companies, publicly traded. There was a drive in the industry for the last 15 years to make it more concentrated. And building owners began to go public in the form of REITs [*real estate investment trusts*] and That was the first time that we really began having more of a regional focus, in a coordinated fashion, both for bargaining and organizing. to operate in many cities across the country. And property managers began to operate across cities and states. So, in 2000 we had a national coordinated bargaining effort that included Los Angeles, Cleveland, NY, and Chicago.

We're trying to replicate that now on the East Coast, to organize Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Jersey at the same time. Many of the contractors are the same, many of the owners are the same, and it doesn't



make sense just to have a local campaign. We can help each other. We can move a strike to Baltimore when we are striking a building owner (if they employ the people directly) or a contractor in New Jersey. Because we have also adopted a set of principles in the union that all locals try to negotiate in contracts. One of them is honoring picket lines. For example, if we have a picket line against Colin Care in New Jersey, we can also put that picket line in Philadelphia. And, if they have in their contract the principle of honoring picket lines, then the workers are not going to cross that line. That's a very powerful instrument in spreading the strike across the region. In our industry, workers can be replaced very easily. So you have to have a multi-site strategy for strikes that involves different cities and adds to the power of the union. A contractor finds it more difficult to sustain a regional strike than a city-wide strike. It's more difficult to replace the workers and more difficult to manage for them.

**Q: What are the main challenges that the union tends to experience in organizing immigrants?**

**Immigrant workers are, of course, a subject of great controversy for some unions. But they are central to your organizing, aren't they?**

**HF:** Yes. In New York in particular, one of the biggest challenges is the multinational character of immigration. In New York you have Latino, Eastern European, African, English-speaking Caribbean, Asian. So, one of the issues is always how do you develop unity among these workers. In New Jersey, most of the workers have been Latino, but in New York, it is incredibly diverse. I remember a meeting here of nonunion workers where we had to translate into 5 languages: Serbian, Sri Lankan, Italian – believe it or not, we still have Italians coming into this industry -- and Spanish and English. So, that's one of the challenges: to create unity out of this diversity. The second issue is obviously the fear of intimidation and deportation. That's why we're putting such high stakes on the question of immigrant rights. It will be a lot easier for workers to take action and join the union if they know that deportation is not going to happen and if they had the ability to bring their families and enjoy the fruits of their labor without retaliation from employers. We have found that, more often than not, people are willing to take risks because the conditions of work are so shameful and terrible. But it's not good that people have to overcome this because the conditions are so horrible and they fear deportation. That's not how it should be. So, that's an issue we have to deal with.

Lastly, there's the question of how do you integrate the members into the formation of the union. That's the biggest challenge of the Justice for Janitors campaign. It's still a new campaign and it hasn't gone without difficulty integrating the immigrant workers who are organized into the life of the union and developing the capacity to be leaders of those unions and the people who drive the program of the union. The biggest challenge we'll have long-term is to ensure that people we organize are not just rank and filers but are key protagonists in the whole life of the union in many different ways. It's still always a question of language. But it's also a question of recognition of the special needs of immigrants, and making room for them, both in the course of the campaign and afterwards so they can fully participate in the union. You have to be mindful of the ways that families are valued among immigrants are very different, the way that relationships between them and employers work out are very different. You have to be very mindful of all those things in enabling them to enjoy the benefits of the union. Like we have a training school here, but maybe we should have training schools in Brooklyn and Queens so that immigrants do not have to come all the way here. We have English as a Second Language courses, but many of our Anglo and African-American members want to learn Spanish so they can speak to their co-workers. So it opens up a whole series of issues that I think we have to address.

**Q: What role in immigrant organizing does coalition building play; that is getting community groups, labor-religion folks, academics, students, and others involved?**

**HF:** It plays a critical role, because one way that immigrant workers can have rights at work and be able to participate in society is through the union. So we try to make it very clear with immigrant advocacy groups and others that the union can be very good for them to realize the American dream. And likewise, we see that those groups have many needs for them to succeed in advocacy. If unions are supportive of their efforts, with resources and political relationships and with expanding general awareness of the issues, that's what we have to deliver. It has to be a 2-way street. It's difficult to build these coalitions because there's always pressure in organizing campaigns to win one campaign and move on to the next campaign. There's always a tension between how stable and long-term a relation you build and how much immediate involvement of people you have so that the work will succeed. But I think that, in the end, no campaign works unless we have a lasting

relationship with the communities and other organizations. That's what we have been learning and developing on the West Coast, building the relationships to the point where we are both advocates on the same issues

**Q: For immigrants who are fearful of getting involved with a union for the first time, does approaching them through their churches and other community institutions help?**

**HF:** It helps, especially in terms of them feeling more committed and trustworthy of the effort. But what we find more often than not, and this may be very surprising, is that the workers are ready to join the union. It's more a question of them feeling that there is enough social support behind them so that, when they get into a big fight or the employer does something bad, there will be enough voices out there saying, "That's wrong!" I think that's what we have found by experience is most useful in the campaigns. When we have religious leaders doing civil disobedience and calling on owners to do the right things for these workers, then the stakes are much higher for these companies violating their rights and the workers feel more comfortable seeing that they have that kind of support.

**Q: Saying that immigrants today are ready to join the union runs contrary to what some union leaders seem to think in unions that have not traditionally had many new immigrant members. Why is this? Besides the working conditions, have many of the immigrants already had some union experience at home?**

**HF:** We have some workers who have had union experience at home, especially Salvadorans, Peruvians, and, to a lesser extent, Mexican workers. They know that unions can fight for them and they come with that consciousness and immediately make you aware of that. Also, many from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. But also it may be a special situation for us. The reality is that in our industry the union-nonunion wage gap is enormous. A cleaner who is union in New York earns \$17 an hour, with pension, health care, training fund, legal services for free. You compare that with a nonunion worker making \$5 or \$6 an hour with no benefits. So the stakes are very high for that worker to join the union. At least in this metro area, joining the union is quite a good proposition for the workers. I think the other issue here is that I am not talking about every worker but about the critical mass of workers we need to succeed. And because we don't do elections, that critical mass has to be big enough so that it can disrupt operations in the course of a strike, can bring enough

public attention, and can drive and mobilize the rest of the workers. We don't necessarily strive for an immediate majority of workers to be brought into the fight, we just look for a critical mass. And once they show their coworkers that there is a fight that is public, more often than not the rest of the workers do support one another. You know, solidarity is a very real thing; it's not just an analytical construct. Once you have workers move very quickly from, "Yes, I'd like to have a union in my worksite and be a leader in that effort," to saying, "Yes, I'm willing to strike and to pull my coworkers in a strike and to be able to make my case on the street" – that whole dynamic actually drives people to be very active to support a union. I think it's a more effective way than going through a NLRB election and asking people quietly to vote after being subject to an anti-union campaign by the employer. It's a much different dynamic.

When we have master agreements, we try to create a situation in which the employer will voluntarily recognize the union and sign into the master agreement. When we don't have a master agreement, we try to bring enough employers to the table so that we can figure out what the master agreement will look like. We try to avoid elections, but we don't rule out elections at all, especially when we have competition from other unions. We go after elections to make it absolutely clear that the workers are with us, like the case of Harborside. When we don't have competition from other unions, workers sign union cards very quickly and then it's a question of getting card-check recognition.

What we do is try to create a crisis – to create a situation in which the urgency of these workers having to earn a living wage now or having health benefits now becomes very apparent to everybody in the community. These are invisible workers. If they had elections, nobody would care. If they had to go through a bargaining process building-by-building, nobody would care. And the building owner, with 30 days notice, could terminate that union contractor and bring in a nonunion contractor. So the only recourse that these workers have is to be able to bring enough public support behind them. And then, if you get all the contractors to acknowledge the needs of the workers to earn a better standard of living and to get a voice at work, then the issue is getting the building owners to respect that decision of the contractors and to keep them in the building. This may be unique to our industry. I'm not proposing that every union do this. But, at least in our industry it's a more effective way of winning union support and a more effective way of winning contracts and standards.

International solidarity is another aspect of the campaign that we have been developing quietly. The work force is so international that we have very good relations with the unions in the countries our workers come from. Also, the international building service industry has been reorganized and its unions have all joined into one network: Union Network International (UNI). When we meet in Berlin this August, we want to put at the forefront of the agenda the issue of immigrant rights. In some industries that connect internationally through the movement of capital, commerce, and trade, in our industry it is through the movement of workers. And that's what we want to build our international solidarity around. We may participate in a proposed march to the Mexican border in 2003, an international gathering in front of the "new Berlin Wall" there, to demand respect for human rights and better policies.

**Q: Is each master agreement just countywide, or do you try to spread the city's master agreement as far across the region as possible?**

**HF:** Well, the master agreements need to reflect the economics of the region. So, the wages in an agreement on Long Island cannot be the same as in New York, because office rental rates are not the same as in New York. That being said, we try to have a master agreement that has common language across a wide geographical area. So we try to have the same language in New York as in Long Island and New Jersey. Although, if a campaign offers us an opportunity to improve that language, we take that opportunity. And then we try to have wages such that the differential in terms of rents is reflected in the wage differentials, with the understanding that there is always a floor that is necessary for basic human needs that everybody needs to commit to: a living wage. So, in the case of this metro area, it's hard to say. But people should not be living below \$9 to \$11 an hour. Below that you're at less than a poverty level. In the case of Jersey, we think that the areas outside cities should have at least \$9 an hour, if not more, and that the cities there should have a rate not much below New York, because the rental rates and the cost of living are similar. We try to raise the floor and then try to figure out how high the ceiling is. But it's better that it be multi-employer, multi-site and as broad as possible, because then you can defend it better. If not, you can lose a union overnight, because owners just have to put their building up for bid and then the union disappears. What we try to avoid is contractors competing on the basis of how much they pay a worker and get building owners to accept that this is what the cost of labor is in the market. Let the

contractors compete on quality of service and hours, but not on the backs of these workers. And that's why we try to establish an area-wide agreement.

**Q: What kind of demands does the union make about improving work hours?**

**HF:** Most of the nonunion work around New York is part-time. So, our campaign revolves around 4 demands: first, a living wage; second, family health care; the third is moving part-time work to full-time; and the fourth is other kinds of benefits that are specific to the nature of an immigrant work force, like the leave of absence issue I mentioned, English as a Second Language, and training. We want people to be able to leave this industry and find a better future somewhere else. Who wants to be cleaning toilets all their life? We want the union to be a vehicle to find something better.

**Q: Which of those 4 demands do employers resist most?**

**HF:** Part-time work and health benefits are the ones that they fight to the bone. They claim that part-time work has been imposed by the building owners who want to save energy costs because of buildings operating just part of the day. They even claim that workers want part-time work, which I don't believe at all. Nobody has come to me and said, "Oh, don't work me full-time!" I think it's a way for them to save money. But those are things which we have been able to move in other cities and we are very determined to move it back to what it was. This industry was once full-time and directly contracted by the building owners. Then they started subcontracting, and that's when it deteriorated to the point that it went to part-time. One reason it went part-time is that nobody in her right mind would be willing to have a full-time job that pays so little. That's part of the problem: we have to make these good jobs, and going full-time is part of it

**Q: A few weeks ago, students at Harvard staged a 3-week sit-in at the university's administration building to demand a living wage for janitors there. This drew national attention to the plight of building service workers at a university with a \$20 billion endowment. What do you think unions can and will do in coming years to try to attract more young people?**

**HF:** I think we need to put the message out there, and match that message with the reality of our commitment and resources, that the new civil rights movement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is fighting for low-wage service workers, many of whom are either people of color or immigrants. And that's where the next fight for civil rights needs to

happen. And I think that, if we do that, we're going to have much more of an ability to attract young people. Look who does the hotel work – it's mostly young workers. Look who cleans buildings – it's mostly young workers too. So we need to have a movement of young people, at work and in the universities. I don't think we have yet done that very effectively. I really think that this initiative at Harvard and in other cities across the country where students have engaged in the fight against globalization and against sweatshops gives hope that there is the possibility of a youth movement that is concerned about working class issues, and will hopefully bridge again youth with the labor movement. But, for us to be able to do that, the movement has to really make a commitment to organize youth where they work. It's about college students being involved in the fight, having an important role to play. And, when they graduate and get jobs, to bring that social commitment.

There's too much cynicism in society. Somehow every fight is a generational thing. I think that youth today are following the sixties' youth in the civil rights movement and those of my generation who were in solidarity with Central Americans fighting the Reagan policies there. I think there is continuity among youth in America to be concerned about these issues.

### **The Future of the Union: Interview with New President Kyle Bragg (2019)**

On July 24<sup>th</sup>, an hour before he was to speak at the memorial for Hector Figueroa, his newly elected successor, Kyle Bragg, talked with me about his years working with Hector and how the union planned to build on his legacy in the future. The two men knew each other very well: this year was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their first meeting as senior staff at 32BJ.

**Q: How would you describe the main features of Hector Figueroa's legacy for your union?**

**KB:** There are so many. One, he built an organization that can survive this terrible tragedy, because he believed in building leaders. And so he never led in a vacuum. He uplifted everyone around him and wanted everyone to be a leader. Given the humble person he was, and the brilliant person he was, he would talk to anyone and

everyone -- and not just talk, and not just listen, but he'd hear. And that goes to the type of compassionate leader he was.



Kyle Bragg, new union president, speaks at Figueroa memorial, NYC, July 24, 2019 (Photo credit: SEIU32BJ)

He was a strong leader. There's no question about that. But the compassion of this man was something that's also very unique -- that someone who wielded this level of power and influence remained very humble and very compassionate about -- and very cognizant about, you know, who he was, responsibilities that he carried, the weight that he had carried. He always struck that balance of brilliance, strength and compassion.

**Q: Before he became President, he served as the union's Secretary- Treasurer and Political Director under former President Mike Fishmann. How important to him were teamwork and fostering democracy in the union, would you say?**

**KB:** Oh, it was very important. I mean, early on, when I first met Hector in 1999, he was Research Director for the organization and became the Political Director. And then he partnered with me to run two core industries: the Commercial Division and the Residential Division. Hector ran the Commercial Division, and I ran the Residential Division, and we were partnering to make sure that we turned this organization into a member-driven union, and building leaders from our membership and fostering member engagement. Because we knew



the strength of our organization, the success of our organization lay in our ability to mobilize our members and have them feel that the organization was theirs. And so that's who he was.

**Q: The union has a lot of immigrant members. Would you say that's a central aspect of the organizing that he was a part of?**

**KB:** I think that our organization is a very diverse union. It might be one of the best unions around. We have members from dozens of different countries, speaking 37 different languages, and Hector found a way -- by focusing on justice issues, whether it's justice at work or justice in the community -- that found the commonality of interests that allowed us to stand together side by side and fight for worker justice.

And that went far beyond the borders of 32BJ. He knew that for us to continue to be successful that we had to use the platform and the strength of our organization to uplift all workers. So, for example, he was heavily engaged in giving farm workers the right to organize upstate.

**Q: That really was a victory a long time coming. The governor just signed the law, right?**

**KB:** That's right. He led us into organizing airport workers, who were forgotten, and security officers. We now have over 15,000 security officers in New York City, and way more than that throughout our jurisdiction -- to organizing fast-food workers, bringing justice, Fight for 15, paid sick leave, immigration reform.

These were core to the person Hector was, to values and principles that he knew were integral in us winning. And it had to go beyond the borders of our workplaces: we had to use the strength of our organization as a means to give voice to the unorganized and voiceless and a platform to advocate for justice and to make this a more equitable society. He truly believed that. It wasn't words. That was his life. That was his vision. And that's the path we're dedicated to pursuing.

**Q: What are your thoughts now in terms of how the union's going to try to mobilize its members for the 2020 election campaign?**

**KB:** Well, we have principles, core values that we want to see be front and center in this presidential debate. And whenever that candidate best reflecting them comes out, we will use the strength of our organization to support that candidate to win for working families. And if any one of them are absent, you know, like justice for working families, well, you won't find 32BJ supporting them.

We need to ensure that there's a future for our next generation in dealing with this climate change crisis that we're in, instead of denial. And that this country lives up to its principles by finally creating a fair and equitable immigration system that respects basic human rights. That's what we're looking for in a presidential candidate.

**Q: What about the P.R.O. bill that's just been introduced in Congress?<sup>3</sup>**

**KB:** Yes, we obviously want to make sure that people have a stronger right to organize. We believe that labor is the path for equity and justice for working families. It built the middle class in this country, and since then people got away from that. Unfortunately, the time that we're in, you know, there's an unbelievable presence of hate.

Hector was a person of love and compassion, and he truly believed that love, compassion and working together with each other was our path forward to making a more just society and building both power and dignity for workers. Building strong communities, regardless of what your cultural beliefs were. And if we don't do it together, if we don't dismiss those minor things that separate us, and embrace our commonality of interests, then we will fail. But he didn't know failure. He helped build a successful union.

**Q: In coming months, some key 32BJ contracts in New York City and Philadelphia are expiring.**

**KB:** Right, the commercial workers' contracts expired in New York City, covering over 25,000 members. And we have commercial contracts expiring throughout our jurisdiction at the same time. We're working now with our offices and our members to prepare for those negotiations and to secure a contract that sustains the great benefits and raises that we've been able to create in this industry, but also advance them to make sure that people can keep pace with being able to support and provide for their families.

**Q: With the new tenant protection law just passed in Albany, landlords are complaining that it's going to squeeze their profits. Do you see that as something which is a new challenge for you, that landlords might be tougher in terms of negotiating with 32BJ?**

**KB:** It clearly presents a challenge for the industry. But I think that Hector, in his infinite wisdom, has created a relationship in the industry that allows us to be able to always talk and figure out a path forward. We've enjoyed a good working relationship with the industry leaders, and I plan on continuing that relationship for the

betterment of workers everywhere, particularly 32BJ workers, but non-workers. And I think what we do as an organization and as an industry will help lead the way for others to make sure that there's respect and dignity to workers. So that's a challenge, but he's positioned us well to be in that space.

**Q: Are negotiations already underway?**

**KB:** Negotiations have started for the commercial contracts. In the city, they expire end of December, and a little earlier in other geographies. We have other projects: We're organizing all parking workers in Philly. We're organizing airport workers. We're continuing to bring new low-wage workers into this union and building standards for them that allow them to work in dignity and respect. So, you know, all this work that Hector had his hands into, we will make sure that we continue on the path he's set us on, and we will push forward his vision.

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<sup>1</sup> McGeehan, Patrick, "Hector Figueroa, Union Leader With Impact, Dies at 57," *NY Times* (7/12/2019). See also: Greenhouse, Steven, "A Great Labor Leader Gone: Hector Figueroa, 1962–2019," *The American Prospect* (7/26/2019).

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from the 2001 interview. For full text, see: DeFreitas, Gregory, "Can Unions Win at Region-wide Low-wage Organizing? A Conversation with Hector Figueroa of Justice for Janitors," *Regional Labor Review* (Fall 2001): [www.hofstra.edu/cld](http://www.hofstra.edu/cld).

<sup>3</sup> Protecting the Right to Organize Bill [H.R. 2474].