

## *A Vision of Social Unionism: A Conversation with Artemio Guerra*

by Sharryn Kasmir

**A**rtemio Guerra is Director of Organizing for New York Civic Participation Project (NYCPP), whose mission is to promote a pro-immigrant, pro-worker agenda, to get unions active in immigrant communities, and to forge a community-labor alliance. NYCPP is a joint effort of Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 100, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, District Council 37 and community partners Make the Road by Walking and National Employment Law Project.

Artemio was born in Reynosa, Mexico into a family that was involved with the United Farm Workers (UFW). He brings to his work at NYCPP a vision of social unionism that was inspired by his early experiences. Before joining NYCPP, he was a housing and community organizer for Brooklyn-based Pratt Area Community Council, and he was a volunteer in community campaigns. His biography represents a growing trend in the labor movement; many young organizers like Artemio believe that the key to labor's future lies in both the workplace and the community. This interview is one of several pieces in *Regional Labor Review* that evidence this trend.

He spoke with Sharryn Kasmir in September, 2002 and again in January, 2003, just days after NYCPP held its first neighborhood meeting in Washington Heights. Over fifty activists attended the event.

### **Q: How did you first become a community organizer?**

**Artemio Guerra:** I think the first time I realized that being a community organizer was even an option was growing up in Mexico. My father is a muralist, and he was unemployed and struggling, and he met people from the UFW. They were organizing in southern Texas in the Rio Grande Valley, and he connected with the UFW ideologically. I mean, he was a social realist in the tradition of the Mexican school. His art was peasant art. What he was doing for the UFW in the '70s were murals that the UFW got paid for, and it was a fundraising tool, and my father got food in return. Since we owned the land where we lived in Mexico, we didn't have very many needs, and the UFW was not able to pay my father with money. So, they would just bring boxes and boxes of food. And that was my first connection to labor and to organizing.

I also remember the UFW coming to build my father's first studio, because he used to paint outdoors, and they brought boards from a previous campaign for mayor. They brought all the political propaganda— they used to make it on plywood— and they used that to build my father's first studio. So that was my first connection. And my God that was 25 years ago, and after having had 10 years' experience with community organizing, now I'm coming full circle. You know, I'm back in the arms of labor.

### **Q: Is the UFW something you have in mind as part of your vision of social unionism?**

**AG:** We used to call the UFW in Mexico la *Unión de Campesinos*. *Unión* means unity. It wasn't the *sindicato*. *Sindicato* is the literal translation of union. I didn't associate the UFW with the more traditional unions in my country, because my recollection of who the UFW was, their identity, they were so much more than just concerned with a contract. It was a more holistic approach to the worker. And now that I'm able to read and revisit that history—it turns into magic realism for me because my memories are the memories of a child—I realize that it was César Chávez's strategy and commitment to address the needs of the whole person. If it was immigration benefits, if it was food, housing, they would do it. And "We need a contract" was just part of that holistic approach to the worker. That's what I mean by social unionism: Taking the lessons of organizing in the workplace and applying that to other issues that affect your humanity.

### **Q: Tell me about The New York Civic Participation Project.**

**AG:** The tragedy of September 11th made a number of the social issues affecting New Yorkers much more visible, namely the criminalization of an immigrant workforce. For a number of our union partners, immigrants represent their growth and in a very real sense, the future of their unions. In the service sector, the growth in union membership is primarily in new immigrant communities. The

Project had been in the minds of a couple of people in organized labor for several years. New York City is one of the most organized, highest union-density cities in the country. Throughout the country there had been some interest in community-labor partnerships emerging. It needed to happen here, too. They realized that we need to promote a pro-immigrant, pro-worker agenda, and put the immigrant agenda back in the public arena more.

**Q: What's the agenda for the Project?**

**AG:** The advisory board is formed by the three union partners, HERE Local 100, SEIU Local 32BJ, also District Council 37, and community partner Make the Road by Walking, which has been organizing in the workplace in Bushwick, Brooklyn and the National Employment Law Project. There's been an ongoing dialogue about setting the policy priorities for the project, and it's remained a very open dialogue because we're going to be organizing union members in the community, and we want to allow for feedback and for the grass-roots to inform the agenda. So we're looking at a number of issues that are a cross-section of labor, immigration, and civil rights.

I think one of the most exciting ideas and one of the campaigns that we would love to work on is immigrant suffrage. Historically, immigrants have had the right to vote. It wasn't until immigration patterns began to change at the beginning of the 1900s that the states restricted immigrant suffrage. There is a connection between the opportunities to be active in civic society and the right to vote. That's changing in New York City in the midst of an anti-immigrant backlash, the criminalization of immigrants, and the dismantled school board, which was the last bastion of democratic participation for immigrants. It seems like the rights of immigrants to participate in democratic organizations are being taken away.

Another connection to social unionism is that for many non-citizen immigrants, unions are the only place where they are able to be active in a democratic organization. It's also a very clear connection to the civil rights movement and the struggle for Black suffrage, and if you want to go beyond that, the struggle for women's suffrage. So I think in the historical context this will be a very interesting campaign.

**Q: The goal on the ground is to have union members active within their communities.**

**AG:** Yes. We'll develop an organizing model that will allow people to stay engaged. People are already engaged at a community level, but how do we strengthen those connections and how do we strengthen those networks and how do we provide the resources to promote a progressive agenda for immigrants and workers? How do we make the connections that are needed between organized labor and community-based organizations? How do we learn to work together?

**Q: So when that activism takes place at the community level, it also has a union label on it.**

**AG:** Yes, that's a very powerful element of this project. Unions are powerful because they're democratic organizations—they have their problems, like any other organization or institution—but they're powerful in the capacity that they have to represent their members. So with the three union partners, we're talking about over 220,000 constituents. For some unions about 40% of their membership, for instance 32BJ, will be Latinos. In HERE Local 100, about 40% of will be foreign-born Latinos.

And it's very interesting what happens with immigrant communities that are organizing themselves. There's a high level of organization, and a number of civic associations, cultural associations, community-based organizations have emerged within the last ten years with little or no help from foundations or professional organizers. How do we identify those networks? How do we strengthen those networks by, like you said, putting the union label on them?

**Q: I get a sense from you of what the unions hope to achieve, but tell me what you think the community organizations hope to achieve from a partnership with unions.**

**AG:** I had an interesting meeting with Jerry Dominguez, Director of Casa Mexico, and I'm going to steal his analogy. Casa Mexico is providing services for the Mexican community all over the city. He said, "The unions are like a tank. Very powerful, very big, and they move like a tank. We, Casa Mexico, we are like a motorcycle. We go out there and we plant the seeds, but we need the tank to win the war." That's a very interesting analogy. I think our community partners recognize that a strong labor movement is good for New York. By the same token, I think the union partners recognize that strong and organized communities are good for the labor movement, that we cannot exist without each other in a society where low-wage workers are vulnerable to exploitation. That's bad for the labor movement. The more the labor movement has the capacity to organize and include new immigrants, it will have a lasting impact on neighborhoods.

**Q: What are some of the conflicts that emerge between community groups and labor?**

**AG:** People see unions as very big and powerful with their own set of interests. There are difficult feelings, and we have to guard against that. And I think all you have to do is look at one hundred years of labor history to realize that not everyone in the labor movement is a saint. There have been very significant problems. But John Sweeney's New Directions Movement was a significant change. I don't think it's the end, but I think it is the beginning, and I think some people within the labor movement recognize that.

There was a historic commitment to legalization and the rights of immigrants coming out of AFL-CIO in February of 2000. At that time I was working with the Catholic Church as an immigrant advocate, and one question we kept on asking: Where is organized labor? We were working with thousands of immigrant workers in this rural area of Pennsylvania, farm workers and also a number of manufacturing workers, and nobody was servicing their needs. They had the Church—that was the only place people could go. It was like a breath of fresh air when the AFL-CIO came and made a statement, because the connection was so clear. These are people that come to this country to work. They're completely vulnerable, and they have nothing to rely on besides faith communities or ethnic associations. There's no organized effort to incorporate them into the larger labor movement.

It also says a lot about this project to bring somebody on board like me who hasn't had any direct experience with labor who primarily has experience organizing in neighborhoods, and my co-director Gouri Sadhwani who comes from working with the international community on peace and other global issues. Our organizers also come with very diverse backgrounds: Gladys Sanchez was a journalist back in the Dominican Republic and a community organizer in Washington Heights, and Angel Vera has been organizing with the Ecuadorian community in Bushwick for more than ten years.

**Q: Can you think of specific campaigns that can serve as models for successfully bringing communities and unions together?**

**AG:** Something that comes to mind is LAANE's, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, housing campaign. It was a partnership between organized labor and community-based organizations, advocacy groups, elected officials, faith communities, and even corporate partners to promote a social agenda. They were out there and very militant and engaging in direct action to bring attention to the crisis of affordable housing. The lack of affordable housing had pushed people, new immigrants for the most part, into overcrowded, illegal, and unsafe housing conditions that many times had deadly consequences. The result of their Housing L.A. campaign was, even after September 11th and the economic slowdown, there was a commitment from the city of Los Angeles to create a \$100 million affordable-housing trust fund, and not only a housing trust fund, but also hiring union members and providing living wages for the workers who will build this new housing. That was part of the demands.

**Q: A year from now, where do you hope the New York Civic Participation Project will be?**

**AG:** For the organizing piece of the Project, I hope to see it rooted in Washington Heights and Bushwick. Rooted in the sense that we have created power bases in these two neighborhoods, where people are able to respond to issues and also to promote the Project's pro-immigrant, pro-worker agenda. What we're identifying as power bases are where people find a free space to discuss the issues that affect their communities and find solutions to address them. We are starting with two organizers, one for each neighborhood. We hope to do some research on Queens—that's another fascinating area—and East Harlem and the Bronx. And I think we can be very optimistic and think that by next year we'll also have two more organizers beginning to do the work in two other neighborhoods.

Initial steps toward being rooted in Washington Heights were taken when NYCPP held its first community meeting there this January. Union and community activists worked together with NYCPP staff to develop a questionnaire that they will use as a tool to reach out to other community residents. NYCPP is currently involved in three other campaigns that enlist union members to be active in their communities: "One Million Voices" is an effort to get a million signatures in support of H.R. 200, a bill recently introduced in Congress that calls for amnesty for undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. for five years or more. NYCPP is also organizing a postcard campaign for The Equal Access to Health and Human Services Bill, which would require the City to provide translation for non-English speakers who are applying for emergency services, such as Medicaid and Food Stamps. Similarly, NYCPP is joining with eighteen other organizations to stand against the Social Security Administration's crackdown on working immigrants.

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