

## *A New Union Movement for the New Economy: A Conversation with Jose Alvarez, AFL-CIO Regional Director*

by Gregory DeFreitas

Since November 1996, Jose “Joe” Alvarez has been the AFL-CIO’s Regional Director in the Northeast. Based in New York City, he is responsible for implementing the federation’s programs in 12 states stretching from Maine through New York to Maryland and West Virginia, as well as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. He has thus far focused on promoting local unions’ organizing efforts, revitalizing central labor councils through the “Union Cities” program, and mounting support for pro-labor political campaigns.

Born in Havana, Cuba, he immigrated with his family to Miami at the age of nine. After graduating from Duke University, he joined the civil rights movement and became a rank and file activist in the southern textile and health care industries. He worked as an organizer and service representative with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), before being elected as a district manager, first in Georgia and Alabama, and then North Carolina. He went on to serve as the National Political Director of that union, before and after its merger with the ILGWU to form UNITE. As the first Political Director of UNITE, he became known for developing a program to generate membership activism around a broad workers’ political agenda.

In early January, he spoke with Gregory DeFreitas at the regional headquarters in Manhattan.

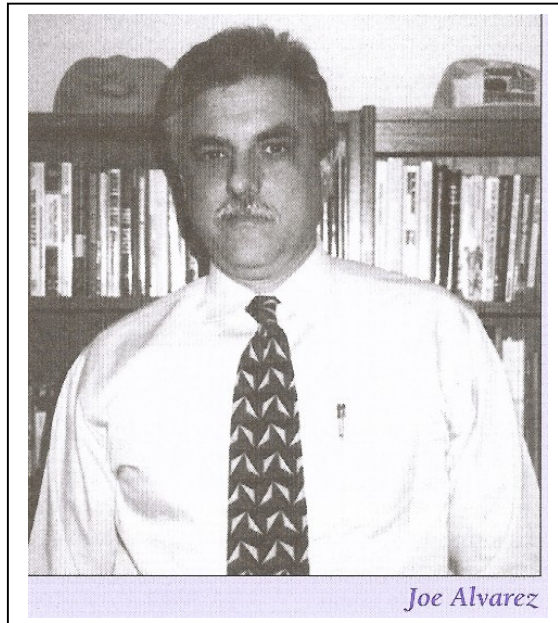
**Q: Organizing the unorganized has been given very high priority by the AFL-CIO since its leadership changed in 1995. You come to your current position with considerable experience at this. How did you first get involved in union organizing?**

**JA:** I was working at a hospital in Durham, North Carolina. I was working as a psychiatric attendant in a private hospital. This was in the early seventies, when there was almost no organizing in hospitals and even less organizing in hospitals in the South. The employees became involved in an effort to organize the 10,000 people in the hospital, which we spent several years doing. But we failed by about a hundred votes. From there I changed jobs and ended up working in a textile mill in North Carolina, which was when I first became a member of what was then the Textile Workers Union. Eventually, after years in the union and trying to change that union as a member, I was hired in Georgia and worked as an organizer and union representative. I was elected manager of the joint board of our union covering Georgia and Alabama. By that time it was the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. I was involved in moving us to become an organizing force. I actually spent many years organizing, mainly in the South.

I was appointed National Political Director of ACTWU in 1992, before the changes in the AFL-CIO. I had the view of changing the whole way that A.C.T. W.U. was doing politics, taking it out of Washington and receptions and building the mobilization of our membership. I prided myself in spending much more time on shop floors around the country than in Washington receptions. So actually it’s that kind of breadth of experience both in terms of organizing and in terms of grass-roots political mobilization -- the kinds of people we are assembling in this part of the AFL-CIO tend to be people who are bringing in those kinds of backgrounds.

**Q: Out of that, did you draw any conclusions for methods of organizing which have helped here?**

**JA:** The main thing I would say that I have taken out of that whole experience, besides having a sense of the challenges and obstacles in organizing, was recognizing that one of our biggest problems in organizing is that as a labor movement we have basically stopped doing it. I have been surprised as I became involved in the broader labor movement of how little organizing there was. In fact, several years ago when we tried to make an assessment nationally, we concluded that there was something like 3% of all union resources that were in fact going into organizing. In contrast to the 1940’s and 1950’s where that figure was much closer to 50%.



**Q: Why do you think that there was such a tremendous decline?**

**JA:** There are probably a lot of factors. Certainly not a small one is that it has become much more difficult to organize. One of the main efforts that we're involved in is what we call a "Right to Organize" campaign. The goal is to try to restore workers' ability to build unions and to talk about how we change the environment to be able to do that. But, the other reason for the decline in the 70's and 80's is a lot of unions were finding themselves in defensive situations where their resources had to go into keeping what they already had: into fighting plant closings, fighting efforts to privatize. Bargaining became more difficult as more and more unions lost density in their respective industries. In fact, the whole culture of the labor movement became much more concentrated on issues like negotiations, collective bargaining, arbitrations, and the representation activity of the shop floor. Even in many instances, unions that saw the need to organize were nevertheless absorbed by these kind of activities.

There are three key parts to the program of the AFL-CIO. One is precisely the whole issue of shifting the focus of our internationals and of our locals back to organizing again. Once again trying to shift resources, trying to develop that capacity and trying to make the cultural changes inside our organizations to transform them into an organizing movement again.

**Q: Since you moved to your present position as the Regional Director, do you see that beginning to happen?**

**JA:** I should probably tell you a little about what we do in the Northeast Region of the AFL-CIO. Within the AFL-CIO, the Field Mobilization Department is that part that has the responsibility of implementing the field program of the National AFL-CIO. And that program is focused on three main areas. First, supporting the organizing efforts of our member unions. Secondly, political activism. And the third area is member mobilization, building the structures at the grassroots that are able to help us move forward into the other two areas: political activism and the support for organizing.

I think in the last couple of years the message that we have to become an organizing movement again has definitely begun taking hold. Actually, in 1997 (we don't have the full figures for 1998 yet), as a labor movement we organized 400,000 new members. Unfortunately, that was not sufficient to keep up with job loss and the growth in the economy, but it was the first year in decades that we were able to hold labor union density steady. It was the first year that we did not see another continuing decline in union density in our nation.

A key part of our organizing program, and one where AFL-CIO state federations and central labor councils are involved, is to change the environment in which unions have to organize. There is a major civil rights issue in our nation right now that is hidden from view. The fact is that when workers do set out to try and organize a union they are met with an outrageous campaign of terror. In our

society workers technically have a right to form unions. They have a right to organize. But, this is the only right within our society that is exercised with fear. The fact is you can go to any worker who is unhappy with their job and ask them if they would like to have a union and they would tell you: "Certainly, it would be great to have a union here." As a matter of fact, something like 44% of unorganized workers say that they would like to see a union in their workplace. That is something like 48 million workers.

You ask the same worker if they would like to call together a meeting of some of their fellow employees to talk about forming a union and their reaction is to look at you and say: "Are you crazy? In my workplace? We are not allowed to talk about unions, to speak about unions." It is not enough for workers to have self-interest to form a union. It actually takes heroes and heroines who are willing to take uncommon risks. Common people that are willing to take uncommon risks for the common good. There is something like 10,000 workers a year who are fired for trying to organize a union. An effort by workers to form a union is basically met by a campaign of terror that tries to turn the question from one of "Would you like to be represented or not represented by unions?" turn that into a questions of "Would you like this job to stay here or not have this job stay here?"

**Q: Do you think that is likely to change anytime soon through the NLRB structure? Do you think that unions have to go outside using corporate campaigns and the like?**

**JA:** For a long time there was a debate in the labor movement in terms of this whole question of the right to organize. Do we first have to change the law and then organize? Or do we recognize we don't have the power to change the law so we first organize and then change the law? In the AFL-CIO we have resolved this question for ourselves. We have no choice but to organize first in spite of the law. The reason we have to do this is that there is little recognition or understanding of the terror that workers face or their lack of political voice.

What we have done is we have launched what we call a "Right to Organize Campaign." It tries to put a spotlight on this terror that is created in the workplace and right in our communities, by educating our allies, by involving elected officials -- not just whether they are going to vote or not on a piece of legislation -- but in using their moral authority and their presence to speak out and defend workers who are trying to organize unions. The federation at the national, state, and local levels is beginning to try to create an environment where that kind of activity by employers no longer goes unnoticed. We're looking at what steps we can take to make sure that employers engaging in this kind of behavior are not receiving public funds, that they are not receiving public support. And we're mobilizing union members in support of workers who are trying to achieve this basic right.

**Q: That same issue of the right to organize has recently been taken up by the academic-labor organization, Scholars, Artists and Writers for Social Justice, that emerged out of the 1996 Columbia University labor teach-in. There has been much talk since October '96 of a revival on a national scale of the labor-intellectual alliance. What value do you think union members could find in stronger links with intellectuals, academics, colleges and universities?**

**JA:** We look at the relationship with progressive academics, intellectuals as another critical relationship. Actually this organization you speak of, SAWSJ, we just recently, with their collaboration, put out a new publication called *Faculty at Work*. They worked with us on that, they're in the credits. We have been involved in conversation with academics about the role they can play, whether it's in educating the current generation of students and from the ranks helping us develop a new generation of union activists or whether it is in the work that they do in developing public opinion and joining us (as SAWSJ is beginning to do) in exposing the terror that exists in the workplace and raising public consciousness about this issue. Or whether it's in engaging their research and writing to help us explore and investigate the kinds of policy directions in our very quickly changing world and economy, to help us figure out in this new economy how do we make this work for workers. In any of those kind of ways this is a very critical relationship that we support and have supported. There is no question that there is a movement around the country. I don't know what the number is off the top but I do know that there were something like 40-50 teach-ins on campuses around the country. And in fact SAWSJ is getting ready to hold its second annual conference in New Haven, Connecticut and its focus is on this whole question of building support for workers' right to organize.

**Q: The Columbia labor teach-in happened in the wake of a strike at Barnard, Columbia's women's college, in the winter, spring and summer of 1996 by the UAW. Today there are more university staff than there are steel workers in America. Do you think the notion of professionals like university staff as a major part of the work force that is ripe for organizing, do you think that is something that the labor movement as a whole is more and more accepting? That is, that the focus can no longer just be on the traditional sources of unionization?**

**JA:** Absolutely. The logic of this new economy is working itself into all the different sectors. This is a story to illustrate: I was driving around in the middle of a political campaign in '94 at which time Secretary of Labor, Reich, was talking about how the solution to the low-wage economy was education. It was a call-in show and there was a professor, a woman, who called in and said: "Secretary Reich, I've received two Ph.D. For the last four years I've been working as an adjunct with no benefits earning \$12,000 a year teaching what is considered a full load. Should I get a 3<sup>rd</sup> Ph.D.?" The fact is the logic of this economy is moving into every single sector so you see in universities more and more where faculties are made up of growing number of adjunct professors. They are the university temp workers, who work for significantly lower wages, often without benefits. There is no question that all the different sectors of this new economy -- without organization, without making sure the economic setup is one that is focused on the question of: how do people make a living, how are they able to attain some benefits for their work with some sort of security and expectation of stability, without organization --that is not going to happen.

These groups are starting to organize. There is an organization, in New Haven, Connecticut, for example, the Graduate Students' Employees Association, that is active precisely among those workers. Right here in New York City, we've seen at the New School where the adjunct instructors in the music program who are jazz musicians just not only organized, but successfully just negotiated a historic first contract. I think these are harbingers of activities we will see spreading throughout our economy. Just in the same way some years ago, it wasn't that long ago, the organization of teachers at the elementary and high school levels was not viewed as a likely place for union organization and now it is almost commonly accepted. I think that we will see the same happening more and more in different sectors of our economy.

*"It is not enough for workers to have self-interest to form a union. It actually takes heroes and heroines who are willing to take uncommon risks. Common people that are willing to take uncommon risks for the common good."*

**Q: What do you think about the potential for more involvement of community groups in organizing drives, like ACORN's recent efforts to organize thousands of workfare employees?**

**JA:** There are many organizations that are dealing with the results of the new low-wage economy that's emerging. The new labor movement realizes it is critical to build alliances with other organizations today that are trying to address the same kinds of issues. Actually, we are working and many of our affiliates are working very closely with ACORN, not only in what I just described but also in "living wage" campaigns in cities throughout the nation. We're organizing workers in sectors that don't yet lend themselves to organization, like certain categories of low-wage and temporary workers. It's actually another way of dealing with the whole privatization system.

**Q: In last November's elections, there was unusually high turnout by union members. In New York, over one-third of all votes were cast by union households. This surprised many people, that such numbers would come out to vote during an economic upturn. What concerns motivated union families to do this?**

**JA:** Well, even though we are in the midst of an economic expansion, that expansion is hardly being reflected in improving wages. Nor is it being reflected in the way our public officials are dealing with public policies in areas like social security, education and health care. A lot of it has to do with the kind of approach that the AFL-CIO has been taking to how working families are going to get a voice in government, in the political system. The shift is recognizing that we're not going to defeat corporate interests based on our ability to spend more money than they spend. Even though in 1996 the labor movement spent in that campaign, with a great deal of success, \$35 million, we were nevertheless outspent 11 to 1 by corporate interests. So, number one, our efforts are focused on our greatest strength of mobilizing our membership. Our members are not going to be mobilized because of individuals who happen to be running or allegiance to parties who happen to be competing. But they are mobilized because we are moving our members around issues that happen to be of concern to working families: like health care, social security, retirement, education. That has been the focus of our efforts. I think that in the '98 election all of this was given further impetus, at a time where Congress was spending most of its time

talking about everything but those issues. At that time, we were in the throes, well we still are, of the debate surrounding impeachment. But our message focused on: let's get back to talking about working family issues. Our members very strongly responded to this and turned out in tremendously large numbers.

Take a very specific example of what a union city central labor council is doing. In that election, the New York City Central Labor Council had 3,000 rank and file volunteers out on the street on election day. That's a very good example of what we are talking about, looking at what are the factors that lead to the fact that 1/3 of the voting households ended up being union households. There is an excellent example of what that effort actually looks like. In terms of our alliances with community organizations, a lot of the Labor Council's effort was particularly aimed at and in concert with the African-American communities and Latino communities. There were 50,000 new Latino voters in this last election. So that's just further making a point of what the efforts look like in the local area.

**Q: In New York, in that election an effort was made by third parties like the new Working Families Party which managed to win a place on the next ballot, in large part due to union households. Do you see third parties as possibly a useful means in the future to get the labor message out, insofar as the Democratic Party isn't always reflecting the full set of labor concerns?**

**JA:** First of all, let me say that the AFL-CIO is open to all kinds of different efforts to try and mobilize our membership and welcomes experimentation with those kind of efforts. Campaigns like the Working Families Campaign made use of the fact that in New York you can run on several party lines. So you have the ability to express your support for a particular agenda without giving up your ability to really influence the elections. Even though we were not officially involved in the Working Families Party, we had a number of our affiliates who were involved in it, and who see a need to experiment with different kinds of forms. And we view that as a positive development.

**Q: Given the amount of time and resources that the AFL-CIO put into the elections, do you think that the unions will look back on this as money well-spent, in the sense the Clinton Administration has done as much as it could for labor? Or do you think the evaluation might be much more mixed?**

**JA:** Well again, in this last election and in the Congressional elections we just held, we don't characterize our efforts as having been focused on getting a particular person into office. We viewed our efforts as mobilizing around the issues that are of concern to working families. And in that respect, we have been tremendously successful. The political debate back in '94 was completely dominated by wedge issues that had very little connection to workers being able to provide for their families and take care and educate their families. In the '98 elections, those were the questions that were being debated and focused on. In that sense, we think we are having a tremendous impact in redefining what is under discussion. In many ways, at the presidential level, Roosevelt was who he was because of the CIO, Kennedy was who he was because there was a civil rights movement and any president is who they are largely because of how much we have succeeded in mobilizing working families around an agenda in these elections. There is no question about it that we are moving in the right direction.

**Q: In terms of the next election, John Sweeney has recently said that the AFL is going to make, "...the largest grassroots mobilization in its history to fight against efforts to privatize social security." Why is the AFL-CIO putting so much importance on this particular issue?**

**JA:** Social Security is a good example of what happens in our society when a labor movement is not what it needs to be. It's probably the most successful social program in our history. And it is not just a program for retirement security, but also a program for family security in that it addresses disabled workers, it addresses families who have lost a breadwinner. Corporate interests have succeeded in creating a sense of crisis, as part of an effort to figure out how to dismantle this most successful of social programs. We disagree that there is a crisis. There is no question about it that, if labor is not out here weighing in in this debate, that there is no other voice in this society right now with the organization or resources to be able to weigh in to defend this critical program. So we have made it a priority to make sure that the debate is focused on what the actual situation is, what the actual interests of working families are. And in order to do that we have launched the campaign which you just referred to.

**Q: What are some of the specific elements of that campaign going to be?**

**JA:** Initially it is very much focused on internal education with our membership. Our membership is not immune to the main public information that has come out about social security. So there is an effort to do a lot of education internally. We, likewise, are also

joining in with allies looking at the impact that some of the schemes that are being drawn up, like privatization, particularly would have on groups like minorities and women who are particularly going to be impacted with the kinds of proposals that are being floated here. Around the country right now we have forums in local hall after local hall. In the next few weeks, there will be community summits in 60 cities across the country. So we are doing both an internal education effort and weighing in in the public debate that is taking place, making sure that this critical element for retirement and family security is not dismantled and basically handed over to Wall Street in the next several months.

**Q: For the future, if you had to guess where unionization will be in five years time, are you optimistic?**

**JA:** There is no question for anybody who looks at history that workers will find a way to build self-organization, that they will find a way to make sure that their ability to exist and survive in our society will be achieved through self-organization. The challenge we have in the AFL-CIO is that, throughout history, there are points during major transitions of an economy where workers organizations came to a point where they represented the past economy. The only way the new economy and its concerns was achieved was through a new labor movement. We are now in the middle of an effort to change our current labor movement to be able to address the organization that is going to be necessary in the new economy. And that is something that really has not taken place before. In the 30's the new labor movement emerged out of the CIO, which eventually cam together with the previous labor movement in the merger some years later. Going back another 50 years when the AFL was founded, the Knights of Labor and the other organizations that existed before that basically faded away while the AFL emerged as the new labor movement in the new economy.

So the challenge before us is: are we going to succeed in this tremendous change effort? I am extremely hopeful that the officers of the AFL-CIO are courageously looking at the kinds of ways that we need to change ourselves. We say that the mission of the AFL-CIO is to be a voice for working families in our economy and for justice within our society. And that in order to achieve this, we must "build and change the labor movement." We have explicitly launched an effort not only to try to grow a better labor movement, but to understand that we also need to change the labor movement. The fact that we are able to define our mission in this kind of way gives me great hope that working families will once again be able to have their voice in America.

---

*Gregory DeFreitas is Professor of Economics at Hofstra University, and Director of the Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy.*

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 13-18.

© 1999 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University.