

How the Labor Movement Can Help Speed New York’s Recovery: A Conversation with Central Labor Council President Vincent Alvarez

by Gregory DeFreitas

Figure 2
NYC Job Growth by Industry: Oct. 2019 – Oct. 2020
(in 1,000s of jobs, and percent change)

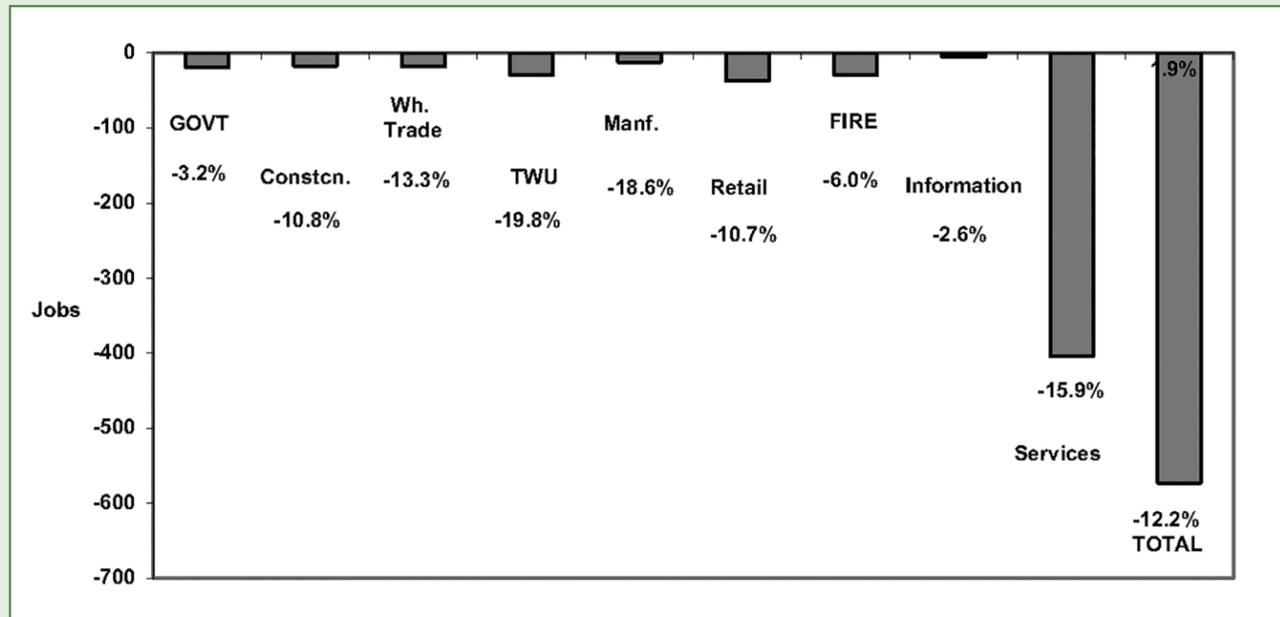
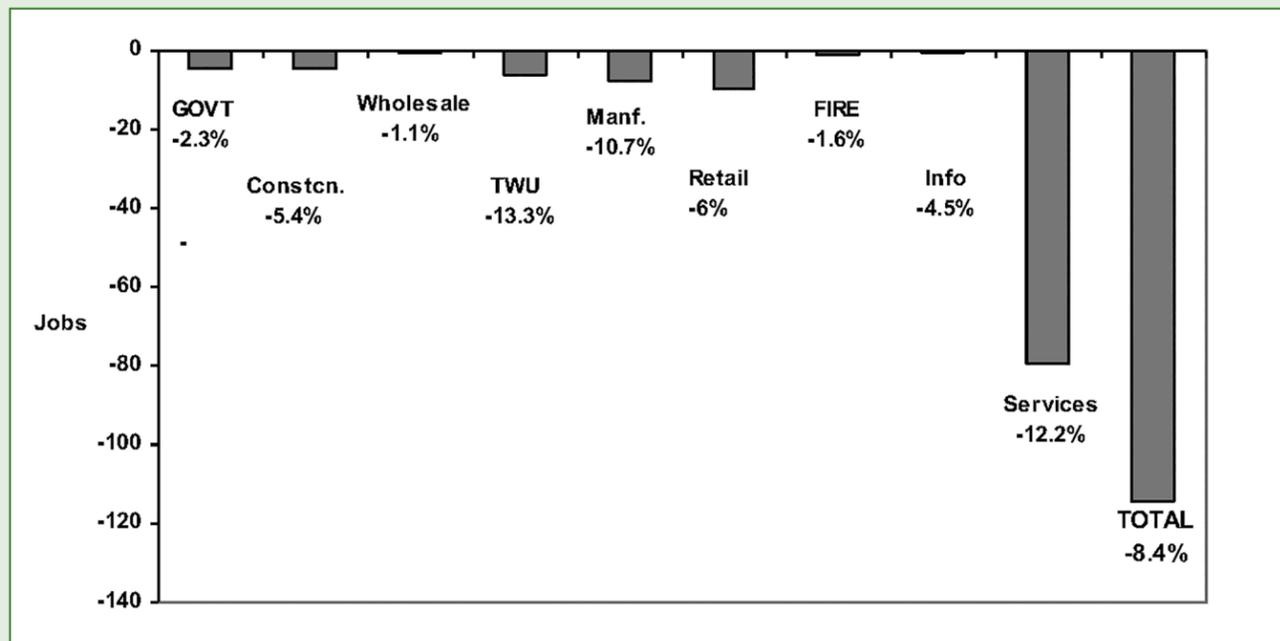


Figure 3
Long Island Job Growth by Industry: Oct. 2019 – Oct. 2020
(in 1,000s of jobs, and percent change)



New York City is the center of the most unionized metropolitan area in the country. Most of its unions – nearly 300, representing about 1.3 million workers – are members of the NYC Central Labor Council (CLC). As the national AFL-CIO’s local coordination arm, the CLC is the umbrella organization that tries to preserve solidarity among its many diverse unions, partners with state and community organizations for shared goals, and provides a united voice in policy debates affecting workers’ interests.

This year marks a decade in office for Vincent Alvarez as CLC President. The son of two New York union members, he is a graduate of SUNY Oneonta. After college, he worked for 17 years as a union electrical worker, most often on the night and swing shifts. After becoming increasingly active in the political campaigns of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Local 3, he was hired as an assistant legislative Director of the New York State AFL-CIO. In 2011, he was elected president of the NYC Central Labor Council, the first Latino to hold the post. He also serves as a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York; as board chair of NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; as a vice-president of the Consortium for Worker Education; as a board member of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition; and as a principal officer of Climate Jobs NY.

On November 20th, the day after the first CLC Delegate’s Meeting since the presidential election, Gregory DeFreitas spoke with him about his past 10 years leading the CLC, the 2020 pandemic’s New York impacts, the election, and its likely implications for New York working families – union and nonunion.

Q: Yesterday, the CLC had your first big delegates meeting since the national election results came in. What was the general reaction to that?

VA: Well, I think I would say overwhelmingly, there was a sigh of relief with the results of the presidential election. I think four years ago, you know, there were some working-class folks who maybe had different thoughts of what a Trump presidency would mean and

there were some union members who supported him. But, after four years of seeing what a Trump presidency is like in reality for working people, I think that many of us have had enough and want to turn this page and get this country back on course. And get an administration that’s going to support workers’ rights, as we know the Biden-Harris Administration is going to do. So there was a sigh of relief. No question about it.

Q: Four years ago, didn’t Donald Trump present himself as a pro-worker candidate – speaking up for the “forgotten man”? Though early exit polls are notoriously inaccurate, those I’ve seen so far in this election suggest a sizable, 40% or so labor vote for Trump. Why? Biden has said “I’m a union man. Unions are going to have more power if I’m elected president.” So why would any union household, do you think, vote for Trump? He staffed his administration with anti-labor people, his Supreme Court came out for the Janus ruling, he’s against raising the minimum wage. What do you think was going on in their minds?

VA: Well, look: working people have been under extraordinary pressure over the past four decades. We’ve seen the stagnation of wages, diminishment of benefits in the workplace, a decline in having a voice at work through unionization. And I think that, in the political system dominated by the two parties, they have been dissatisfied with their ability to solve basic problems that everyday working class people are facing and also to support their rights in the workplace. So a lot of them were willing to give Donald Trump a shot.

I think it was four years of seeing how that manifested itself with respect to attacks on workers’ rights at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB); the lack of support for higher minimum wages and overtime protections; the support by the Trump administration for anti-worker judges and the court cases at various levels, not just the Supreme Court – how that has played itself out. They’ve seen the lack of safety and health protections, especially during the pandemic, how important that’s become with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). And then more recently politics

being played with the fiscal stimulus that is needed to support working class people in cities and states throughout this country. So we've seen a lot of different things and I think it was good, in a way. A lot of them said, well, we want to turn the page and we want to get an administration in here who we know is going to be more supportive of creating a broad-based prosperity in the economy, that works for all, supporting workers' rights.

Q: What do you think should be the top priorities of the Biden administration when they come into office in late January? If you could speak to him soon and say, "Boy, New York labor would really love this"?

VA: I would not put any of them in front of each other. I think what we want to see is, because we're in the middle of a pandemic and because the Republican administration hasn't done anything to support the next round of COVID legislation, that is an immediate need that we have right now and we've been pushing for that. The National AFL-CIO and national unions have been out there. We've had actions over the summer. Since the House passed the HEROES Act, their next round of legislation that needs to be done immediately. Our city budgets are under such extraordinary strain, as are other agencies like the MTA, the US Postal Service.

If you look at the original COVID legislation that was passed by the House, it's been stalled now in the Senate for many months. The aid to states and localities, unemployment assistance, COBRA reimbursement for those who are losing healthcare – there is a lot that everyday working folks need right now. So we must get that done.

The PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize) is a significant piece of legislation that we think will go a long way to restoring some of the balance that has been lost in the workplace between management and workers. And that was already passed by the House! So, we are really looking forward to having that discussion about the need to pass the PRO Act as well. Those are simultaneous things – it's not an either/or. The COBRA thing is overdue. It's overdue. We should have done it back in June.

Q: I think the numbers are that, by the end of December, about 13 million unemployed people are going to lose those benefits.

VA: Yes, you have 12 plus million Americans, who are going to lose their unemployment assistance. We already have seen many people every month, even on the union side, our affiliated organization too, every month that goes by for severely impacted industries like hospitality and entertainment, you know, some of the industries have been very hard hit. They've done a phenomenal job, some of them in cooperation with their employers, at trying to provide ongoing and uninterrupted health benefits. But at a certain point there are people who are losing their benefits.

And then you have the self-employed. In New York City, we have now about a million workers that are either unemployed or, if they're self-employed, they were receiving the pandemic unemployment

benefits. But that's expired and they're still waiting for another round of assistance. So they're receiving some benefits, but they're not receiving the full benefits that they were receiving previously. So there is a really, really big need out there. It's hard to believe the numbers in New York City, that roughly a third of the workforce is out of work in some areas – when you add both the W2 employees plus the self-employed. It's hard to believe.

Q: Yes, just by the conservative official numbers, the city's unemployment rate's 13% – nearly four times what it was last year. We have a job deficit of nearly 600,000 since then. The damage to New York has been profound.

VA: Right, but some economists use the actual unemployment rate, which includes the self-employed who are out of work, because they were contributing to our economy as well. Many of them are misclassified, some intentionally, but some of them are in just traditional self-employment work. In the union sector of entertainment, those musicians are some of the original gig employees. They are self-employed. That's why they were relying originally on the pandemic unemployment assistance being included so they can get some sort of financial relief. But this is a broad-based, very-long term problem with the economy that we're seeing. As we know, we're in the middle of a third wave now. So we're having to deal with that as well. And a lot of these industries are not going to be returning for a while.

Q: Could you talk a bit about young workers. I spend my life with 18-to-24-year olds. Surveys show young people are actually the most pro-union age group around and they were also the most pro-Biden. But they often have a rather fuzzy idea what unions do. And certainly of what a central labor council does. Could you describe that a bit? What would you say to a young person in terms of why they should be involved with the New York labor movement? And why the CLC mattered in terms of this election and going forward.

VA: Well, I would say that that we want every worker to be involved. We've seen the numbers are at a high watermark for a few decades now of workers in support of unionization. Because everybody basically wants to have a voice at work. It's just that simple. And during the pandemic, I think it's become more evident that they need to have a safe workplace as workers are either working through the pandemic or returning to work. To make sure that they have PPE at work, make sure that they have a safe workplace right now. These are just some of the most basic, fundamental things of life and work during a pandemic.

If you have a voice at work, especially a collective voice at work through unionization, you have the ability to have a seat at the table in those discussions that are going to impact you and your coworkers. Not only your workplace, but your lives, your economic lives and your well-being.

And, you know, eventually, having the ability to retire with a certain degree of dignity and economic security. Right now in New York

City, we see roughly 65% of workers have no retirement security whatsoever. No 401(k), no traditional defined-benefit plan. That's a staggering figure, and it's a slow-motion crisis. About 10 years ago we did a forum on that and it was about 59%. Then it crept up a little bit. It's the worst kind of crisis and we need to get government intervention, because it creeps up a little bit every year.

And if you look further into the figures on retirement security, the amount of people that have 401(k)s and the balances in the 401(k), whether looking at the median or the average balance, they're very, very low: under \$100,000 for most of those, certainly the median. The average may be skewed a little bit higher from some of the higher account balances.

But generally speaking, what that means is there's not enough private funding, either through savings or social security or through a self-funded account like a 401(k), to fund adequate retirement security. So I think that, whether you're looking at wages and benefits, whether you're looking at retirement security, whether you're looking at issues of safety in the workplace and disability and protections if you should be injured at work – the unions are going to enhance the ability of workers to achieve those. Having a voice at work through collective bargaining is only going to enhance workers' rights in the workplace.

And I think they get that. They're going out there in a world which is very difficult, the young and recent college grads, so they understand. And that's why I think they're more sensitive to understanding what life is like without health care, what life is like without job security, without having a voice at work in basic things like safety in the workplace.

Q: You're on the board of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition. Its president, my Hofstra colleague Marianne Trasciatti, says the CLC has really been very supportive of their educational efforts. With all the many current issues the CLC must deal with, why have you also devoted your efforts to this symbol of the city's labor history.

VA: We've been trying, we've been trying to help. We have to continue to support each other. I always say that all students should learn about the labor movement in New York City when they go to school. You know, my kids and other kids when they went to school they learned about the Triangle fire, which is a good thing.

Q: Have you always been interested in labor education?

VA: Yeah, I'm a big believer. So many people get hung up on: "We have to do more of this one thing. We have to just do more labor education; we have to do more politics; we have to do more

organizing." I said no, we have to do more everything. We have to do a little bit of everything. It's like we have to not just do organizing or politics or coalition building or even in this case education. We have to do all of those things concurrently.

Q: So you definitely view labor education as a key part of it?

VA: I think it's one of the reasons why we see such high support for unions today. I think we've more recently done a good job in tying the ongoing failure of our current economy to create broad-based prosperity to the decline in the labor movement. I think that we've done a better job of that recently, of getting that out with the help of research by people from academia and the New York Federal Reserve Board, on which I serve. There's a lot of research and, while it's hard to quantify, it points to how much the diminishment of worker power in this country is attributable to the rise in the economic disparities and the economic insecurity that we see exist. But it is a factor. Globalization is a factor; there's a lot of factors.

Q: Can we talk about your background. How did you get involved with the union movement? Do you come from a union family?

VA: My mother was a member of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees), she was a librarian in Staten Island. My dad came from Cuba back a long time ago. When he was a teenager and in his early adult years, he was an organizer for SEIU in Brooklyn (Service Employees International Union). He would help organize the bowling alleys and some related industries back in the '50s. If you go into my office in the city, there is a letter on the wall to my father from Cesar Chavez, for the Association of Catholic Trade

Unionists' backing in the Delano grape boycott of the mid-1960s. My father was a member of the association back in the 1960s that was very supportive of the farmworkers and their union.

I went to college in the 80s, the State University of New York up in Oneonta – where I got a Bachelor's in Business Economics. I was fortunate enough at the time to get a role working in the IBEW. Like a lot of us, our career paths kind of zigzag through life. But I had the great fortune of working in the IBEW Local 3 for the next 17 years, with a terrific organization with phenomenal leadership. You know, Harry and Tom Van Arsdale. And now, of course, they have Chris Erikson and they have a tradition of just great active leadership in the labor movement.

Q: Was Harry Van Arsdale still around when you were there?

VA: No, he passed away, I believe, in the mid-'80s. But Tom Van Arsdale was the leader at the time and so I was really grateful and



Vincent Alvarez [photo credit: NYC Central Labor Council]

fortunate to be able to work for 17 years in IBEW Local 3. And then in 2007, I went up to work at the Central Labor Council as the Assistant to the Executive Director, who at the time was Ed Ott, when we had an executive director model. And then, as you know, back 10 years ago, they changed the model and they went to a full-time model for an elected full-time president. And that was when I began as president.

You know, it's really very important, the lived experience as a worker, working out in the field. I worked swing and night shift for over 14 years.

Q: Get electrocuted much?

VA: No, fortunately. But there's a lot that you learn about working people and about life, I think, by actually getting out there and working over the years. I used to work nights. And I was fascinated by the amount of working people in this city that work after hours when everybody else goes home and goes to sleep. I used to see them, you know, working in buildings, cleaning buildings, people on a night shift. Maybe when a shift ends at 11 o'clock at night, going home. And some people coming into work. And I think we take it for granted in America how many people are out there just 24 hours a day working. People that are making our cities, making our towns, making our states in this country work. They do it in unbelievable and extraordinary circumstances at times.

So working all those years with people out in the field, getting to work with some of the most skilled and professional workers in Local 3 of IBEW, but also seeing and interacting with the general workforce, particularly at night – that was something that always stayed with me.

Q: IBEW Local 3 is famous for being very politically engaged. That must have been a whole education right there.

VA: Well, yeah, they understood the value of being engaged as a workforce, as unions. They understood our role of helping the less fortunate. It was taught in my day and still is today through their current business manager, Chris Erikson. He does a terrific job at making sure Local 3 continues to help the less fortunate, stay engaged in our community, support elected officials, support communities and working class people, and making sure that we are doing our part as a union. And then, more broadly, as a labor movement in the city of New York. And that's what we've tried to do over the past, I would say 10 years, at the CLC.

Q: So you came in in 2011 and the very next year the Fight for \$15 started in New York?

VA: We had the Occupy movement, the Fight for \$15, we were still climbing out of a recession, a deep recession. And then, in 2012 we had to deal with Hurricane Sandy. So it was like, boom, boom, boom! Plus a very, very big city-wide lockout of utility workers by Con Edison in the summer.

So we were hit with a lot. And what we tried to do – and I think that

we've been successful at it over the years at CLC – is reengage. Again, getting back to what I said earlier on three levels of: first, making sure that we're engaged politically and legislatively -- not just electoral politics, but making sure that we're passing policies and supporting the passage of policies at the city level. And then working with organizations at the state level: the state AFL CIO, the national AFL CIO. And passing pro worker legislation and supporting pro-worker, pro-union candidates. Then, secondly, working on supporting the organizing efforts of and really encouraging our unions to get out there and organize workers. Organizing the unorganized and having a growth strategy for the labor movement and trying to support them in the ways that we can. Organizing is traditionally a role taken on by individual unions, but there are some ways that we can be supportive of those at Central Labor Council. I've tried to support that.

And also the third leg of that stool, I would say: we build and expand out our community engagement and coalition building. Because, you know, you have to bring in those who don't have the benefit of a union card or have a union contract. We have to make sure that we're reaching out more broadly and building coalitions and allies for a workers' rights movement in the city. So we've tried to always continuously and simultaneously be working in those three lanes.

And, you know, I feel we've had some success. But there's always more work to be done. Right off the bat, dealing with the Fight for \$15, dealing with the Occupy movement, dealing with an aggressive lockout of a large unit of utility workers which spans the whole city, a city-wide lockout. And then dealing with a natural disaster like Hurricane Sandy, which really put the city back on its heels. We dealt with that and then other issues. There's been some high-profile contract fights, certainly.

But I think one of the things which I've been really proud of over the past decade is the response that the New York City labor movement, particularly the public sector movement, has had in response to the Janus decision of the Supreme Court. It is clear, if you talk to anybody from a variety of different industries, that there were a lot of people who thought this would be the death knell for the labor movement.

And not only have we figured out a way to survive, but we've also figured out a way to thrive in this environment, and that is to the credit of these organizations. The teachers' union, AFSCME, CWA, District 37, the TWU, the Teamsters – so many public sector organizations have done a phenomenal job at reengaging with their members and talking to them about the value of being part of a union and the collective strength that they have. And they have overwhelmingly responded, those members, and have supported the unions and continue to support their organizations. So they've all done a terrific job. And I think that that's been a real bright light. There's always more work to be done, and it's ongoing. Being in the public sector right-to-work environment, they have adapted and they have overcome that. They're thriving.

Q: Could you say a bit about the unity of the labor

movement in New York today. How many individual unions are in the CLC?

VA: We probably have about 300 unions, which represent collectively, I would say 1.3 million union members who work in unions in the five boroughs of the city of New York, not necessarily live in the city. And I think that there's a lot of unity certainly among them. Last night we had a delegates meeting, like everybody else via Zoom. We have had over 100 delegates every month.

Not only that. Throughout this pandemic, we've not only done delegates meetings every month via Zoom. But we do interim meetings. We have a monthly delegate meeting, but we do an interim call just for checking on people, and we've had tremendous support and communication. Because this pandemic has been a trying time for people on a lot of different levels. On our executive board we've done something very similar: having, initially weekly calls at the start of the pandemic, and now biweekly calls every other week. On the bimonthly calls with our board they've all been very active and working together. So that's something, a very positive thing.

The other area where I think we've seen a high degree of success is the New York City economy. After the last recession, it really grew at a pretty impressive pace. People forget that we peaked out around roughly 3.9 million workers in the city of New York around the time of the recession. Pre-pandemic, we were at about 4.6 million – a pretty significant increase. We have a lot of newer industries and changes in technology. But many of them are figuring out ways to organize workers, particularly in digital media. We've seen the Writers Guild of America East, and the News Guild of CWA reaching out to those workers. It might be a newer form of that profession, but still these workers have some of the same concerns about conditions of work, scheduling, pay, benefits, things like that.

Legal services unions, represented by UAW, and others have done a terrific job of reaching out to workers as well. So I think that those are just two quick examples, but there are other examples too. TWU (Transport Workers Union) has reached out to other modes of transport. From an organizing perspective, as I said, we wanted to support their efforts and they've done a terrific job. The graduate students' union at Columbia has been going out pursuing members, making sure that they have that voice in the workplace. And oftentimes against pretty aggressive, anti-union environment. They've done a terrific job. Many times, younger workers have responded positively.

Q: Do you have hopes in a Biden administration that gig workers, like Uber and Lyft workers, might be ripe for unionization going forward?

VA: Well, I know there's been discussions of this in other states, but certainly at the national AFL CIO, they are continuing to push for the PRO Act, which addresses some of this. But we would like to make sure that protections are afforded to those workers in the gig economy. So we'll see how that plays out.

Q: But building trades historically have sometimes – because they want development jobs – had disagreements with other unions. Like over building Walmart stores here or that Amazon deal in Long Island City. Do you see that as something which is likely to flare up again as people are desperate for new jobs next year?

VA: Well, you know, I'm optimistic because I've seen the cooperation between these other unions on what were more traditional areas where there might be some conflict. So, let's look at climate. When

a lot of unions, perhaps could not reach agreement on an agenda or a role for unions to work collectively on climate, here in New York, they've done it. We created the Climate Jobs New York coalition. It's a 501(c)(3) organization of public sector unions, private sector unions, construction trades, and directors like myself, Gary LaBarbera, President of the Building & Construction Trades Council, and Mike Fishman formerly president of 32BJSEIU. We work in cooperation with Cornell and its Worker Institute to create an agenda for unions to work together in the energy sector and to address climate change.

It's the dual crisis of climate change and addressing inequality through the creation of good jobs. We've seen these things as being interconnected and we figured out a way for a labor movement to work together in what was traditionally, at times, a discussion which would be somewhat difficult for unions. We've been successful at working together on these issues. Climate change needs to be addressed in the energy sector, in the building sector, in the transportation sector, and also in those jobs and those communities that may be transitioning.

So we've had a strong coalition that is working together on these issues and finding areas of mutual cooperation and saying: "Okay, we know that as a society we have to address the crisis of inequality through the creation of good jobs, but we also have to address climate change. Let's figure out a way that we can work together to do that." When we address climate change, we're also simultaneously creating good jobs -- hopefully union jobs -- in various sectors, but certainly good jobs that could help decrease the levels of income



Vincent Alvarez [photo credit: NYC Central Labor Council]

inequality and economic insecurity that we've seen grow over the past several decades. We've worked through those issues. There might be some other areas, which at times, there's some conflicts between different parties. But I know a lot of these folks for many, many, many years, and I'm optimistic, because I see a culture of people wanting to sit down and try to work through and have the city grow.

We want to see the city economy grow. We want to see it come back now, of course, from the pandemic, but we also want to see it grow in a way that the prosperity is broad based. We want to see our city economy be a diverse economy. We want to make sure that we have sufficient revenues to support budgets that reflect our values as a city. But we need to make sure that we have sustainable economic growth as well, in order to support those priorities as well.

We often forget it's not only just another city; it's arguably, I will say, the most important city in the world. It absolutely is. But, you know, there's an ecosystem, which makes our city work in a partnership between the various sectors of the labor movement, academia, government, business and industry. We all kind of work together to achieve, at times when it's working well, this growing and thriving economy. The numbers were pretty staggering. As I said, we reached 4.6 million workers in the city. We had 70 million tourists a year. A growing, thriving, booming travel and tourism industry, entertainment sector, hospitality sector, building sector. So many things going right, everybody kind of working together. That is not always seen in a lot of cities around our country, but it has been seen here. We have to restore that as well, as we climb out of the pandemic.

Q: Before the pandemic, there was a big upsurge of strikes across the country. Why?

VA: In a lot of these big work actions we saw throughout the country, like the teachers' Red For Ed drive, I think there's a correlation between that and the rise of people's support for unions. They've said that, hey, these organizations are the ones that are out there on the front lines fighting for more favorable working conditions, wages, benefits, safety in the workplace, protections in case you get injured at work, retirement security, things like that. I think the folks recognize it. You reach a certain tipping point as a society.

And when we see literally decades of wage pressures against workers and the decline of worker power through collective bargaining, people look and they say: "Wait, wasn't the National Labor Relations Act actually created to support unionization?" Yes, it was. We always say: the NLRA wasn't ever meant to be neutral. The legislation actually says: "that it shall be the policy of the federal government to encourage collective bargaining." So I think you see all these things kind of came together and people were pushing back against the Trump administration, which is being more aggressively anti-worker, and a Trump NLRB which was being more aggressively anti-worker. There was a level of activism that we haven't seen in a while and I think that desire for workers to

have a voice in their workplace is still there and still strong and we want to continue to support that.

Q: And do you think, with the new attention to essential workers, with all the pain that especially minority workers have experienced in this crisis, that we'll come out of this with renewed energy in the labor movement?

VA: I think so. We just spoke about climate. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted lower income communities and communities of color. Quite often when we have these climate-related events throughout the country, as we saw directly here with Sandy, they impact the most vulnerable communities. Very often those are communities of color, lower income communities of color.

I do think that the disproportionate impact that we see on these folks is going to lead all of us to make sure that we continue to work with them. We see policies that are created that are going to be not only looking for our economy to recover in a post pandemic world, but that are also going to deal with some of those who've been disproportionately impacted. There's just too much economic insecurity and we need to try to figure out how do we grow our economy in such a way that the economic activity is going to reach those people who have been left behind for too long. And create meaningful work for them with family sustaining wages and benefits. It's part of a broader discussion, but I think you'll continue to see support for that.

Q: On that hopeful note, I'd like to thank you for being so generous with your time today. Any concluding thoughts?

VA: Only to say that I think we've had a real positive span at the CLC the past 10 years. I know we've got a lot of work ahead of us. But the past 10 years have been some of the most rewarding work that I've had in my life. And I look forward to continuing to serve the workers in the city in the best way that I can. We're fortunate to have a phenomenal team at the Central Labor Council that we put together – some of the most dedicated people that we have. And that's why we've been able to do what we try to do in the city – bring people together.

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ORGANIZING

There is Power in a Union: How I Became a Labor Activist

by Drucilla Cornell

When a global pandemic, ongoing climate crisis and creeping American authoritarianism seem to promise a dark future, one naturally looks for any rays of hope. Recent events have encouraged me to both take a fresh look at encouraging signs around us of youthful activism, and to reassess my own history as a young woman in the labor and anti-war movements during some of our bleakest years. In this article, I will try to make sense of that for a new generation in the hope that it may offer some useful perspectives on meeting the challenges we all face today.

My activism, like so many others in my generation, grew out of the gross contradictions between what the United States supposedly stood for as the leader of the "free world" and the brutal realities of systematic racism, sexism, classism and neo-colonialism abroad. I was born in 1950, the dawn of a promised "American Century," in the Southern California homeland of the John Birch Society, a militant anti-communist organization. It was a scary time. Just five years before, the U.S. had dropped atomic bombs that annihilated two large Japanese cities. And by 1950 Russia had its first nuclear weapon, with more countries soon to follow. I began first grade with the movie *The Red Scare*, which showed us that the "communists" were everywhere and after us and our "democracy." The threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union was always on the horizon. Members of the Democratic Party were condemned as "dangerous communists." To be an "American" was to be a Republican. White meant Anglo-Saxon, or the fantasy that you were. Conspiratorial claims and demonization of anyone thinking differently were core principles. Sound familiar today?!

My mother had me dye my red hair blonde before entering kindergarten because red was associated with having some kind of Irish heritage and a marker that we were not really and truly "white." There was an unchallenged definition of women: no can do. Women can't be lawyers, professors, firefighters, scientists, mathematicians, and on and on. A brief stint as a primary school teacher was all you could hope for before settling down as a wife or mother. So where was the freedom in this claustrophobic world? Well supposedly, unlike those poor people behind the "iron curtain," we could vote.

In 1956 there was a major election between President Dwight Eisenhower and his Democratic rival, Adlai Stevenson. In the gerrymandered town of San Marino, you really could not even vote

if you were a Democrat. There were literally no Democrats in the town. I met my first Democratic party member when I was 17. We had a straw election in my first-grade class. Everyone voted for Dwight Eisenhower. Except me. I don't know why I didn't vote for him. It had nothing to do with his policies, or that he was a Republican or that someone in my family was voting for him. My grandmother said it was because I hated to see anyone excluded from birthday parties. But once I decided I stood by it. I was asked to change my vote twice. When I did not, I was sent down to the principal's office. The worry was that I was under communist influence or maybe that someone in my family was a closeted Democrat. My mother was very upset. My grandmother was called in from work and came up with the birthday idea. We had just started to read "See Dick run and Jane sit and admire him" so I obviously was not influenced by communist propaganda. Nor was I trying to embarrass my mother. All I did was vote. The ideology had been pounded into my head that the right to vote was why the United States was the free world. Something was the matter. Of course, at six I had no idea what. But the lesson lingered somewhere. We have the right to vote – but we are not supposed to exercise it if it goes against how all the neighbors say you are supposed to behave and think.

There was a breath of fresh air in this suffocating environment — my grandmother. Yes, the one who came up with the birthday idea to get me out of my school's worry that I had been contaminated by Communist influence. My grandmother was a German immigrant daughter of an injured railroad worker and an in-house private domestic worker. She was forced to leave school at 13 to support her family in sweatshops, which is what too many non-union workplaces still are. It was her idea to move the family to California where she got a job in the book bindery in a company called Kellow-Brown. She saw a job in the office, jumped at it and got it. In what at first seems like the feminine version of the Horatio Alger story, she married the president of the company who was also from a poor background.

But tragedy struck in the 10th year of their marriage when he died one afternoon of a heart attack. It was 1931, the height of the depression. Of course the question came up: who was to become president of the company? Three weeks after her husband's death she went to Kellow-Brown and said she would become president and that was that. To say that this was unusual is an understatement. Women did not run printing companies. Period. But she did and