



Community-Labor Alliance Sparks South Carolina

■ *Simon Greer*

On October 27, 1994, employees of the Melrose Resort, on South Carolina's Daufuskie Island, made history. They voted 98 to 45 to be represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE). With this vote, these workers became the first in the Hilton Head area to successfully organize and win union representation.

In the South, where corporate control is still the dominant theme and less than 3 percent of the workforce is organized, the victory in Hilton Head was remarkable. The campaign that led to the vote was also remarkable because it pulled together an alliance rarely seen in this part of the country—labor and community. In order to win the vote and survive the 16 months of contract negotiations that followed, the workers depended on the support of an unusual and very successful partnership forged between the union and the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE).

CAFE, a community-based workers rights organization was founded in Greenville, S.C. in 1980. The decision to form CAFE grew out of the the national settlement that ended the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) campaign to organize the J.P. Stevens

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textile plants. ACTWU had been unable to organize any of the 14 Stevens plants located in Greenville County, due in part to a massive anti-union campaign mounted by the entire business community. CAFE recognized that while most South Carolinians would never enjoy the benefits of a union contract given the low rate of organization, the workers still want and need organization. But the definition of “organization” needed to be broadened beyond traditional unions. So CAFE set out to organize county by county around the issues of workers rights. Today CAFE has 12 chapters covering 23 counties and works from this base to organize community-based campaigns to correct unfair employment practices, lobby to improve labor laws, and try to win concrete victories for working people.

CAFE leaders also recognized from the beginning that race has been the number one factor in keeping the south unorganized. The legacy of slavery and segregation has left black and white workers separated and distrustful, and even the relatively few unions that existed here often reflected the racial prejudices of the larger society. Therefore, CAFE has always focused on developing a truly bi-racial membership and leadership. As CAFE approaches 3000 members, the organization is almost exactly half African American and half white. CAFE’s current worker board is balanced in terms of race and gender, with African Americans and women in a slight majority.

While CAFE is not directly connected to labor unions, it seeks to build bridges to labor unions whenever possible. At Hilton Head a community-based campaign directed against the Hyatt Hotel served as the initial introduction for CAFE and the IUOE. CAFE was working with banquet staff to demand that the servers be fairly compensated for their work. The Hyatt, which attaches a gratuity to all banquet bills, was in the habit of keeping the “tips” for itself instead of paying the gratuity

to the workers who earned them. In 1992 CAFE organized the first public protest Hilton Head residents could remember. Members from across the state rallied against the banquet pay policy during the Island's busiest tourist weekend of the year. The protest was big news all over the state and came to the attention of representatives of the IUOE who then met with CAFE.

In the months and then years that followed, IUOE representatives and CAFE staff met consistently to share ideas and organizing strategies. While the fight against Hyatt has not resulted in victory, these meetings laid the groundwork of trust that later became critical to the campaign to organize the workers at the Melrose Resort on Hilton Head.

In the summer of 1994, a Melrose Resort employee contacted CAFE because of job problems he and others were experiencing. He became a CAFE member and expressed interest in unionizing. CAFE put the employees in touch the IUOE, and a series of union organizing meetings were held with the Melrose employees. A bi-racial group of more than thirty employees turned out to form an organizing committee.

Over the course of the three-month campaign, CAFE and the IUOE developed an innovative labor-community campaign. In contrast to many union campaigns, CAFE and IUOE decided to bring as much attention to the organizing drive as possible. A press conference was held to announce CAFE's endorsement of the campaign. As Charles Taylor, CAFE's state coordinator, said, "We knew that Melrose management, the hospitality association, and the chamber of commerce already knew about the campaign, and we wanted to let everyone in the community know so they could support the workers at Melrose."

Melrose management wanted the workers to feel isolated. In an effort to counter management's plans CAFE began to build support in the community. CAFE rallied public interest and support by organizing community events that brought together local residents, ministers, and representatives of community organizations from across the state. CAFE members printed a newsletter written by local workers. The newsletter included an article by a leader of the Melrose organizing committee explaining why he supported the union drive. CAFE distributed thousands of copies to the island's workforce. At the bus stops where workers waited to go home from the island, during the one to two hour bus rides home, at local churches, and in front of supermarkets—CAFE members were there, talking union and building support.

In the last days before the election, CAFE and IUOE brought national attention to the campaign by distributing a letter to the Melrose employees from Reverend Jesse Jackson a South Carolina native. Reverend Jackson wrote, "You are part of an important and historic struggle for

justice and respect at Melrose Resort. You have an opportunity to build a strong union and to create a better life for yourself, your family and your community.” Many observers, including the law firm employed to bust the union, believe this letter was crucial in solidifying the pro-union majority. It helped; there is no doubt about that. But it is the community-labor cooperation that explains the historic vote.

Community organizations brought crucial resources to the campaign, including local media contacts, assistance with public events, respected community leaders, broad community support, and contacts with state, regional and national organizations. With their roots in and commitment to the community, these organizations raised a powerful voice in support of organized labor—a voice that management had difficulty countering.

Since the election, monthly negotiations still have not resulted in a contract agreement. However, as the negotiations drag on the community-labor alliance grows stronger. In the spring of 1995, 70 organizers from across the South who were coming together for a National Organizers Alliance regional meeting went to Melrose and protested the contract delays. CAFE brought the Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, and the local Democratic Club together in an unprecedented local alliance to support the Melrose workers. And in late February of 1996, CAFE members distributed 600 “wanted” flyers featuring a picture Pierre Renault, the General Manager of Melrose, to his neighbors. These community tactics were effective complements to the union’s consistent filing of unfair labor practice charges. Finally, in March the NLRB issued a bad-faith bargaining ruling against the Melrose Club.

In addition to the power that the alliance has brought to bare on Melrose the collaboration has spurred other important organizing efforts in the Hilton Head community.

- Within weeks of the Melrose election, waste haulers at ECO Services contacted CAFE leaders who put them in touch with the IUOE, cards were signed and an election held. Although the union fell just short in the election, the NLRB issued a bargaining order because of ECO management’s gross violations of the law.
- With the union efforts as a background, CAFE helped workers at Wal-mart organize and win an agreement with management to post job openings and promote African Americans into supervisory positions.
- Employees at Ellen Ashley also took actions that yielded the desired result. Their intolerable manager resigned and the managerial position was offered to an employee leader.

TIPS FOR ALLIANCE BUILDERS

While alliances are not always easy to build they are definitely a thrill to watch when they succeed. If we are to respond to the all out assault on working people then building new alliances is a must. I believe that any successful alliance must have the following five characteristics:

- The community organization must be indigenous to the area and must have established it's own identity prior to entering into the alliance. Furthermore, the smaller community organization must maintain its own independent work while collaborating with the union on work of mutual concern.
- The local organization must draw on solid local contacts and relationships. There must also be an honest assessment of their good and bad relationships with other local organizations.
- Unions and community organizations must learn about and develop an appreciation for each other's structures, organizing strategies, and strategic strengths and weaknesses.
- The community organization and the union must use their knowledge of each other to build a trusting relationship over time. Trust must exist prior to any effort to work together.
- The relationship must expand beyond a single campaign to benefit both partners in other areas of their work.

- Bus drivers for the Low Country Regional Transit Authority are currently putting together a proposal to management in hopes of guaranteeing a significant pay increase after three years without a raise.

Clearly, the community-labor collaboration has succeeded not only in strengthening the union campaign but also in making labor issues a central piece of the Hilton Head landscape. Beyond the local efforts, the relationship between CAFE and IUOE staff has blossomed across the state. We have recently worked together on a Grassroots Conversion Coalition at the Charleston Naval Yard; an IOUE organizing drive at a Dupont factory in Lugoff and the 50th anniversary celebration of the Cigar Workers strike of 1945. By building on this solid foundation of cooperation and support we hope to see both CAFE and the union grow. ■