



Organizing for Prevailing Wage In Florida

■ *Janice Fine*

"You know, up until two weeks ago, I didn't know the difference between Davis-Bacon and Oscar Mayer. But now, every construction worker in Broward County knows that this is our fight."

Thus spoke Chris Broderick, a member of Operating Engineers Local 675, on the night building trades and other Broward unions won a local victory that culminated several years of smart political organizing. That night, a majority of the Broward County Commissioners voted to adopt the only county prevailing wage law in the state. How we got there is a story that I've been telling friends and fellow organizers for the last five years.

I went to work as an organizer for the Broward County AFL-CIO in late July 1983. At initial meetings with local union leaders and activists, one issue emerged above all others—prevailing wage. In 1979 the National Right to Work Committee had targeted prevailing wage laws across the country, helping to file 52 bills to weaken or repeal them in state legislatures. Florida was the only

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state to vote for repeal.

Frustrated at the state level, the Broward County Central Labor Council decided to go for a local prevailing wage law and at the same time test its local political muscle for other fights in the future. For ten years, Broward labor had been forging a strong coalition with senior citizen organizations based primarily in the county's numerous condominiums; together they comprised the backbone of a new political order in the Fort Lauderdale area, directly north of Miami and Dade County. After years of Republican dominance, this coalition had come of age, electing Democratic majorities to the county commission and the state house.

The Broward AFL-CIO had spent a great deal of its time and member unions' money helping to elect several county commissioners. Now it posed the prevailing wage ordinance as a litmus test: Would county commissioners who had benefited from labor backing and had pledged their support to labor at election time, support it? Or would they side with the Board of Realtors, the Associated Builders and Contractors and other anti-union forces?

The Issue: Dignity and Decency On the Construction Site, Quality in the Community

The prevailing wage concept dates back to the federal Davis-Bacon Act of 1931, one of the oldest fair labor standards statutes in the country. Davis-Bacon requires that contractors on federally funded construction projects pay whatever wage prevails in the community, whether that wage is union, nonunion or a mix of the two. State laws that require the same thing for state-funded construction projects are called "mini-Davis-Bacons." What we were after in Broward could be called a "micro-Davis-Bacon."

Fundamentally, prevailing wage is progressive legislation because it says that workers should not be forced to compete for a decent standard of living. Prevailing wage helps focus competition on the area of management, production and efficiency, rather than on hiring the cheapest labor available no matter what the cost to local, tax-paying workers.

We argued that, besides protecting wages, a prevailing wage law would reduce local unemployment, which in 1983 was running close to 40% in the Broward building trades. By taking wages out of competition, the law would take away the incentive for contractors to import nonunion workers and pay them less.

Prevailing wage laws also protect against shoddy construction. Money the county may have saved by paying lower wages was being lost to greater supervisory, repair and maintenance costs

and to lower worker productivity, which put government contracts chronically behind schedule.

Prevailing wage is good for communities. When workers are paid more, they have more money to put into the economy. In researching our county ordinance, we found that the increase of one dollar paid a worker in construction resulted in 76 cents of additional income to the area. We also found that the increase of one worker in construction resulted in 1.09 additional jobs.

The Campaign

Over the summer of 1983, a core group of labor leaders assessed the prospects for passage of prevailing wage by the county commission. We found that at least a couple of our "allies"—commissioners who had actually pledged at our COPE interviews to support the ordinance—were having second thoughts.

"This was one of the more educational aspects of the campaign for me," said Robert McMenemy, Political and Legislative Director of Operating Engineers Local 675. "Here these politicians had received our backing—not just our money but our labor as well—and had pledged to vote in favor of prevailing wage, even signing our COPE questionnaire to that effect. And they were still acting uncommitted."

In the end, two of our original supporters ended up "flaking," one by voting no and the other by not showing up—which was his way of doing us a favor! But the campaign we waged was strong enough to sway a commissioner we had not counted in our column and to hold the other commissioners to their commitments.

We identified several goals for the campaign. Of course we wanted to win the ordinance itself, but that was not our only purpose. We wanted to test the political coalition we had been instrumental in fashioning—to see that our community participation would also help move labor's agenda, that it was a two-way street with our community allies and local Democratic activists and elected officials. Most importantly, we wanted to use the campaign to build the local labor movement. We saw it as a vehicle for identifying and training secondary leaders and rank-and-file activists in valuable political skills. Empowerment was our Number One objective, and with that in mind, we planned the campaign.

Over the course of the campaign, two unions lent full-time staff to the effort: Harry Stultz, a member of the UA Air Conditioners and Pipe Fitters local, and Paul Horan, a business agent out of

the Carpenters District Council.

Chief among our observations was that too often union members are *told* by their unions to support an issue because it is "good for labor." This strategy may have worked in the earliest days of trade union militance, but it does not work, by itself, today. We wanted workers to make up their minds to support prevailing wage not just because their union told them to, but because they individually felt that it was an important issue. What better way for a worker to renew his or her faith in their union than to become involved in an issue out of self-interest—only to discover that their union is out on the frontlines fighting to win on that issue? This is one of the best ways that we can rebuild a strong union identification among union workers.

Similarly, we observed that information accessible to labor leaders almost never filters down to the rank and file. When unions do make attempts to do so, they post notices on bulletin boards or leave leaflets at entrances or exits. We wanted to take the information off the bulletin boards and place it in the hands of workers—with a clear explanation and appeal for help. That's why we decided to make use of a technique called the "on-the-job canvass."

Canada's New Democratic Party, working with labor, had developed this exciting technique for reaching out to trade unionists. The canvass was brought to the states by the International Association of Machinists, who developed training films and materials and pioneered the use of the canvass in the U.S. Marty Letsinger, then Education Director of the Florida AFL-CIO, had taken training with the Machinists and was starting to set the state on fire with the new possibilities the canvass presented for internal organizing. I got a crash course from Marty, presented it to our steering committee, and we decided to make it an integral part of our campaign.

The basic concept of the canvass is simple: One worker agrees to talk to 20 others at work (during breaks) one-on-one, not in a group. They talk about a particular issue, with the aim of getting each worker to do something, right then and there, in support of that issue, and to pledge to do more later on. There is an over-all canvass coordinator—in this case, Harry, Paul and me—and then one canvass organizer for every 10 canvassers. The canvass coordinator keeps up with each of the organizers, and the organizers keep up with each of the canvassers.

We held trainings for each level of the canvass. We trained the leadership to help with over-all coordination. We trained shop stewards, foremen, business agents and active rank-and-filers to



IUOE Local 675

On the podium at rally for prevailing wage law are (from left to right) Chic Perez, president of Broward County AFL-CIO; County Commissioner Howard Forman; Bob McMenemy, Operating Engineers Local 675 Legislative Director; Congressman Larry Smith; and State Senator Peter Weinstein.

be canvass organizers, and we trained over two hundred workers to canvass. To be sure that canvassers felt prepared to respond to questions, we gave them all plenty of information on the prevailing wage issue and on the subject of unions and politics in general.

We developed a basic piece of literature that did not have a lot of heavy writing. It simply laid out the basics of the issue, told what we needed people to do, and contained tear-off postcards for the commissioners and a tear-off pledge that the canvassers turned in to the canvass organizers, who then called each worker before every action. So, right there, when workers got turned on about the issue, they could take action!

Over a two-week period, one worker talked to one worker about prevailing wage on almost every job site in the county, and labor leaders were pleasantly surprised by the results. Chic Perez, the President of the Broward County AFL-CIO, still recalls: "We

always assumed that they didn't care. But what we saw was that when they had the right information, and were asked to get involved, they got involved!"

In a three-week period we held four events that canvassers asked workers to take part in: a rally in front of the county commission on October 26; an open hearing on November 9; a phone-in to the swing commissioners on November 15 and 16; and the final vote November 17.

Many other things happened spontaneously during this period. According to Harry Stultz, "The high level of mobilization allowed us to take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves at the last minute—like packing a debate or, in one of our favorite coups, winning a call-in poll on support for prevailing wage conducted by the most popular early morning radio show."

The most exciting part of the campaign was watching the troops mobilize—and watching the reaction of the building trades leadership. At our first action, we had close to a thousand members march on the county commission. Many work-sites virtually shut down for the duration of the rally. "I saw guys that I had literally never seen before wearing union insignias on their shirts and on their hats," said Jim Weldon, President of the Broward County Building and Construction Trades Council. There was tremendous excitement in the air that morning, and members kept asking what else they could do on the campaign.

The Citizens Committee: Labor's Allies Go to Bat

In addition to the major actions, just about every day for over a month members, leaders and community allies mobbed the offices of the county commissioners in an unprecedented grass-roots lobbying effort. Here were workers, straight off their job sites, coming into their county government to visit their elected officials—revolutionary for Broward County. And they were the best informed and most articulate spokespersons for the prevailing wage cause. After each visit, they'd call to let us know what the commissioners had said—providing valuable, up-to-the-minute intelligence on how these commissioners were leaning. "Labor and her allies took the Commission by storm. My colleagues and I could not get over how persistent and persuasive they were," said Howard Forman, a county commissioner and sponsor of the prevailing wage ordinance.

At the Citizens Committee kick-off press conference, State Representative Fred Lippman told the press: "Prevailing wage is

good public policy because it benefits the entire county by ensuring more jobs for Broward residents, more capital for Broward's tax base, and better quality construction on county projects. It is just good common sense that our county construction contracts should go to county contractors and county workers, thereby fueling Broward's economy. I do not believe that our county should accept the taxes of our construction workers, only to turn around and use it to put them out of work . . . and this is the situation we find ourselves in today.'

From the outset, we knew that labor alone could not win prevailing wage. While we understood the importance of mobilizing our own, we also recognized a need for a strong coalition component to our campaign. It would have been too easy for our opposition to brand this a "special interest" issue (which they did anyway) if we had not had strong community allies playing a major role.

There is no question that the primary beneficiaries of prevailing wage are construction workers. As such, it was easiest to construct the most convincing arguments for those workers. Prevailing wage is a worker issue. But we argued: "What is good for workers is good for the community." There is no question that prevailing wage is good for local economies; working with a labor economist, we carefully shaped arguments that were legitimate and convincing for our community allies to use.

We asked one of our greatest allies, Fred Lippman (a state representative and chair of the Broward County legislative delegation), to help with the campaign. He and several other community leaders and elected officials brought together the Broward Citizens Committee for Prevailing Wage. It was this committee that hosted the public hearing and represented us in the media and at many public debates. The existence of this committee made it much tougher for the media—almost 100% opposed to prevailing wage—and our opponents, the Gold Coast Committee for the Preservation of Free Enterprise, to brand this strictly a labor issue.

Labor was able to call in ten years worth of chits and the Citizens Committee brought together an impressive group of labor's allies, including the presidents of almost every Democratic Club in the county, the President of the National Organization of Women, many of the retirees' condominium associations in the county, a majority of the state representatives and senators, clergy, black community activists and many others, including some Republican elected officials. And try as they did to brand the Citizens Committee a front group for labor, the media was forced to cover its events.

The Public Debate and Why We Won

"THE PREVAILING WAGE LAW... IT COULD BE THE DEATH OF YOU, THE TAXPAYER" began the full-page ad in the *Ft. Lauderdale News and Sun Sentinel*. Underneath the headline, a drawing of a skeleton dressed in Tory uniform and standing atop a pyramid of skulls stared out at readers. The text declared "It's time to blow the whistle on waste" and included a tear-off coupon to be signed and sent to commissioners.

"The public good requires 'no' vote on prevailing pay" read the headline in the second of what would be three staff editorials in the *Miami Herald*. The *Ft. Lauderdale News* editorialized the importance of a nay vote five times, even going so far as to include a tear-off coupon right on the editorial page that readers could send in to commissioners.

Our opposition cloaked themselves in free enterprise and argued that prevailing wage would kill construction in Broward County. They ignored the fact that most of the major public and private projects were being built at the union wage. They charged that under prevailing wage all workers on county construction projects would be paid the same "superwage" regardless of their skill, productivity or experience. We explained that prevailing wage merely set a floor not a ceiling for wages, and that the prevailing wage itself differed by trade and type of construction.

The Associated Builders and Contractors rounded up the usual suspects—right-wing Republicans, realtors, scab contractors and the Chamber of Commerce—in their effort to thwart us at the



IBEW Local 728

... rally at Broward County Courthouse.

commission. They held press conferences, produced reports, visited editorial boards and appeared at innumerable public forums on prevailing wage. They clearly won the battle for the hearts and minds of the local media. But the coalition they tried to build never seemed to quite gel. We often heard that there was a lot of fighting inside, and except for the full-page ads and articles in the newspapers, they seemed at a loss for how to fight us.

Arithmetically, we realized that they were at a severe disadvantage. After all, there are a lot fewer realtors and anti-union contractors than there are workers, retirees and family members.

Momentum was on our side, and we never retreated from the opposition, even when it meant appearing at hostile forums or painstakingly preparing for editorial board visits we knew we could not hope to win. Every negative editorial was answered, every negative comment over the radio was responded to. We ceded nothing.

In many ways it seemed our opponents were just not used to such perseverance. Ft. Lauderdale, county headquarters for the Ferrari-set, was after all supposed to be *their* town. What had occurred for there all of a sudden to be a good chance for this heinous proposal to become law? They were shaken and forced to confront a harsh reality—the times they had a changed, and the unions now really had some power.

Why did we win? Because in this classic case of money going head-to-head with people, money lost. We made a strong case, but more than that, we backed it up with thousands of postcards and phone calls, hundreds of visits to commissioners, and a history of campaign support for these commissioners.

One commissioner who opposed us, after pledging to support us on her COPE questionnaire, decided not to seek re-election after being told by enough of the coalition leaders and just plain voters that they would no longer support her. Another commissioner ended up taking to a hospital sick-bed and holing up there until the vote was safely over.

Commissioner Howard Craft, who had never been known for his pro-labor record, became a true believer that fall. Telling the *Ft. Lauderdale News* why he had changed from a no vote to a yes vote, Craft explained: "You should offer a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. What we're doing by endorsing prevailing wage is saying to the contractor, 'We want you to include a fair day's pay for the worker in your bid.' You do get a higher quality job, there is no question about that, if you have a higher quality laborer performing the job." Yep, we couldn't have agreed with him more. ■