

Patton - Henry
FOR KENTUCKY!



“I Think the Unions Beat Me”

The 1995 Kentucky Governor’s Race

■ *Michael Matuszak*

The political pundits were almost universal in agreement: Republican Larry Forgy would win the governor’s race and end a 24-year drought of Republicans in the governor’s mansion. Forgy, Ronald Reagan’s state campaign manager in both the 1980 and 1984 races, had reached out to the far Right in hopes of insuring his victory. Throughout the campaign, Forgy emphasized conservative “family values” and a belief “in the natural family order where the man works and the woman stays home and raises the kids.” He said, “It’s what the people want and what they will get if I am elected governor.” Speaking to gatherings of Christian Right groups such as the Freedom Heritage Forum, Forgy said, “If people such as yourselves do not take control of this country, people who disagree with you will be glad to run it for you.”

Some of the “people who disagreed” and threatened Forgy’s definition of control were the organized workers of Kentucky. Throughout the campaign, Forgy emphasized his anti-labor agenda and voiced strong support for right-to-work legislation, pro-employer reform of workers’ compensation, and opposition to a prevailing wage law. He opposed collective bargaining for public employees saying, “If you think state government is stagnant today. . . it would be doubly so with an overlay of union organization.”

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Instead of marginalizing labor unions, however, Forgy's anti-labor posture "put labor issues on the front burner," according to Morgan Bayless, COPE Director of the Kentucky State AFL-CIO. In this climate, Democratic candidate Paul Patton offered a clear alternative and actively sought labor's endorsement early in the campaign. With the lines so clearly drawn, organized labor might have run a typical political campaign, but the 1995 election was not typical. It was the first governor's race conducted since the 1992 adoption of a new campaign finance law that aimed to limit spending. Labor was faced with new challenges in offering support to their pro-labor candidate.

Under the new law, each candidate had to limit spending to no more than \$1.8 million in order to receive a state subsidy. This spending limit included money spent by outside organizations on campaigning beyond their membership. Organized labor was faced with the question of how it could make a difference in such an important campaign without making monetary or in-kind contributions to the candidate. This question goes to the heart of the dilemma that campaign finance reform poses for a progressive labor movement. On one hand, a progressive labor movement needs to support a truly democratic political process in which access to money does not determine access to political power. On the other hand, the movement needs to be able to support candidates who will defend the rights of workers and organized labor.

The Kentucky election is one in which organized labor grappled with this dilemma and discovered that the democratic tools of education, coalition building, and organizing, which are the keys to building a strong labor movement, can also play a key role in winning elections.

HOW THE ELECTION WAS WON

Rather than follow the traditional practice of concentrating on contributions to a Democratic candidate, resources were dedicated to educating and mobilizing union members across the state. Labor unions had wide latitude to run campaigns among their members.

By continually emphasizing the importance of defeating right-to-work legislation, working for prevailing wages, and defending worker compensation, the labor movement ensured that these issues remained central to the debate. Such a keen focus on the concerns of working people also helped to avoid any waffling by the Democratic candidate. In the pages of the Farm Bureau newspaper, Patton reiterated his support of collective bargaining as the most effective means for all workers to communicate with employers. Carl Dowell, UAW 862 president, said that Patton "stuck to his guns. He didn't sugar coat his views or hedge

on his position.”

For the AFL-CIO this was more than a governor’s race. According to Bayless, they “looked at it as a [preview] of where Kentucky [would] stand in the presidential race and in the congressional districts that Republicans captured or nearly won last year. It had so many far-reaching consequences for our next election. We just had to make sure the turnout was there, and that the membership was excited and stayed excited.” Getting Patton to the governor’s office was a long process that first involved building a labor coalition in the greater Louisville area of Jefferson County, and then launching an unprecedented statewide effort coordinated by the National and State AFL-CIO.

THE JEFFERSON COUNTY LABOR COALITION AND CAMPAIGN

Labor efforts in Jefferson County were critical to any hope of electoral success. The county is the most heavily populated in Kentucky and has the highest concentration of union members in the state. To win the race, Patton had to win Jefferson County by enough votes to overcome the rural support of the GOP. In addition to the efforts of the national and state AFL-CIO, a coalition of unions spearheaded the Jefferson County campaign.

Jerry Vincent, business agent and secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 783, was a key player in coordinating the work of the labor coalition that helped deliver the vote. The Teamsters had formed the coalition the previous year to protest a decision by the United Way (a major recipient of Teamster and union donations) to hire a non-union contractor for a building project. Coordinating efforts with the central labor council and the Building Trades, the Teamsters sponsored a meeting and invited trade unionists in the area to join together and challenge the United Way. The unions even met with bankers to discuss the possibility of starting their own fund, recognizing that while “poor people need help” the rights of workers should not be neglected. In response, the United Way revised its criteria for contracting the job and a union contractor was selected.

Analyzing the United Way dispute, Vincent believes it provided area unions with a “focus point” and led them to realize “[they] could do something.” Beyond the good feelings generated by the victory, the United Way dispute brought together AFL-CIO affiliates and non-affiliates. After the dispute, the unions agreed to keep the coalition together in a loose form and meet when a problem arose.

The gubernatorial primary race presented just such a “problem.” When State Senate President John Eck Rose, a Democratic candidate

for governor, came out in favor of right-to-work legislation the group responded. While support for right-to-work was expected from the Republican camp, “it was the first time the same issue came up twice [from both Democrats and Republicans]” according to Teamster representative Vincent. Right-to-work gave the unions a real issue, something they could relate to, and one from which the “Christian Coalition could not pull us away.” At a meeting hosted by the Teamsters, Vincent told representatives of the various area unions that they must “focus on one thing—Paul Patton.” Labor officials believed it was important to get Patton, the labor backed candidate for governor, selected as the Democratic candidate in the primary, without a runoff. The task was to deliver the labor vote in a decisive primary victory by maintaining a solid labor front (something which had been problematic in the past) and generating momentum for the uphill fall campaign.

To help Eastern Kentucky develop economically, [Republican] Forgy wants to “wind down some of the problems that the organized labor mentality imposes on the area. . .”

Louisville Courier Journal

The effort began with a small cell of union leaders. Vincent and others labeled the existing coalition as inadequate, and initial efforts were devoted to building an organization through regular meetings and expanded participation. While the unions were each free to do their own thing, they agreed on a common strategy to get Patton elected by concentrating on simple bread-and-butter labor issues. Individual unions used a variety of methods to educate their own members. For example, the Teamsters, with an estimated 20,000 members in Kentucky, set up an 800 number so that over-the-road drivers could call in for campaign updates.

John McCarty, a Teamster representative assigned to work on the campaign full time, observed that the campaign “relied less on pollsters” and instead “listened to what our members were saying.” In his words, “we felt the pulse of the campaign through our members. . . Our members were a barometer.” Late in the campaign, however, the labor issues were played out, and McCarty observed that “right-to-work only plays so long and the message becomes boring.” To keep the campaign energized and to reach the families of union members and retirees they broadened their approach. They noticed that union retirees, many of whom belonged to fishing clubs, were concerned about a GOP proposal to sell four state-owned lakes. Fliers were sent out addressing the lake issue and it struck a nerve. Working as volunteers, union retirees proved

invaluable in the campaign. McCarty believes that through the efforts of the labor coalition “everybody had an issue [and] a reason to vote.”

THE AFL-CIO STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN

The organizing campaign in Jefferson County was a success. And after the primary the unions knew they could tackle the general election with the same simple strategy: educate and mobilize. Approximately six weeks before the November election, six labor campaign coordinators (one each from the Kentucky AFL-CIO, CWA, UFCW, and two from the regional AFL-CIO) were each assigned to a specific Congressional district to begin work in the field. First, coordinators were instructed to meet with every local union president in their election district. For most, this meant making more than 50 contacts. Local union presidents were asked to leaflet their workplace by October 13 with a simple flier comparing Patton’s and Forgy’s views on organized labor.

Next, every local union president was asked to send a letter to each member of their union encouraging their support for Paul Patton. COPE Director Morgan Bayless explained that “our research shows that rank-and-file union members respect the opinions of their local union presidents and regard them as reliable sources of information.” On October 16, the effort was turned into a media event in a number of locations throughout the state when local union presidents converged on post offices carrying bags loaded with letters to their members. In Louisville, 41 local union presidents attended a press conference at the main post office bringing with them an estimated 60,000 pieces of mail. Across the state, it is estimated, that more than 100,000 letters were mailed that week.

In the last 10 days before the election, the State AFL-CIO organized “precinct walks” in selected communities. State AFL-CIO Education Director, Dewey Parker, one of the campaign coordinators, said it was the first time the Kentucky AFL-CIO had engaged in such an effort independent of the Democratic Party. The precinct walkers consisted of local union officers and rank-and-file members who volunteered their time. Sophisticated statistical data, provided by the National AFL-CIO, identified key precincts of persuadable voters to be targeted. Precinct walkers were provided with fliers and a list of union households. Because changes in campaign law prohibited unions from coordinating efforts with the Democratic Party and communicating with the general public, precinct walkers only knocked on the doors of union households. AFL-CIO officials report that the names and addresses provided by the National were accurate, and based on the turn out and vote counts in

targeted precincts, the tactic was an overwhelming success.

To keep the momentum going, the state Fed faxed regular editions of its Campaign Alert to 125 local unions across the state. The Alert contained information on events, activities, and ideas to energize local efforts. The updates kept the locals plugged into the campaign and were widely circulated and posted. Many locals duplicated the messages and passed them out in workplaces upon receipt. The AFL-CIO estimates that the locals distributed 480,000 fliers to labor council and local union members.

A phone bank organized by the national AFL-CIO made over 150,000 phone calls to union members during the campaign and coordinated specific follow-up mailings based on caller responses. The campaign reached a fever pitch when Richard Trumka, the recently elected secretary-treasurer of the national AFL-CIO, attended several rallies the weekend before the election. In a report summarizing the various activities, AFL-CIO officials said that, "In this election we had more union volunteers than in any campaign that we have ever worked. Most of the credit must be given to Paul Patton, because he did not run from us. He publicly stated he was our candidate. This helped us more than we could ever say."

THE VICTORY

The mobilization in Jefferson County and across the state by the AFL-CIO paid off. After a surprisingly easy primary victory, Patton carried Jefferson County by less than 25,000 votes in the November election. The statewide margin of victory was less than 22,000 votes. In a post-election interview the unsuccessful Republican candidate Forgy said, "I think the unions beat me and I'm not too proud to say it. They had every reason to fear me. . . They feared me; they came after me; and there is no question that they cost me more than 20,000 votes. . . I carried Kentucky and they carried Jefferson County."

According to Vincent, the coalition represented the first time unions had gotten together since 1957. McCarty attributes this to the effect of campaign reform laws. He believes the law forced a "separation of the labor movement from the state Democratic Party." Rather than contribute funds to the party, the labor movement spent its money internally. McCarty notes that "the money did not go to road pavers," but was used instead to educate and mobilize the membership. The campaign itself was not about brilliant strategizing but rather the result of basic organizing skills and hard work. In Vincent's words, in the beginning of the campaign "we felt like a blind hog rooting for an acorn, but in retrospect it was a good campaign."

LESSONS FROM THE CAMPAIGN

A few important lessons can be gained from the 1995 governor's race. First, while the changes in campaign finance law forced unions to take a fresh look at how they participate in elections, the upset victory clearly shows that the labor movement still possesses significant political power. And, in Kentucky, this power may be more effectively used when mobilized independent of the Democratic Party. Second, union members can be more effective communicators than party operatives on the bread-and-butter labor issues that were the primary focus of the campaign. Finally, the results of the election may also send a message to aspiring candidates: If you present a clear alternative to the anti-labor attacks of conservatives and have the courage to stick to your position, you can attract working class votes. ■

LRR FOCUS

On the heels of the Democratic victory in the 1995 Kentucky Governor's race, the Kentucky Republican Party filed a complaint with the state Registry of Election Finance. The complaint alleges collusion between the Democratic Party, the Patton campaign, various unions, and the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI), a Black voter education group based in Louisville, Kentucky. The Lexington Herald-Leader reported that "outside groups with ties to the Democrats, including unions and the A. Philip Randolph Institute. . . spent at least \$300,000 on the election. Most of the spending was in Jefferson County," which Patton carried by a large margin. The GOP has made unsubstantiated claims that collusion enabled the Patton campaign to skirt the election reform spending limits.

The 1995 campaign was the first conducted under the new regulations which imposed spending limits and lower maximum contributions—changes which the Republicans opposed. The effort of unions and other organizations to educate and turn out voters were paramount in the Patton victory. A primary target of the Republican charges are the activities of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. On election day, close to 600 mainly Black youths were paid by the state Democratic Party and APRI to hand out leaflets and offer voters rides to the polls in predominately Black neighborhoods. APRI reports that it paid between 200 to 400 teenagers \$20 to \$35 a day to pass out fliers and encourage voter turnout on and before election day. On election day it also provided 26 vans equipped with loudspeakers to transport voters to and from polling sites. APRI insisted that it engaged in non-partisan efforts to increase the vote in Black precincts. The Lexington Herald-Leader reports that so far "the registry has turned up no smoking gun—such as an incriminating letter or telephone record—to indicate that Patton's campaign colluded with anyone." ■