

# Executive Vice President's Report



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**A**LL OF US in the union movement believe in solidarity. And each of us has moments when we see solidarity at its very best.

One of those moments for me was in my hometown of San Antonio in May 2005. I traveled on the “CAFTA—We Don’t Hafta” tour with three union activists: Marta Sonia Díaz Palacios of El Salvador, Reynaldo Federico González of Guatemala and Albino Vargas Barrantes of Costa Rica.

The tour had a great launch in Washington, D.C. In fact, it was a huge breakthrough for the U.S. union movement to be working hand in hand with Latin American union movements to oppose a trade scheme that would hurt workers here and in Central America. But it was during the workers’ forum at the Communications Workers of America Local 6143 in San Antonio where Marta, Reynaldo and Albino really brought home the meaning of solidarity. They talked about the damage CAFTA

would bring about in the lives of working people here and in their own countries. Their message that day was “We don’t want good jobs in the United States to be sent to our countries and turned into terrible jobs without rights or benefits for our countries.”

That morning, everyone in the CWA hall knew in their hearts what they already had heard many times: Working people really are one, whatever their language, or skin color, or union or nation. That’s exactly the kind of solidarity that all of us try to build in the ways we know best. In the past few years, I have focused on five key areas: building solidarity by working with the AFL-CIO constituency groups, raising awareness for the need for justice among immigrant workers, building relationships with other union movements in the Americas, campaigning for voter protection and advancing the efforts of the nation’s working women and people of color.

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## **Constituency Groups Gain Strength Through Unity**

In the past four years, the AFL-CIO constituency groups have become stronger, more focused and more effective—and in the past two years, they also have become more united than ever.

In 2003, the six groups met to talk about how they could be involved in the 2004 elections. The groups include the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Coalition of Labor Union Women, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement and Pride At Work. They formed a nonpartisan group, the Labor Coalition for Community Action (LCCA). Led by Gloria Johnson, the longtime president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, LCCA's aim is to mobilize, in a more unified fashion, grassroots activism in local communities.

A year later, LCCA turned out to be the largest coordinated effort in the history of the constituency groups. In that time, LCCA:

- Sponsored 23 town hall meetings in 14 states at which citizens talked about issues ranging from revitalizing cities to improving access to health care to creating affordable housing and more jobs with living wages.
- Conducted voter registration, education and get-out-the vote activities in 41 cities, enlisting more than 2,000 volunteers.
- Developed a southern strategy to mobilize African American and Latino voters in Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana and Mississippi.

This year, LCCA is building on the foundations laid in the 2004 election cycle. The coalition is moving forward with town hall meetings on issues for women and workers of color in Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Detroit.

## **Justice for Immigrant Workers**

"The AFL-CIO proudly stands on the side of immigrant workers." That was how the Executive Council began its resolution five years ago that charted a new course for the union movement on the issue of immigration.

We have been true to our word. The partnership between our movement and the nation's immigrant communities is closer now than it has been in generations. Advancing the rights of immigrant workers has become one of the highest priorities of the AFL-CIO. It makes good sense and is the right thing to do.

There was dramatic evidence of this in 2003 when the AFL-CIO and affiliated unions sponsored the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. In September, hundreds of immigrant workers and their allies representing hundreds of organizations boarded buses in 10 cities across the country and converged on Washington, D.C., New Jersey and New York.

This year, the struggle has moved to Congress, where there are several proposals for immigration reform. The basic AFL-CIO position in this debate is clear and unchanged. We're fighting for citizenship for all undocumented workers and their families who have been working hard, paying their taxes and contributing to their communities, no matter where they were born or whether they are documented or undocumented. They deserve the right to a minimum wage, a safe workplace and the freedom to form unions.

There is a moral principle here. In my opinion, no one has put it better than Kyron Parris, an immigrant from Trinidad and a proud member of Operating Engineers Local 15C. "Immigrants work longer hours, get the hardest jobs and the least pay," he said at the time of the

Freedom Ride. “We need a way to make sure that law-abiding immigrants who work hard get respect.”

Exactly.

## **Building Solidarity Throughout the Western Hemisphere**

With economic globalization growing ever deeper and wider, solidarity with our union sisters and brothers in other countries has taken on renewed urgency—and nowhere is the need for such solidarity greater than here in the Western Hemisphere. That is why one of my biggest priorities has been to build the natural alliances among unions in the Americas.

Four years ago, I had the great honor of becoming the first U.S. trade unionist and the first woman elected president of the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), the federation of union movements that represents more than 45 million workers throughout the Western Hemisphere. I was re-elected for another four-year term in April 2005. From the start, this has been an incredible experience. I’m constantly seeing firsthand what all of us already know: The interests of working people in this country are the same as those of working families in every part of the Americas.

CAFTA is a perfect example. We’ve seen what a terrible disaster the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been for workers here and in the rest of North America. I’ve had the chance to get involved in ORIT’s effort to build an alliance of unions and legislators against CAFTA, both here in the United States and in Central America. We won a big victory on Capitol Hill when the Congressional Hispanic Caucus rejected CAFTA and have given all our support to the Costa Ricans

who are taking a stand against the pro-CAFTA forces in the Costa Rican National Assembly.

In a further demonstration of hemispheric solidarity, our sisters and brothers in ORIT now have taken a strong stand on some of the issues that mean the most to us in the United States. At their April convention, ORIT members voted for resolutions we in the AFL-CIO had brought to the table calling for support of our Employee Free Choice Act; more inter-American cooperation in protecting immigrant workers and strengthening their freedom to choose unions; resisting CAFTA and the Free Trade Area of the Americas; and including effective guarantees of labor rights in trade agreements.

It was further proof that with multinational corporations threatening us all, workers in the Americas are planning and acting and struggling effectively together.

## **Advancing the Efforts of Working Women and People of Color**

Although working women are nearly half of the workforce, they represent 55 percent of newly organized workers. What’s more, in organizing campaigns in which most workers are women, they are more likely to win their union. So there is no question that working women are absolutely critical for the union movement’s future.

That is why working women have been at the center of much of the AFL-CIO’s activity in the past several years. A few highlights:

- In 2003, we convened the first Work and Family Conference on Bargaining and Policy. It brought together more than 250 union activists to discuss how we all can advance paid family leave,

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child care, dependent care and control over our work hours.

- In 2002 and 2004, our Working Women Vote program was a big success. For example, while working women as a whole voted for John Kerry by only 51 percent to 48 percent, union women voted for Kerry by an overwhelming 45-point margin (72 percent to 27 percent).

In summer 2002, the AFL-CIO Executive Council confronted the challenges women face in joining unions. Balancing work and family needs, women often hesitate to get involved in organizing campaigns. And even though more and more women are joining as members and becoming grassroots union leaders, they are inadequately represented at the highest levels.

To address these obstacles, the Executive Council set up the Overcoming Barriers to Women in Organizing and Leadership project. It researched barriers women face in attaining union leadership and membership, developed a comprehensive report and presentation, engaged union women nationally and produced diversity policy recommendations for ratification at the 2005 Convention.

The report notes, “There is a clear road map for reaching working women. Women respond strongly to traditional women’s economic issues—equal pay, work and family and control over work hours.” And it recommends (among other things) unions develop plans to increase women’s representation as leaders at all levels, appoint women to core positions in unions and provide work and family programs to help women fulfill both their union and home responsibilities.

In addition to this report, the Executive Council’s Civil and Human Rights Committee

prepared a report on overcoming barriers to people of color in unions and union leadership structures. Similar to the findings of the report on working women, this report shows we have much more work to do to improve the participation of people of color at all levels of the union movement. Recommendations are similar—the need to increase representation of people of color as leaders at all levels, appointing people of color to core positions in unions and combating issues of institutional racism.

You’ll be considering these recommendations at the AFL-CIO Convention. I urge you to study them closely and take them very seriously.

## Protecting Our Right to Vote

In 1965 when I was a young woman in Texas, the Voting Rights Act became law and the world changed for people who look like me. We’re celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act this summer and we are fighting hard to make sure that many of its key provisions are reauthorized. I’ll never forget when it passed. For the first time in American history, people of color could hope their constitutional right to vote finally was guaranteed and secure. Then came the 2000 election scandal. There were no lynchings as in the old days—but in Florida and other states, thousands of people of color and immigrants were cheated out of their vote because of faulty voting equipment, police checkpoints that hampered access to polling stations and misleading voter instructions.

Early last year, we in the AFL-CIO resolved that we were not going to let that kind of abuse take place in the 2004 election. In March, the Executive Council launched a massive voting rights project, My Vote, My Right.

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International unions, locals, state federations, central labor councils, constituency groups, the Alliance for Retired Americans and the AFL-CIO Lawyers Coordinating Committee all pitched in. Together, we educated and mobilized union members, arming them with the “Protect Your Vote” information they needed to defend their right to cast a ballot and ensure it was fairly counted. We let them know their rights under the Help America Vote Act. We recruited union members and retirees to serve as poll watchers. We set up teams of My Vote, My Right advocates to investigate how well state and local authorities were obeying election laws. We utilized radio, TV and other media to spread the word in our communities about registering and voting.

Was every voice in America heard and every vote properly counted because of the union movement’s My Vote, My Right campaign? No—but there’s no question we made a huge difference in one city after another. By working together and coordinating our efforts, we learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t. Far more important was that at the end of the day, the election was fairer and more honest. In coming years,

we will build on the networks we created and expand our efforts to ensure that every vote is counted.

## Shaping Our Future

When I started out in the union movement as a secretary in a small local union in Texas more than 35 years ago, many people in our movement considered international solidarity and issues of concern to people of color and women to be secondary. The real business of the union movement was supposed to be other things.

How times have changed. Today, when we see global corporations exporting our good jobs to low-income economies in which workers are underpaid and exploited, we know we must build effective alliances with our union sisters and brothers in those countries. Here at home, strong, vibrant constituency groups and a powerful women’s agenda are critical for ensuring the concerns of women and people of color are reflected throughout the union movement.

For our movement not only to survive but to prosper, we have to make those choices. We have to—and we will.

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Linda Chavez-Thompson