

Organizing for Change in Contentious Times: Three Stories

Story Three

We moved to Buffalo from Chicago in January 1986. Eunice had been called to be the Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Western New York. It was a return to our beginnings in ministry. In 1952, I had been called from my Union Theological Seminary graduation by the then Buffalo-Niagara Presbytery to a new church development project in the Town of Tonawanda. The region was an industrialized section of north Buffalo. We spent four good years organizing and then building the Northminster Presbyterian Church before moving to Manila in the Philippines in 1957. The Northminster congregation had been part of the Presbyterian Church's great era of new church development.

Eunice had spent her life in Buffalo at an earlier age. She lived in Buffalo in 1935 when her father Pete Blanchard's aeronautical work had brought the family there to work at Curtiss-Wright. In 1986 this was old territory to our family, but the times had changed Buffalo since our earlier years. In 1952, Buffalo was a city of 500,000 people. In the ensuing years the city had grown outward, and the core now was down to 350,000 folk. The industrial base, which had been central to Buffalo's old economy had diminished. The Bethlehem Steel Company in Lackawanna had become a shell. With major steel gone, the local automobile industry and its accessory manufacturing plants were being threatened.

Not long after our arrival in Buffalo we could feel the tremors of the moving trucks hauling Buffalo's remaining industries away. Upon arrival, I had been called to an interim position at the South Presbyterian Church in South Buffalo, in the vicinity of the defunct Bethlehem Steel in nearby Lackawanna. Our previous experiences both in Youngstown and in South Chicago had prepared us for the dynamics of a deindustrializing Buffalo. We moved into Allentown, the downtown Buffalo neighborhood which had been the older residential and theatre district of the city. We were within a block of Symphony Circle, the home of the Buffalo Philharmonic and the First Presbyterian Church.

It was not long before we were in the midst of a wider welcoming church community. Eunice's new work, as the first woman executive of the Presbytery of Western New York, had prepared the ground for ecumenical contacts. A monthly Wednesday morning ecumenical breakfast gathering put us in touch with people of a broad, generous spirit. We quickly learned what groups were most effective in keeping in touch with the region's major issues. The United Church of Christ folk tended to be at the center of the issues, with a sprinkling of Episcopal, Methodist and Roman Catholics also on board. It helped that one of the major players in the group, Bob Grimm, had been the Council of Churches' executive in Erie, PA, Syracuse and now Buffalo. His wife Bobby Grimm was a delightful hostess for the breakfasts which usually met in the Grimm's dining room. Issues were quickly shared and participated in by the gathering at the breakfast table. Love Canal and its toxic aftermath, which had been one of the earlier primary issues, had drawn participants from this gathering. One of our breakfast participants, Roger Cook, a UCC layman, headed WNYCOSH the regional center for occupational and safety issues in western New York. He set up a worker's health center to keep track of local worker's health issues and to pursue them in the courts. Another of the attenders was Jim Mang, a former Roman Catholic priest, who during the anti-Vietnam conflict, organized the Peace Center of Western New York which is still active in 2012.

During one of our breakfasts Bob Beck, a pastor at St. Paul's & St. Mark's UCC congregation in the sight of Buffalo City Hall, brought an issue to the table. Norm Harper, head of United Automobile Workers (UAW) Local 2100 had made an appeal to an inter-racial religious task force at which Bob Beck was in attendance. Norm worked at the Trico plant in downtown Buffalo, which made windshield wipers for many makes of automobiles. The word was out that Trico was in the process of shutting down its Buffalo plants and moving to the Texas/Mexican border. The word "maquiladora" had entered our hearing, and our vocabulary. How could we help Norm get the issue to a larger group of people, especially those who might make a difference?

Our breakfast group set in motion a meeting of those we thought might respond to Norm Harper's plea. Word went out and a group gathered in early 1986 to pursue the organization which was to bring together a coalition of religious, university, community and union leaders (CRUCUL). The organization drew not only upon the religious and labor community but upon economists and political scientists from the University of Buffalo. The university community opened us up to research channels which could tap into the information on the economics of plant closings.

We put those resources to immediate use. We used our connections to the university and labor to bring the Midwest Center for Labor Research and the University of Buffalo's Center for Applied and Urban Research onto the scene to investigate the community impact on the Trico move. The initial findings from the first study showed that the annual loss from the Trico move to the Western New York economy would be more than ninety-four million dollars. It was also estimated that within two years following the move the cost to the social agencies and to the government would be an additional twenty-six million dollars annually. Beyond these financial costs would be the impact upon family life with increasing family break-down, child and spouse abuse, and alcohol and drug use.

Following on this initial study, CRUCUL, through its UAW contacts, was able to pressure the New York State, through Vincent Tese of the Urban Development Corporation, to contribute, along with Trico, \$125,000 to fund a Cornell University feasibility study of a reorganization of the Trico manufacturing facilities. The reorganization, the study suggested, would increase productivity and save jobs. At its completion in October 1986, the study proposed the abandonment of three of Trico's older plants and the building of a modern one story plant. The proposed reorganization plan would save 1,000 of the 1,400 jobs at stake in the move to the Texas/Mexico border. The proposal also suggested the establishing of a joint union-management committee. "Rarely has there been such a broad effort to study options, cajole management and persuade a company not to move of state," reported the N.Y. Times on the proposed Trico move (Feb. 17, 1987).

In November 1986, Richard Wolf, CEO of Trico, rejected the Cornell proposal and set about the closing of the Buffalo facilities of the company. Trico's plant 3 on Elk St., which employed 300 people, was to close by the end of December. The company's plant 2 on Main Street which employed 500 people was to phase down to minimum operations in 1987. Some of the Elk Street plant's workers were to be transferred to Trico's only remaining Buffalo facility, Plant 1 on Washington St. The UAW, in an agreement with Trico, was able to preserve 894 jobs through 1988. By that time Trico would have established a new plant in Matamoros, Mexico with a technology center and warehouse in Brownsville, Texas. The operations on the Texas/Mexican border would employ 1,250 people.

The decision disappointed many leaders in Buffalo which had already witnessed the loss of Bethlehem Steel in 1983, followed by the loss of the General Motors Chevrolet foundry in 1985. The New York Times reported the community's feelings. "The difference with Trico is that it is based and rooted here," said Eunice Poethig, a Presbyterian minister and chairman of the Buffalo's Cabinet of Bishops and Executives. "We expected better of them." The group, representing 20 Jewish Catholic and Protestant congregations, sought to dissuade Trico from moving to the Rio Grande and maintaining its manufacturing in Buffalo. (N.Y., Times, Feb. 17, 1987).

CRUCUL suggested a meeting of the Cabinet of Bishops and Executives with Richard Wolf. As a church attending Episcopalian, Wolf responded to the Episcopal Bishop's request to meet with the Cabinet. CRUCUL also suggested the presence of those who conducted the State/university sponsored research at Trico. N.Y. State official Lee Smith and Peter Lazes of Cornell's Programs for Employment in Workplace Systems (PEWS) attended the meeting and made a presentation of their findings to the group. Richard Wolf remained unmoved by the presentation and the discussion that followed. Trico, he reported had already begun to build its plant in Mexico and in Brownsville.

By 2002 Trico had five international plants: Argentina, Austria, Mexico, Wales and Brazil. Back in 1987 Trico made a concession by keeping its Plant 1 at Washington St. in operation. In 1999 it moved its operations from its Washington St plant to Buffalo Industrial Park. In 2002, the plant at 50 Thielman Drive was down to 212 employees. The plant at the Buffalo Industrial Park location, however, followed the original suggestion of the Cornell study of 1986. A Trico executive surmised: "One of the advantages of this new space is its single story, open-floor plan that allows us to reconfigure and retool our machinery easily and our close proximity to major highways, simplifying the shipping process."

In the midst of the Trico negotiations, CRUCUL decided to incorporate and become a non-profit 501©(3) organization. With the incorporation we decided upon a name change to the Coalition for Economic Justice, Inc. It also had become apparent that the economic issues surrounding Trico were the tip of the iceberg in Buffalo. In 1987, the employees of Blue Cross/Blue Shield came to the Coalition with a plea for help in their "concession" negotiations with management requiring them to reduce job hours and eliminate benefits in jobs primarily held by women. With union members on the board of the Coalition we began to get calls for support from local unions.

In 1987, Communication Workers of America (CWA) Local 1168/Nurses United came with a plea for support in the reinstatement at DeGraff Hospital of North Tonawanda of permanently replaced employees. The Coalition, through its religious members, sought to involve the local ministerial association of the Tonawandas to actively engage management on behalf of the shut-out employees. The news of the support of the Coalition for workers in conflicts with management brought similar situations to our attention. A request came from the Buffalo Hospital & Nursing Home Council, AFL-CIO in their effort to win the reinstatement of employees replaced in the buy-out of Georgian Court Nursing Home by the Niagara Lutheran Home, Inc. Under the aegis of the Buffalo Council of Churches, the CEJ met with the management of Niagara Lutheran Home, Inc. to urge the reinstatement of the employees laid off in the change over of management.

The Nurses union next brought the Mercy Hospital of South Buffalo to our attention. The National Labor Relations Board had ruled that Mercy Hospital administration had actively interfered in the certification of a union at the Hospital. CWA Members of the CEJ called for the CEJ to work through the religious community to help change the anti-union stance of Mercy Hospital. Through the late 1980s and the early 1990s the Coalition monitored the union organizing and the bargaining process that was happening within the hospitals in the Buffalo community. The Coalition supported the rights of nurses and other hospital personnel to organize and bargain collectively at South Mercy, St. Joseph's and DeGraff hospitals.

By 1992, besides the monitoring of the strategies of hospital administrations and their impact on hospital jobs in the Buffalo region, the Coalition had developed an educational and lobbying program for a single-payer, universal health care system and HR 1300 at the national level. As part of the Health Care Coalition, CEJ was working for the election of Robert Abrams, a supporter of the single-payer system, to the U.S. Senate. The Coalition was also party to a one million national post card campaign to President Clinton on behalf of the single-payer system by February 1993. The goal for Western New York was 10,000.

In summary over the first five years of the existence of the Coalition its work has focused on the issue of saving jobs in the Western New York region and in the promotion of the arbitration process between labor and management. This has been done through 1) the education of the public through open forums, working with national media on documentaries, carrying out press conferences, and engaging with editorial boards of news agencies; 2) developing research projects through the use of university consultants in conducting community studies of the impact of plant closings on wage and benefit reductions and loss; 3) encouraging labor-management dispute resolution; 4) developing networks with national, state, and local organizations on the issues of saving jobs in the region; 5) developing the process of public hearings in the advocacy of job retention and regional economic issues.

In May 2011, the Coalition for Economic Justice celebrated its 25th anniversary in Buffalo with a recognition of those who have dedicated themselves to preserving and creating jobs in the Western New York region.

Richard P. Poethig
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