

**Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse  
Monograph Series**

**Talking to Union Leaders  
About Smart Growth**

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# Talking to Union Leaders About Smart Growth

by Greg LeRoy

I admit it; I'm biased. I think sprawl stinks. I've also been a union member for 26 years, and I think sprawl is terrible for working families and their unions.

Why do I think that? Because unions are urban institutions, and when sprawl erodes our urban cores, it also undermines good union jobs.

For that reason, I am adamant that unions belong in the forefront of the smart growth movement, with environmentalists and others. If you agree, and decide to strengthen your region's smart growth movement by reaching out to organized labor, this article is a tool for you.

By the time you've finished reading this, you'll understand at least ten different ways that sprawl harms specific union members. You'll have a basic grasp of union structures and their situation today. And you'll have a rough game plan to begin reaching out to union leaders.

*(Words in italics are union lingo worth remembering.)*

## Working Families and Sprawl

Aside from industry-specific issues laid out below, union leaders are becoming concerned about sprawl for the same reasons most Americans are – its negative components – such as traffic congestion, skyrocketing children's asthma, lack of affordable housing near jobs, and lack of choice about how to get to work.

When you approach union leaders about smart growth, it is critical to stress these issues, along with industry-specific issues. The frustrations and injustices of sprawl are felt by all working families, most of which don't have a union member. But because unions are the nation's largest organized force for the concerns of working families, they can join the fight for smart growth solutions that will benefit everyone.

## Ten Ways (At Least) Sprawl Harms Union Members

In at least nine economic sectors – each one affecting specific unions – and in political geography, sprawl is anti-labor. Mastering this analysis will enable you to approach the leaders of specific unions and articulate why they have a self-interest in joining the smart growth debate.

**Grocery Retailing:** High-profile campaigns against Wal-Mart and other “big box” retailers are a strong example of the potential for coalition work between unions and smart growth advocates. These retailers threaten rural lands and small-town merchants. Typically accessible only by auto, they increase congestion and pirate sales from stores that are accessible by public transit, reducing shopping opportunities for people without cars.

Labor activists usually oppose such retailers because they undermine unionized jobs. Most major grocery chains are at least partly unionized, making food retailing a bright spot in the notoriously low-wage retail sector. Among grocery workers, unionized workers (about one in four) earn 28% more, and usually much better benefits. Most of these unionized jobs are in urban chains threatened by the big-box giants that penetrate metro areas from the exurbs first.

It's not just Wal-Mart's lower wages and benefits that provoke labor's opposition; it's the company's aggressive anti-unionism. In February 2000, ten Wal-Mart meat cutters in Texas voted to join the United Food & Commercial Workers (“*the UFCW*” or “*the Food and Commercial Workers*”). Two weeks after *the Board* certified the election, Wal-Mart announced it was closing the meat departments in 180 of its stores, and switching to outsourced, pre-packaged meats. (For more, go to [www.walmartwatch.com](http://www.walmartwatch.com) and [www.walmartyrs.com](http://www.walmartyrs.com).)

Angered by Wal-Mart's behavior, *the UFCW* has joined the anti-sprawl movement, making this 1.4 million-member union the most visible such advocate in the labor movement.

**Wholesale/Warehousing:** Developments in wholesaling also present an opportunity for coalition-building. While it has only a third as many jobs as retailing, wholesaling is better organized, and therefore workers receive better wages. The relevant unions are *the UFCW* and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT, “*the Teamsters*”).

A new threat to jobs and open lands is the hyper-efficient method of grocery-warehousing known as “cross-docking” that has arrived from Europe. Based upon a system of huge regional warehouses in exurban areas close to interstate highways, cross-docking is the practice of literally moving goods from one truck across a warehouse dock onto another truck. In its most extreme version, it even bundles beer, soft drinks, milk and dairy, bakery, and snack products into one truck at the warehouse for delivery to the store, instead of separate product deliveries to the store. Jobs, food freshness, and product choice can all be affected.

Cross-docking favors suburban stores (which are able to purchase large shipments with the lowest shipping costs) at the expense of inner-city stores and their shoppers (who get higher

shipping costs when the customer base of the existing warehouse system is “creamed”). In a model campaign in the Buffalo area in 1996, a Teamsters local formed a coalition with inner-city churches, civic leaders and merchants to win a “code of conduct” with a major grocery holding company. The agreement reduced the harmful impact of cross-docking on both workers and consumers.

**Transit:** When most of a region’s growth occurs at the fringe, transit jobs are undermined because commuters no longer have a choice: they must use a car. Transit ridership declines, forcing cities to cut service, reduce crew sizes and consider privatization, or contracting out, which can lead to lower wages and benefits and the de-unionization of jobs.

Besides direct harm to transit workers, sprawl-induced service cutbacks hurt other low-wage workers. For example, after the Chicago Transit Authority eliminated late-night bus service, unionized hospital workers getting off second shift after midnight found themselves waiting until 4 or 5 a.m. for a bus home. In a few cities, transit unions have joined forces with community groups, such as Chicago’s Campaign for Better Transit, co-founded by two locals of the Amalgamated Transit Union (“*the ATU*”).

Besides *the ATU*, other unions with many transit members include the Transport Workers Union (“*TWU*”), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (“*the Teamsters*”), the United Transportation Union (“*the UTU*”), and the Transportation Communications Union (“*TCU*”), as well as two unions with large numbers of public employees: the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (*AFSCME*, pronounced “*AFS-me*”) and the Service Employees International Union (“*SEIU*”).

**Education and Other Public Services:** Schools are usually the public service most dependent upon local property tax revenues. When core communities are disinvested and suffer tax-base erosion, schools suffer in many ways: class sizes grow; amenities are eliminated; teacher salaries lag regional averages (making it hard to attract talented teachers); and capital improvements and maintenance are deferred. Families that are able to leave (disproportionately white) move to higher tax-base suburbs with healthier schools. The loss of such families makes the student body less diverse; it also harms home values, which in turn means either less property tax revenue or higher rates for families that stay. The resulting degradation of schools leaves core-area graduates less attractive to employers and becomes one more “push” for companies to leave core areas.

For teachers, who mostly belong to local affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (“*AFT*”) or the National Education Association (“*NEA*”), the tax-base erosion caused by sprawl means lower pay, tougher working conditions, and increasing pressure for privatization schemes that undermine public education such as vouchers.

The tax-base issue affects many other public employees, too. A declining tax base creates a systemic web of problems for urban governments: it lowers the municipal credit rating and raises borrowing costs. It also forces city councils to raise tax rates, which in turn drives more businesses and homeowners away, further eroding revenues.

Those problems undermine every kind of public job: police, fire, sanitation, maintenance, human services, and parks and recreation. Agencies are forced to reduce public services and defer necessary maintenance. When emergency-response times are long, when library hours are cut, when parks are ill-kempt, or when potholes aren't repaired, citizens lose faith in their public institutions. That encourages some politicians to propose anti-union quick fixes, such as privatization.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (*AFSCME*) is the largest public employees union, followed by the Service Employees International Union ("*SEIU*" or "*the Service Employees*") and the Communications Workers of America ("*CWA*"). Generally, one union or the other tends to be dominant in a given state, though some states are mixed. The *Building Trades* also usually have public-employee members; the *Teamsters* often do, too. A big city may have bargaining relationships with a dozen unions or more.

Public employees tend to be especially politically savvy. They have to be: their bosses are the politicians. They also tend to be very knowledgeable about public policies: again, they have to be, because they administer those policies and programs.

**Health Care:** Inner-city hospitals are the most likely to close; they are also the most likely to have been unionized. Hospital closures have several causes. Sprawl causes a hyper-concentration of poverty in core areas, and that means a high share of families lacking insurance coverage. That squeezes hospitals financially because Medicaid reimbursement rates have been cut. On top of that, managed care shortened hospital stays, which created over-capacity in some hospitals; the financially-weakest facilities forced to close were mostly in core areas. Combined with a trend towards more outsourcing of support services, the effect has been to drive more health care dollars – and good job opportunities – away from urban cores.

Health care workers belong to several unions; the largest ones are the Service Employees International Union (*SEIU*), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (*AFSCME*), the American Federation of Teachers (*AFT*), and the American Nurses Association ("*ANA*").

**Hospitality:** Hotels and restaurants are home to some of the nation's fastest-growing job titles, but they are notoriously low-wage except when unionized, which is only in some urban cores, airport areas, gaming centers and amusement parks. If you have ever stayed in a hotel on the Las Vegas "strip," you've probably noticed the remarkably good service, the result of a terrific labor-management partnership program for high skills and good wages co-sponsored by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union ("*HERE*," usually pronounced by the letters, though sometimes like the word). But with the proliferation of sprawling "edge cities," unionization rates and therefore job quality in the hospitality sector has suffered.

**Building Services:** The cleaning jobs and physical maintenance work in office buildings are unionized in many urban cores. Indeed, SEIU's "*Justice for Janitors*" campaign has been one of organized labor's highest-profile organizing drives since the early 1990s. However, the growth of "edge cities" and suburban office parks has led to the geographic dispersion of office space. That means these jobs are less accessible to inner-city residents who need them most and they are less likely to be unionized. The same is true for physical maintenance work, most often done by members of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE, "*the Operating Engineers*") or the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB, "*the Boilermakers*").

**Manufacturing:** Manufacturers migrate to suburbs and exurbs for the same "push" reasons as other businesses (such as crime, taxes and services), and for reasons specific to manufacturing, such as new production processes which require "large footprint" single-story plants, lack of available urban space due to development and/or contamination, and a desire to hire younger or first-generation factory workers with lower healthcare and pension costs. Manufacturers also often seek to avoid unions.

Besides migrations within regions, some manufacturing sectors are undergoing massive geographic realignments, such as the new auto belt in rural Kentucky, Tennessee, southern Indiana and Ohio, Alabama and South Carolina, with more than 300 plants built since the mid-1980s. Almost none of these factories are unionized; they are also overwhelmingly located in areas not served by public transit. Many have been found to have workforces in which minorities are underrepresented, and a few foreign-owned auto assembly "transplants" have been charged with discriminatory employment practices, such as designating recruitment territories that excluded urban areas with minority populations.

To be sure, manufacturing unions have also lost members because of job flight off-shore and advances in automation. But U.S. factories still employ more than 18 million people and pay wages more than a third higher than the rest of private-sector jobs, so it's worth fighting to keep them in urban areas.

Therefore, smart growth advocates would be wise to bone up on industrial retention strategies, such as planned manufacturing districts (to shield factories from displacement due to gentrification), employee ownership (especially attractive for aging family-company owners), and "cluster" or "sectoral" strategies designed to build and reinforce loyalty between a group of companies and the community and its educational institutions. A cluster strategy promotes regional linkages by helping all firms in a given sector get better at non-competitive activities such as training, quality control, or export promotion.

The major manufacturing unions include the United Auto Workers ("*the UAW*"), the United Steelworkers of America (USWA, "*the Steelworkers*"), the International Association of Machinists (IAM, "*the Machinists*"), the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees ("*UNITE*", in clothing and textiles), the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union ("*PACE*"), the Graphic Communications International Union ("*GCIU*," in printing), the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers Union

(BCTGMU, “*the BCT*”), *the Teamsters* (especially in food-processing), and the International Union of Electrical Workers (“*the IUE*,” which just merged into the Communications Workers of America, “*CWA*”). Some of *the Building Trades* also have factory members, including the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (“*the IBEW*”) and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA, “*the Carpenters*”).

**Working Families Legislative Concerns:** Finally, the way sprawl affects politics is also harmful to union members. In April 2000, our organization, Good Jobs First, presented a day-long curriculum on sprawl and smart growth to 107 leaders of the 500,000-member Chicago Federation of Labor. After presenting the regional data on the nine economic sectors, we closed our argument by presenting maps of the voting records of the region’s state representatives, state senators and members of the U.S. Congress. We based the shading of our maps on the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education non-partisan ratings (“*COPE ratings*,” with “*COPE*” pronounced like the word). *COPE ratings* are based solely on economic justice issues such as affordable housing, workplace safety, fair trade and the right to organize.

The maps are striking. Legislators representing Chicago, its mature inner-ring suburbs and blue-collar south and southwest suburbs voted far more favorably for working families than those in outer-ring suburbs and the north and northwest, with high-tech DuPage County being especially adverse. The same pattern would be apparent, no doubt, in almost every urban region of the U.S.

The growing political power of the suburbs has been fueled by sprawl. With population decline or stagnation in core areas and population growth in the outer-ring suburbs, sprawl areas gained the most new political power in the legislative re-districting after the 1990 census, and will gain more as a result of the 2000 census. National analyses of the 1994 election (when so many legislative bodies changed their political majorities) point to “swing” districts mostly located on urban fringes.

### **The *Building Trades* Exception**

One group of unions has occasionally self-identified against smart growth: the *Building Trades*, which include the *Operating Engineers*, the *IBEW*, the *Carpenters*, as well as the *Laborers* (full name: Laborers International Union of North America), the *Bricklayers* (full name: International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers), the *Plumbers and Pipe Fitters* (full name: United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry, or “*the UA*”), and the *Iron Workers* (full name: International Association of Bridge, structural and Ornamental Iron Workers).

To be blunt, many members of the trades suspect that smart growth is “No Growth” in sheep’s clothing. In some places, they have actively supported highway construction or opposed smart growth ballot initiatives.

It's a complicated story, and *the Trades* are not all the same. The *Operating Engineers*, for example, are the workers who operate heavy equipment, so they get a lot of work in highway construction. *The Carpenters*, *the IBEW* and *the Bricklayers* benefit more from office building and other commercial construction.

A key issue here is that *the Trades* have very close ties to the contractors – indeed, often family ties – and the contractors have never been presented any persuasive arguments for smart growth. I consider this a critical weakness of the anti-sprawl movement. Smart growth advocates have failed to develop a positive jobs argument to woo the construction industry or its unions. There is precious little data about job creation resulting from policies such as reclaiming brownfields, repairing infrastructure, higher-density mixed-use projects or expanding mass transit. As a result, the building industry continues to lobby for what it knows best – more sprawling-style development – and *the Trades* follow suit.

This is no small weakness, because the *Building Trades* are politically active. They have to be, for example, to defend state workplace safety and liability laws that have enormous effects on construction fatality rates. Construction, along with mining, is our nation's most dangerous occupation.

<b>Types of Jobs</b>	<b>How Sprawl Harms Them</b>	<b>Unions Usually Affected</b>
Grocery Retailing	Wal-Mart and some other big-box retailers pay less and are anti-union, taking market share from unionized grocers	UFCW, Teamsters
Grocery Warehousing	“Cross-docking,” a hyper-efficient warehousing system, eliminates delivery jobs, harms inner-city food stores	UFCW, Teamsters
Transit	Job growth off the transit grid reduces ridership, costs jobs, creates pressure for concessions and privatization	ATU, UTU, TWU, Teamsters, SEIU, AFSCME, TCU
Teachers and school support jobs	Tax-base erosion caused by sprawl means larger classes, deferred maintenance, lower salaries, pressure for concessions and vouchers	NEA, AFT, AFSCME, SEIU, CWA
City and county employees	Tax-base erosion means service cutbacks, deferred maintenance of infrastructure, pressure for concessions and privatization	AFSCME, SEIU, CWA, Building Trades, Teamsters
Health Care	Hyper-concentration of uninsured families at the core contributes to hospital closures, and they are more likely unionized	SEIU, AFSCME, AFT, ANA, Teamsters, CNA
Hotel and Restaurant	“Edge cities” pull hospitality dollars away from core, driving wages and benefits down	HERE
Building Services	“Edge cities” and suburban office parks disperse janitorial and maintenance work away from affordable housing, unions	SEIU, Operating Engineers, Boilermakers
Manufacturing	Corporate relocations to exurban or even rural sites, seeking fewer unions and lower wages, reduce job opportunities for city residents	Auto Workers, Steelworkers, PACE, Machinists, UNITE, IBEW, Teamsters, BCT, Carpenters, GCIU, IUE/CWA



## **Key to Unions Listed**

AFSCME - American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees  
AFT - American Federation of Teachers  
ANA - American Nurses Association  
ATU - Amalgamated Transit Union  
Auto Workers - United Auto Workers  
BCT - Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers Union  
Carpenters - United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America  
CNA - California Nurses Association  
CWA - Communications Workers of America  
GCIU - Graphic Communications International Union  
HERE - Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees International Union  
IBB - International Brotherhood of Boilermakers  
IBEW - International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers  
NEA - National Education Association  
Operating Engineers - International Union of Operating Engineers  
PACE - Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union  
SEIU - Service Employees International Union  
Steelworkers - United Steelworkers of America  
TCU - Transportation Communications Union  
Teamsters - International Brotherhood of Teamsters  
TWU - Transport Workers Union  
UFCW - United Food & Commercial Workers  
UNITE - Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees  
UTU- United Transportation Union; the Transport Workers Union

## **It's Really About What *Kind* of Growth**

Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D - Portland, Ore.), founded the Livable Communities Task Force in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996. He has an active relationship with organized labor, and he says smart growth opponents present “false choices” to working families.

Livable communities using smart growth policies give families more housing and commuting choices, with more jobs that are likely to be union, says Blumenauer, citing Portland’s \$1 billion light rail link to the airport built with all-union labor. More Portland kids walk to school than perhaps any other major city, he says, and Portland has only one Wal-Mart because neighborhood-scale retailers thrive.

Blumenauer points out that Portland’s housing prices, often cited by smart growth critics, are actually lower than other large West Coast metro areas. And families with one less car can afford 25% more housing, he estimates, which translates into more construction work.

Blumenauer sees smart growth as “a different kind of environmentalism” that promises to unite union members with environmentalists, unlike divisive past issues such as the spotted owl or salmon. Smart growth “allows people to pick their shade of green,” he says; “a blue-green alliance can build new bridges.”

## **Reaching Out to Union Leaders**

Knowing how sprawl harms union members is not enough. Before you start your outreach, you need to know what unions do, and how they are structured. You need to appreciate the fact that unions are under siege in America today. Finally, you need to understand how today’s labor movement is struggling to reverse its decline, and how that struggle augurs very well for coalition-building with regional smart growth movements.

With 16 million members, the union movement is America’s largest force for social justice, yet it is often poorly understood by the general public. Unions do many things: they seek to take wages out of competition, so that companies compete fairly on quality, innovation and other business basics. They give working people a voice on the job through safeguards for fair promotions and discipline. They promote social justice in the workplace, as longtime advocates for laws against race and sex discrimination and sexual harassment. They have caucuses comprised of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, women, and gays and lesbians. They enable workers to achieve better wages and benefits, and they engage in political action that benefits all working families.

More than any other constituency, organized labor is responsible for our major civil rights laws, the abolition of child labor, the 40-hour work-week, the minimum wage, Social Security and occupational safety and health. Appreciating this labor history will help you reach out more effectively to union leaders.

Regarding structure, there are dozens of national unions, hundreds of state and local union federations, and thousands of local unions – and they vary a great deal. To effectively approach them, you should first learn the structure of the union or federation you are targeting. Without an organizational road-map, you can easily waste a lot of time.

For example, the AFL-CIO is the result of the 1955 merger of the American Federation of Labor (“*the AFL*”) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (“*the CIO*”). AFL unions were those formed from the 1880s through the 1920s; CIO unions were those formed beginning in 1935, in an explicit revolt from the AFL’s practices.

AFL unions (which include *the Teamsters*, *the Building Trades*, *the Machinists*, and *the Service Employees*) are bottom heavy. That is, in both their constitutional structures and distribution of dues revenues, the *local unions* have most of the power and a great deal of autonomy from the “*International*” (read national; some have Canadian members). So, for example, when a Teamster flight attendant on Northwest Airlines pays her dues, less than \$5 per month *per capita* goes to Teamster headquarters in Washington.

CIO unions are the opposite; they are more centralized in both constitutional power and finance. Examples include the Steelworkers, the Auto Workers, and the Mine Workers. So, for example, when a State of Michigan employee who belongs to the United Auto Workers pays her dues, roughly half of the money goes first to UAW headquarters in Detroit. Then regional and International staff members help the locals serve the members.

(As you may glean from the occupations cited, many unions have grown quite diverse in their composition. While most unionized steel-mill workers belong to the Steelworkers, so do some nursing home workers and university employees.)

Besides the quilt-work of specific unions, there are three layers of multi-union leadership. These union structures get a lot of public attention because they are *federations* of unions. At the urban county level (or multi-county rural level) is the *central labor council* (“*the CLC*” or “*the labor council*”). At the state level is the *state labor federation* (or “*the state fed*”). At the national level is the *national AFL-CIO* (or “*the AFL*”). These federations exist to coordinate activities that benefit all union members, such as political advocacy and new-member organizing.

For your purposes, besides union locals, the key leaders are *CLC* presidents (on regional matters) and *state fed* presidents (on state issues). But keep in mind: these federations have no control over their member unions. Local unions pay *per capita* dues (based on their membership) to *the CLCs* and *the state feds*. Federation officers exercise leadership and persuasion, but they work for their affiliates who pay the *per caps*.

Job titles vary too. The *principal officer* of a local union might be called “president,” but he could just as easily be called “secretary-treasurer” or “district chairman” or “business manager.” You need to know who the *principal officer* is. As suggested below, ask a local activist for such details. And if you have to make a cold call to a local, just admit you need help and ask the staff person who answers for guidance.

Another key point: union officers are elected officials with political constituencies. You would be wise to approach them in the same way you would approach a mayor or a state senator. Homework and protocol matter.

### **America’s Unions: Under Siege and Fighting Back**

Today, fewer than 15% of U.S. workers carry a union card, the lowest rate of workplace democracy among industrialized nations. After World War II, more than 35% of American workers were union members. But a concerted employer assault – fueled first by the Cold War, then by Reaganomics – has cut the rate of unionization in the private sector to less than 10%. The public sector is about 37% unionized.

Unions – our nation’s largest social-justice movement – are under attack. This fact is best demonstrated by explaining the legal situation unions face in America. Unions representing private-sector workers are governed by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, or “*the Act*”) and by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB or “*the labor board*”), which enforces *the Act*. (Some private-sector workers aren’t covered by *the Act*, such as agricultural workers.)

Under an anti-union amendment to the NLRA enacted during the early days of the Cold War, each individual state was granted the right to designate itself a “*right to work*” state. If a state adopts such a designation, a private-sector union contract in that state may not require every worker in a unionized workplace to join the union as a condition of employment (known as a “*union shop*”) – even though every worker gets the benefits of union-negotiated wages and benefits.

This loophole in the NLRA effectively makes it harder for unions to build a base in “right to work” states, because some workers are prone to “free-riding” the contract. Today, 20 states, mostly in the Old South and Mountain states, designate themselves “right to work;” it’s a big reason the rate of unionization is lower there. Unions note that wages are also lower in such areas and dub the law “*right to work for less.*”

The NLRA is viewed by many union leaders as a miserable failure. Why? Because if a private corporation really wants to resist its workers unionizing, union-busting is cost-effective. A company may even go so far as to break the law by firing workers for organizing, a deliberate tactic to create a chilling effect shortly before a union vote. Companies do this routinely because penalties for violating the NLRA are not high. And labor justice is extremely slow: it can take years for *the Board* to reinstate unjustly fired workers.

For public-sector workers, the legal situation is even more complex. Their rights are regulated by the states, not the NLRA. So, for example, a state might grant police and teachers the right to bargain collectively, but not other workers. A state may allow some workers only to “meet and confer” with their bosses, but not to have a written agreement. Or a state may deny some public workers any collective rights.

Simply put, American workers face the most hostile legal climate of any major industrial economy. But unions are finally fighting back against this attack, and key to that fightback is coalition-building. As I explain next, smart growth advocates are very well-positioned to benefit from labor’s new direction.

### **Unions and Their New Leadership Favor Regional Collaborations**

The criticism often made of unions in the 1970s and 1980s was that they were poor coalition partners. Many activists found that unions were aloof and didn’t work together with community groups or environmentalists. Indeed, companies often succeeded in pitting unions

and environmentalists against each other. There were exceptions to be sure, like the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, but only exceptions (OCAW is now part of PACE).

Since being elected president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, John Sweeney has restructured the federation to send a clear signal to national and local labor leaders: unions must break out of their shell and again be active coalition partners. This new direction comes from a painful internal consensus that Sweeney forged among his executive board: if unions remain aloof, they will keep losing members and effectiveness.

To rebuild labor's strength, Sweeney has instituted two structural reforms that augur well for unions joining the smart growth movement. First, he developed the "*Union Cities*" program to revitalize *CLCs* (the metro labor federations) as direct supporters of new-member organizing. This has prompted many *CLCs* and their affiliate unions to become more involved in issues that matter most to low-wage workers. That's why today, there are more unions supporting immigrants' rights, living wage campaigns, affordable housing and equal pay for women than at any time in the last quarter century. *Union Cities* is an overt effort to reach out more aggressively to organize women, people of color, immigrants, and younger workers – those Americans most in need of a union.

More recently, Sweeney has launched the *New Alliance*, a program to reinvigorate the political clout of the *CLCs* and *state feds*. Although it is still a work in progress, the *New Alliance* promises to rebuild organized labor's presence in city halls and state capitols by focusing on populist issues that reinforce the climate for union organizing. Many smart growth policies – rebuilding urban schools, expanding public transit, supplying more affordable housing – fit that profile; they benefit labor's prospective members as well as current union members.

The other leadership change in today's labor movement is demographic: baby boomers are rising to many top posts. More likely to have been influenced by the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement or other progressive movements, these new leaders tend to be more comfortable in coalitions with diverse groups of activists.

To quote a recent book title: it's not your father's labor movement. Check out [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org) for the latest!

### **A Game Plan for Winning Support from Union Leaders**

I suggest you start by seeking an activist personality in your local labor movement; you are looking for someone who knows labor and also works closely with community groups. Ask him or her to help you plan your approach. Share a copy of this article with them and go over the specific industries and unions to see how the issues are playing out locally.

This activist could be the director of your local *Jobs with Justice* chapter; JWJ is a national network of local labor-community coalitions active on issues such as living wages and the right to organize (go to [www.jwj.org](http://www.jwj.org) to find out if your area is lucky enough to have a JWJ

chapter). Or, you may find a labor educator at a local college or university (go to [www.uale.org](http://www.uale.org) for a directory of regional contacts of the United Association for Labor Education.) Or the activist could be the editor of the local labor newspaper or host of a labor-oriented radio show or public-access TV program. Ask around (or contact me for advice).

Ask the local activist for guidance on the basic protocol issues: who are the principal officers at each local union? What are their job titles and jurisdictions? What are their current concerns? Are there multi-union bargaining councils or other structures besides *the CLC* and *the State Fed* to be aware of?

While every region's labor movement is different, here are some general thoughts about where to start looking for sympathetic leadership. First, seek out *the UFCW* leadership and find out if they have been involved in campaigns against Wal-Mart or other "big box" retail projects. Ask them about *the Teamsters* or find the Teamster warehouse local and find out if it has been fighting cross-docking. Next, reach out to your local union of transit workers and find out if they have been active on funding and service issues.

After retail, warehouse and transit leaders, your next most likely leaders may be among the area's teachers' union and other groups of public employees: city and county workers, especially those in core cities and distressed inner-ring suburbs who understand the devastation of sprawl on a city's tax base. Given the many unions in the public sector, find out if they have a joint bargaining committee and seek out that committee's leadership, too.

Other unions that are likely to be activist include: *SEIU*, the largest health-care workers and janitors' union; *HERE*, which is actively organizing hotel workers; and *CWA*, whose base membership is phone workers – so they are everywhere and acutely aware of issues such as technology and deregulation.

Next, try the manufacturing unions and *the building trades*. Despite what we said before about *the trades*, they are not monolithic, and you may find different opinions among them even in the same region. You need to hear what all of them are concerned about.

As you reach out, some local union leaders may point you to *the CLC* or *the state fed*, and that is fine, especially if they will make an introduction. But given what a new issue sprawl is to most union leaders, I recommend that you have as many individual conversations as you can with local union leaders. In the labor movement, personal relationships mean everything; if you really want unions to actively support your coalition, time spent face-to-face with local leaders is critical.

If a union leader is uncertain, think creatively about ways he might test the issue with his members. Will he run an article in the newsletter (which you will provide) that explains how sprawl affects working families? Will the union let you make a presentation at its next membership meeting or executive board session? Is the union hall available for a coalition meeting?

If the leader agrees whole-heartedly, can she introduce you to other potential union allies?  
Can she identify employers who are affected by sprawl and might be supportive?

The bottom line is this: unions are urban institutions. So smart growth -- when it focuses on social justice and access to good jobs -- is right in sync with labor's historical mission. Take some time to appreciate that history and reach out to labor -- you can greatly strengthen your smart growth movement.

## **About the Author**

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## **About Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse**

The Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC.

The Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse mission is to make the tools, techniques and strategies developed to manage growth, accessible to citizens, grassroots organizations, environmentalists, public officials, planners, the media and business leaders. At the Clearinghouse, we identify, collect, compile, and disseminate information on the best land use practices, for those listed above.

Allison Smiley, Executive Director

**[www.sprawlwatch.org](http://www.sprawlwatch.org)**

This report and many other sources of information on sprawl and smart growth are available on the World Wide Web at [www.sprawlwatch.org](http://www.sprawlwatch.org)

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