



**SECTION 4: LABOR ACTIVISM ON AND OFF CAMPUS AND  
LABOR-ACADEMIC-COMMUNITY ALLIANCES**

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**PLACES OF CHANGE:**

*Colleges, Communities, and the Logic of Struggle*

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In the Fall of 1998, after 18 months of conflict, the administration at Southampton College of Long Island University terminated their maintenance contract with Laro Service Systems and rehired the custodial unit whose jobs they had outsourced just a year and a half earlier. After countless protests, sit-ins, educational campaigns, and a variety of strategic political interventions, the Southampton Coalition for Justice [CFJ] succeeded in pressuring the administration to cancel the Laro contract. Although CFJ discussed other campus and community issues including organizing adjunct faculty, campus recycling, the democratization of campus governance, etc., the group (comprised of college faculty, students, staff, community members and the custodians themselves) focused mostly on ending the Laro contract. And we won. In September of 1998, the provost announced to the press that Southampton College was rehiring the custodial unit intact, and that the campus remained a "caring community." He expressed the hope that custodians wouldn't see the decision as "a victory" per se. But, in a CFJ meeting following the announcement, custodians explained, "it feels like a victory to us."

I have written widely about the CFJ (Dolgon, 2001; 2000a; 2000b; 1999; 1998; 1997) and I feel strongly that it stands as an excellent contemporary model for coalition building on college campuses. But what I want to discuss in this article is the impact that the group's organizing had on the larger, extended community of the Hamptons. I contend that the issues raised, the institutions engaged, and the visions created by the CFJ left a lasting impression on the area's political landscape. While this paper will describe some of the Coalition's history and actions, I want to focus on the enduring ways in which the group's campaign for social justice created the necessary political and social space for continued struggles that are directly and indirectly related to the initial circumstances of the outsourcing. Specifically, I examine how the Coalition's emphasis on issues of race and community identity became particularly salient for the Town of Southampton with its unique history and current demographic changes.

**The College and the Community**

Administrative decisions to contract out service employees are now commonplace among university officials, who believe that the problems of higher education can be solved by downsizing and

privatization. A 1997 opinion piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by Richard Maloney--the "Distinguished Corporate Executive in Residence" at Washington University--extolled the virtues of applying corporate downsizing techniques to university management. He called on universities to reinvent themselves just as corporations had by privatizing "non-essential" tasks and terminating "non-productive" people. While many have argued that stronger links between higher education and corporations have evolved steadily since the early 20th century (Geiger, 1997 & 1986; Noble, 1979), the infusion (if not complete saturation) of educational practices and policies with corporate, bottom-line mentalities now appears hegemonic (Soley, 1995; Nelson, 1997; White, 2000).

For over a decade before 1996, Southampton College had run a deficit; its enrollment had dropped steadily and it had no endowment to speak of. In response, the administration did what many institutions do: they conflated education with management and hired more administrators. They also initiated regular breakfast meetings with regional corporate executives to determine ways in which the institution's curriculum and policies could address the "educational and training needs of area businesses." And when the College was charged with hurting local business because it sponsored large retail warehouse sales for J. Crew and the Maslow Group in its gymnasium, the Provost responded, "[We are] an enormously powerful economic force, bringing in at least \$30 million worth of business to the East End.... The broader perspective is that we are decidedly pro-business" (Southampton Press, 1998). Contracting out custodial workers, however, was perhaps the most blatant act of corporate banditry, as even LARO executives admitted they were in the business of cutting wages and benefits and busting unions. LARO Vice President, Lou Vacca Jr., explained to the *New York Times* that LARO gets hired because they can do it cheaper and the only way to do it cheaper is to "take it out of labor."

Just as downsizing and privatization are no longer new to higher education, the exploitation of low level, service workers (especially people of color) is not new to Eastern Long Island. Southampton has been a famous summer resort area for some of New York City's trendiest elite since the late 1800s. While many long-time European American residents either made fortunes by selling property and starting service companies or established themselves as well-paid craftspeople and "skilled" service providers for metropolitan blue-bloods, the local Native American and African American population took on the jobs of low paying service work. Because of the seasonal nature and racial bifurcation of the summer-colony economy, major unions ignored the area, few unions formed and workers of color remained disenfranchised, the last hired and first fired, and concentrated in the most dirty, difficult and demeaning jobs in town (Breen, 1989; Dolgon, 1999).

But the past two decades have produced a shift in political economy as changes in financial markets, transportation and telecommunications have allowed more wealthy New Yorkers to enjoy the Hamptons on a year-round basis. In part, according to historian, Stephen Gaines, young Wall Street millionaires wanted "not only second homes but an arena in which to compete socially. And so with pockets stuffed with cash, a generation of arrivistes invaded the East End" (Gaines, 1997). But local planning documents, surveys, and realtors claim that the majority of new, year-round residents are those wealthy, mid-thirties to mid-forties couples who want to raise families far from city decay and the fortress aesthetic that now dominates "downtown" urban life (Southampton Planning Commission, 1997; SCIRR, 1997; Interview with Homes and Lands publisher, Linda Miller-Zellner). Whatever the primary motivation, this migration has now combined with an eastward movement of developers' capital pouring into one of the few areas on Long Island where significant open space remains. Meanwhile houses and condominiums, megastores and outlet centers, are sprouting rapidly throughout the Hamptons. The region is quickly becoming not so much a summer resort or a suburb where people commute from everyday, but more a distant borough of New York City where executives, attorneys, and entertainers send faxes, e-mails, and run teleconferences.

These changes have also been accompanied by global capital's new labor relations and migrations, as

Latino(a) workers from Central and South America comprise the fastest growing segment of the low wage service sector. The East End is likewise experiencing another new migratory trend: the immigration of international workers (predominantly Latino(a) directly to exurban and suburban areas (Mahler, 1995). And the evolving niche for year-round, low wage agricultural (gardening and landscaping), construction and service work has inspired a growing population of permanent Latino(a) residents whose local numbers have increased over 600% since 1980 and now comprise between 10 and 15% of the Hamptons public school population. Even more noticeable is the evolution of an extensive informal economy of "off-the-book" house cleaners, groundskeepers, dishwashers, and both skilled and non-skilled day laborers. One local paper explained as early as 1990 that, "the Hispanic community has, for the most part, come here to fill in the gaps of our service economy ... [and] represents a crucial part of the workforce" (East Hampton Star, 13/1/90). Although this "informal economy" builds on previous seasonal and migratory labor relations, the rapidly expanding nature and ethnic make-up of the area's low-wage workforce represents what Portes and Castells claim is a "realignment of class structure" (Portes and Castells, 1989). The Hamptons stand as a unique place where the two extremes of class reformation (the newly wealthy and disenfranchised immigrants) have begun the process of stabilizing and solidifying new footholds on the fields of global capitalism.

While neither of these trends was directly evidenced on campus before the outsourcing, both were important in shaping a new set of dynamics: one for the administration's decision to outsource, and the other for the cultural and political work of CFJ. The administration knew that economic conditions were driving wages down and, in fact, LARO's own success was based almost entirely on the use of low wage, non-unionized, Latino immigrant labor. But the Coalition's work challenged this dynamic of service sector rationalization by questioning the "marketplace" hegemony prevalent among administrators. In essence, the group attacked a contradiction that rose from the College's corporate practices being at odds with its proclaimed social mission, that of building a "caring and compassionate community." As CFJ brought its protests to the wider Hamptons community, it also challenged the domination of visions of community and area identity by the older, established white, middle class and the newly rich. CFJ not only tried to recast the political and social segregation of campus relations by bringing together students, faculty, custodians, and supporters from the larger community, it also explored a model of democratic process and practice that countered the increasing bifurcation of economic and cultural politics in the Hamptons.

### **The Coalition**

While outsourcing was a "trigger event," Southampton College custodians were angry about the way that they had been treated for a long time. They wanted to act in some way, and appreciated the support from others on campus and in the community. While all of the early coalition members (students, faculty, community members and the custodians) agreed that the outsourcing was economically motivated, it was the custodians who explained to us the salient place that racism held within the administration's mindset. The custodial unit was the only one on campus comprised of predominantly people of color. In fact, under the leadership of a new shop steward, the custodians had finally started pressuring the administration to create what they called a "promotional pipeline." For 30 years, only two custodians had ever been promoted to the next highest level—mechanic—within the Physical Plant Department, and neither of them had been people of color. Custodians were sure that this pressure had inspired the administration to find a private management company and, in the words of the Physical Plant manager, "Wash our hands of all of you."

CFJ organized a publicity campaign to educate the campus and community as well as place pressure on the College. This concern with publicity was especially salient since the College was embarking on a campaign to build its endowment by taking advantage of the local community's staggering wealth. Another early CFJ strategy was to involve the Town of Southampton's Anti-Bias Task Force (ABTF).

During the Coalition's second meeting, a local community activist and ABTF member suggested that a couple of custodians attend an ABTF meeting and ask for assistance in challenging the College's discriminatory employment practices. The ABTF initially responded with outrage at the College's past practices as well as its recent decision to outsource custodians. Soon after, however, more conservative ABTF members met with the College's provost and he assured them that no racism was involved in employment decisions. Thus the ABTF backed off.

Over time the ABTF would shift back and forth from a conservative and defensive position, where some members claimed no interest in "getting involved with College's business," to an active, progressive role in trying to negotiate a resolution around issues of promotion and hiring. More importantly for the ABTF (and the Town itself), the groups ultimately recognized that institutionalized discrimination existed both on campus and in the larger community. As the local papers increased their coverage of the CFJ's charges of racial discrimination, the ABTF became a more visible agency. The combined pressure to address the "College problem" and become a more viable and active group in the community led to the resignation of many conservative ABTF members and ushered in a more progressive and activist leadership for the Task Force.

CFJ's most successful strategy involved challenging the College's attempt to raise funds from the Town of Southampton for a swimming pool. The College proposed to make the pool available for public use (with a \$500/year family membership) but it would be located at, and operated by, the College. CFJ informed the College that it would publicly oppose the pool project because the College had acted as poor local citizens by negatively affecting the employment conditions of residents. In fact, we argued that the College's policies could influence a downward spiral for employment conditions throughout the region if the wages and benefits fell for unionized workers in maintenance and service positions. In response, the College offered numerous concessions to the custodians: 1) restoring tuition remission; 2) revisiting the promotional pipeline issue; and 3) incorporating the Coalition in the College's evaluation of LARO's performance. The Coalition accepted these concessions and decided not to publicly oppose the pool project. This decision was difficult, however, as some members of the group believed the issue represented a very important opportunity to expose the administration's duplicity. While administrators claimed to be "good citizens" and part of a "caring community" on the one hand, they were treating custodians (as one said) "like slaves on the auction block." In the end, however, it was the custodians themselves who swayed the rest of the Coalition to accept the concessions and back off of the pool project. The workers believed that students and faculty wanted the pool and that public opposition would damage the Coalition's support on campus.

One of the first major impacts of the struggle was the demand of student CFJ members (many of whom were enrolled in College's Friends World Program) for a course in social activism. The Program responded by hiring Bob Zellner, a long-time Civil Rights activist who had begun his political work as the first white field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s. Zellner had moved to the Hamptons about 16 months earlier, and had gotten involved in local issues including CFJ and the ABTF. In constructing a course on activism, Zellner wanted to introduce students to a variety of social and political movements and how they shaped the contours of American life. He also had an important action component that required students to engage in some form of community activism. According to Zellner, this element addressed the FWP emphasis on experiential education and forced students to contemplate the practical and emotional dynamics of political work. Many of the students in his Fall 1997 course ended up getting involved with the Coalition, thus refueling its efforts.

Maggie King, a first year student from Texas, went to a Coalition meeting and said that she was "really upset and disgusted" at the way custodians were treated by the College. She was inspired to take action and join the Coalition. Another student who attended wrote in her journal that the custodians' situation was part of a larger problem with racism and segregation on campus. She explained:

Since my first days at LIU I have been aware of the lack of minorities within the student body and the faculty and the segregation within the dorms. I have seen rent-a-cops [campus security], and I have yet to see one of them be a minority. On more than one occasion I have seen them pull aside an African American man from a group to check for ID with no apparent reason.

The Coalition agreed that students should form a separate "task force" to take on particular actions that the Coalition could support but might be too risky for custodians and other employees to participate in directly. The desire to be more active would be a growing source of frustration for students, especially new ones. Some custodians had "settled" into their new roles as LARO employees, since CFJ maintained a presence to protect them from LARO's intimidation tactics. Many students, though, wanted the College to terminate the LARO contract immediately and were impatient to organize direct actions that might force the administration's hand.

In essence, CFJ activity had inspired students to think critically about larger issues of campus democracy. While students were still focused on the custodial situation, they also questioned status quo power relationships and the lack of real participation in making important campus decisions. Students were not only recognizing their own responsibility as local citizens, but developing what Francis Moore Lappe and Paul Martin Dubois call a "relational self-interest" (Lappe and Dubois, 1994). The connection between the custodians' own self-interests and the students' raised larger questions of social justice such as: who should have power and authority to make decisions in a democratic society, and how might we actually democratize our own community to raise the level of control and dignity in peoples' lives? Environmentally conscious students theorized that any effective campus recycling program would have to include custodians from design to implementation process. The college's womens' issues collective recognized that the lack of student and staff power in policy making stood in the way of adequately addressing sexual harassment issues. The entire campus community was developing a critical consciousness about power and democracy.

The CFJ struggle continued throughout the Winter and Spring of 1998 with little movement, but much angst on the part of the College's administration. It did, however, promote the first African American custodian to mechanic. It also tentatively agreed to establish a system for promotion that included stipends for training and licensing courses. In the summer of 1998, the custodians affiliated with the Teamsters Union. This decision represented a new level of solidarity among custodians, who had never been able to replace their union, despite much discontent with the way they were represented by the organization. Meanwhile, the Coalition held meetings to plan for Fall demonstrations and publicity. Intimidated by the prospect of another barrage of bad press and keen on renewing their local fundraising drive which would undoubtedly demand an untainted public image, the College agreed to terminate the contract and rehired the entire custodial unit under the same terms they had before the outsourcing. The new custodial contract, which would come up for negotiation in late Fall of 1998, would be bargained with Teamster representation. It felt like a victory for all of us.

The CFJ, however, had already gained quite a bit of support from local community groups and activists and wanted to build on its success. During the first meeting in September of 1998, the Coalition decided to put on a conference that focused on local and regional community organizing and would pull in a wide range of groups interested in a variety of issues. The group also was concerned that, without the custodial issue, it might not be able to focus on some of the broader concerns raised during the struggle, such as the fragmentation and hierarchy of power in campus governance; the lack of minority representation in faculty and staff; the need for adjunct faculty to organize; and the desire to have an environmentally safe and sustainable campus. While all of these issues had been discussed at meetings and demonstrations, the CFJ itself had rarely done any specific work or crafted any particular strategy to deal with them. The group, now led mostly by students and ad-hoc gatherings, continued to organize the conference, but it became increasingly clear that the Coalition itself would probably cease to meet once

the conference was over.

The conference itself was quite successful as over 100 people attended sessions on youth organizing, environmental sustainability, a national demonstration against the School for the Americas (which had been attended by some CFJ students), Anti-Bias activism, and a variety of other local issues. Over the ensuing months, a number of local activists would credit the CFJ with raising the community's consciousness about race and class issues and bringing together activists to network and strategize on a number of different topics. On campus, adjunct faculty continued to organize and students held a demonstration and sit-in in the provost's office to protest the school's lack of an official policy on sexual harassment. Many of the students who led the sexual harassment protest had been involved in the Coalition's efforts. As one student explained, "the Coalition still remains with each person who participated in it. The group and the experience is part of us and we bring it to other places and groups of people."

### **From College to Community**

On a frigid winter's day in January of 2000, over 100 people marched through the streets of Southampton to protest the Town Board's violation of Affirmative Action policies. The demonstrators nailed a three page list of demands on the door to Town Hall calling on the local government to diversify its staff positions--only 29 of 345 government workers were African American and two-thirds of those workers were in the lowest pay grades. The key incident triggering the march occurred when the Board hired 5 new Town attorneys, all of them white, despite the application of a highly qualified Black woman, Judith Mitchell. Many leaders from various communities of color addressed the crowd. Lucius Ware, president of the Eastern Long Island NAACP chastized the Town's long history of racism and discrimination, while Sherry Blakey-Smith, Director of the Shinnecock Indian Reservation's Community Learning Center observed that, "People are coming together and waking up. We need to go on, to stand up and say we want a better community. Everyone needs to be a part of this. Let's get those people out of their mansions and into this kind of forum."

One week later, Ware was back in front of the Southampton District School Board. As part of the NAACP's annual address to the board, Ware lambasted the group for not hiring more African American and other teachers of color. Citing figures once again, he noted that only 9 of 144 teachers were Black, fewer were Latino or Native American, and only 2 of 21 professional staff were minorities. Ware was joined at this presentation by Sharon Saunders, the founder of the local youth group THANKU (The Hillcrest Neighborhood Kids Union). The Hillcrest area is the largest black community within the Village of Southampton and Saunders has become the neighborhood's strongest youth advocate—directing after-school activities, learning groups, a partnership with a local organic farmer, and a host of music and theater projects. At the Board meeting, she argued that "it should be against the law to deprive African American children of having Black teachers.... It's important to see someone who looks like you behind the desk, teaching you and showing you that you can succeed, too." Both Ware and Saunders mentioned the increasing need for more Latino instructors to meet the burgeoning population of year-round Latino residents.

In April of 2000, a group of Shinnecock activists blocked developers' attempts to start bulldozing property across the highway from the Reservation. Claiming the land was an ancient, ancestral burial ground, dozens of people tried to keep work crews from clearing trees and digging foundations for a housing development. The Shinnecock had filed a lawsuit seeking an injunction against the development, but were turned down because they missed a 30-day deadline following the Town's approval of the project. While they awaited an appeal, the developers tried to move in, hoping to make any subsequent court decision moot. As Shinnecock and their supporters showed up to stop the bulldozers, State police arrived, and within minutes had arrested three demonstrators. Meanwhile,

Shinnecock residents and student supporters from Southampton College had built a teepee on the grounds of the College across from the proposed development. After several days College Provost Tim Bishop requested that the teepee be removed. He stated that, "The teepee represented a symbol that the college was taking a position in this matter, and we're not taking a position." While it may have been wise to avoid land disputes with the Shinnecock who have for years claimed that Southampton College itself sits on land stolen from the Tribe, Bishop's claim seems disingenuous given earlier statements concerning the institution's "decidedly pro-business" position.

This was not the first land-use protest by Shinnecock residents in Southampton, but it marked the first time that Native Americans were joined by members of the Town's Anti-Bias Task Force and the NAACP. In fact, one of the first people arrested during the civil disobedience was Bob Zellner, who had become the ABTF Co-Chair. A few days later, Ware again addressed the Town Board, this time arguing for a policy that would notify Shinnecock leaders of pending development applications for any lands bordering the Reservation and other contested areas. He explained, "These lands have been taken, stolen, over the years. This town needs to immediately take it upon itself to properly code the disputed lands and put into law means that would directly notify the Indians of any development on property that would remotely be linked to Indian ownership." What was new about this particular land dispute between the Shinnecock and Town-supported developers was the evolving coalition of groups that formed to support the Tribe's protest.

According to Bob Zellner, it would be hard to imagine this type of activist climate without the Coalition for Justice's struggle two years ago. Zellner explains:

When the Coalition came to the Anti-Bias Task Force, it forced the group to address real issues of racism in the community. Before the custodians' fight, the task force was mostly made up of apologists and people who wanted to celebrate 'diversity.' Only a few people wanted to challenge long established structures of racial and economic oppression. The Hamptons (Southampton College included) really looked like a modern day plantation society.

As the Coalition pressed the ABTF to address the custodial issue, the more conservative leadership came under fire for backtracking on promises and for holding secret and exclusive meetings with College administrators. As the leadership lost credibility, they stepped away from the task force, as did other conservative members who tired of heated discussions that became commonplace. In their place came a newer group of more activist-oriented members.

Lucious Ware was not a "new" attendee to ABTF meetings—he had been a member in the past. But Ware conveyed that when Zellner became co-chair and started "making waves," he decided to return and become an active member of the group. Soon, the task force also attracted people who had been quietly active in neighborhood or school issues (Hazel Saunders, for example), and were now beginning to speak out on larger issues. In fact, Saunders is currently organizing the Hillcrest area residents (with the aid of the NAACP and the ABTF) to block the building of an 86,000 square foot nursing home facility in the middle of the neighborhood. Despite local environmental groups' concerns over pollution and traffic, the Town Board has given the developers approval for the construction. But Saunders argues that it's an act of environmental racism because, "the Town would never have given such a zoning exemption to developers to build in a white community." She continues, "We are going to stop this by any means necessary—any means necessary, you understand. I'm rounding up local activists, appealing to the state legislators, Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton. I talked to Jesse Jackson last week, and if we have to conduct sit-ins or demonstrations, people in this neighborhood and others will do it." And Saunders will get help from a variety of local activists, the ABTF, and Shinnecock leaders who have pledged their support.

In November 2001 Bob Zellner lost an election for Southampton Town Supervisor. His work as Co-Chair of the ABTF had placed him sufficiently in the public eye to be chosen as the Democratic candidate for Supervisor. Given his uphill battle in an overwhelmingly Republican region, Zellner did much better than any recent Democratic candidate for the position. By running for office, Zellner was able to promote a platform that both criticized the history of racism and prejudice in the area and recognized the need to address the result of changing local demographics. Thus he called for continuing affirmative action in support of the growing low-income population. He also spoke about increasing bilingual programs for the growing population of Latino and Asian children in the public schools. Zellner got almost unanimous support from Latino, African American and Native American voters.

I do not want to claim that, without the CFJ's work, none of this community activism would have occurred. Struggles over racial discrimination and inequality in Southampton have arisen in the past. But the unique social and economic dynamics of the community made these past protests brief, limited and localized moments of action. For the first time in the Southampton's history there is a prolonged conversation on issues of race, discrimination, and economic and social justice. Two years ago the pressures from communities of color and from progressive white activists fueled the return of two Democrats to the previously all-Republican Town Board. This year, despite Zellner's defeat, another Democrat was elected to the Board, giving Democrats a 3-2 majority. While the Democrats have promised to be more accessible and sensitive to issues of racial discrimination and bias, none of the activists interviewed or observed seem prepared to rely on pledges made by politicians. The new climate of organizing, demonstrating, and civic engagement is not likely to be quelled easily.

I would like to conclude by saying that this invigorated spirit of political participation and progressive activism comes in a unique period. With new populations vying to establish identities as legitimate residents of the Hamptons, and older "settlers" in the area also struggling to maintain their control over the region's character and landscape, struggles over issues of racial and economic equality have an enormous potential to make a significant impact on the future. Specific and explicit discussions and debates about racism and discrimination won't guarantee a more equitable, democratic and just society in the Hamptons, but a continued silence on these issues would most certainly have guaranteed their impossibility. I am confident that the campus struggle of a small coalition has helped to break that silence.

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