



Amy Bolger

The Union Builder

Lavon Chambers
*President, Local 279
Association of Professional &
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DO-GOODERS, BEWARE: Lavon Chambers has his eye on you. Or, more specifically, on your workers. The 39-year-old union organizer is setting out to conquer one of labor’s frontiers, nonprofit staff.

But if you’re expecting traditional union gripes to drive this campaign—low pay, long hours, fix it or we walk—you’d better take a second look. “I have workers that say, ‘They can’t afford to pay me for 60, 70 hours, and that’s okay,’” says Chambers, who entered the union movement after a stint as a community organizer challenging it. Many nonprofit workers are willing to deal with tough working conditions because of the social mission, says Chambers. And that social commitment is exactly what he hopes to gain by getting nonprofit workers to join the Laborers Union. His campaign to organize nonprofits aims to build bridges between grassroots groups and organized labor, heightening both groups’ political power.

For Chambers, it’s a personal issue. The former construction worker found himself repeatedly working on union jobs, but—like many

black men—never getting into the union. So he joined Harlem Fightback, a group demanding that neighborhood residents be given union membership and jobs on local projects—and ended up being recruited by the Laborers to work as an organizer.

Branching out to nonprofit workers is new territory for the union movement, says Chambers, now president and director of organizing for Local 279. His predecessor had focused on organizing administrative staff at unions, a path Chambers could have followed. Instead, he saw an opportunity to build alliances between labor and community groups. In the past, says Chambers, community organizations haven’t been enthusiastic about organized labor. “They assume, ‘This is some union hack, and he’s going to come in and talk to us about his stuff. He has no idea—he just wants us to pay dues,’” says Chambers. “And, historically, unfortunately, they’re right.”

Challenging those assumptions is a skill Chambers honed in his last job, also for the Laborers, demanding that public housing pro-

jects employ local workers. When pro-labor community organizing group ACORN built a new high school in Bushwick, the group was embarrassed to find that the developer was using nonunion contractors. “The Carpenters said, ‘What the hell is this? Here’s a nonunion job.’ And they threatened to put a rat in front of the high school,” says Bertha Lewis, ACORN’s executive director. “So I call Lavon—who else?” With Chambers’ help, Lewis met with the unions and the developer and figured out a compromise. “That really could have been a horrible community-labor showdown,” says Lewis. “And it was avoided with the work of Lavon.”

His most recent targets include For a Better Bronx, an environmental justice group and staff at the Citywide Harm Reduction Program. The mix sounds about right to Chambers. “Some people might accuse me of being dramatic, but if there’s not a direct link created in the near future between labor and the grassroots, you’re going to see a negative effect,” he says. “Both sides pretty much have the same enemies. I think it’s a perfect fit.”

—Tracie McMillan