

BUILD, BALTIMORE'S WORKING POOR, AND ECONOMIC CITIZENSHIP IN THE 1990S

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This essay examines the history of economic citizenship in urban America in the 1990s by focusing on Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (known more commonly by its acronym BUILD). In 1994, this “citizens power organization” of churches and congregations won the first living wage ordinance in the United States. Its response to the urban redevelopment regime of the 1980s and 1990s focused on the needs of the Baltimore poor and working-class service workers. Although BUILD was a self-described “multi-racial, ecumenical, city-wide institutionally based organization,” its agenda was attentive to the way differently situated workers experienced urban decline and redevelopment. This was the case in Baltimore where African American citizens—especially African American women—constituted a significant proportion of its service workers ranks.

“Labor Leaders Preach, and Preachers Urge Union Solidarity,” read the *Baltimore Sun* headline to a story about a meeting of over five hundred low-wage workers, clergy, community organizers, and unionists in May 1994. They gathered to promote a “social compact” on Pentecost Sunday, a major religious holiday commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the first Christians. The centerpiece of this compact was a demand for a “living wage” ordinance, the first ever in American history. Organizers from “Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development,” known more commonly by its acronym BUILD, convened the packed meeting at East Baltimore’s Knox Presbyterian Church. After decades of being buffeted by deindustrialization, political neglect, and, more recently, privatization of public-sector jobs and policies designed to serve developers and businesses, they sought to assert their citizenship by demanding economic rights.¹

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The most powerful speeches that evening came from workers themselves, most of whom were African American women. Blacka Wright, a hotel housekeeper who earned \$5.25 an hour, announced that the social compact “won’t happen overnight but today we stop complaining about history and start making it.” In alliance with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), BUILD created the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee (SSC) as an organizing vehicle for Wright and other workers. This new organization, predicted AFSCME President Gerald McEntee, would “build a bonfire at the bottom and let the heat rise to the top.” The living wage ordinance, which Baltimore’s city government passed in December 1994, inspired a national movement: over 125 cities and counties approved their own measures between 1994 and 2010. The movement, one *Washington Post* writer claimed in 1997, “is the most interesting (and under-reported) grassroots enterprise to emerge since the civil rights movement. . . . It signals a resurgence of local activism and around pocketbook issues.”²

BUILD members organized for economic citizenship that was both broad in scope and suited to the needs of the urban poor and working class. Although BUILD was a self-described “multi-racial, ecumenical, city-wide institutionally based organization,” its agenda was attentive to the way differently situated workers experienced urban decline and redevelopment. This was the case in Baltimore where Blacks, especially women, constituted a significant proportion of its service-workers ranks. The living wage took on new meaning in this context. The living wage had been, as historians Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon put it, “deeply inflected by gender, race, and class” in its framing of the dependent and independent classes. BUILD members recontextualized the idea, exposing the “double burden” of women’s “care work” for family and neighborhood as well as their racially gendered segmentation in the workplace. To be sure, BUILD was not a feminist organization; nor did feminist groups ally with it in the 1990s. But its leaders understood the ways its various constituencies experienced the city’s economic structure. On the cusp of the living wage campaign they wrote of “the exhaustion at the end of the day in thousands of working women’s voices as they come home from work to face their children with paychecks that are far less than those of their male counterparts.”³

The scholarship on the history of economic citizenship since the 1960s is patchy, particularly on urban America. Most scholarly attention on the subject focuses on the national and state-level campaigns for comparable worth (sometimes called “pay equity”). This “civil rights issue of the 1980s,” as then-EEOC chair Eleanor Holmes Norton called it, was a radical challenge to

the meaning and value of wages according to gender. In contrast, historians examining the nation's cities of this period have concentrated their attention on the retreat of the federal government, partisan politics, policing, neighborhood devastation, and commercial development and gentrification. They afford only cursory attention to BUILD and other community (or "citizen power") organizations. A rich literature on campaigns for economic and social justice by religious studies scholars and urban sociologists, however, highlights the central role of religion in contemporary community organizations. Working in a different scholarly vein, labor historians and labor scholars capture the effectiveness of new kinds of solidaristic organizing infused by civil rights and feminist activism. These included organizational forms in addition to the dominant collective bargaining model, such as the well-known community unionism exemplified by the "Justice for Janitors" campaigns begun in the mid-1980s. Although they do not address the potent bodies of ideas embraced by local people in community organizations, these scholars detail the power of living wage campaigns in local and national settings.⁴

This essay draws on this literature to establish the significance of the economic citizenship push by BUILD in the 1990s. The community organization's relentlessly local leadership and disciplined resistance to political and economic power structures shaped its response to the urban redevelopment regime of the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that the impact of BUILD's living wage movement extended horizontally and vertically to contemporary challenges in other cities against public subsidies to developers and private businesses as well as the local fight against federal and state efforts to weaken social welfare provisions that aided Baltimore's struggling residents. Although much of its social compact was not enacted as law in Baltimore, BUILD's approach has had considerable influence in recent political and policy debates on equality and economic justice. "Baltimore's example sparked a grassroots movement," noted a labor educator and a community organizer with ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now). "While the specifics have varied, all campaigns have followed the basic formula used in Baltimore by requiring certain companies receiving public money to pay a living wage and to fulfill other community-driven criteria."⁵

Citizen Power Organizing in an Urban Crisis

The history of BUILD points to the central place of community organizing in urban America in the 1990s. It is part of a longer, well-documented account

of economic citizenship whose origins lie in the living wage ideal as first articulated by white, skilled workers during the Industrial Revolution, who took the normative male worker as head of household and the “productive” citizen as white and deserving of a “family wage.” This understanding did not go uncontested; campaigns under the banner of economic democracy and wage justice drew in working people across gender and racial lines. They were prevalent in the civil rights movement when activists embraced economic rights as indispensable to their citizenship status. They backed the Full Employment Act of 1945 and championed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Second Bill of Rights” (sometimes referred to as Roosevelt’s “Economic Bill of Rights”). In the 1960s, Bayard Rustin, chief organizer of the signature civil rights event, the “March on Washington,” told the U.S. Congress that civil rights “are built on ‘the right to a decent livelihood’ or they are built on sand.” Martin Luther King Jr.’s final initiative, the “Poor People’s Campaign” in 1968, rejuvenated the call for an economic bill of rights.⁶

Economic citizenship is a unique form of citizenship, different from that of civil citizenship and political citizenship that are the foundation of classical liberalism. So too is it distinct from British sociologist T. H. Marshall’s well-established notion of social citizenship. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Marshall contended that social rights such as education, medical care, and housing inhered to individuals based on their citizenship status, not on the basis of class position or need. Where Marshall folded economic elements into civil and social forms of citizenship, scholars more recently, such as historian Alice Kessler-Harris, argue that this approach still masks the importance of economics to the lives of citizens by ignoring how many forms of labor (for example, household, caregiving, child rearing) go largely unpaid. It thus mutes the effect of economic inequality on the ability of citizens to participate fully in the polity. The economic rights that inhere to individuals include wages adequate to support self and family, education and job training, unemployment insurance, and public policies that support the selection of an occupation of one’s choosing. As did previous generations of workers and advocates, BUILD members understood the centrality of economic citizenship in their lives. “Social is fine, but social don’t carry you but so far,” said Catherine Brown, a BUILD leader and retired salesclerk. “Economics is what carries you . . . to help this country go forward and to help our people get into good jobs and be part of this country upfront.”⁷

BUILD’s focus on economic citizenship in the 1990s was rooted in its members’ understanding of urban politics and religion. It was a “citizens power organization,” affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF),

a national network established in 1940 and led for its first three decades by Saul Alinsky, the doyen of modern community organizing. The IAF's "iron rule of organizing"—"Never do for others what they can do for themselves"—was manifest in the origin, organization, and funding of BUILD initiatives. Although its members eschewed a political label, BUILD delivered searing criticisms of the dominant economic and political order. It rejected top-down organizational approaches, as well as what members referred to pejoratively as "activism," in favor of "deep roots organizing." "People can move mountains. No matter who they are . . . if we're organized," said BUILD member Valerie Bell.⁸

Religion played a key role in BUILD. It manifested itself institutionally through member churches that provided the main source of funds and social space in which to organize. Local clergy and lay church members brought their various theological, scriptural, and ethical traditions to bear on community concerns and sought consensus for courses of action. These traditions included the Social Gospel, first promulgated by Progressive-Era Protestant reformers, with its application of Christian charity and justice to social problems. The prophetic themes of liberation and collective empowerment in African American churches were prominent as well. The Catholic notions of communal interdependence, solidarity, and subsidiarity, which recognized the importance of intermediate organizational forms such as families, community groups, and unions alongside the state, and where the goods of creation were meant for all, helped shape BUILD's identity. Other prominent networks of ecumenical, faith-based citizen organizations such as PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center), and the Gamaliel Foundation shared an approach similar to that of IAF affiliates.⁹

BUILD's pursuit of economic citizenship lay in the urban crisis of the 1960s, as Baltimore joined with other large American cities that slid dramatically from their mid-century peaks of economic and political power. Grim statistics capture this decline. Between 1949 and 1998, Baltimore lost some 300,000 people—close to one-third of its population. A disproportionate number of these were white residents, as their share of the population shrank from 65 percent in 1960 to 44.1 percent in 1980. With few immigrants and Hispanics, its population by 1990 was 64.3 percent African American and 31.6 percent white. The number of manufacturing jobs, many of which were higher-paying union jobs, dropped as well: by 25 percent in the 1960s and then another 45 percent—some 40,000 jobs—between 1970 and 1985. Baltimore's remaining residents suffered from a deteriorating housing stock,

underfunded schools, and rising crime. Lower-paying service jobs filled in for some of the old manufacturing jobs. While there was a modest growth in better-paying finance and professional positions, the clear majority of new jobs paid close to minimum wage. By the mid-1990s, almost half the city's neighborhoods were deemed "poverty neighborhoods" (where more than 20 percent of the residents subsisted below the poverty line). Forty percent of Baltimore's total population met the federal government's definition of "poor." A 1992 Maryland Food Bank study revealed that nearly one-out-of-three residents who used its 140 affiliated soup kitchens and food pantries worked at full-time jobs.¹⁰

A succession of civil rights, Black Power, and neighborhood rights activists attempted, with limited results, to address Baltimore's daunting problems. President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the mid-1960s catalyzed local efforts to bypass calcified city bureaucracies and entrenched politicians with direct grants to community organizations. In Baltimore, activists created a "community action commission" to confront, among other things, relations between the police and African American residents. Internecine fighting over control of the modest federal funds, however, hampered efforts, as did police persecution of radicals. As elsewhere across the country in the 1970s, the "neighborhood movement" attempted to devolve control over individual and community to governance at the neighborhood level. Its adherents were white ethnic progressives, middle-class homesteaders (or "brownstoners"), and urban communalists; they included as well women's health center organizers, founders of local food cooperatives, and gay activists who engaged in municipal politics for the first time. The movement took form in Baltimore both in some "homesteading" efforts in the Otterbein and Fells Point neighborhoods around the Inner Harbor and in neighborhood groups and associations across the city. Residents rehabbed playgrounds, sponsored summer day camps and job training programs, and opened food pantries. Two of the best-known were the Northeast Community Organization and the Southeast Community Organization. These unique organizations of predominantly white ethnic residents emphasized both neighborhood and ethnic pride and the need to forge coalitions across racial lines.¹¹

Control over the local economy and development remained in City Hall and corporate boardrooms. As did a new generation of mayors in cities such as New York City, Atlanta, and Detroit, Baltimore's elected leaders touted solutions to urban decay that privileged privatization, deregulation, and subsidies to developers and businesses. William Donald Schaefer, Baltimore's mayor from 1971 until 1987, made improving Baltimore's

attractiveness to investors and tourists, particularly in its downtown and the Inner Harbor, a priority. Schaefer limited municipal spending and held Baltimore's credit rating as a key to meeting his objectives. Federal urban policies during his tenure helped shape this approach. Lyndon Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, promoted a "New Federalism" in which public officials, not community groups, received block grants. During Jimmy Carter's presidency in the second half of the 1970s, various grant and economic development programs pumped nearly \$90 million into subsidizing private investment. President Reagan's gutting of urban and antipoverty programs in the 1980s led big-city mayors to seek cost-cutting measures. Baltimore city officials cut services by 25 percent and reduced municipal payroll by 37 percent over the course of the decade through elimination or privatization of positions.¹²

The white and Black clergy who founded BUILD in 1977 sought a new approach to organizing, one that drew on the strength of Baltimore's many parishes and congregations. Many of its early leaders were active in the Interfaith Ministerial Alliance, which worked closely with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Urban League. They wrote in a statement of purpose that, "What distinguishes BUILD from existing organizations is its metropolitan scope, its interracial and multid denominational make up and its non-political and non-governmentally funded structure." The BUILD clergy judged other efforts as well-meaning but too dependent on charismatic leaders, political ideology, or the government. Reverend Vernon Dobson, a BUILD co-founder and pastor of the Union Baptist Church, characterized the Black Panthers as a group of "very bright young people" who were stuck in a "reactive organization." Dobson, already a seasoned civil rights leader (he helped lead the desegregation of the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in 1963), reasoned that the Panthers and other Black nationalist groups "cannot survive in the modern context without connecting to an institution that has a history, that can interpret the sweep of events in the black community over a period of fifty years, maybe a hundred years." He confessed that, by the mid-1970s, he had become "an old, disillusioned preacher" who organized demonstrations that generated only a dozen or so protesters. The minister, along with Reverend Wendell Phillips of the Heritage United Church of Christ and Monseigneur Clare O'Dwyer of Saint Matthew Catholic Parish, recruited the first ten dues-paying member churches to launch a sponsoring committee. Just two years later, in 1979, one thousand delegates, representing twenty member institutions, participated in BUILD's first citywide convention.¹³

BUILD's member congregations, diverse in denominational identity and racial and class composition, articulated lofty goals alongside practical concerns for its struggling neighborhoods. There were congregations of white Catholics and Protestants, although Black Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations dominated the membership rolls by the 1980s. Almost all these congregations and parishes housed social services and outreach programs; many had histories of support for civil rights and labor causes. BUILD membership, then, was a continuation of these pursuits of economic and social justice. O'Dwyer's St. Matthew Parish in northeast Baltimore, for example, saw the new organization as "providing us with training that will enable us to maintain our dignity as people of God and give us strength through unity to control our lives." Leaders from Dobson's Union Baptist Church, an African American congregation organized in 1852, hoped that "the people of God grow into the community of God." Another congregation joined BUILD when a storm damaged their church building; unable to receive government assistance, they benefitted from BUILD "focusing its power behind us" by bringing one hundred clergy and lay leaders to meet with the mayor on their behalf. Yet another congregation hoped that BUILD might increase neighborhood patrols by police and improve customer service at the local shopping center. Intent on creating a stable, independent organization, BUILD leaders calculated dues, which could run up to \$3,000 per year based on the size of individual congregations and parishes. By the late 1980s, BUILD had forty-seven churches and congregations in its fold, along with three teacher and school principal unions. In all, some 55,000 families held BUILD memberships through their parishes and congregations.¹⁴

As an IAF affiliate, BUILD's organizational structure checked the power of clergy and paid organizers. A *Chicago Reporter* writer noted that BUILD "does not believe in having one charismatic leader, and, instead rotates its offices among members. There is no single voice associated with BUILD as Jesse Jackson is with Operation PUSH." Four co-chairs—of which only two could be clergy—served terms limited to two consecutive years. The "strategy team" of thirty-seven lay and clergy members made the key policy decisions, set the agenda for internal and external meetings, and supervised the organization's financial health. In addition, an "organizing council" of five lay leaders planned mobilization for rallies, assemblies, and mass meetings. The "annual convention," usually attended by 1,500–2,000 BUILD members, endorsed the strategy team's agenda. Professional IAF organizers were key figures in BUILD. They were limited in number, however, to only a few organizers at any time and held contracts with BUILD that required annual renewal.

BUILD was “a power organization that’s broadly based in the community,” said Arnie Graf, IAF’s organizer for BUILD in the 1980s and ‘90s. Graf, who was active in the Congress of Racial Equality and served a stint in the Peace Corps and as a welfare rights organizer in Harlan County, West Virginia, before coming to the IAF in the early 1970s, explained that “its purpose is to train lay leadership in the neighborhood and churches to become kind of co-creators in their own history.”¹⁵

In addition to the IAF’s intensive three-day local training workshops, scores of BUILD members participated in the ten-day training institute that grounded them in “relational organizing.” BUILD member Emily Thayer called it “one of the greatest faith moves I’ve ever made. . . . [W]e learned about the world as it is, and the world as it should be, and we had confrontational encounters. We learned discipline.” It was a mix of practical and introspective sessions underscored by deeply intellectual reading in Saul Alinsky’s writings, the Bible, Thucydides, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Frederick Douglass, among others. Margaret Waddell, a lifelong Baltimore resident who was educated in segregated schools and belonged to Dobson’s church, noted, “It wasn’t so much [the] mechanics of doing things, as it was about relationships, how to develop them, how to talk to people, how to relate to people.” Waddell embraced the core tenet of a citizens’ power organization: “We distanced ourselves from the power structure only to bring our power.” Once back in Baltimore, she practiced this approach with “one-on-one” and small-group meetings. Mary Sterrett, a custodial worker with seven children, recalled inviting neighbors to her house and serving refreshments. “And I’d get them to talk about how they feel about what’s going on in the city,” she remembered. “‘What’s going on?’ ‘What about your children?’ ‘How do you see yourself?’”¹⁶

BUILD leaders did not paper over racial injustices and inequalities. “For over a decade the Black community has suffered through the ravages of double-digit unemployment and underemployment,” they wrote in 1984. “The corporate community has been part of the problem. They must become part of the solution.” Dobson viewed BUILD’s work as a continuation of the civil rights movement. “What we do in BUILD, we do out of an understanding of what we were trying to do in the Civil Rights Movement,” he said. The paucity of Black IAF organizers, however, threatened to undercut the organization’s effectiveness. Dobson tempered his wariness of white allies in general and his position that the IAF was “too white,” with admiration for the way Graf and other white organizers engaged with Baltimore’s African American community. The “IAF Black Caucus,” to which Dobson and

other BUILD members belonged, proclaimed in their 1981 statement “Tent of the Presence,” “Like Moses and the Israelites, black church leaders and black Americans are in exile. Down the road from slavery but not yet near the Promised Land.” They urged a collaborative approach, across faith and racial lines, to turn this disappointment into meaningful change: “Anger that is focused and deep and rooted in grief is a key element in the organizing of black churches in the 1980s.”¹⁷

In its first fifteen years, BUILD accrued an impressive record in organizing for political and social citizenship. The organization signed up tens of thousands of new voters and extracted the following gains: \$15 million from corporations for a college-preparation program and scholarships for public school students, employment guarantees from local businesses for high school graduates, a city ordinance for improved nursing-home safety, and a handgun control measure. BUILD pushed for community policing and succeeded in reforming auto insurance rates so that they were based on driving records and not place of residence. One of the most visible “actions” undertaken was a campaign against Baltimore banks that issued too-few mortgages in working-class and poor neighborhoods, that hired few African American applicants, and that promoted only a handful to managerial positions. BUILD leaders estimated that its members had \$13 million in these banks. Graf admitted this “wasn’t a lot of money for a lot of banks, but it is a lot of money when people think collectively.” When meetings with bank officials failed to bring results, BUILD members organized a “dollar-into-pennies” action. Bank officials, embarrassed by the media reporting on the long lines of local customers requesting the time-consuming exchange of dollar bills into pennies (and vice-versa), agreed to BUILD’s demands. As a result, over 500 city residents received approval for their mortgage applications.¹⁸

The most significant accomplishment during this period was the building of 1,000 affordable, single-family homes, known as “Nehemiah houses,” after the biblical prophet who rebuilt Jerusalem. Another IAF affiliate, the East Brooklyn Congregations, developed the “Nehemiah Plan” in the 1980s, and BUILD adopted it in 1988. The attractive homes cost 40 percent less than market price and were a wildly popular initiative (over 4,500 homes were built in Brooklyn over the course of the next three decades). True to IAF principles, the design, funding, and pricing were forged free of government or business control. Yet once BUILD raised \$2.25 million of its own funds from members’ congregations, parishes, and religious denominational governing bodies, it secured \$9 million in state-government support, \$1.5 million from

city government, and \$4.2 million from the federal government. This mixed funding approach was evidence of the practical persistence of the citizens' power organization. The organization had become "a respected, and feared, part of the local political equation," reported one journalist. BUILD's influence "is considered far greater than the local chapter of the NAACP. City officials will not speak against BUILD on record."¹⁹

Yet BUILD could not alter Mayor Schaefer's approach. In the 1970s, most clergy and community leaders had lent their support to the Baltimore Economic Development Corporation and other components of the mayor's plan. Over the course of the next fifteen years, however, they became alarmed at the growing ranks of low-wage workers who had little or no employment security or benefits. The policy of privatization continued unabated as the city's payroll dropped an additional 16 percent between 1988 and 1993. As tourists poured into Inner Harbor venues and affluent white residents moved into adjacent gentrifying neighborhoods, Arnie Graf warned of "a growing racial tension and growing income disparity between the rich and the poor." He urged that BUILD "get to the root of this . . . to deal with people's work and wages and [the] economy." In their "Call for Transformation," BUILD leaders noted the "marked increase in private affluence for some matched by a dramatic increase in public poverty for many." A new direction was necessary because Baltimore's "connective tissue is fraying. We run the risk of becoming a 'city of strangers.'"²⁰

Embracing Economic Citizenship: Baltimore's Living Wage Ordinance

The immediate impetus for BUILD's taking up the living wage cause came from clergy who observed the increasing number of employed local residents who sustained themselves and their families through the services of soup kitchens, food pantries, and clothing distribution centers. "Pastor, I do have a job. . . [but] I don't have enough money to afford to eat," one man revealed to Reverend Dobson. BUILD organizers described "custodial workers at the Arena living in shelters. . . . [L]ow wage Central American immigrants from D.C. cleaning the Convention Center. . . and the replacement of secure and well-paid city custodial jobs by Johnson Controls as nine schools were privatized." As of October 1993, Baltimore had \$710 million in service contracts. City government had created, one pastor charged, an "urban sharecropping" system. This was corrosive to civic values because, as Graf put it, it "degrades

and dehumanizes. How can anyone expect the city to give birth to vibrant, caring neighborhoods?”²¹

Economic citizenship resonated powerfully among BUILD members. Many of their denominational governing bodies in the 1980s had issued statements on the need for economic justice to counter the effects of stagnant wages, crime, urban neglect, and a waning labor movement. These had a powerful effect in changing the priorities of local congregations. BUILD clergy from Catholic, United Methodist, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, and Presbyterian congregations explained the centrality of work to citizens’ lives. “It is through work that people provide for their material needs,” they wrote. “And it is through work that people contribute to larger society.” A living wage, then, was necessary to securing citizenship rights: “People of faith have fully supported the right of workers to organize and secure their rights to fair wages and decent working conditions.”²²

Jonathan Lange, the chief architect of BUILD’s living wage campaign, drew both from his own background as well as his organizing experience in formulating the mandate. Lange came from a self-described “old-fashioned Jewish, socialist background.” This background included a grandfather who was a member of the Cigar Makers International Union and a father who was active in his teacher’s union and who impressed on the younger Lange the importance of wage justice when he queried store clerks on “whether she made a ‘living wage.’” Indeed, the notion of a “living wage” had fallen into disuse with the appearance of minimum-wage laws and improved incomes through industrial unionism beginning in the 1930s. In the dismal context of 1990s urban America, however, Lange argued for its revival. “Service work is undervalued,” Lange told the *Baltimore Sun*. “Because of that, people who serve the rest of us are locked into poverty. That’s not going to change until service workers get some power.”²³

The campaign took organizational form when BUILD allied with AFSCME in the creation of the SSC. Although this kind of community organization-labor union partnership would become common in subsequent campaigns, it was a novel undertaking in the early 1990s. Both IAF affiliates and labor union leaders eyed each other warily. Alinsky himself criticized the labor movement by the late 1940s for its calcified tactics and approach to workplace justice. The Baltimore labor movement, never as strong as in cities such as Chicago and Detroit, suffered substantial losses as factories closed. The still-strong building trades local unions, dominated by white, male workers, fixed on defending the “prevailing wages” they received through the Bacon-Davis Act (1931) and fretted that BUILD’s efforts might

diminish their status. AFSCME proved to be a more suitable ally: given its concern with privatization in its strongholds in government, corrections, and higher education, AFSCME welcomed an opportunity to reverse this trend through a living wage measure. In the partnership, AFSCME paid most expenses related to SSC organizing, including organizers' salaries and lost pay for workers attending IAF training. BUILD would control the day-to-day running and general direction of the social compact campaign. The BUILD-AFSCME partnership illustrated the importance of religion and faith communities in coalition with labor organizations in the post-civil rights era. "The religious alliance is a growing part of the labor movement. And it is especially distinctive here in Baltimore," acknowledged an AFSCME spokesperson.²⁴

BUILD leaders found Kurt Schmoke, Schafer's successor and the city's first African American mayor, resistant to a living wage ordinance. Schmoke, an Ivy League graduate, described by a local journalist as a "laid-back technocrat with a 5,000 kilowatt smile and little substance," was first elected in 1987 with BUILD's tacit support. He disappointed BUILD early in his tenure by continuing Schafer's development stance. Community organizers had designed the measure to be modest in scope so as not to challenge directly most businesses and corporations, aiming it only at companies holding city contracts for outsourced work. Lange reasoned, "We had to organize where we had some power, electoral and other sorts of power, and aimed it at the public sector that was letting the contracts out for bid." They pegged the "living wage" for a family of four at \$16,000 per year (to rise, in stages, to \$20,000), which put it above the federal poverty level of \$14,000. The mayor resisted BUILD's living wage entreaty on the grounds that he did not have the authority to approve such a measure.²⁵

Mary Pat Clarke, the mayor's chief opponent on the City Council, shepherded the measure to passage. Clarke's affinity for BUILD's positions was longstanding, first through her involvement in neighborhood organizations in the late 1960s and then, beginning with her first City Council bid in 1975, in support of many of the positions BUILD took. In particular, she embraced the living wage cause after discussions with John Ricard, an African American clergyman and auxiliary bishop in the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore. Armed with a city Legal Department opinion that affirmed the legality of the measure, Clarke refuted Schmoke's claim that he was unable to sign a living wage ordinance. In December 1993, she introduced "Bill 716" "to amend the City's current prevailing wage law, applicable only to public works contractors and subcontractors, TO INCLUDE *all* contracts over \$5,000, i.e., *the*

purchase of any goods or services, including professional services” [emphasis in original]. The new ordinance would set wage rates at \$6.10 per hour for the first year—a notable increase over the \$4.25 per hour most workers then received—followed by set annual increases to reach \$7.70 per hour within four years. Employers were required to pay overtime rates if workers’ shifts exceeded eight hours or if they worked more than forty hours per week. Those in violation of the ordinance faced fines and contract denials for one year. The mayor agreed to support Clarke’s bill but insisted on a revision that would leave the annual increases to be determined by the condition of city finances. Schmoke remained ambivalent about the living wage ordinance that became law in December 1994. He told the *New York Times* two years later that he would have preferred a federal minimum wage hike but reckoned that, if the bill had not passed, “we would be paying out more in food stamps and welfare, and so far the ordinance is not that costly.”²⁶

The 4,000 workers covered by the ordinance registered their satisfaction with bigger pay packets in terms both of the tangible gains in their everyday lives and in the empowerment it gave them as citizens. One worker reported that he could purchase a new storm door for his aging row house and begin to repay a \$7,000 student loan. Another was able to order home telephone service for the first time. “I just want to live a normal life, just like everybody else,” he said. “You can’t do that off \$4.25 an hour. . . . That’s for high school kids.” Lonnie Howard, a seventy-one-year-old school custodian, was pleased that his weekly pay jumped from \$154 to \$192 a week: “I’m doing a whole lot better now. I’m paying off my debts.” Baltimore’s service workers understood the inextricable link between pay and respect. “Don’t give me all this work and then not enough to take care of my family,” cautioned another worker. Willie Lee, a sixty-year old woman who cleaned offices in Baltimore’s World Trade Center and had a second cleaning job at a local university to help support her daughter and two grandchildren, celebrated having “a little left over” to pay for long-overdue electrical repairs. She viewed the living wage in a community context. “We’re just trying to bring the neighborhood back up a little,” said Lee.²⁷

Studies in the late 1990s on the ordinance’s effect confirmed BUILD leaders’ argument about economic citizenship’s importance. The reverse of privatization was the most noticeable result. In the first six months alone, the city hired sixty-two new workers to clean schools that private contractors had handled for the previous two years. AFSCME District Council 67, the union’s body representing Baltimore’s municipal workers, reported enrolling

eight hundred new members. The authors of a 1996 study conducted by the Washington, DC-based Preamble Center for Public Policy interviewed representatives from thirty-one companies holding city contracts. They concluded that “no layoffs were reported and no evidence of declining investment in businesses” happened in Baltimore. An Economic Policy Institute report three years later drew similar conclusions, noting especially that the increased wages had created greater workforce stability. The one area for improvement was that many low-wage workers desired full-time jobs alongside their higher wages.²⁸

The “Social Compact” Challenge to the Urban Redevelopment Regime

Community organizers viewed the 1994 measure as a necessary, but insufficient, victory. The social compact was an even bolder claim to economic citizenship. The ordinance, Lange noted, “was not an end in itself. . . . [I]t was the first step that would allow unions to come and organize. . . . [It] was a basic union organizing strategy.” BUILD’s paramount challenge was to the urban-growth paradigm that favored private developers and downtown businesses. “Unless you establish a much broader base, one that reflects all the public spending, then the wage floor will stay at \$4.25 an hour,” said Lange. BUILD argued that these employers, who benefitted from public monies, should create jobs that paid a living wage, provided benefits, offered career advancement, and did not impede workers from forming unions. BUILD demanded that workers retain their jobs when a city contract changed contractors (“Work belongs to the worker,” they insisted).²⁹

Government subsidies lay at the center of BUILD’s “power analysis” of what ailed the city’s poor and working class. These monies—in the form of low- (or no-) interest loans and outright grants—underscored, said Arnie Graf, “an unchallenged belief that the downtown is the most important neighborhood in the city.” Schmoke and his allies considered developers, banks, and the hospitality and entertainment industries to be best suited to turn around Baltimore’s fortunes. The result was the “denigration of work and decent wages” and a “growing assault on the public sector.” In “A Call for Family and Neighborhood Investment,” BUILD leaders proclaimed that “After thirty-five years of subsidies to the private sector in every imaginable form. . . it is time to refocus on those efforts that build families and neighborhoods.”³⁰

BUILD organizers provided eye-popping figures on these government subsidies to private enterprise. Maryland's state government had spent \$42 million and made commitments for another \$115 million. State and city funds had gone to Inner Harbor venues such as the National Aquarium, the Christopher Columbus Pavilion, and the Pier Six Concert Pavilion. Hotels received considerable support as well, including Stouffer's Hotel (\$228,000 in bonds for a parking garage and \$920,000 in block grant funds for front entrance paving and landscaping), the Omni Hotel (\$5.9 million in loans from the city), and the Lord Baltimore Hotel (\$7 million in a city loan). The state government spent over \$205 million to help build Oriole Park, a major league baseball field at the center of Camden Yards. In addition, the city built a parking garage for the ballpark at a cost of \$9 million (plus an additional \$1 million for the land). They allocated \$9.75 million for transportation improvements in the area. There was a host of other subsidies, including \$6.1 million for street and infrastructure improvements around privately owned and operated marinas. "Just as the corporations count on . . . the subsidy dollars they receive," stated BUILD clergy, "the public which supports them must be able to measure the benefits."³¹

In the wake of the living wage ordinance, BUILD was optimistic about its pursuit of economic citizenship. Baltimore's Board of Estimates passed a "right of first refusal" ordinance in 1995 that allowed contract workers in good standing the right to remain in their positions when contracts changed hands. "It makes sense," they reasoned. "It helps stabilize the working men and women of the City in terms of their income." Bolstered by the news, Lange wrote AFSCME's Paul Booth in April 1995: "We are in the middle of a good stretch for the campaign. The combination of the Living Wage Ordinance and its recognition, plus the return of many of the jobs we have targeted to the public sector, along with the potential for SSC recognition has made this an exciting and challenging time." In addition to its general critique of subsidies, the SSC made focused efforts against specific employers. A group of two-dozen Johns Hopkins University students, hired as part of the SSC's "corporate campaign," identified their own university as culpable in building the low-wage economy. The wealthy university had considerable power in Baltimore. In addition to its economic control over its sprawling main campus and medical campus, it also owned Broadway Services, Inc., a for-profit subsidiary that employed janitors, parking attendants, and other workers, many of whom worked as contract employees. At a rally of students and faculty, joined by BUILD, AFSCME, and SSC members, speakers demanded a pay boost to \$6.10 per hour, along with health benefits for its

workforce. As a result, Johns Hopkins employers gave the workers a dollar-an-hour raise over the course of the following year.³²

BUILD and AFSCME members fanned out across the downtown to engage with other low-wage workers. It was a humbling experience for the mostly middle-class paid organizers and clergy. For the group who woke at 5:30 a.m. to meet workers at bus stops and coffee shops it was, in the words of IAF organizer Kathleen O'Toole, "like the scales fell from their eyes." Roger Gench, pastor of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, was impressed by the fortitude of these workers, including "Rip," a middle-aged, African American man he met at Mr. Jay's, a coffee shop. The worker had never earned above the minimum wage. When Gench asked him how he coped with low pay, he pointed heaven-ward and replied, "God helps me." Many of these workers found the social compact compelling. The workers that SSC organizer Kerry Miciotto met "sat on a bus stop right next to each other and never knew that they worked together in these jobs." Rene Brown, a cleaner who made minimum wage at the World Trade Center, joined the SSC after striking up a conversation with an organizer handing out coffee on a downtown corner. Mary Sterrett had a similar encounter at a bus stop and thought, "Now, this can't be true. . . . Are they for real?" Intrigued, she attended the next SSC meeting and a subsequent IAF training session. In an audacious "action" aimed at reaching isolated workers, a group of clergy and organizers went floor to floor in downtown hotels to talk to housekeepers. Hotel security rousted most of them—they chased Reverend Dobson down a fire escape—with the exception of Gench. As a well-dressed white man with a distinguished appearance, he escaped notice and was able to get fifty workers to sign SSC membership cards that night.³³

Employers and city officials pushed back, arguing that the social compact would cause increased hotel rates and office rents. Businesses would flee Baltimore, they cautioned, and investment would dry up. M. J. Brodie, head of the City of Baltimore Corporation, which oversaw development, had "serious doubts" that the business climate would remain healthy. According to Champe McCulloch, president of the state's Chamber of Commerce, "You make people want to invest in Maryland when they can say, 'That is one hell of a place to do business.' This does just the opposite." The hotel industry defended its employment practices by noting that it paid over \$18 million in state and local taxes in 1992 and that the \$43 million payroll for their 3,000 employees boosted Baltimore's economy. Howard Rawlings, a Baltimore member of the Maryland House of Delegates and the first African American to chair its powerful Appropriations Committee, claimed that "short of a

revolution” a living wage for Inner Harbor and downtown workers would be difficult. Mayor Schmoke wavered between vague endorsements of BUILD’s objectives and protestations of his limited means to enact them. He told the 1,000 BUILD members gathered at the West Side Enon Baptist Church in August 1993, “I support the principles of a social compact”; the next month, at another large BUILD meeting, he hesitated when Reverend Douglas Miles drew a chalk line on stage and asked Schmoke to cross it if he backed the social compact. When, after some hesitation, he crossed the line, Schmoke qualified his support by stating that he could not force local hotels to release subsidy and pay data; nor could he bring them to pay above the minimum wage.³⁴

Much of the organizing drive for economic citizenship came from within the SSC. It was a unique organization: equal parts a collective bargaining union, an old-fashioned occupational union, and a community union. Although it did not engage in collective bargaining per se, the SSC initiated union organizing drives at specific worksites, including Camden Yards and downtown business offices, and then handed them off to AFSCME. So too did the SSC operate a worker-owned temporary agency known as the SSC Employment Agency, Inc., much like older union hiring halls such as those for plumbers, painters, and musicians. It focused on placing members in catering jobs at hotels and the Convention Center. In addition, the SSC provided services and benefits for its members for a \$10-a-month dues. These included tax preparation and check-cashing services, \$10,000 term life insurance, vision care, and a pharmaceutical drug plan. It negotiated an arrangement with the Ideal Federal Savings Bank, a Black-owned institution, so that members could open accounts for a \$10 minimum opening deposit. SSC members, many of whom were isolated due to the third-shift nature of their work, welcomed the opportunity to create a vibrant culture. The organization’s headquarters, in an AFSCME-rented building near the Federal Hill neighborhood, was busy with dances, holiday parties, and other social events. Its members wore their SSC tee-shirts with pride.³⁵

These service workers were tenacious in the face of harassment and threats to their already-tenuous employment status. They were, as one AFSCME member characterized them, “a community of workers that historically have slipped through the cracks. Folks that are working for their poverty are now building a community and educating themselves, and taking action.” The majority of the members were African American women. They moved into SSC leadership positions with a “great gutsy, ‘take-no-prisoners’ approach,” according to Kathleen O’Toole. The consequences for such militancy were

serious. In 1994, Johnson Controls, which held a cleaning contract with Education Alternatives, Inc., a for-profit manager of twelve Baltimore public schools, threatened to fire five workers for attending SSC meetings. At the same time, the management for Harrison Hotel harassed several workers for the same reason. In response, twenty ministers and clergy conducted a “pray-in” in the hotel’s lobby until management agreed to cease their threats. BUILD and the SSC met with Mayor Schmoke about such incidents and drafted a resolution that the city’s Board of Estimates passed, which cancelled existing contracts and barred future contracts with employers who violated the National Labor Relations Act. The next year the SSC filed unfair labor practice charges against Broadway Services, Inc., when managers fired Valerie Bell and Virginia Johnson for “gossiping.” The organization’s executives countered that the company discharged the two SSC members for distributing to co-workers during lunch breaks a newspaper article on the mayor’s vow to protect service workers’ rights. In response to their termination, Schmoke hired both women to work in his office.³⁶

The Range and Limits of Citizen-Power Organizing

BUILD’s most notable success in the second half of the 1990s was in modifying the state’s “workfare” provisions contained in a federal law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The new measure, passed by the Republican-controlled U.S. Congress and signed into law by a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, altered considerably the structure of the nation’s welfare system. Among other things, the Welfare Reform Act (as it was commonly known) required welfare recipients to work in order to receive time-limited assistance. “Work-eligible” adults were to engage in “work activities.” The law mandated that parents with children under age six were required to work twenty hours per week; those with older children were required to work thirty hours per week. The types of work included unpaid employment, government-subsidized employment paid with federal block grants, and unregulated “on-the-job-training” (almost always at below-minimum wage levels). The new law capped a nearly two-decade campaign by workfare advocates. Welfare rights advocates’ and feminists’ efforts for maternal health and childcare support and wages for full-time homemakers lost out in the 1980s and 1990s to militant pro-family and fiscal conservatives.³⁷

The law’s impact on Baltimore’s workforce was alarming: within the first several months of going into effect, a cohort of workforce “trainees,” paid \$2

an hour, replaced around 1,000 service workers. AFSCME's Gerald McEntee called it "a cruel version of musical chairs" involving the city's working poor. BUILD's Reverend Douglas Miles denounced the Welfare Reform Law as "plainly sinful . . . a transfer of wealth from the neediest to the greediest." Workfare employees replaced janitorial workers who earned living wage rates at Baltimore's Patterson High School; bus aides for CityWide, a transportation company with a city contract, reported that managers asked them to train workfare hires who would then replace them; and, food service provider Aramark rewarded local managers with travel alarm clocks and state savings bonds for meeting a hiring quota of workfare employees. "We've got the working poor pitted against the dependent poor," complained Arnie Graf.³⁸

BUILD, joined by IAF affiliates in Maryland's Prince Georges County and Montgomery County, leveraged a provision in the Welfare Reform Act that allowed individual states some leeway in work rules to push Governor Parris Glendening to modify workfare regulations. BUILD had good reason to think that Glendening would consent to the proposal: although IAF affiliates did not endorse specific candidates or political parties ("Our platform is our candidate," they liked to say), the community organization responded with more enthusiasm to his comments at the public forums they hosted than for the other gubernatorial candidates. The Democratic governor, then in his first term, had benefitted from the 350 IAF canvassers that fanned out across the state during the general election in which his margin of victory was slim. Once at the state's helm, Glendening directed that service-worker employees at the state-owned Baltimore World Trade Center be paid BUILD-proposed living wage rates. In addition, he provided \$185,000 for a BUILD school initiative, and he bolstered state funding of Prince Georges's public schools in response to the IAF affiliates' demand. AFSCME was pleased with the governor as well. Although the union lost a bruising battle for state employee collective bargaining rights in the 1996 General Assembly, Glendening issued an executive order granting limited bargaining rights. The community organizers and unionists were heartened when told at a "raucous meeting" of nearly 300 BUILD and other IAF affiliate members at City Temple Baptist Church in May 1997 that workfare was "illegal . . . against the policy of the State of Maryland, and it's immoral."³⁹

Business opposition and Glendening's equivocation on his initial pledge, however, threatened the success of the campaign. A group of corporate employers in the fast-food, retail, hotel, and health care industries formed "Work, Not Welfare," a lobbying and media effort to argue that workfare raised local economies and recipients' self-worth. The Chamber of Commerce's

McCulloch doubted the frequency of workers' displacement, claiming, "If it occurs at all, it's an aberration." When the community organizers received the full draft of Glendening's order following the May 1997 meeting, they denounced it as a "bad faith proposal." In it, the governor had offered watery policy language that placed the burden on employees to prove an employer's intention to displace them from their positions. It required only that employers "make every effort" not to displace workers. BUILD members fuming at a gathering in preparation for meeting Glendening cautioned, "He does need to know that if he reneges on his commitment we will go public and hard." When the governor remained unmoved at the meeting, the community organizers walked out of the meeting. They warned him in a letter the next day: "Perhaps you believe you can take us for granted, or that you can placate us with extra funding for some welfare programs, or that we are of little consequence to you." Drawing from Saul Alinsky's reminder that "No politician can sit on a hot issue if you make it hot enough," they informed the governor that they would wait one week for him to present a strong anti-workfare order or they would launch a public "action."⁴⁰

Glendening yielded to BUILD, underscoring citizen-power organizations' influence in the 1990s. The governor's executive order allowed state subsidies to be used only for newly created workfare jobs. He established a simple grievance procedure for dismissed employees. It required employers to demonstrate that they had not replaced incumbent workers with workfare employees. In addition, employers were barred from reducing regular employees' hours in order to hire workfare employees. Still, although Maryland's government was the first in the nation to push back against workfare, its response was not the strongest: an Illinois law prohibited not only displacement but also workfare employment entirely. While BUILD and its IAF allies judged Glendening's actions as positive, they were disappointed that he rejected their proposal to spend \$90 million to create 5,000 new public-sector jobs.⁴¹

On the heels of Glendening's order, BUILD, the SSC, and AFSCME took the lead in their rallies, media events, and meetings with public officials to challenge the Welfare Reform Act's prohibition on welfare recipients' enrolling in post-secondary education unless it was direct job training. Under the new law, one-third of the nearly 900 students at Baltimore County Community College (BCCC) who received welfare payments were forced to leave school. Most were women, many of whom were mothers with young children. As a result of one-on-one and house meetings with welfare recipients who reported their potential loss of student status, organizers established the

“Solidarity Welfare Action Team.” La Tonya Williams, a twenty-year-old mother of two children and a straight “A” student at BCCC, told an SSC rally, “I don’t feel you should tell people they are not worthy of getting an education because you are poor.” Community organizers and unionists considered the law’s education prohibition as a threat to the living wage, as many former students ended up in workfare positions. Alisa Glassman, an IAF organizer for the SSC, recalled that the new and current workers “were pitted against each other, competing for the same job, but one comes subsidized.” SSC pressure on Glendening resulted in his approval in February 1998 of a pilot project that would enable 500 students to count their college-student status as a state-sanctioned welfare activity. Williams was jubilant: “We have won the victory. We won the right to stay in school and will continue to be political players.” The governor extended the so-called School Counts program to other area colleges and universities later in the year.⁴²

Despite BUILD leaders’ sunny report at the end of 1999 that the past year had been one of “growth and success,” the drive for the social compact stalled by the end of the decade. BUILD rejected a proposal from the head of the local chapter of the Building Owners and Management Association to allow office-building cleaners in three buildings to unionize in exchange for dropping the living wage demand. Only a few employers, including a small bus company and a downtown hotel (which was waiting for approval of a guaranteed city loan), agreed to pay BUILD’s recommended living wage. The management at Nation’s Bank rejected the living wage outright, explaining that “the best method for wage negotiations is direct communication between employees and their employers.” So too did hotel management rebuff BUILD’s idea for a one-dollar-per-night room tax to fund the living wage rate on the grounds that it violated Adam Smith’s notion of the free market’s “invisible hand,” to which one minister replied, “We believe in an invisible hand too, and it’s pushing us for justice.” To be sure, BUILD’s vision for Baltimore would have upset the dominant urban-development regime. “I think whenever you aim a campaign at the way capital is allocated you’re going to get a big corporate reaction,” explained Kathleen O’Toole.⁴³

Kurt Schmoke remained the key obstacle in City Hall to bringing the social compact to fruition. The mayor characterized his approach as practical, confiding to the *Baltimore Sun* that he agreed with a citywide living wage as an ideal but that, “in an era of tight budgets and a stagnant tax base, Baltimore doesn’t have extra money—and residents show no sign of wanting to pay higher taxes.” In fact, Schmoke was unmoved from his core understanding of urban development. He would bend, as needed, to the political pressure

BUILD brought to bear on his administration, but he never embraced the social compact. In one telling incident, while waiting for a meeting to discuss their social compact, BUILD and SCC members witnessed Schmoke emerging from his office, smiling and shaking hands with key downtown and Inner Harbor business leaders. Turning to the disappointed community organizers, he told them, “You guys are revolutionaries; I have to be the Mayor of Baltimore.”⁴⁴

The inherent limitations in the SSC’s membership structure, as well as a national economic downturn that affected business in Baltimore’s downtown and Inner Harbor, weakened the SSC. The public-sector reversion of custodial, bus, and food-worker jobs in the first couple of years following the 1994 ordinance depleted its ranks. Organizing workers and dues collection was more difficult in private-sector jobs. Although the total number of those who paid dues at some point reached 3,000 workers, the roster of active, regularly paying members never stood at above 500 workers. The SSC enjoyed some successes, as when it organized workers at three Head Start early childhood and pre-kindergarten centers. Although the number of total new members was modest, approximately forty workers at each center, early results were encouraging. The SSC secured state government funding for the creation of a daycare workers health and welfare fund, but the for-profit companies that ran the centers exploited the loosely defined mandates governing block grants and instead steered the funds toward program expansion. In 2002, AFSCME withdrew from the Head Start organizing drive. The heaviest hit the SSC suffered was the failure of its worker-run temporary agency. In reporting a six-fold increase in business in 1998, BUILD leaders hoped that “If the agency can grow large enough then it may accomplish one of its initial missions . . . to push labor standards among all the temporary agencies in Baltimore.” By 2000, it was billing over \$1 million per year. The sharp drop in tourism in the six months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, however, spelled the end of SSC Employment Services, Inc. In 2004, the SSC folded.⁴⁵

Conclusion

None of the successful campaigns BUILD organizers launched in the 2000s was as ambitious as the social compact of the 1990s. These campaigns included the expansion of its afterschool tutoring and childcare program known as “Child First,” voter registration drives, reformation of payday lending practices by working with Maryland’s attorney general to ensure reasonable lender rates, and developing transitional living and drug addiction

recovery programs for citizens released from incarceration. Some BUILD initiatives were unsuccessful, such as the effort by IAF affiliates on the East Coast to inject a social compact-inspired debate into the 2000 presidential primaries. As the Baltimore example continued to spark campaigns across the nation, a living wage measure for city workers continued to elude them. While Maryland became the first state to require a living wage for businesses holding state contracts, an ordinance requiring “big box” retailers to pay a living wage failed to pass in Baltimore’s City Council in 2010. In 2017, the council passed a \$15-per-hour proposal for all hourly workers, only to have Mayor Catherine Pugh, sounding much like Kurt Schmoke, veto it on grounds that it might frighten investors and increase unemployment. “We had hopes of transforming Baltimore’s crown jewel, the Inner Harbor,” lamented Roger Gench. “These hopes were never fulfilled.”⁴⁶

The history of economic citizenship in 1990s Baltimore challenges the narrative that the end of “labor liberalism” in the 1970s marked the eclipse of collective action by working people. “Americans seem to like to fight with each other more than they do with economic powers that rule them,” argues historian Jefferson Cowie. In a period when urban policies and political neglect made nearly invisible these workers, however, Baltimore’s community organizers and rank-and-file workers marshaled their civic and religious values to organize along the nation’s fault lines. Campaigns in New York City, Tucson, and elsewhere followed closely the Baltimore approach. Several coalitions crafted living wage initiatives as part of larger campaigns, as BUILD did with its social compact. Chicago’s “Grassroots Collaborative” included children’s health insurance, immigrant rights, statewide minimum wage increases, and “big box” ordinances aimed at requiring large retailers to pay a living wage. The “Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee” organized for living wage jobs, environmentally sensitive development, and improved public transportation. At the state level, Georgia’s Georgian Living-Wage Coalition advocated for corporate accountability. Catalyzed by the Baltimore example, these many efforts helped create both public debates about economic justice and direct action to challenge corporate power and inequality.⁴⁷

These new organizational forms of community groups, in alliance with houses of worship, civil rights advocates, and labor unions, proclaimed an alternative to neoliberalism and free-market enthusiasm. “BUILD has learned that for families to thrive in this city they need a healthy place, adequate income, and the opportunity to build some equity,” BUILD organizers wrote in the late 1990s. Baltimore’s poor and working-class citizens announced with their social compact their intention to participate fully in the polity.

“I’m a citizen of this city,” noted Joe Muth, a Catholic priest and BUILD member. “I have a right to say that I want to see things in a certain way and begin to work toward making that happen.” The importance of “deep roots” organizing was central to the struggle for economic citizenship. For Catherine Brown, BUILD “opened the minds of those powers-that-be that here was an organization to be reckoned with. . . . We just wanted what was right for our people.”⁴⁸

NOTES

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