



## **Charles Wowkanech**

The New Jersey State AFL-CIO Executive Board first elected Charles Wowkanech President of the one million-member statewide labor federation on January 5, 1997. Wowkanech was subsequently unanimously elected to a four-year term in 2000 and re-elected in 2004, also unanimously. Prior to his election as President, Wowkanech served two years as Secretary-Treasurer, the number two position of the state's largest labor organization and six years as Assistant to the President.

New Jersey Reporter Magazine, a journal of public issues, hailed Wowkanech's election and his first year in office as the first new direction of the AFL-CIO in New Jersey in 40 years. "He is reflective of what's going on at the national level, with his energy and outreach, and he has been able to unite the labor movement because he speaks the language of progressive unionism," the magazine noted.

Wishing to build a labor movement which is truly reflective of New Jersey's working families, one of Charlie's first initiatives was to recruit Laurel Brennan of the Ladies Garment Workers Union (UNITE) for the position of Secretary-Treasurer. Laurel is the first woman to serve in this capacity in New Jersey and one of only seven nationally.

Charlie's continued commitment to diversity and opportunity for all has led to a record number of women and minorities recruited into non-traditional careers through the Construction Trades Training Program. Consistent with the principles on which unions were founded, he has also supported the rights of all workers to fully participate in the workforce and labor movement. In 2004 Charlie organized one of the nation's largest Immigrant Worker's Freedom Ride events which brought attention to the unsafe working conditions and discrimination faced by many immigrant workers. Charlie has been recognized several times for his efforts in this regard by organizations such as the Latino Leadership Alliance.

A second-generation member of Local 68 of the Operating Engineers, Charlie immersed himself in union activities. His first assignment for the local was as a member of a start-up crew at a Newark Airport terminal where he quickly gained a reputation as an aggressively hard worker. By age 21, he was the youngest member ever appointed to the local's Executive Board in its more than 100-year history. Promoted to shop steward, he eventually earned the title of chief engineer. He was then formally trained in labor law, grievance arbitration and other skills as a graduate of the AFL-CIO's George Meany Institute in Washington, D.C.

In 1985, Charlie joined Local 68's staff as a full time organizer and business representative. His first organizing assignment was to unionize the trash-to-steam plants which, at the time, were planned for every New Jersey county. The plant now owned by Ogden-Martin in Warren County was his first organizing success and it is still a union shop today. For the next three years, Charlie helped organize workers at the Atlantic City hotels, handled grievances with the Newark Board of Education and North Jersey hospitals, and was responsible for statewide organizing and contract negotiations for employee health benefits in industrial and commercial job sites.

Throughout his career at the New Jersey State AFL-CIO, Charlie has spearheaded efforts to make health care more affordable and accessible for the state's residents. From 1993 to 2006 Charlie served as a member and Chairman of the New Jersey Individual Health Coverage Program Board of Directors which was established by law in 1993 to implement the state's aggressive health insurance reforms and to regulate the individual health insurance market. He has been instrumental in enacting major health insurance reform including making New Jersey the first state in the nation to guarantee that every dollar in premiums collected by health insurance carriers necessitated seventy-five cents in benefit payouts. Still considered one of the strongest consumer protection measures in the nation, this measure effectively capped the profits of insurance carriers and has helped New Jersey policyholders collect millions of dollars in premium refunds.

Recognizing that union members' voices are heard politically through aggressive Get-Out-The-Vote operations on Election Day, one of Charlie's first acts as President was to expand the New Jersey State AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education Department (COPE) by hiring its first full-time director. He also created the innovative WORKER/VOTER registration program designed to register union members to vote at their worksites. Having successfully registered more than 350,000 union voters, this program is now considered a national model. The New Jersey State AFL-CIO's Labor Candidates Program, also launched in 1997, now leads the nation with nearly 400 union members elected to office and contains the innovative Labor Candidates School which motivates, identifies, trains, and acts as a resource for rank-and-file union members running for public office as a major component. This successful program has been honored by the national AFL-CIO with the Target 5000 Award as the best political program in the nation.

Over the years, successful political activities by the New Jersey State AFL-CIO and its affiliates have resulted in the election of countless public officials at the local, county, state and federal levels who are committed to pursuing public policy which will benefit New Jersey's working families and our economy.

Acting as the principal lobbyist for New Jersey's labor movement, Charlie's tireless efforts on behalf of New Jersey's workers and working families have led to the signing of several important laws, many of which have since been enacted in states across the country. Under Charlie's leadership, the New Jersey State AFL-CIO has initiated and led successful lobbying campaigns in support of legislation raising the minimum wage, expanding and strengthening prevailing wage requirements, streamlining worker's compensation and enhancing benefits for workers. Additionally, effective advocacy efforts led to Governor James McGreevey's signing of Executive Orders which made New Jersey the first state in the nation to require the purchase of American made uniforms for its employees and ban the practice of outsourcing government contracts.

In an effort to respond to the need for New Jersey's workforce to effectively participate in the global economy and to keep pace with New Jersey's change from a manufacturing based economy to a technology/service economy, Charlie instituted the first New Jersey State AFL-CIO Department of Education and Training staffed by a full-time Director.

This Department has secured over \$18 million in education grants to address the needs of workers in various arenas including literacy training, English as a Second Language, and programs designed to help dislocated workers bridge the gap when a career change is necessary due to loss of employment from plant closings. Significant grant monies were also awarded to New Jersey State AFL-CIO affiliates to develop and expand union apprenticeship training programs. Most recently, Charlie's efforts to improve educational opportunities for union members have led to the creation of the New Jersey Pathways Leading Apprentices to a College Education (NJ PLACE) program. This program, the first of its kind in the nation, offers apprentices in several building trades unions the opportunity to obtain college credits for their work within their respective training programs.

By greatly expanding the New Jersey State AFL-CIO Occupational Safety and Health Education Program (OSHEP), a partnership with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, a dramatic increase in the quality and quantity of workplace safety training available to workers around the state has been realized through Charlie's leadership. Led by a highly-skilled program coordinator, OSHEP has provided tens of thousands of hours of safety training in areas such as prevention of workplace violence, emergency response and ergonomics.

In keeping with this program's tradition of providing new and innovative training based on the evolving needs of the workforce, later this year OSHEP will introduce a first-in-the-nation security awareness and preparedness program geared towards workers in facilities which are considered more vulnerable to attempted terrorist attacks.

Inspired during his early career as a union organizer, Charlie has maintained his deep interest and commitment to supporting worker's rights to form and join unions and has made union organizing one of his top priorities. Accordingly, he has focused new energies on supporting affiliates as they help workers win union representation including the creation of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO organizing committee. This committee has allowed unions across the state to share best practices in and seek support for efforts to help more workers gain a voice at work. His efforts in this regard have resulted in the State Federation growing to represent more than one million working families and nearly 1,000 local unions, and gaining nationwide recognition as, according to a January 2006 report by the U.S Department of Labor, the fourth most densely organized state in the nation.

Charlie's skill at leveraging political capital to achieve legislative victories was most apparent in 2005 when his efforts led to New Jersey's passage of the strongest bill in the nation allowing workers not covered by the National Labor Relations Act to obtain union recognition via the card check method of organizing. Our state's organizing activity was also recognized in 2005 when the AFL-CIO asked New Jersey to host the first Congressional Hearing on the Employee Free Choice Act in the nation.

President Wowkanech continues to lend his personal support and political expertise to organizing campaigns by participating in rallies and marches with workers demanding the right to organize in recognition disputes, bargaining impasses and strikes against recalcitrant employers.

Charlie's desire to ensure the future growth and strength of the labor movement is evident through his passion for speaking to young people about the history and goals of unions. He considers the opportunity to meet with college and high school students one of his most important roles as President, and often accepts invitations to appear as a guest-lecturer or speaker at colleges, universities and high schools across the state.

Understanding the valuable contributions gained by past generations of union members, Charlie started the first New Jersey State AFL-CIO Statewide Retirees Department. Working with experienced trade unionists now retired from their jobs, retirees are organizing through the New Jersey State AFL-CIO to achieve political power on issues affecting them.

To more effectively assist workers in their struggle to achieve dignity and respect in the workplaces and in their communities, Charlie regularly pursues key alliances with community, student and religious organizations. Charlie established the New Jersey State AFL-CIO Community Services Agency, staffed by a full-time Director, which creates a forum linking a statewide network of labor councils, unions, labor liaisons, and community services agencies in order to respond to members' needs, community projects, strikes, layoffs and organizing drives. Through this department's work, Charlie ensures that labor takes care of its own and demonstrates its commitment to social progress and responsibility.

Throughout his Presidency, Charlie has remained committed to improving the tools the New Jersey State AFL-CIO has at its disposal to convey the labor movement's message to members and supporters, as well as to communicate effectively with key decision makers on issues related to our political, legislative and organizing campaigns. Under his direction, the State Federation launched its first website, [www.njaflcio.org](http://www.njaflcio.org), and established the E-Activist network which allows members to contact lawmakers to seek their support for issues important to New Jersey's working families. He also continues to co-edit the award winning LABOR FAX and direct the distribution of legislative, organizing and solidarity alerts.

In addition to a host of other volunteer activities, Charlie serves in various leadership capacities on numerous committees and boards, including: The New Jersey State Planning Committee for the Help America Vote Act of 2002, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Advisory Councils on Workers Compensation and Prevailing Wages, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the United Way, the American Labor Museum, New Jersey SEED, the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations' State Advisory Council, and the Dredging Project Facilitation Task Force. Additionally, he has been appointed by several Governors to serve in various public positions including the New Jersey State Pilotage Commission, the Governor's Commission to Support and Enhance New Jersey's Military and Coast Guard Installations, the New Jersey Character Education Commission, the Commission on Jobs, Growth and Economic Development and the State Employment and Training Commission. Earlier this year Governor Jon Corzine appointed him to serve on the Governor's Economic Growth Council which has been established to provide advice and feedback to the Governor on issues of economic development and business expansion in New Jersey.

Over the years numerous state and national organizations have recognized Charlie for his work and achievements on behalf of the labor movement. New Jersey Monthly Magazine included him as No. 11 on its list of the "25 Most Powerful People in New Jersey" and PoliticsNJ, New Jersey's premiere website for political news, listed him as one of the state's top five most politically influential personalities.

"I look upon my work and position as State Federation President as an honor and perhaps, without exaggeration, it is the greatest job in America. It's a work in progress with limitless possibilities for enhancing the quality of life for the hard working families in our great state. The credit for our success," says President Wowkanech, "belongs to the dedicated and tireless staff of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO."

Charlie Wowkanech is married to the former LuAnn Mercadante of Elmwood Park, New Jersey. They reside in Ocean City, New Jersey and are the proud parents of two children, Charles and Michael.