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“CHANGING TO ORGANIZE”

JORGE MANCILLAS

Thanks in large part to effective organizing efforts under president Andy Stern, SEIU has become the nation's largest union. But it hasn't been uniformly successful, and the uneven progress of different locals and campaigns shows how the key issues that Bronfenbrenner identifies affect actual organizing drives.

Labor's greatest achievement in years, gaining union recognition for 80,000 Southern California home-care workers in 1999, was achieved using the multifaceted approach that Bronfenbrenner recommends. A lucid leadership and a team of seasoned organizers reached out to rank-and-file workers at 80,000 worksites, developed a close alliance with the clients who depended on their labor, ran an effective public relations campaign and engaged in vigorous targeted political activity.

SEIU's concurrent healthcare organizing efforts elsewhere in California, on the other hand, reveal what can happen when not all of these components are in place. More than four years ago, SEIU launched an ambitious plan to organize 148,000 employees in 473 California hospitals. The centerpiece of the "Healthcare Action Campaign" was a drive to organize ancillary workers among the 39,879 nonmedical employees of Catholic Healthcare West's forty-eight hospitals. Yet, four years and hundreds of thousands of dollars later, the campaign was limping along--partly as a result of its excessive reliance on an aggressive corporate campaign. While the corporate campaign exposed CHW's poor record of community service, a chaotic, high-turnover rank-and-file worker effort, which relied on young, inexperienced organizers, took a back seat. Only in mid-2001, after putting experienced organizers in key positions and moving toward solid rank-and-file worker organizing, did SEIU experience a series of electoral victories, bringing their new members to 8,000 in twenty CHW hospitals (including 3,000 in four hospitals in May and July). While encouraging, the total represents just 5 percent of SEIU's goal.

Harder to overcome has been SEIU's fateful decision to organize not only hospital employees and licensed vocational nurses but also registered nurses, unleashing a quarrel with the California Nurses Association. This jurisdictional battle has evolved into a vicious ground war, with negative campaigning and mutual accusations of dirty tactics undermining both sides. Unfortunately, such conflicts are becoming increasingly common as unions expand their organizing efforts.

Politics is another area where unions can be unnecessarily divided. To their credit, the leaders of the AFL-CIO and SEIU have vowed that in politics they "have permanent issues, not permanent friends." Personal alliances, however, still too often influence decisions on where to invest financial and human resources. From 1996 to 2001, a dynamic labor electoral machine took advantage of term limits in California and helped wrest the legislature and governorship away from the Republicans. But term limits also forced labor to choose among friends, resulting in a self-defeating scramble: In 2000, several reliable allies in the State Assembly went to battle over Senate seats, and unions that had worked together to elect these representatives spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to defeat each other's candidates, when labor had no real stake in those confrontations.

A deeper problem is that too little emphasis has been placed on creating district-based organizational structures--otherwise known as the "labor-neighbor" strategy--to provide

continuity to labor election volunteers, link politics to organizing, offer political education, nurture new labor candidates and create a vehicle for continuous issue-based political advocacy around programmatic goals instead of relying on individuals elected on the basis of political marketing techniques. In addition to "changing to organize" from within, labor needs to change the political climate in which organizing occurs. And that requires an equally deep and systematic commitment--animated by a broad vision of social justice--to achieving political change.

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ANDREW L. STERN

A dramatic expansion in union organizing is important to everyone in this country who wants to see a more equitable society, and all readers of *The Nation* ought to actively support campaigns to get employers to respect workers' freedom to choose a union.

Our union, now the largest in the AFL-CIO, has boosted the number of workers who join us each year from a rate of 20,000-30,000 in the mid-1990s to 70,000-80,000 now--the result of a huge shift in resources at both the national and local levels. We have focused on uniting workers in the three sectors where we represent significant numbers of members--SEIU is the largest healthcare union, the largest building-service union and second-largest public employee union. This year, thousands of janitors who have organized into SEIU from New Jersey to Baltimore have won raises from \$5.50 per hour to more than \$9 per hour. Thousands of healthcare workers at Catholic Healthcare West, the largest hospital chain in California, have joined us in order to win progress on understaffing and other problems that affect the quality of care.

To take our efforts to the next level, we have started new programs to train hundreds of rank-and-file members and committed young people as organizers. In cooperation with Morehouse College and Cornell University, SEIU has launched an education institute to develop new leaders. Through a variety of initiatives, women and people of color are playing a far greater role in our union at every level.

Yet, as Bronfenbrenner says, the labor movement and its allies need a greater sense of urgency about organizing. Independent public opinion polls consistently show that about 30 million workers who do not have a union would like to have one. The main reason they don't is that employers use one-on-one pressure from supervisors and other tactics to intimidate workers who try to form a union. Workers are taken aside on work time by their bosses, who control their job security, work schedule and chances for promotion, and are given the clear impression that their future treatment will be determined by whether they steer clear of union involvement. This abuse of power is similar to sexual harassment by an employee's boss, and ought to be opposed by progressives with the same sustained effort that has made that practice both illegal and socially unacceptable in most workplaces.

It is the responsibility of everyone--from union leaders and members to readers of this magazine--to help reduce employer interference and to let every public official know that they cannot get our support if they don't stand up for workers' freedom to choose a union. That's the only way that we will build a movement in America that can get off the defensive and win real progressive change.

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