



ONLINE MEDIA KIT

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SEIU: A Closer Look Inside Labor's Fastest-Growing Union

The 1.8 million-member **Service Employees International Union** is the fastest-growing union in North America, and its membership is among the most diverse in the labor movement. Since SEIU President Andy Stern took office in 1996, nearly 900,000 workers have united in SEIU. Focused on uniting workers in three sectors, SEIU is the largest health care union, including hospitals, nursing homes, and home care; the largest property services union, including building cleaning and security; and the second largest public employee union.

SEIU is taking bold action to unite the nine out of 10 non-union workers in America. To launch innovative campaigns that will bring new hope and opportunity to workers in today's global economy, SEIU helped form Change to Win, a labor federation representing nearly six million members. SEIU and the six other Change to Win unions are spearheading a national movement of workers and community and religious groups called "Make Work Pay" to restore the American Dream for families through strategic, industry-based campaigns. The "Make Work Pay" movement involves hotel workers, truck drivers, Wal-Mart workers, and bus drivers.

SEIU is fighting for quality, affordable health care for all Americans through its Americans for Health Care project. The group is helping to unite working families, small business owners, seniors, health care workers, community leaders, and policy makers to find real solutions to the health care crisis. In states across the map including Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington, the group's grassroots push for health care policies will increase access to quality, affordable health care. Over 350,000 "Health Care Voters" have already pledged to make health care their top priority.

SEIU is utilizing the Internet to activate thousands of ordinary Americans through its online advocacy arm, PurpleOcean.org, and its online campaign Since Sliced Bread. The first-ever Internet-based union affiliate, PurpleOcean.org combines technology with the power of the grassroots to transform members of the general public into activists for social and economic justice and workers' rights. In a call for fresh, common sense ideas Since Sliced Bread encourages ordinary Americans, policy experts and economists to debate and implement fresh ideas to improve the lives of working men and women and their families. People from every state in the US, and all walks of life submitted over 22,000 ideas to Since Sliced Bread.

SEIU is building a 21st-century global union to help ensure that workers, not just corporations and CEOs, benefit from today's global economy. SEIU is working with unions in similar industries across the globe to challenge multi-nationals to provide **decent** wages and benefits, and allow workers in every country the freedom to form unions. School bus drivers in the United States, with the help of SEIU, have formed a partnership with the Teamsters Union in the U.S. and the Transport and General Workers Union in the U.K. to hold accountable their common employer – FirstGroup and its U.S. subsidiary First Student.

SEIU is helping ensure immigrant workers have a shot at the American dream. Representing more immigrants than any other union, SEIU has been instrumental in leading the way for immigration reform that rewards work and improves conditions for all working people in this country. SEIU was the driving force behind the American labor movement's shift in recent years toward supporting legalization for hard-working, tax-paying immigrants. SEIU's civic participation program encourages immigrants to actively participate in our communities and our democracy. Since April, SEIU helped coordinate a National Day of Action that included rallies and marches in over 100 US cities and drew millions of supporters to call on Congress to enact realistic and rational legislation to fix our broken immigration system.

(over)

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SEIU is the nation's largest union of health care workers. Over half of SEIU's 1.8 million members work in the health care field, including 110,000 nurses and 40,000 doctors. SEIU's Nurse Alliance is bringing together more than 84,000 nurses from 23 states in Value Care Value Nurses — a campaign driven by front-line nurses who are dedicated to helping raise standards in the nursing profession and improving patient care. By partnering with providers like Kaiser Permanente and the League of Voluntary Hospitals in New York, SEIU caregivers work side-by-side with management to solve problems and have a voice on the policies and decisions that affect working conditions and the patients in their care.

SEIU is utilizing an innovative, industry-based model to help lift janitors out of poverty and help companies remain competitive. The more than 400 janitors at the University of Miami who recently won a voice at work join more than 5,000 janitors in Houston who formed a union in late 2005 to cap one of the largest successful organizing drives ever by private sector workers in the South. Houston and Miami janitors were able to win a voice at work in part through the support of janitors in nearly 30 other major cities who work for the same national cleaning contractors — often in buildings owned by the same large, national real estate companies. The Houston janitors will soon begin negotiating improvements in a single, “master” agreement that will set area-wide standards for compensation and working conditions.. This approach has allowed janitors in cities across the country to win health care and pay increases and has ended a “race to the bottom” in which companies vie for contracts by paying janitors as little as possible rather than competing on quality, efficiency, and innovation. More than 225,000 janitors in 29 cities across the country have united in America's largest union of property service workers.

SEIU is transforming the U.S. private security industry by partnering with employers, unions overseas, and community allies determined to hold companies accountable on safety and training standards. Employers such as Sweden-based Securitas, and Maguire Properties, the largest building owner in downtown Los Angeles, have now agreed to respect U.S. security officers' freedom to form a union and signaled their willingness to work with SEIU to create good jobs with training. In June, security officers from cities throughout the US joined forces with South LA clergy and community groups in a massive outreach to lift thousands of LA's security officers out of poverty. SEIU is the largest union of security officers in the country, representing over 50,000 officers who work in the public and private sector.

SEIU is the largest union of long-term care workers in the United States. Providing vital services in both facility and private home settings for our nation's seniors and the disabled, 440,000 home care- and 160,000 nursing home workers are also winning improvements in wages and benefits. In April 2005, in one of the largest union election victories ever, 41,000 home care workers in Michigan voted to unite with SEIU, and joined a national movement of home-based caregivers in California, Oregon, Washington, Illinois New York and elsewhere. SEIU nursing home workers have increased funding for staffing and other improvements through coordinated outreach to employers, campaigns to hold irresponsible providers to higher standards, and political action to address budget and care crises.

SEIU is setting a new standard for quality child care services nationwide. When 49,000 Illinois family child care providers joined together in SEIU and won a contract including training incentives, health benefits, and pay increases, they raised the bar for quality child care services nationwide. Continuing the momentum of Illinois' win 10,000 family child care providers in Washington won the freedom to bargain collectively, and are on their way to negotiating a contract that will help stabilize their profession, and improve care for children in their state. Together in SEIU, family child care providers are helping to stabilize the child care workforce by improving funding for child care and early education, and expanding parents' access to affordable, quality care. SEIU is the largest union of child care workers in America, representing more than 200,000 people who work in child care and early education.

SEIU is the second largest union of public service employees. In Houston, 13,000 city employees are uniting in a new union called HOPE -- the Houston Organization of Public Employees — to improve their jobs, ensure reliable public services, and improve city wages and benefits. In New Hampshire and California, workers beat back attacks on retirement security and helped pass a landmark bill in Maryland that would ensure profitable corporations, like Wal-Mart, pay their fair share of their employee's healthcare. In less than a year, SEIU members in San Antonio, TX won union recognition, held politicians accountable at the ballot box, and won a 4.5 percent wage increase and freeze in health care costs in 2005.

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Modern Healthcare

November 27, 2006

United she stands

SEIU's Henry, called 'a new breed of labor leader,' hopes to consolidate unions across industries

Melanie Evans

Among labor's staunchest allies, chief executives typically rank near the bottom. With the conviction of an evangelist, Mary Kay Henry believes that can change.

"My biggest job is to be a missionary for the union in areas of the country and with constituencies" not typically open to organized labor, says Henry, head of hospital organizing for the Service Employees International Union.

For Henry, international executive vice president for the SEIU's 500,000-member health systems division, healthcare organizing has been a life's work and a calling.

Raised Roman Catholic outside Detroit, the 49-year-old Henry was impressed early in life by the heavily unionized automotive industry. The third oldest of 10 children, Henry got a glimpse of the healthcare business as she earned money for high school in a nearby hospital. In college at Michigan State University, she majored in urban studies and labor relations, and she lobbied for a grass-roots advocacy group alongside union activists. She graduated in 1979 intent on working with a healthcare union; she landed a research job with the SEIU within a year.

Roughly 25 years later, Henry is the public face and a behind-the-scenes force for the SEIU's ambitious effort to organize the nation's largely nonunion hospitals and health systems. By 2015, the union aims to recruit an additional 1 million nurses to the roughly 84,000 already among its members.

Success, Henry says, hinges on the union's ability to win over unorganized workers, leverage past victories and build unlikely alliances with rival unions, hospital chief executives and industry insiders.

To that end, Henry estimates she spends 80% of her time traveling outside of Washington, where the SEIU is headquartered, building her case on the union's behalf. Her recent schedule is littered with potential converts—a Boston hospital executive, a Florida healthcare management consultant, an America's Health Insurance Plans conference—along with rank-and-file rallies and union budget and strategy meetings. Her remaining time is divided between the union's public policy and political priorities and lobbying for labor within the Catholic Church.

The latter sponsors 13% of U.S. hospitals—including the nation's third-largest health system, Ascension Health—and has proven to be an influential, if contentious, partner for organized labor.

Faith-based activism

Henry's faith fueled her activism, she says. She attended Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and says the order that ran Marian, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, stressed social justice and advocacy. (The Detroit Free Press dubbed the Sisters "feisty" in a 2003 article on the ecofriendly renovation to their motherhouse, noting the congregation operates a South African AIDS hospice and once owned Detroit Edison stock to launch a shareholder protest of a Michigan nuclear plant.) Henry's advocacy work extends beyond her job; Henry, who has been with her partner, Paula Macchello, for 20 years, is an advocate for gay and lesbian marriage.

Henry led organizing efforts in California that enlisted sympathetic Catholics for a campaign to organize Catholic Healthcare West, a San Francisco-based health system sponsored by nine congregations. The Rev. Michael Place, then president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association, first met Henry after the U.S. Conference of

Catholic Bishops asked healthcare, church and union officials to meet in the wake of the union's contentious CHW campaign.

"This was not a do-goody, church basement conversation," Place recalls. "It was a frank and candid exchange of views." The assembled bishops, sisters, healthcare executives and labor leaders did not reach an agreement easily, he says. Henry and Gerry Shea, a high-ranking official with the AFL-CIO labor coalition, argued the union's position effectively. "They were not hesitant to be faithful to how they see the world," Place says. He describes Henry as articulate and forthright.

"Her desire is to build bridges," he says. "The challenge is that the gaps are so wide that it's hard to get the bridge across the gap."

One gap that may prove too wide for Henry is labor's broad objection to the SEIU's attempts to consolidate unions across industries—with healthcare and nurses folded into the SEIU's members. Led by SEIU President Andy Stern, the union aggressively pushed union mergers within the AFL-CIO and broke away to form a rival coalition after AFL-CIO leadership rejected the proposal.

Susan Bianchi-Sand, executive director of the largest U.S. nurses union, the United American Nurses, met Henry after the SEIU's break as Bianchi-Sand quickly sought assurance from the SEIU that the union wouldn't woo the UAN's already organized nurses.

Talks led to an agreement that the pair of unions would not raid each other's members and would jointly target unorganized health systems in four cities. The partners agreed to divide and organize—the UAN recruiting nurses and the SEIU signing on remaining healthcare workers—in Detroit, Minneapolis, New York and Portland, Ore. "We knew we were both in the business of organizing nurses," Bianchi-Sand says. "We do not want to be fighting each other if we could avoid it, although sometimes it's unavoidable."

But the joint organizing stops far short of the mergers that Henry and the SEIU's leadership envision. "Other unions are already in the healthcare industry," Bianchi-Sand says. "That's a fact. We all have to work with each other. No one union can do it themselves." Labor gains strength in united efforts to influence public and workplace policies, she acknowledges, but that doesn't mean one union can serve all healthcare workers. "We respect SEIU," she says. "It's different than our organization. We're specialized. I don't think they're a rival for us in representing nurses."

Though Bianchi-Sand rejects the SEIU's merger plans, she credits the UAN's new partner with labor's recent efforts to pour more resources into organizing. "It's very clear that she's very serious," Bianchi-Sand says. "She's serious about the agenda. That comes across when you talk to her. She has an agenda, and she's seriously committed to it."

Officials with a third rival, the California Nurses Association, did not respond to requests for comment. The Oakland-based union and its national organizing arm, the National Nurses Organizing Committee, represent 70,000 nurses, nearly all in California.

Henry—who has held 18 jobs within the SEIU—organized in California during the mid-'80s and more recently during the CHW organizing drive. Henry says the union's work in California—with two of the state's healthcare giants in particular, Kaiser Permanente and CHW—strongly influenced subsequent campaigns. Meanwhile, the union experimented across California with alternatives to federally run elections, a tactic increasingly favored by organized labor.

The California experience

The lessons learned in California have become Henry's organizing gospel.

With Kaiser, the SEIU brokered a deal to improve operations and quality without costing employees work. Unsatisfied with run-of-the-mill contract negotiations, the union argued that workers can boost performance and have a stake in employers' viability, Henry says.

“Traditional bargaining had its limits.” Working together with employers serves union members better than a costly, heavily contested organizing campaign. “It’s a waste of our members’ resource to have fights,” she says, and healthcare’s crisis is too severe to squander time and money on such disputes.

With CHW, the union adopted a strategy to organize the entire system, rather than a single hospital, as a rapid, effective way to gain momentum.

The union gained 200 members at the system’s 30-bed Mark Twain St. Joseph’s Hospital in San Andreas, Calif., in 1999. The following year, the SEIU picked up some 2,700 workers at 10 CHW hospitals in eight cities. The union added another 14,000 workers in 26 CHW hospitals in 2001 and 2002. More than 80% of those workers joined the union under elections held after the SEIU and CHW brokered a systemwide organizing deal.

Two of the system’s officials who negotiated with the SEIU, the senior vice president for sponsorship and mission integration, Bernita McTernan, and CHW’s chief operating officer and executive vice president, Michael Erne, were unavailable for comment.

Organizing victories at CHW sparked campaigns elsewhere in California, Henry says. Elections at Tenet Healthcare Corp. and HCA hospitals in 2002 and 2003 added another 5,300 members to the SEIU’s rolls. Such momentum can be gained by strategic victories across the U.S., Henry says.

The SEIU can credit a recent Midwest victory in part to the union’s prior success with 28-hospital Kaiser. Richard Pettingill spent seven years with Kaiser before being named president and CEO of 11-hospital Allina Hospitals & Clinics in 2002. Pettingill inherited the reins of the Minneapolis not-for-profit health system from a trio of executive officers put in charge when Allina’s split from insurer Medica after a bruising audit by Minnesota Attorney General Mike Hatch.

In California, Pettingill worked successfully with the union. He approached Stern after joining Allina to see if an alliance could be duplicated in Minnesota. “My thinking was clearly influenced by what had been achieved at Kaiser,” he says. The pair unveiled a 10-year pact in March that includes Allina’s promise not to lobby against future SEIU organizing efforts and a joint pledge to identify quality and efficiency improvement efforts. The health system agreed to guarantee work for employees whose jobs may be eliminated.

Despite overlapping tenure in California’s healthcare market, Pettingill and Henry did not meet until roughly two years ago; they now speak monthly, he says. Henry brings a grasp of healthcare policy and business acumen to negotiations, Pettingill adds. “She strikes you as engaging and thoughtful. She’s reflective of a labor leader who looks at relationships between labor and management.”

Not all of Pettingill’s peers appreciate his embrace of organized labor. “I’ve spent a lot of time talking with CEOs—to keep them informed, why it is we’re taking a contrarian strategy,” he says.

But Pettingill credits Stern and Henry for recognizing efficient operations as vital to workers’ security. Traditionally combative relationships between management and labor may not go as far to improve results as jointly tackling mutual concerns, such as rising healthcare costs that strain business and household budgets. “Mary Kay, in my opinion, is a new breed of labor leader,” Pettingill says.

“She believes for labor to be successful, businesses have to be successful,” he says. “She appreciates and respects that.”

The New York Times

July 26, 2006

Borrowing Language of Civil Rights Movement, Drive Is On to Unionize Guards

Steven Greenhouse

LOS ANGELES — For Michael Johnson, a security guard for 16 years, unionization cannot happen soon enough. Mr. Johnson says the \$10 an hour he earns guarding an office tower on Wilshire Boulevard is too little to support his family, so he has taken a second full-time job, guarding a construction site. His long hours exact a toll on him as a father: he leaves home at 6:15 a.m., before his four children wake up, and returns at 11 p.m., after they have gone to bed.

“Ten dollars an hour is not good,” he said. “You have to work too hard to make it. I shouldn’t have to work two jobs. I can’t do this forever.”

Mr. Johnson is among more than 70,000 office-building security guards nationwide whom the Service Employees International Union is trying to organize this summer, a group that in many cities is more than 50 percent African-American. Those cities include Los Angeles, where, the service employees say, guards’ pay averages \$8.50 an hour, or about \$17,700 a year for a 40-hour week.

The city’s black clerics are rallying behind the unionization drive, which has borrowed the vocabulary and history of the civil rights movement.

“This parallels what Dr. King was doing in Memphis when he was killed,” said the Rev. Eric Lee, chief operating officer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Los Angeles. “He was speaking out on behalf of African-American sanitation workers, who had poor wages and poor working conditions, and it’s the same thing for security officers here.”

William Julius Wilson, a professor of sociology and social policy at Harvard, calls the drive “a very important development for black workers with low to modest levels of education.”

“The position of the African-American worker in today’s labor market,” Professor Wilson said, “has been severely weakened because of job losses, the decline in manufacturing and the union movement’s downward spiral.”

Many African-Americans recall that when Southern blacks moved north, it was unions that helped lift large numbers of them into the middle class. Later, however, blacks’ enthusiasm for organized labor waned, given some unions’ discrimination against them and, more recently, a focus on attracting low-wage Hispanic immigrants as crucial to ending labor’s decline.

But the service employees say they have obtained the signatures of most of the 6,000 guards they are trying to organize here this summer. One supporter is Mr. Johnson, who hopes that the raise he expects to get as a union member will help him buy a four-bedroom home for his family of six so they can leave their cramped two-bedroom apartment.

“We’re trying to get a house,” he said, “but we can’t afford the house payments.”

Though many building owners and security companies are unenthusiastic about the organizing drive, they have not resisted as fiercely as employers typically do. They decline to say why, but may have concluded that digging in would be unwise, considering the strong support for the drive from clergy members and politicians, as well as the service employees’ record of success.

Using tactics that have included sit-ins and the picketing of executives’ homes, the union has organized far more workers than any other in the last decade.

Robert Rediger, the chief lawyer for the city’s security contractors, declined to address the union’s assertion that the guards were underpaid. Rather, Mr. Rediger took a cooperative tone, saying the two sides would meet in August to discuss procedures that could quickly lead to unionization in the office buildings.

Officials of the city’s five largest security companies either declined to comment or did not return phone calls.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has urged the employers not to battle unionization, seeing it as a way of advancing his efforts to reduce poverty in South Los Angeles and of improving security as well. Low wages, he said, have led to extremely high turnover, leaving many guards with little training and a lack of familiarity with their buildings and tenants.

“I didn’t raise this as just a labor-management issue,” Mr. Villaraigosa said, “but as a homeland security issue.”

Among the service employees’ successes has been the organizing of thousands of Los Angeles janitors, who now average some \$2.50 an hour more than the guards and, unlike most guards, have employer-paid health insurance. Andrew L. Stern, the union’s president, noted that nonunion guards often worked in the same buildings as unionized janitors.

“They’re doing jobs that require more skill,” Mr. Stern said, “but they’re paid less in wages and benefits. It’s pure exploitation of African-American workers.”

The organizing is just the kind of ambitious effort that the service employees and other unions that quit the A.F.L.-C.I.O. last year said they would undertake. The service employees have unionized 4,000 security guards in the San Francisco area, 1,500 in Minneapolis-St. Paul and, of some 40,000 guards in New York City, about 4,000 there. They are also seeking to organize guards in Boston, Seattle, Sacramento and Washington.

The Rev. Lawrence E. Logan, senior pastor at Bethel A.M.E. Church, said he expected unionization here to lift black neighborhoods by improving wages, providing families health insurance and enabling many guards to work one job instead of two so they can spend more time with their children.

Thinking back decades, Mr. Logan recalled, “Dr. King used to say that any religion that tries to save the soul but doesn’t do anything that deals with the conditions that damn the soul is a dry-as-dirt, do-nothing religion.”

Service Employees Union Aims to Tap Latinos' Energy

Mary Lou Pickel

Union organizers say they want to start building a strong "black-brown" alliance between African-Americans and Latinos to channel the energy they saw nationwide in marches for Latino immigrants' rights earlier this year.

The Service Employees International Union kicks off its three-day Social and Economic Justice conference in Atlanta today at the Hyatt Regency Hotel downtown, with 1,000 participants expected.

SEIU says it plans to take a long-term approach to union building and political mobilization in the South, home to the civil rights movement. The union's goal is to bring more Hispanics into the fold.

So far the union represents 5,000 state workers in Georgia. About 49 percent are African-American. Many are women, and less than 2 percent are Hispanic. Union members work in state nursing homes and hospitals, as social workers and as corrections officers, among other professions. Many earn less than \$20,000 per year, said Ralph Williams, president of SEIU Local 1985.

"It's up to us to bridge the gap between blacks and browns in our state and mobilize the community," said Williams. "My grandfather was an Alabama sharecropper who did not have the right to vote."

Yet now, because of the civil rights movement, Williams said, has a college education and was able to choose a career as an activist.

"We want to tap that old energy about justice in the South and put it back in the labor movement," said Gerry Hudson, one of SEIU's executive vice presidents.

Raising the minimum wage, improving access to health care and education are among the issues the union hopes to address by building a political alliance of workers.

The South and Southwest will continue to grow in population and electoral votes, said Eliseo Medina, an executive vice president of SEIU.

Georgia now has 100,000 to 120,000 Hispanic registered voters, Medina said. The state's Hispanic population is 576,113, according to 2004 U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

While many immigrants are here illegally and cannot vote, they have relatives who can, and their children will grow up and vote, Medina said.

The New York Times

November 28, 2005

Janitors' Drive in Texas Gives Hope to Unions

Steven Greenhouse

Union organizers have obtained what they say is majority support in one of the biggest unionization drives in the South in decades, collecting the signatures of thousands of Houston janitors.

In an era when unions typically face frustration and failure in attracting workers in the private sector, the Service Employees International Union is bringing in 5,000 janitors from several companies at once. With work force experts saying that unions face a slow death unless they can figure out how to organize private-sector workers in big bunches, labor leaders are looking to the Houston campaign as a model.

The service employees, which led a breakaway of four unions from the A.F.L.-C.I.O. last summer, has used several unusual tactics in Houston, among them lining up the support of religious leaders, pension funds and the city's mayor, Bill White, a Democrat. Making the effort even more unusual has been the union's success in a state that has long been hostile to labor.

"It's the largest unionization campaign in the South in years," said Julius Getman, a labor law professor at the University of Texas. "Other unions will say, 'Yes, it can be done here.' "

Mr. Getman predicted that the Houston effort would embolden other unions to take their chances with ambitious drives in the South, although success could prove difficult because many companies will continue to fight unionization efforts, and many workers still shy away from unions.

"This could be important to build momentum in the South, but it's still an incredibly hard task to organize" there, said Richard W. Hurd, a professor of labor relations at Cornell. "One big problem is there's not a base of union members in the South to use to do organizing. And employers in the South have demonstrated a very strong antiunion bias and a willingness to go to great lengths to avoid unionization."

The service employees' success comes as the percentage of private-sector workers in unions has dropped to 7.9 percent, the lowest rate in more than a century.

With its campaign to organize the janitors, the union has focused on two groups it says are pivotal if labor is to grow again: low-wage workers and immigrants. The janitors, nearly all of them immigrants, earn just over \$100 a week on average, usually working part time for \$5.25 an hour.

Some of Houston's business leaders oppose the unionization drive, saying its pledge of higher wages may hurt business.

"I don't see how it's going to help Houston from a business standpoint," said Mark Jodon, a Houston lawyer who represents employers. "It has the potential of raising the cost of doing business."

The union has trumpeted the Houston effort - which cost more than \$1 million - as part of its Justice for Janitors campaign, billed as an antipoverty movement.

Flora Aguilar, a Mexican immigrant who cleans an office tower for \$5.25 an hour, volunteered to help the organizing drive as soon as the union gave the janitors questionnaires asking what aspects of their jobs they thought needed improvement.

"The wages are terrible, there are no benefits, there's nothing," Ms. Aguilar said. "I have to stretch myself like a rubber band to make ends meet. I want a union because it will give me a better life."

In recent days, the union has collected cards signed by about three-fifths of the workers at four of Houston's biggest janitorial companies. An agreement signed in August calls for the American Arbitration Association to inspect the cards and certify when the union has received majority support. The janitorial companies have promised to recognize the union once that happens.

Even if the union is recognized, it still faces a big obstacle in negotiating a contract that delivers some of the hoped-for improvements in wages and benefits.

Yet the union's Texas achievement stands in stark contrast to the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s failed drive in the early 1980's, which sought to recruit tens of thousands of Houston workers. Known as the Houston Organizing Project, that \$1-million-a-year effort faltered along with the economy, as unions retreated and focused on holding onto the workers they had, and as Texas companies fought hard against unionizing.

Despite the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s anger at the service employees' union, which in breaking away had accused the federation of doing too little to organize workers, Stewart Acuff, the federation's organizing director, praised the Houston janitors' campaign, saying more such drives were needed.

In the current campaign, the service employees urged several public-employee pension funds to press building owners and janitorial companies not to mount hard-hitting anti-union campaigns to defeat the organizing drive. To step up the pressure, the union called a strike at one building in Houston and then arranged sympathy strikes by janitors at 75 office buildings in four other states.

Because the union had no office or local in Houston, its giant local of building-service workers in Chicago oversaw the recruitment drive. That local dispatched a top official to Houston to run the campaign and flew in 25 Spanish-speaking janitors for weeks at a time to talk to janitors at their homes and workplaces.

Workers were told of the union's success in New Jersey, where the salaries of 4,500 recently organized janitors had risen to \$11.90 an hour from \$5.85 an hour three years ago, and where many part-time workers had been converted to full-time status with health benefits.

The union announced its campaign last April, but two years earlier, it sent a community liaison to Houston who helped line up backing from the city's mayor, several congressmen and dozens of clergymen, including the Roman Catholic archbishop, Joseph A. Fiorenza. The archbishop even celebrated a special Mass for janitors in August and spoke at the union's kickoff rally, telling the janitors that God was unhappy that they earned so little and did not have health coverage.

"They work for the same companies that are in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, and their counterparts there are getting much higher salaries," Archbishop Fiorenza said in an interview. "It's just basic justice and fairness that the wages should be increased here."

Office building janitors average \$20 an hour in New York City. They make \$13.30 in Chicago and Philadelphia, cities with office rents comparable to Houston's and a cost of living about 40 percent higher. Janitors in Houston typically earn \$5.25 an hour, 10 cents more than the federal minimum wage. But business leaders say the wages are consistent with what other unskilled workers earn.

"The wages that are paid in Houston to janitors are generally above minimum wage," said Tammy Bettancourt, executive vice president of the Houston Building Owners and Managers Association. "Their wages are very much in line with every other part-time job and with the city's retailers. That's what the market dictates."

Ercilia Sandoval, who cleans offices in a prime office tower, says she has not had a raise in eight years and does not have health insurance. A school dentist recently found that her 7-year-old daughter had six cavities, and fillings will cost \$750, when her weekly take-home pay is \$91.50.

"Everything has gone up except our wages," Ms. Sandoval said. "If we ask for a raise, they say, 'Anyone who doesn't like it here, there's the door.' "

The union and the janitorial companies declined to discuss details of the drive because of a confidentiality agreement. The service employees have pressured the companies to accept majority support based on the number of workers who sign cards saying they want a union.

Convinced that it is easier to unionize workers through card checks, the union has shunned the typical process of having an election run by the National Labor Relations Board.

Even before the confidentiality agreement was signed, cleaning company officials were reluctant to discuss the janitors' wages and why they had agreed to card checks and arbitrators' oversight.

OneSource, one of the nation's largest cleaning companies, said, "OneSource, along with every other major contractor in the Houston area, made a business decision to remain neutral in this process."

The company said it was premature to discuss wage levels while workers were considering whether to join the service employees' union.

Union leaders said the cleaning companies had agreed to remain neutral because of pressures from building owners and pension funds, and because the service employees had threatened to pressure operations elsewhere, as it did with the sympathy strikes in California, Illinois, New York and Connecticut.

Many unions hope to copy the Houston effort, but that could be difficult because many do not have the skilled organizers that the service employees have. Moreover, not all other industries are as vulnerable to union pressures.

Expanding on the Houston effort, the service employees hope to unionize 4,000 janitors in Atlanta, 2,000 in Phoenix and tens of thousands of shopping mall janitors nationwide. But even the service employees have encountered problems. For instance, their effort to organize 7,000 condominium workers in Miami has stalled because of opposition from the largest property management company there.

Still, the Houston effort has gone more smoothly than union officials had expected.

"We decided that Houston would be the place to bring to bear everything we've built in the last 15 years," said Stephen Lerner, director of the Justice for Janitors campaign. "That would allow us to organize a whole city at once."

Chicago Tribune

April 8, 2005

Union For Child-care Workers

Barbara Rose

Thousands of Illinois child-care providers have voted to join a union, ending a nearly decade-long organizing campaign. They handed a significant victory to the Service Employees International Union, an organization with growing political clout.

The election results, announced Thursday by SEIU's Local 880, extend collective bargaining rights to nearly 50,000 mostly female workers who offer government-subsidized child care in their homes.

The workers, many of whom earn as little as \$ 9.48 per child per day, care for about 200,000 children from low- and moderate-income families under a state-run program funded by state and federal grants.

"We're going to press for the same issues we've been fighting for the last 9 1/2 years--quality child care, better wages and health care," said Angenita Tanner, 40, a Local 880 shop steward who operates "Grandma's House" out of her South Side apartment.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich signed an order in February opening the door for workers like Tanner to bargain with the state through a union, even though they are not state employees.

His order paved the way for the election, which started with a ballot vote mailed March 16, following a brief but bitter fight for organizing rights between SEIU and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees after AFSCME launched a competing campaign.

The AFL-CIO ended the dispute by supporting SEIU, ruling that the service union had been organizing home child-care workers since 1996 and actively sought Blagojevich's commitment when he was a candidate.

SEIU's contributions to his campaign totaled more than \$ 800,000.

Child-care providers are the second group of state contractors for whom the SEIU has won bargaining rights with Blagojevich's help. The union reached a contract with the state two years ago covering about 20,000 home health-care workers, securing a 34 percent pay increase.

Robert Bruno, a labor expert with the Chicago Labor Education Program of the University of Illinois, said the SEIU, "has become a premier political player in the state of Illinois."

"There's real implications because this is a union that's very focused on progressive public policy and is addressing some of the most pressing social problems in the country--education, housing, health care," Bruno said. "They're not only politically very influential but the kinds of policies they'll be focused on will have a lot to do with redistributing wealth and income to those" at the bottom of the economic ladder.

The activist 1.8 million member union, with 106,000 members in Illinois not counting the child-care workers, represents workers such as janitors and nursing-home aides.

In Local 880's election, about 16,700 of the state's 49,000 child-care workers mailed in ballots, SEIU officials said. Of those who cast ballots, more than 80 percent voted to join SEIU. The remainder voted for AFSCME or no union. The AFSCME ballots were disqualified because of the AFL-CIO ruling.

The vote gives SEIU the right to bargain for all 49,000 workers, whether they join or not.

The union's next step is to negotiate a contract while continuing to lobby lawmakers for more child-care funding--a formidable hurdle given state budget constraints.

Thomas Green, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Human Services, said the state's \$ 642 million annual child-care budget is slated to stay the same next year.

Keith Kelleher, Local 880's chief organizer, said the union is "encouraged by the meetings we're having with the state legislators."

Two years ago when the union negotiated a rate increase for home health-care workers, the state faced a \$ 2.5 billion deficit, Kelleher said.

"We think we can do the same thing today" for child-care workers, he said. "There's always money problems. We think it's not a matter of money, it's a matter of priorities."

The election results were announced at a press conference punctuated by cheers from child-care workers from Illinois and six other states.

SEIU's strategy is to gain sufficient market share in targeted occupations to improve working conditions and lift wages for the lowest-paid workers.

"Collective bargaining rights give these workers the strength to pull themselves up," Tom Balanoff, president of SEIU's Illinois State Council, said in a telephone interview while driving to Springfield to meet with Senate President Emil Jones and attend a dinner with Blagojevich.

The union has turned "unstable high-turnover jobs into real jobs, and that same wave is going to happen for child-care workers, too," said Anna Burger, SEIU secretary treasurer.

DENVERPOST.

January 13, 2006

Nurses' Angst Part of Sick Health System

Al Lewis

As a nurse, Barb Hostrup, 58, deals with everything from bedpans to bedsores.

She sticks patients with needles. She gives sponge baths. She changes not only bandages but sheets on beds.

"I have patients stare at me," she says, "saying, 'Why are you changing the beds?' ... Well, there's no one else to do it."

Sometimes, her shifts stretch to 12 or even 14 hours. Sometimes, she can't take a break because there aren't enough other nurses or assistants on her station.

Hostrup said she went into nursing more than 19 years ago because she wanted to be a caregiver. Now, she says she has become something else.

"I feel like I am an apology machine," she said. "I am always apologizing for not being there quickly enough. ... I have to be sorry to management, sorry to the patient and sorry to the family for what I can't get done."

Hostrup was one of 10 nurses dressed in scrubs to lobby this week for state legislation aimed at making hospitals more accountable. One proposal would require hospitals to report nurse-to-patient ratios so consumers could make an informed choice about where they go for care.

The nurses' efforts were organized by the Service Employees International Union, which would like to unionize Colorado's 51,000 registered nurses - and thousands of other health-care workers.

That's an ambitious goal in a state that does not embrace unions. But Colorado's health-care system - like the rest of the nation's - is so screwed up that some of its workers are beginning to appreciate what a little organization can do.

"Before, when the unions tried to get in, I wouldn't have anything to do with it," said Glaphre Spencer, 64, who has been a nurse for 42 years. "But things have gotten to a point where we have to have a stronger voice."

The nurses I spoke with at the Capitol view health care as a spiraling mess:

Skyrocketing health-insurance costs leave more people uninsured.

Hospitals can't turn away the uninsured, so they shift the costs of the uninsured to the insured.

That makes health insurance even more expensive, perpetuating the cycle.

Profit-hungry corporations - instead of faith-based nonprofits - are increasingly running hospitals.

"The emphasis is more on the dollar than the patient," Spencer said.

In this environment, many folks won't turn to hospitals until they are severely ill, making nurses' jobs even tougher.

"The patients are just getting sicker and sicker," Hostrup said.

More than "100,000 Americans die each year from hospital-acquired infections," according to an SEIU fact sheet in support of state legislation that would require hospitals to report infection rates.

Hospital administrators frequently lament a nationwide nursing shortage. But have they created this shortage by making nursing an unbearable profession?

"I quit bedside nursing because I did not feel that I could deliver quality and safe patient care," said Jule Monnens, 50.

She took a pay cut to become a nursing teacher, hoping to influence a new generation of nurses with the hard facts.

"There is little respect for the knowledge that nurses have," she said. "Nurses are not considered partners at the table."

It's a thankless job. But it pays relatively well, with a median hourly wage of \$27.40 in Colorado, according to the Colorado Department of Labor.

The Nurse Alliance of Colorado, a group organized by the SEIU, argues that there is no shortage of nurses - just a shortage of nurses willing to work in hospitals. The group cites a 21 percent annual turnover rate for bedside nurses nationwide. These nurses get easier work in clinics, outpatient centers and doctors' offices.

Hostrup - who has dedicated herself to caring for the truly ill - says she is not going to do that.

"I don't want to be the doctor's handmaiden doing simple things for relatively healthy people," she said. She's not bucking for an administrative post, either, having worked as an administrator in the past.

"I got to the point where I felt like a phony," she said, "representing the people at the top who don't know what the nurses in the trenches are up against."

The Boston Globe

November 24, 2005

Helping the helpers

"I WOULD shake your hand if I could," Liz Casey explained to a writer on a recent visit to the Globe. Because of multiple sclerosis, Casey is a quadriplegic and uses a wheelchair, so ordinary tasks like dressing, eating, and cooking are impossible to do without help. That help comes from personal care attendants. But finding qualified candidates to do the work can be a long, frustrating task of placing ads and trial and error. And when one PCA needs to take a day off, finding backup care can be tough. Currently Casey works with 10 PCAs to maintain daily coverage.

After a rupture in his marriage, John Carlucci, a quadriplegic who uses a wheelchair, ended up in a nursing home. He couldn't leave until he could find enough personal care attendants to provide the help he needed to live at home. He spent weeks searching, lost income (he had worked as a freelance writer and editor), and saw his health decline.

Nugent Palmer says he worked in construction and as a PCA for Carlucci part-time to earn extra money. But now he's a full-time PCA because "John needed me." Originally from Jamaica, Palmer says that a lot of people from the Caribbean do this work, in part because of a tradition of caring for people. It's a first job for a lot of immigrants. But it's also work that leaves people at the low end of the economic scale.

PCAs earn a Medicaid-set rate of \$10.84 an hour, not including the time it takes to drive to the homes of clients. They often lack health insurance, so they neglect their own health for fear of the doctor's bill or of losing a day's pay. Faced with these conditions, many PCAs leave their jobs in search of better pay and benefits. High turnover is hard on consumers who must again search for a quality caregiver.

It's a problem not only for those who currently use PCAs but for the state's many aging baby boomers who will need help to live independently instead of going to a nursing home.

A bill in the State House would help by setting up a workforce council that would set wages and benefits, establish a registry to make it easier for consumers to find a PCA, and create a career path: recruiting, training, and showing PCAs how to advance in the healthcare field. Consumers would still choose, hire, and fire their PCAs. Similar councils exist in California, Oregon, Washington, and Michigan.

A council could be the first step toward PCAs organizing into a union so they could bargain for better wages and conditions.

The economy has many high-tech needs, but as people live longer, human needs are also increasing. By setting up a workforce council, Massachusetts can systematically protect the well-being and dignity of both personal care workers and their clients.

Unions Aim to Help More Than Members

Ralph Williams

Working people in Georgia are facing hard times: soaring health care costs, disappearing retirement security, less time to spend with family and cutbacks in vital public services.

It is the union movement's responsibility to help working families take on these problems. But to help improve jobs and communities in this state, the union movement needs to have the courage and the vision to change.

Effective unions today are "community unions" that work with allies for social and economic justice on a broad range of issues from jobs and health care to education and housing. Community unions are concerned not just with the 7 percent of Georgia workers who have a union but the 93 percent who don't.

We work with elected officials, regardless of party, who take a stand for the hard-working people of the state. We want to raise living standards for all, which in turn will make businesses in our community more successful. And we reflect at every level the diversity of today's changing work force.

At the recent national convention of the AFL-CIO, seven major unions representing nearly 6 million workers proposed a dramatic modernization of that 50-year-old labor federation based on these principles. But the AFL-CIO did not agree, and three of the four largest unions, including the Service Employees International Union, Teamsters and Food and Commercial Workers, have left the national federation entirely. Those unions have joined with four others — the carpenters, laborers, clothing and hospitality workers, and farm workers — in a new, innovative partnership that will unite millions more workers with employers, elected officials and community allies to raise living standards and improve public services for all.

On Saturday, thousands of members of these unions and those who are left in the AFL-CIO will join with a broad range of grass-roots organizations at a campaign kickoff, convened here in Atlanta by Rainbow PUSH, to extend provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act. Clearly, the right to vote is one crucial key to ensuring that working people have a voice in the public policies of our cities, state, and nation.

But protecting voting rights is just the beginning for community unions because what working people need is full participation in our society, from the workplace to the corporate board room to the halls of government.

SEIU, for example, is joining with small businesses and other community groups through Georgians for Health Care to seek affordable, quality care not just for its own members but for all working families in our state. One out of three Georgians under the age of 65 had no health insurance at some point in a recent two-year period. Costs are rising so fast that 61 percent of Georgia businesses that offered insurance in 2000 have since dropped it.

Members of our union are also a key partner with advocates who won the recent legal settlement requiring safer and more effective services for foster children in our state. The settlement applied to two counties — Fulton and DeKalb — and now we are working with community allies to make sure it is extended to the state's other 157 counties. We also are working with child services advocates to draw attention to chronic understaffing that has gone on for years in the state agency responsible for protecting kids from child abuse.

In the years ahead, Georgians can build communities where rising living standards, good jobs and effective public services create new opportunities and hope for all the people of our state. Unions have a responsibility to transform ourselves so we can do our part to make that happen.

Ralph Williams is president of SEIU Local 1985, representing Georgia state employees.

Public's Good Health is Union's Goal

Local uses its research to promote reforms that help everyone, leaders say

Suzanne Hoholik

It's not your typical union.

Sure, Service Employees International Union District 1199 organizes new members and works to get them better wages and benefits, but that's not all.

This Columbus local — which represents health-care employees, social workers and janitors — also wants to change health-care policy in Ohio. Not just for its members, but for people who might never join.

During the past four months, the union has made health care in Ohio a priority and issued two reports critical of hospitals.

The first, released in March, found that uninsured and underinsured patients sometimes pay more for hospital services than people with private or government insurance.

The second showed that while Ohio hospitals received \$898 million in tax breaks in 2003, they provided only \$219 million in charity care to the poor.

The union's goal is to improve the public's access to quality, affordable health care.

"We are very conscious of the fact and believe deeply that the general public and our members' interests are the same," said Dave Regan, president of the union, which represents 27,000 workers in Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia.

"Nonprofit hospitals are all too aware of the fact that the uninsured are an important profit center for the hospital. There is no way in the world that the public is supportive of that, but someone has to speak out for them."

The union recently examined records of the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation's payments to hospitals. The union found that during the past seven years the bureau has paid hospitals 50 percent more than their actual costs to provide treatment.

"These are the communities' hospitals, and their focus has been the bottom line," said Scott Courtney, the union's executive vice president. "They get huge tax breaks, pay their CEOs big salaries, get government grants and sue people for unpaid bills."

To do this work, the union created a research team that collects, analyzes and interprets databases. The two researchers on the BWC project were John Burant, who has a doctorate in theoretical chemistry from Yale University, and Adam Weisberg, who has a master's degree in physics from Ohio University. Regan earned his degree from Cornell University.

"We've made a commitment as a local union to building a top-flight research operation and set out to hire very smart people who feel passionate about what our mission is," Regan said.

The local has more than 100 fulltime employees. Nationally, it is the fastest-growing union, with 1.8 million members.

It's not operating in a vacuum. The national union produced its own studies on hospitals' high costs and collection tactics.

"They have had a history of putting a lot of money into their research department from the mid-1940s to the present," said Louis Jones, the union's archivist at the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit.

"When you're armed with a lot of facts and statistics, you're just better equipped."

The union's focus on Ohio hospitals isn't stopping. Regan said the industry is in need of reform.

"Hospitals need more accountability, more oversight and more scrutiny in this state, which is exactly what we're trying to do with our studies over the past few months."

Workers Of the World Uniting

Harold Meyerson

CHICAGO -- The business at hand was furthering globalization, but the usual suspects were nowhere to be seen. No U.S. trade representatives set the agenda. No corporate executives stalked the hall.

But then, the meeting this week in Chicago of roughly 1,500 labor leaders from around the world had a rather novel agenda. They convened on Monday under a banner that read "Imagine a Global Union." When they adjourned on Thursday, they had begun to build one.

The world's first global proto-union, surprisingly enough, comprises workers in the property services industry -- that is, janitors and security guards. Over the past half-decade, companies all over the world that have long provided the employees who guard and clean offices and factories -- including such venerable U.S.-based security companies as Pinkerton, Burns and Wackenhut -- have been bought by a handful of largely European-based multinationals.

The consequences, for both the employees and their home nations, have varied considerably. The guards at Pinkerton and Burns, for instance, are now employees of Securitas, a Swedish-based multinational known for providing extensive training and having good labor relations. But the employees of Group 4 Securicor, a British-Danish conglomerate, haven't been so fortunate. In South Africa, guards at the airports have been reduced to working on month-to-month contracts with no benefits. In Indonesia and Kenya, Group 4 has refused to deal with its workers' long-established unions. And in the United States, guards at Group 4's subsidiary Wackenhut work with skimpy health insurance for a company that has been fined repeatedly for labor law violations.

Not surprisingly, it's the union that's been organizing security guards and janitors in the United States -- the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) -- that has taken the lead in getting this global effort off the ground.

Not only do property service workers increasingly share common employers but guards and janitors hold jobs that cannot be relocated. There are also so many immigrants in this workforce that the global nature of the industry is apparent at thousands of work sites. At London's Canary Wharf, where janitors are endeavoring to organize, says SEIU's Stephen Lerner, architect of that union's Justice for Janitors campaign, the contractor is ISS, which employs thousands of U.S.-based janitors. "The building owner is Morgan Stanley," he adds, "and the workers come from Africa and Latin America. The workers, the companies, the capital is global. Everything travels across the world -- except unions."

Now unions will be traveling, too. On Thursday the property services section of Union Network International, a Geneva-based amalgam of unions not involved in manufacturing, announced the creation of a new alliance, with a fund that will initially help organizing efforts in South Africa, India, Poland, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. The SEIU will provide money and its expertise in organizing workers, shareholders and lenders to employers such as Group 4. The Swedish Transport Workers have already been working to convince their fellow European unions that without global organizing, the embattled paradise of Western European workers could quickly become a memory at best.

These far-flung unions envision a day when unions from every continent can sit across the table from a global employer and negotiate a common code of conduct and worker rights. Absent that kind of union pressure, a model employer in Europe that abuses its workers in the United States is more likely to bring its European standards down than its U.S. standards up. "It's much easier to change the behavior of a company that's unionized at an 80 percent level globally than it is when it's unionized at 10 percent," says SEIU President Andy Stern.

In a sense, I suppose, we've seen this once before. At the conclusion of the Civil War, the United States began to evolve from a nation of locally based economies to a country with a national economy. The first entities to go national were corporations, in railroads, meatpacking, oil and steel. At the beginning of the 20th century, professionals developed such national protective organizations as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association. It took until the 1930s, though, for workers to build effective national organizations, with the coming of industrial unions that won national contracts with companies such as General Motors.

Now that process looks to be repeating itself on a global scale. Corporations have been going global for several decades, and global intellectual-property rights have been a chief focus of trade agreements for the past 15 years or so. But not until this week have we seen workers effectively lay claim to their place in the global economy. In a world where globalization has been designed and practiced almost solely for the benefit of corporations and their shareholders, the formation in Chicago has come not a moment too soon.

San Francisco Chronicle
November 10, 2005

Election's Lessons; The Power of Labor United

IN RECENT years, the plight of organized labor has been defined by its deep divisions among various unions about how to respond to an erosion of membership and clout.

The national story of Tuesday's election was how California's public-employee unions demonstrated that labor, if sufficiently unified and motivated, remains a powerful force in American politics.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger set out on the path to this epic showdown when he became overly cozy with the California Chamber of Commerce, which almost reflexively lists any legislation addressing consumer or union concerns as a "job killer." The governor added to the us-against-them drumbeat with his coarse comments about kicking the derrieres of the nurses' union and by targeting teachers in his State of the State address in January.

His brash rhetoric, combined with his since-abandoned effort to downsize their lavish pension plans, gave public employees the sense of urgency they needed to overcome their rivalries for budget dollars and differences in strategy and culture. Suddenly, the unions were all working together, from teachers to prison guards, as a matter of survival.

Their success was not just a matter of money, though the \$100 million in campaign spending, tapped largely through union dues -- a tactic that was the target of Proposition 75 -- certainly helped. It was also a measure of their adeptness at crafting their message, at using ads to define their image in heroic working-class faces before Schwarzenegger could try to portray himself in a good-guy role against "union bosses."

There was also something very old-fashioned about labor's victory. The union's 15,000-strong contingent of door-to-door campaigners helped invigorate an electorate that was ambivalent about this special election.

Organized labor has rarely been more organized or laborious than in this election. Schwarzenegger incited and united a formidable foil.

June 23, 2004

Major Union Takes Organizing Drive to Web

Leigh Strope

One of the country's largest unions is taking its organizing drive to the Internet, creating a new, virtual labor organization that isn't tied to a work site or dependent on employer recognition.

The Service Employees International Union's new affiliate, called PurpleOcean.org, was disclosed Tuesday at the union's convention in San Francisco. The union's trademark color is purple.

The new group "is a radical new way to think about organized labor," said Andy Stern, president of SEIU, the largest union under the AFL-CIO umbrella with 1.6 million members.

The union, which endorsed former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination, is drawing on his campaign's extensive Internet network of supporters to build the new group. Dean raised millions on the Internet and mobilized hundreds of thousands of supporters.

Stern was inspired by the effort and began to write a Web log about the labor movement, its future and its challenges. The virtual union idea came next, with a goal of 1 million people to support SEIU's campaigns.

The labor movement needs "to draw strength from the new forms of community that are developing because of the Internet, which is connecting millions of people who want to take action and get involved," Stern said. "We need those people to be part of our movement."

He called for a transformation of the AFL-CIO, or to "build something stronger that can really change workers' lives."

Sweeney, who headed SEIU before becoming AFL-CIO, addressed the convention Tuesday, saying, "When we're honest, we know we have to change faster and fight smarter and work even harder."

The AFL-CIO has created a new organization similar to PurpleOcean.org, but it is not Internet-based. Called Working America, the group also is targeting people supportive of the labor movement and its goals, but who don't have access to unions at work.

Union membership is at an all-time low, with just 12.9 percent of the work force belonging to a union last year, according to the Labor Department. That's down from 13.3 percent force belonging to a union last year, according to the Labor Department. That's down from 13.3 percent in 2002. In the private sector alone, only 8.2 percent of workers were union members last year.

"Organized labor needs to reach into bag and look for as many different ways to reach workers and speak their needs as possible," said Bob Bruno, an associate professor of labor and industrial relations at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The decline of unions is sparking fierce debate in the labor movement about possible remedies and the future. Stern is one of a handful of union leaders unhappy with labor's organizing efforts under AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, whose term ends next summer as the federation celebrates its 50th anniversary. They have formed a coalition called the New Unity Partnership, and are pushing for big changes, including a realignment of unions into broadly defined sectors.

"John Sweeney has proven that the problem is not who captains the ship, but that the ship was not built to navigate the storms of the modern world," Stern said Monday in his opening convention speech.