

Labor pit bull: The Service Employees International Union surges ahead

By John Dorschner
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For two years, Local 11 has been trying to organize condo workers on Miami Beach. It has yet to gain a single member. It has yet to even ask for an election to see if workers want a union.

And still this wing of the Service Employees International Union keeps battling. A feisty upstart that dismisses the AFL-CIO as stodgy, it has grown to 1.8 million members. Locally, it has achieved some remarkable success, notably at Pan American Hospital, where 97 percent of employees voted last year to unionize.

The SEIU has done all this while national union membership shrinks and some opponents dismiss organized labor as an outdated concept.

In its Beach campaign, Local 11 has organized demonstrations, arranged for a group of clergy to pray for workers at the management company's offices, set up two websites to support its efforts and proposed that the Beach city council pass a condo reform law.

"The hallmark of our union is our tenacity," says Rob Schuler, president of Local 11. "We know the labor movement is dying unless we go out and create new places. What are we going to do? Die with our last member?"

Joan Canny is not impressed. An attorney representing the Continental Group, which has about 3,600 condo maintenance employees that SEIU is trying to organize, Canny says, "Unions' purposes are really obsolete at this point. There don't seem to be compelling reasons for them."

She says once unions had "an important voice for the protection of workers" in issues about safety, minimum wage, overtime regulations and child-labor concerns. "Now the government regulates all of that, so there's no reason for employees to hire unions to speak for them."

"Clearly that's wrong," fires back Monica Russo, president of SEIU's local for healthcare workers.

She points to the Broward body-armor company Point Blank as a prime example. "They were earning poverty wages and getting fired for going to the bathroom. And so many workers don't have healthcare [insurance]. They need to find their own voice," says Russo.

Nationwide, union membership has been declining for years, down to 12.5 percent of wage and salary workers, a drop of 37.8 percent since 1983, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Florida, only 6 percent of all workers are card-carrying union members.

While other unions are rarely heard from, SEIU advocates aggressive action. In July, it led a highly publicized break from the establishment of America's labor unions, the AFL-CIO, taking with it \$10 million in annual dues.

SEIU's president, Andy Stern, thought the AFL-CIO had become complacent, and it placed too many restrictions on how an aggressive union like SEIU can organize. "We need to find ways to grow," he told The Herald.

Under Stern, it has become the second largest union in America, after the National Education Association. It has wings in healthcare, government and building services.

Stern won't say exactly how much the national is sinking into its Local 11 effort, but it's part of an overall \$20 million SEIU strategy for the southern rim, from Arizona to Florida.

SUFFERING ABOUND

"Workers in all parts of the country right now are suffering, and in the South it's an even more severe problem because southern workers have historically made less money and had less benefits," Stern says.

Stern and many other union leaders complain that the South, including Florida, has right-to-work laws, meaning that even if a job site is unionized, workers don't have to belong to the union. In the view of labor leaders that means workers can get the benefits of union efforts without paying dues to the local.

Even within the anti-union South, South Florida is viewed by organizers as a tough place, because it has many new immigrants willing to work for low pay and afraid of angering their employers.

But Tere Gavalda, who works in the South Florida office of the AFL-CIO, says "in the last eight to 10 months, I have had so many calls from people who want information on organizing. I'm surprised how many people are inquiring."

Lack of job security, reduction of benefits -- particularly healthcare -- and the shift from full-time workforces to temp or part-time workers, have left many upset. "People are getting very concerned," says Gavalda.

Of course, there is far more talk than action in many unions, and that's why the activist SEIU stands out.

A visit to the headquarters of the healthcare union near the Golden Glades interchange in North Miami-Dade feels something like walking into a consciousness-raising sanctum.

The walls of a meeting room are filled with goals for the next 10 years. An imagined headline summed up the local's ambitions: "Sweeping Victory: SEIU woman Dusts Anti-Healthcare opponent in Governor's Race -- First bill signed healthcare for all."

"Our focus is not just winning a nickel or a 50-cent raise," says Russo. The union has lobbied the Florida Legislature for set nurse-patient ratios to cut down on hospital errors, as well as minimum class sizes and upping the state's minimum wage. It recently produced a study on nurse staffing problems in Florida hospitals.

Local 11 is lobbying the Miami Beach City Council to pass a condo reform act to make living conditions better for residents. It also has reached out to a group of religious leaders and persuaded them to go to Continental's headquarters to pray for condo workers.

STRANGE CASE

Union organizers face unique challenges in South Florida. Perhaps the most bizarre came in 2002, when workers at the Mount Sinai-St. Francis Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Miami Shores voted 49-37 in favor of the union.

Management complained to the National Labor Relations Board that the union had been using voodoo to incite workers, employing such tactics as putting rows of coins on the floor and a ritual dance with black beads by an organizer.

"That was really bizarre," says Russo of the accusations. The NLRB sided with the union, and the vote was approved.

One of the union's top organizers of nursing homes is Stella Williams, a 30-year-SEIU member and a certified nurse assistant. "I love it," she says about confronting management. She usually starts by finding a worker who is a leader, then meeting quietly with others in their homes, hoping to stay "under the radar" of management until widespread support has been built up.

Still, at the more than 60 nursing homes SEIU has organized, wages aren't high. Williams herself generally works two jobs, six days a week -- at Miami Shores and Hialeah Shores nursing homes. Her pay is only \$8.25 an hour, but she participated in the negotiations, and the CNAs decided it was better to accept a lower wage in return for full healthcare benefits, which many nursing home workers don't have.

At Local 11, Schuler also has faced serious challenges. For the first six months of the local's existence, Schuler, a former auto mechanic and Teamster, simply studied the labor situation here. The conclusion: "If Detroit is about automobiles, Miami is about condos."

About 20 SEIU staffers are now involved in the effort. Their main target has been Continental, a subsidiary of FirstService of Toronto. It has contracts in about 600 buildings for workers to do cleaning, maintenance, guest relations, car valet and other chores.

SEIU says they earn barely more than minimum wage -- \$7 to \$9 an hour -- with virtually no benefits and no job security. "Ninety percent are Hispanic, with some Haitian and African-American. Everybody has a second job."

Continental President Richard Strunin insists the company pays above average wages and "almost all have medical benefits. . . . We have paid holidays, sick leave, overtime."

Strunin says that if Local 11 wants to seek an election, all it has to do is have 30 percent of employees sign a petition, and the NLRB will call an election. "We will abide by that."

Instead, Continental complains, the union has mounted campaigns smearing its name. "They suggest it's providing poor services, and they question residents whether they should use Continental's services," says Canny, the Continental attorney. "So they're actually threatening the jobs of Continental employees."

SEIU says it's Continental that's threatening employees. The union has filed at least five complaints with the NLRB about Continental workers who were fired for supporting the union, including Lady Borrero, a Colombian working as a maid at the Sands Pointe condo in Sunny Isles Beach.

The complaint says Borrero was fired for talking to a condo board member in support of an employee who had been fired for asking for vacation time.

Borrero said she had been making \$7.25 an hour and received no health insurance. She thought the union could make a big change in condo workers' lives.

WORKER CONFUSION

But when a reporter asked her if the majority of condo workers would vote for a union if a secret labor vote were held, she said no. ``They [the workers] don't understand."

Schuler says that's because Continental has intimidated the workers with anti-union propaganda in meetings and its managers have called police to scare away organizers trying to hand out union materials at Continental work sites.

The union vows not to give up.

"We're in Miami to stay," says Schuler, ``and we always have the ability to escalate."