

SEIU hires activist from a new school

The union signs up an alliance builder who worked for an environmental group and is credited with forming the coalition that helped sell FasTracks to voters.

By Tom McGhee
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Lauren Martens doesn't match the image of a hard-boiled labor activist. His meticulously polished shoes would blend into any corporate board room, and he spent his early years as an environmentalist

But he is just the type of new blood the upstart Service Employees International Union seeks out. Local 105 hired Martens as political organizer in June as part of an effort to help lure workers who haven't traditionally been drawn to organized labor.

"We are looking for folks who have a broader view about economic and social issues, because at the end of the day social justice is what we want to achieve," said Mitch Ackerman, SEIU Local 105 president.

Martens, 46, fills the bill. When death squads were terrorizing El Salvadoran peasants in the 1980s, he joined a Chicago group that educated the public about conditions in Central America.

As part of Neighbor to Neighbor's campaign, he lobbied Congress to pressure Latin American governments for change. In 1996, he went to work organizing and lobbying for the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

And in 1998, he began building a coalition of 40 organizations that are credited with selling the FasTracks light-rail expansion to Denver voters last year. That skill at alliance-building made him especially valuable to the SEIU, Ackerman said. It and The Teamsters last week defected from the AFL-CIO.

The dissident unions believe the federation is spending too little money on grassroots organizing and too much on supporting politicians in efforts for pro-labor legislation. They vowed to reverse the steep decline in nationwide union membership.

The SEIU has focused its new efforts on the Southern and Southwestern states, areas of the country where unions have not historically had great success. Colorado now has about 9,000 members, for example, but the SEIU hopes to enlist thousands more. By building the ranks, Martens said, unions will naturally increase their political and bargaining power.

Over the past nine years, Service Employees International Union has doubled its membership to 1.8 million, a record unmatched in the labor movement.

Much of the growth came about by enlisting groups that traditionally went unorganized, such as nurses and janitors. It also was the result of aggressive and sometimes unorthodox campaigns that used civil disobedience and methods associated with protest movements.

In 2003, for example, 1,000 SEIU members clogged Denver's streets during contract negotiations for about 2,000 janitors. The march brought traffic to a standstill. While organizing janitors at the Denver Tech Center in the mid-1990s, about 50 members and supporters were arrested for blocking traffic.

During other demonstrations throughout the city, SEIU members have gathered in front of buildings and have attracted attention by shaking cans filled with BBs.

SEIU isn't the only union to use unconventional labor tactics, but the service workers are more likely than others to take radical action, said Steve Adams, president of the Colorado AFL-CIO. "They don't start breaking heads, but they interrupt the flow of the norm. I think this is the new radicalism in union organizing."

Labor has been credited with helping Democrats win control of Colorado's legislature last year. Adams and the Colorado AFL-CIO built coalitions with big-money Democratic donors, social and environmental groups in what has been called one of the labor movement's finest moments in recent years. Martens has joined the union at a time when that kind of community- building may prove invaluable.

The splintering of the AFL-CIO has caused some to wonder if organized labor can survive, but Martens and Ackerman are optimistic that the union locals will work together.

They will have to, Adams warned. "If we allow it to blow up at the local level the same way it is blowing up at the national level, there will be a diminished labor movement."