

## BUSINESS

### **ORGANIZED LABOR / Union has sights set on Houston / SEIU pumps resources, efforts into organizing**

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For years, the Service Employees International Union ran its Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana operations out of a garage apartment in the Heights.

But that was until the nation's second-largest union set its sights on the nation's fourth-largest city.

Today it occupies an entire floor of a bank building on San Felipe where it has signed an 11-year lease for 11,000 square feet.

SEIU is also pouring more than \$1 million into the local effort and has at least a dozen organizers on the ground at any given time in the hopes of signing up 8,000 janitors and 14,000 Houston city employees.

On another front, Unite Here, which never had much of a presence in Houston, has also been making significant strides, organizing laundry and hotel workers. Its biggest coup: 600 workers at Hilton Americas-Houston last year, the first union-represented hotel in Houston and the second in Texas after the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport's Sheraton Hotel.

Houston, which has never been much of a union town, is turning into a hotbed of organizing activity, which could have far-reaching consequences.

Workers in certain job fields could see higher wages, business could face increased expenses and - in the end - the AFL-CIO is becoming more aggressive as it goes head to head with these two breakaway unions for membership.

"The SEIU is coming off successes in other cities," said Mark Jodon, employment lawyer with Littler Mendelson, who deals with labor/management issues. "It would be a feather in their cap if they could pull this off in a right-to-work state where unions are so weak."

#### Eyes on Lone Star State

The drive in Houston by SEIU is part of its plan to spend \$60 million on courting new members, a pledge it made when it pulled out of the AFL-CIO this summer.

SEIU and six other unions launched a "Change to Win" coalition, vowing to boost wages and extend health care insurance to the millions of workers who aren't unionized.

"We have 45 million people without health insurance, including many full-time workers who work two to three jobs," said Eliseo Medina, international executive vice president of SEIU who lives in Los Angeles but works out of Houston.

"You just have to look at the airlines to see secure retirement is a thing of the past for most workers."

It was time to invest in Texas, he said, because it's a large state, has a large congressional delegation and has a strong influence over public policy.

Houston not anti-union

"It hasn't been that Houston is anti-union," Medina said. "It's a case that unions haven't been investing time and energy to build a solid foundation for the future."

In addition to signing up the 600 hotel workers, Unite Here has organized 110 employees at the Angelica Corp. The company, which cleans hospital linens, agreed to a nationwide neutrality agreement with the union in June after an 18-month dispute.

That meant the union, which was able to leverage its existing contracts to win the nationwide agreement, could avoid contentious election campaigns, which makes it easier to win representation.

Two-thirds of the plants were already unionized, Angelica CEO Steve O'Hara said.

He said he figured employees who lived in right-to-work states such as Texas, where union membership isn't mandatory, could decide whether they'd like to join through signing cards.

Willy Gonzales, Unite Here's Texas manager, has already begun bargaining with Angelica officials for the first contract. He's seeking higher wages - the employees currently earn about \$7 an hour - as well as more affordable health insurance.

The organizing campaign at the Hilton, which resulted in raises and more affordable health insurance, is a model for future campaigns, Gonzales said.

"Those 600 workers live in the community," he said. "The more we can raise their standard of living, the more the community can raise its standards."

The organizing drive was also a turning point, he said: "It was the first big success in years."

And, he added, "it won't be the last one."

Stepping on toes

With two breakaway unions turning up the heat in Houston, there is bound to be friction between more than just workers and management.

SEIU, which is making a play for 14,000 Houston city hall workers, has also antagonized many longtime local labor leaders with the AFL-CIO.

For decades, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union has represented city workers.

"At this point, I feel betrayed," said Richard Shaw, secretary-treasurer of the Harris County AFL-CIO. "They basically stabbed another union in the back. I expected better from SEIU International."

Shaw is especially annoyed because he supported SEIU's successful Justice for Janitors campaign and introduced its organizers to many important political, religious and community leaders.

"I expected them to go after health care workers, not city workers," Shaw said.

But Medina says workers will make the choice.

Avoiding arguments

"Our plan is not to get into an argument with anybody," Medina said.

And, he added, the union is in for the long haul.

"We're making a long-term commitment," he said. "If workers are ever to get a fair shake, they need workers in Texas to join them."

The dispute about poaching has become so contentious that the AFSCME and SEIU drew up a pact recently promising not to raid one another's work sites and instead, focus their efforts on organizing the unorganized.

But the agreement doesn't apply to the city government's work force because it doesn't have a collective bargaining agreement.

Nurses side with AFL-CIO

The AFL-CIO, meanwhile, may have another bargaining chip in its back pocket. The California Nurses Association has voted to join the AFL-CIO.

While most of the 65,000 registered nurses it represents live in California, the association recently hosted events to meet and greet potential new members in Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, Detroit and soon in Ohio and Kentucky.

Texas isn't on the national tour yet, but the association hopes to visit next spring, said Charles Idelson, spokesman for the Oakland-based group.

In addition to organizing workplaces and negotiating contracts, the association has lobbied successfully for minimum ratios between patients and nurses. Nurses in general medical units in California, for example, can't handle more than five patients, while the ratio is 1-to-1 in intensive trauma treatment units.

Arizona has adopted intensive care ratios and other states are considering similar ratios, he said.

As for SEIU, the California Nurses Association has an agreement that it will organize just nurses and leave its competitor to organize other health care employees, Idelson said.

"We'd rather not go head to head with SEIU," he said.