

L A B O R

Service with a smile

For most of its 75 years, since it was founded by an ethnic hodgepodge of downtrodden janitors in Chicago, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) got little attention or respect, even within the ranks of organized labor.

The SEIU, already America's fastest-growing union, expands its plans to organize.

By David Moberg
CHICAGO

Most of its members were in jobs that offered little prestige, pay or power. They didn't have the heroic proletarian panache of miners, autoworkers and truckers, who in their heyday could shut down industries and make the national economy tremble. The union represented a grab bag of members—public employees, office workers, nursing-home and other health care workers, janitors, workers at racetracks and amusement parks. The union's membership also included more minorities and women than most other unions. SEIU members often belonged to locals that had

little in common with the rest of their international union, not even sharing a name. Though some locals were honest and militant, others were cesspools of corruption, often allied with the old-guard crooks of the Teamsters. The painful joke among SEIU staffers was that, to the rest of the labor movement, they were S-E-I-Who?

That has all changed dramatically. Now the SEIU is the third-largest and fastest-growing union in the AFL-CIO (with 1.1 million members). It is also one of the most imaginative, militant and progressive unions in the American labor movement, providing inspiration and ideas for a labor revival, if there is to be one.

SEIU transformed itself over the past 15 years under the leadership of John Sweeney, who brought new prestige to his old union last year when he was elected president of the AFL-CIO. Now Andrew Stern, a 45-year-old former reform leader of a large social service worker local and for 12 years the chief strategist of SEIU's brilliant organizing campaigns among janitors, nursing-home employees and

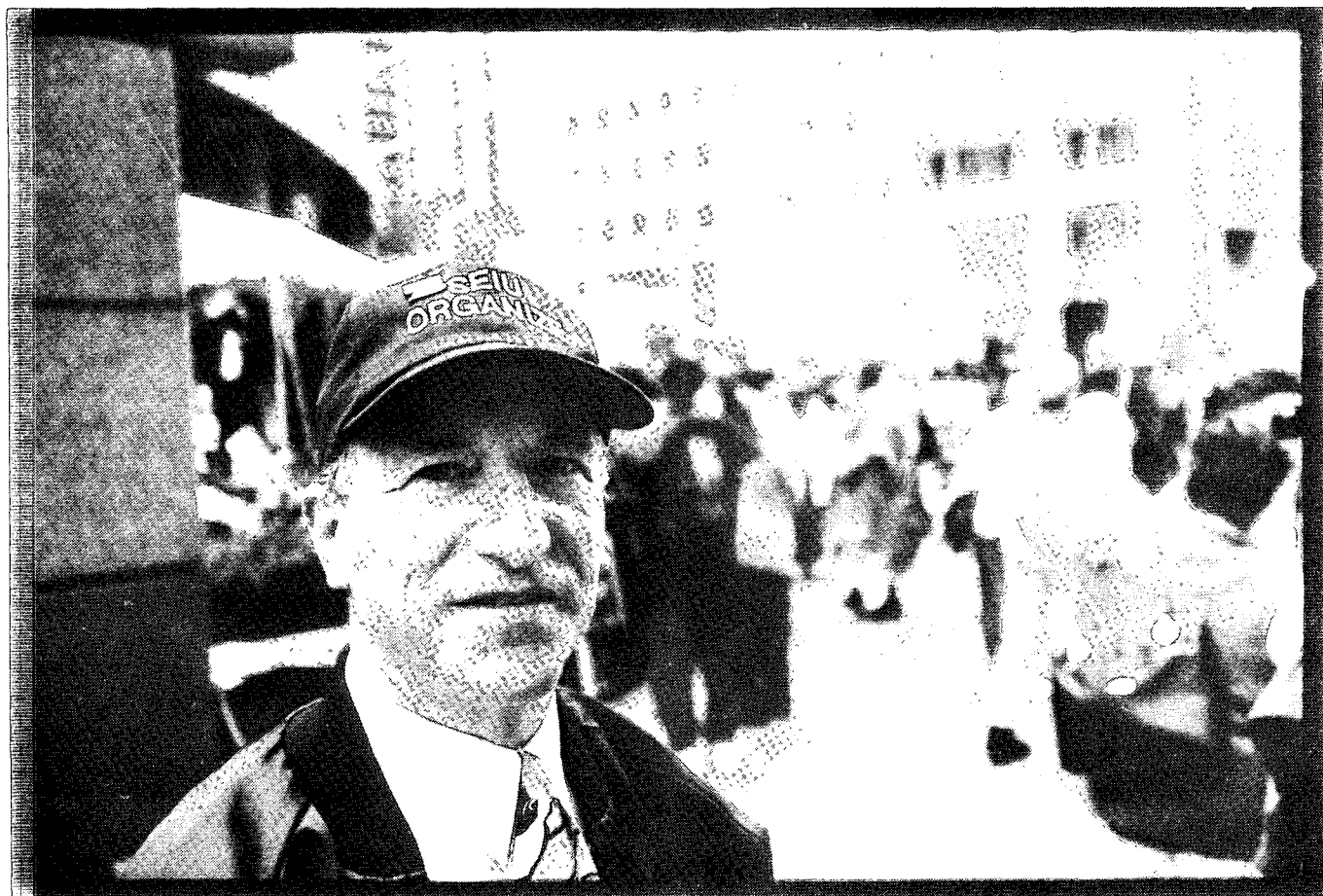
other workers, has taken the reins at SEIU. Colleagues describe Stern as passionate, intense and thoughtful. "Andy is an organizer's organizer," says Atlanta Labor Council President Stewart Acuff. "He thinks about it, worries about it, goes to bed with it, wakes up with it."

Stern wants to remake the SEIU "to fundamentally change how local unions do business, [that is], seeing their mission as building power in their industries and not simply bargaining contracts. ... I think you'll [also] see much more grass-roots independent political programs."

After Sweeney's retirement, SEIU's conservative wing, with its strength mainly in big-city janitor locals, moved to win control of the union, but Stern and his allies out-organized the old guard. Richard Cordtz, Sweeney's longtime secretary-treasurer and the interim president, dropped out of the race in March, ceding victory to Stern and his newly expanded five-member executive slate, including two women, a Latino and an African-American. The convention further strengthened Stern's mandate by reducing the conservative old guard to a vestigial role in leadership and by endorsing a new strategic program. The program, a remarkably frank assessment of union weaknesses and strengths, was developed over the past four years by the Committee on the Future, chaired by new Secretary-Treasurer Betty Bednarczyk.

The convention also struck a compromise on the thorny, embarrassing internal issue of whether leaders could draw multiple salaries from the union: Top officers will no longer be permitted to get dual salaries, but new executive board members will get standardized, publicly disclosed compensation for the extra work they do for the international—though they will draw more modest fees than those previously paid to some leaders. Much of the

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SEIU President Andrew Stern at a recent rally in Chicago.

SEIU President Andrew Stern at a recent rally in Chicago. [REDACTED] rancor within the union has focused on one man, Gus Bevona, the arrogant, retrograde head of the big New York janitor local 33B/33J. Bevona had threatened to fight for radical local autonomy but ultimately settled for keeping his money—about \$400,000 a year all told—and diminished national power.

Now a new generation of leadership, sympathetic to Sweeney's emphasis on organizing and on promoting a broad social agenda, has full control. "John Sweeney was the great straddler," linking the old local barons and new staff and local leaders like Stern, many of whom were influenced by the social movements of the 1960s, observes a former SEIU leader. "Now there is the emergence of a new generation of leaders who don't have to straddle." Sweeney was the master of a "silent consensus" that broke down when he left, argues District 925 director Debbie Schneider, but Stern's campaign, however brief, finally established a public consensus on the union's new direction. Leaders of the previous pro-democracy dissident caucus rallied behind Stern—despite continued disagreements over issues such as direct election of officers—and were included on the union's executive board.

Sweeney created a strong, creative central staff for what had been a highly decentralized union—and used it to orga-

nize. (The union's best-known organizing campaign is Justice for Janitors, which has used public disruption and civil disobedience to gain leverage.) Sweeney also pursued coordinated contract campaigns among small, fragmented work sites, such as nursing homes, that are often hard to organize.

Though SEIU leaders intend to create a more democratic union and a "culture of participation," they have a long way to go. Most of the union's members and local leaders are not active participants in the union's main projects. In a 1993 union survey, only a third of SEIU members supported the union's organizing program. Sometimes successful organizing campaigns, such as the heralded Los Angeles Justice for Janitors effort, have been grafted onto locals without changing the structure of the local union or the outlook of its leaders or previous members.

"There's organizing internally and organizing new members," says Michael Baratz, director of the building service division. "We're woefully unorganized internally. We don't have the benefit of our numbers until our people are organized. I don't mean just paying dues, but having respect for the union and acting." Now, Stern says, he wants to take the last step of the process Sweeney began, by "bringing local union leadership more into that center. Our members and leaders want to participate more." And Stern wants to educate them, through action when possible, to support organizing as the key to their own power to improve their lives.

Despite its success compared to other unions, SEIU scored a net gain of only 8,700 workers a year through organizing over the decade ending in 1993. Because of restructuring and turmoil in the industries where it organizes, the SEIU had to organize 40,000 workers a year to compensate for losses elsewhere and still realize those gains. At the same time, the service sector is growing so rapidly that the union needs a net gain of 40,000 each year, or roughly double its current overall organizing pace, simply to maintain its percentage share of these growing industries. To increase the percentage of unionized workers and thus gain power, it will need to organize even more.

Faced with these pressures, SEIU leaders continue to step up the union's commitment to organizing. The convention raised dues for both the international union and locals—increases primarily set aside for organizing. But local unions still control the vast majority of the union's resources and remain the key to aggressive organizing campaigns.

"This whole convention was about trying to get locals to understand that they can't represent members at the bargaining table anymore if they don't organize," Stern said at its conclusion. "We're not going to get stronger if our numbers get smaller. We're not going to raise our wages when people down the street are making far less."

If local unions boost their organizing budgets from 5 percent of income to 20 percent over the next few years, and the international continues to devote at least a third of its budget to organizing, SEIU expenditures on organizing could roughly double to \$45 million a year, enough to at least keep pace with service sector growth. But the structural and ideological changes the new SEIU leaders envision could multiply those membership gains even further.

Over the next four years Stern hopes to recruit and train 5,000 "member organizers." Currently, union stewards see their task as handling problems in the workplace. But the new member organizers would be parallel union leaders, who see their task as recruiting new union members and building unions at other work sites. Now only about 60 out of 400 locals are actively organizing.

The union will continue to organize to build strength in local markets. A health care local is now targeting a wide range of health services throughout the Akron area, for example, and in Cincinnati, too, the National Association for Working Women, offers a citywide non-union forum for office workers. Meanwhile, SEIU District 925 targets specific workplaces, especially universities and not-for-profit organizations, for unionization. The union is also using its growing bargaining power to ease the task of organizing workers; it has already won agreements from nursing-home chains to be neutral in organizing drives or recognize the union without the lengthy National Labor Relations Board election process. It is also beginning to use its political power to support organizing efforts: In its hard-fought campaign to organize ill-paid home-care workers, the union

has worked to establish local public authorities that can bargain with the organized workers.

Even where the union controls a big chunk of a market, it must use novel tactics. Nursing-home aides are easy to replace, so the union resorts to surprise, quickie strikes that minimize job loss but still take a toll on the employer: There have been 70 over the past year, as many as in the previous decade, according to David Snapp, director of the union's Dignity campaign to organize nursing-home workers in California. SEIU is seeking an injunction against industry giant Beverly Enterprises for illegally replacing 350 low-skilled workers in Pennsylvania who struck over unfair labor practices. To bolster its bargaining in several health care and nursing-home campaigns, SEIU has attacked government funding for rogue corporations, conducted demonstrations and civil disobedience, revealed damaging information about companies to financial markets, agitated for increased regulation, and mobilized consumer and patient groups to fight for better care. To win gains for janitors, the union typically pressures high-profile developers or corporate giants, like Apple, that hire building service contractors in lieu of going after the janitorial firms themselves.

The union is trying to organize at a time when the world of service work is rapidly changing: National, even transnational, corporate chains of janitorial services, nursing homes, HMOs and other employers of SEIU members are grabbing larger shares of their markets. As they do so, they create growing pressures to "restructure" in ways that deskill the work, weaken workers' bargaining position and greatly enrich the owners. To succeed in recruiting new members and winning stronger contracts, Stern thinks, the union will have to form more partnerships among locals—and between locals and the international—to confront these new service corporations. Also, especially in health care, SEIU is fighting for better patient care by allying with patient and consumer groups. In one key alliance, SEIU has joined forces with the union health care trust funds that are often big clients of HMOs, such as Kaiser. (SEIU is embroiled in a major battle with the formerly progressive, union-backed HMO that is now behaving much like other profit-driven HMOs.) With its allies, the union presses for tighter state regulations and bargains for "patient care" committees that involve workers in key decisions, such as determining adequate levels of staff.

The union's new leaders also face big internal obstacles to their ambitious organizing plan. First, it won't be a snap to organize members and to persuade them that, with all the competing demands on their time, it's worth working more for their union. Members already feel a certain ambivalence toward the union: They give SEIU high marks for fighting, but low marks on winning what they need. Local officers also are often resistant: Why risk the local's money on an organizing drive that might lose and then

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GENDER POLITICS

"Sluts" and suits

*Are lawsuits
the answer to
student-to-
student sexual
harassment?*

By Leora Tanenbaum

A junior high school girl in

Petaluma, Calif., known as Jane Doe was the target of an ugly and persistent rumor. In the fall of 1990, when she was in the seventh grade, classmates spread the word that Doe had a hot dog in her pants. Throughout the year Doe was repeatedly called a "hot dog bitch" and a "slut." And the rumor did not dissipate over the summer. When Doe returned to school the following year, the comments kept coming. One day a classmate stood up in the middle of English class and blatantly said, "This question is for Jane. Did you have sex with a hot dog?" The entire class laughed. Doe ran out in tears.

Doe's experience is far from rare. In fact, 42 percent of girls have had sexual rumors spread about them, according to a 1993 nationwide poll conducted for the American Association of University Women. In

another survey, conducted by Nan Stein of Wellesley College in conjunction with the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund and distributed through *Seventeen* magazine, 89 percent of the teenage respondents said they had been the targets of unwanted sexual comments, gestures or looks. (Eighty-three percent said they had been touched, grabbed or pinched.) In two-thirds of the cases, other people were present.

The school "slut" typically endures cruel and sneering comments—"slut" is often interchangeable with "whore" and "bitch"—as she walks down the hallway, rides the school bus and gathers books from her locker. She is publicly humiliated in the classroom and cafeteria, targeted in boys' bathroom graffiti and late-night prank phone calls. Teachers, generally speaking, do not intervene; they consider this behavior normal for teenagers.

Consider "Marcy," a Catholic girl from Queens then in the ninth grade, who was hanging out at a friend's house one evening when she drank so much she blacked out. A

classmate raped her and then spread the news that they had had sex. Marcy, now a college sophomore, comments matter-of-factly that within hours she acquired a reputation as a "slut." "They'd call out 'slut' to me in the halls," she recalls. "There was graffiti." Everybody in the school knew about her, in all the grades. Marcy's reputation as a "slut" is so legendary that the new crop of incoming students at her old high school hears all about her each year.

I know what it feels like: I myself had been the subject of painful, mocking gossip in the spring of ninth grade, 12 years ago. A friend felt betrayed after I dated a guy she'd had her eye on. In revenge, she spread the rumor that I was a "slut." It was my first lesson in the sexual double standard: Boys who bragged about their sexual status were routinely glorified, while I was belittled to an extraordinary degree. My sexuality (real or imagined) was, in effect, policed.

So what's a high school "slut" to do? Unfortunately, the solutions currently advocated by educators, many of whom consider "slut"-bashing a form of sexual harassment, are ineffective or impractical.

The NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund counsels schools to develop and enforce sexual harassment policies, so that a strong message is conveyed that verbal harassment will not be tolerated, that students know how to make a complaint and that punishments are speedy but fair. A student who is harassed by another student is advised to confront the harasser, if she feels safe and comfortable doing so. She is encouraged to write a letter to the harasser that describes the behavior, explains that it bothers her and says that she wants it to stop. This is said to be empowering and therapeutic for the student who is harassed.

But it can be incredibly difficult for anyone, let alone a