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UNION STRUCK

Party girl

Among all the current strikes against oppressive employers across the country, one of the most controversial involves eight workers in Connecticut. Their seven-month-old walk-out may have tremendous implications for the labor movement because their employer is a union.

The National Association of Government Employees (NAGE), an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), represents municipal and federal workers. NAGE operates offices across the country, including one in Cromwell, Conn., just outside of Hartford. In April 1995, the Cromwell office staff of lawyers, worker representatives and clerical workers organized as members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 376. They wanted higher salaries and better-regulated hours. But in the 18 months since they organized, the UAW workers still don't have a contract.

The last straw came in September 1995, when NAGE fired Bob Cerritelli, who led the organizing effort, soon after the UAW workers began contract negotiations with NAGE. In January, the workers filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging that NAGE fired Cerritelli for his efforts to unionize the Cromwell office.

After nearly a year with the UAW and still without a contract, the workers walked out in March. Awaiting a ruling on the original NLRB charges, they have filed other complaints, including one accusing NAGE of threatening strikers.

"We knew that we were on virgin territory with NAGE because none of their offices had been unionized before," says Cerritelli. "But we didn't expect this."

David Bernard, national vice president of NAGE, says the union fired Cerritelli for submitting fraudulent expense reports. He also dismisses as "frivolous" the claims that NAGE engaged in any anti-union activity,

THE CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN FINANCE PROPOSITIONS WILL NOT APPLY, OF course, to federal elections. Nor would they necessarily curb the state's big-time contributors, such as Democratic Party activist Barbra Streisand. At her open house last month, Streisand raised \$4 million for the Democrats, including \$140,000 she coughed up herself. The following exchange between *ABC Evening News'* Brian Ross and Streisand took place prior to the party.

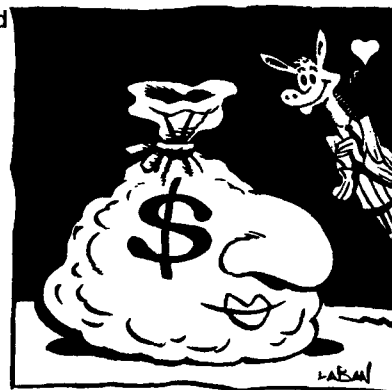
Ross: "Should any one person be able to give as much money as you do?"

Streisand: "If you have it, you can give it."

Ross: "How about those who do not have it?"

Streisand: "They can't give it. They can vote."

They can also eat cake. —J.B.



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including charges that it threatened to lay off union organizers and refuses to bargain in good faith. "This is just an attack by the UAW to throw as much as possible against the wall to see what will stick," he says.

But NAGE must also contend with charges from within its own ranks. The presidents of six NAGE locals filed a complaint in early October with SEIU's national office, accusing NAGE officers of violating a SEIU constitutional provision that prohibits members from "acting as strikebreakers" by replacing striking workers.

"They think it's wrong for us to use management people to replace workers," protests Bernard. But Cerritelli alleges that it's not just managers doing the striking staffers' jobs. "They have also hired people from outside of NAGE who have never worked for NAGE before," he says.

This bitter fight highlights the debate, which came to life with the advent of business unionism, over whether to unionize union staffers. In the '50s and '60s, just decades after the modern labor movement's radical beginnings, unions, eager to institutionalize themselves, became their own companies. They acquired buildings and hired staffs to do the business of representing and protecting workers. Now unions themselves have workers—workers who, Cerritelli argues,

only want the same protections and provisions their union employers provide to their own members.

Peter Rachleff, a history professor at Macalester College in Minnesota who is himself active in the labor movement, says that this conundrum is only to be expected given the current state of trade unionism. "It's not just the worst unions that do this," he says. "Progressive unions have problems too. Make them an employer and they act like an employer." The debate is not likely to die soon, he adds. "If Sweeney and Co. can transform the labor movement from business unionism to a real social movement, this problem might disappear," he says. "But that's an awful lot to wish for."

—Leah Samuel

DOWN TO THE WIRE IN WASHINGTON

Two years ago, with the Republican Contract with America in one hand and anti-incumbent sentiment in the other, state Sen. Linda Smith ousted three-term incumbent Democrat Jolene Unsoeld from the

Third Congressional District seat in southwestern Washington. Unsoeld, along with five other of the state's Democrats in Congress, fell victim to the 1994 Republican revolution. Now, it appears a 40-year-old psychologist could swing the district back to its Democratic roots.

At the outset, hardly anyone thought Olympia Democrat Brian Baird had a chance of defeating Smith. The incumbent's grass-roots conservative campaign volunteers, known as "Linda's Army," were expected to march right over Baird. These true believers—who, like their representative, denounce big government—have donated countless hours doing everything from making fliers to door-to-door campaigning. Not surprisingly, they've also kept Smith's campaign expenses low.

So imagine their surprise on September 18, when primary election returns showed that Smith led Baird by only a few thousand votes, and lost to him in four of the nine counties in the district. (Washington conducts a "blanket" primary, in which Democrats, Republicans and independents vote on the same ballot.)

"It was a wake-up call to my supporters," says Smith, who remains at least outwardly calm about her re-election chances. "Now, they know they have to get out and work."

Baird has focused his criticism on Smith's conservative voting record. "She's basically voted down the line with Newt Gingrich," says Baird, echoing a campaign theme used by many Democrats this year.

Baird's strong showing in the primary will mean extra cash for his campaign. The Democratic Campaign Coordinating Committee has promised to kick in an undisclosed sum of money. Baird has yet to hear from the AFL-CIO, which is spending millions on advertising it hopes will assist other Democratic congressional candidates in the state.

State Democrats have also benefited from President Bill Clinton's bus tour of western Washington last month and the near invisibility of

Bob Dole's campaign in the state. Baird has traveled tirelessly in the 8,500-square-mile district, especially in Vancouver and along the coast, traditional Democratic areas of the district where Smith did well last time. Meanwhile, Smith, whose congressional schedule kept her away from the state for much of the year, admits she has a lot of people to visit before the election.

Smith is hoping to appeal once again to voters' mistrust of the political establishment, drawing attention to her record on campaign finance reform. She co-sponsored the Bipartisan Clean Congress Act of 1995, a bill that would have banned contributions from political action committees and set spending limits for candidates, although some say it has too many loopholes to be effective. (See "Reforming the beast," June 24.) In her campaign ads, Smith, who last year stopped accepting PAC

contributions, has portrayed Baird, who does accept PAC money, as a dupe of special interests. As of September 1, Baird had raised \$259,000 for his campaign and spent most of it; Smith had raised \$539,000 and spent more than half. When combined with the \$187,000 she raised in 1995, however, Smith's war chest totals \$726,000—more than \$100,000 over the \$600,000 spending limit called for in her campaign finance reform bill.

—Mindy Chambers

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THE ADVENTURES OF A HUGE MOUTH

By Peter Hannan

