

How the labor bureaucracy scabbed on the Portland school janitors

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18 July 2003

Even an experienced observer of the American labor bureaucracy may be forgiven an astonished double-take at the Justice for Janitors rally organized by the Service Employee International Union (SEIU) in downtown Portland, Ore., last month. For alongside the 200 members of SEIU Local 49 campaigning for a new contract were 10 members of SEIU Local 140, with bullhorn in hand, denouncing Local 49 for taking their jobs.

One of the Portland School Board's responses to its budget crisis was to vote last July to fire its 300 custodians and contract out to the Portland Habilitation Center (PHC). The PHC is a non-profit corporation that trains and places disabled workers in its landscaping, clerical or janitorial divisions. State law requires that organizations like the PHC be given first consideration for any janitorial jobs contracted out by public agencies. In 2001, with over 300 employees, the PHC had 24 custodial contracts that earned it \$17.7 million. All of these contracts but one were with public bodies such as the Portland International Airport and Oregon Health Sciences University. Its sole private contract represented less than 1 percent of its 2001 income.

Different SEIU locals represent both the school and the PHC custodians. PHC custodians (Local 49) earn a maximum of \$9.50 an hour—\$7.50 an hour less than the school custodians (Local 140)—and receive substandard medical benefits and only \$300 a year in employer-contributed pension benefits. The school district saved \$3.7 million this year with the PHC and hopes to save \$7.0 million next year.

The school board made no attempt to bust the union or to replace it with a company union. Much like a shopper seeking a bargain at the local supermarket, the board simply replaced the 300 custodians of SEIU Local 140 with their lower-paid union brothers of SEIU

Local 49.

In response, Local 140 made no strike threats, much less any preparation for a strike. It did not bother calling for a common front with the teachers, who were also facing severe cutbacks. There were no efforts to expose the anti-labor program of the Democratic Party. Instead, Local 140 responded to this attack with an ineffectual campaign of appeals to Democratic Party politicians. It also filed lawsuits and bought advertisements that sought to convince the school board of the advantages of retaining its members. In contract negotiations, the offer of larger and larger concessions—first \$900,000 then \$2.4 million—were rejected out of hand.

Emboldened by Local 140's futile pressure strategy, the board never wavered from its demand that the custodians absorb, in wage and/or benefit cuts, the estimated \$4.5 million savings that contracting out would save.

Limiting its efforts to mobilizing community support behind impotent protests to politicians and legal challenges, Local 140 ultimately and predictably failed its members. The school board voted to fire its 300 custodians and to contract out their jobs to the PHC. The appeals court and the circuit court, as well as the Employment Relations Board, rejected the various lawsuits.

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The bankruptcy of appeals to the politicians was highlighted at one hearing when a custodian charged board member Lorenzo Poe with betrayal for voting to fire the school custodians and award a contract to the PHC after having received money from Local 140 for his election campaign.

Having lost its campaign to save the school

custodians' jobs and unable to present any progressive policies, the leadership of Local 140 instead publicly rails against its sister local.

Described as the fastest-growing union in the US, the SEIU has cynically welcomed the gutting of one local's hard-fought wages and benefits in order to improve its opportunities for organizing. According to Alice Dale, president of Local 49, "We don't want our union contractors [paying wages] so high that they lose business because the non-union market is lower." Said in the context of unionizing janitors in the downtown core, this statement openly expresses the unabashedly subservient outlook that dominates the official unions. It also demonstrates the SEIU's willingness to limit workers' wages to what businesses will accept in order to further the union bureaucracy's goals of collecting more dues.

One further fact underscores the parasitic character of the labor hierarchy: in 2002, SEIU president Andrew Stern pocketed \$234,900 in salary, allowances and disbursements—around eight times more than a Portland school janitor earned.



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