

# Service employees union organizes thug attack at Detroit Labor Notes conference

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Representatives of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on Saturday night physically attacked supporters of the California Nurses Association (CNA) and others attending a conference organized by the *Labor Notes* magazine in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan.

The SEIU, which is involved in a bitter jurisdictional dispute with the CNA and its affiliates over union representation for nurses in California, Nevada, Ohio and other states, sent hundreds of International staff and other members to disrupt the conference, where Rose Ann DeMoro, executive director of the CNA, had been scheduled to speak.

According to a statement posted by *Labor Notes*, union members and others at the conference were punched, kicked, shoved and thrown to the floor by SEIU staff members and supporters who forced their way into the conference banquet hall. A recently retired member of United Auto Workers Local 235, Dianne Feeley, suffered a head wound after being knocked to the ground and was hospitalized. Dearborn police responded and evicted at least three busloads of SEIU supporters. No arrests were made.

The CNA said DeMoro cancelled her appearance at the event after the SEIU began sending “roving bands of staff to the homes of CNA/National Nurses Organizing Committee board members in California Thursday and Friday, stalking and harassing them” at their places of work and their homes.

In Dearborn on Saturday night, the CNA wrote in a statement, “at least seven busloads, carrying up to 500 SEIU staff in purple jackets and T-shirts, drove up to the Hyatt Regency Hotel... Upon unloading from the buses, the hundreds of picket sign-wielding staff stormed the hotel and pushed their way through doors to break into the ballroom where the event was being held. While breaking into the building, the SEIU staff, now joined by SEIU

staff inside the building, physically assaulted a group of union members and activists at the door.

“As the SEIU staff broke into the hall, some three dozen CNA/NNOC nurses and leaders, there to attend the conference, including Malinda Markowitz, RN, a member of CNA/NNOC’s Council of Presidents, who was scheduled to speak in DeMoro’s place, were whisked out the back of the hall for their safety, leaving in vans. The atmosphere was so tense that hotel cooks tried to climb into the vans to join them for fear of their own safety.”

The assault followed a day of disruption by SEIU staff at workshops, where various CNA/NNOC members were on panels or among the participants, according to *Labor Notes*. The statement posted on the *Labor Notes* web site said, “Despite being welcomed to the conference earlier in the day—and given space to debate supporters of the CNA and the National Nurses Organizing Committee about neutrality organizing agreements, SEIU international and regional staff shouted down speakers at workshops and panels throughout the event.”

“I am deeply concerned about this heightened attack on women and nurses, directed by SEIU President Andrew Stern,” said DeMoro. She added, “There is an ugly pattern here of physical abuse and tactics of intimidation that have no place in either our labor movement or a civilized society.”

Mark Brenner, director of *Labor Notes*, said such violence was unacceptable and called on the national leadership of the SEIU, including Stern, to repudiate the attack. Although *Labor Notes*, which advocates the reform of the trade unions, had seen its conferences picketed by United Auto Workers (UAW) and Teamsters officials in the 1980s, the group said this was the first time in nearly 30 years that protesters physically attacked one of its events and those attending it.

Contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* to respond to the allegations, a spokesperson for the SEIU pointed to a

statement on the union's web site, denying any violence. The statement said union members, "led by hospital workers from Ohio, whose union elections were recently sabotaged by the California Nurses Association," had engaged in a "peaceful protest." It added, "At no time did they engage in or witness the kind of activities described by the CNA."

The gangster methods of the SEIU should be denounced by all working people. There is a long and sordid history of such violence against dissidents and, above all, socialist opponents of the labor bureaucracy.

This record includes the anti-communist purges organized by the Reuther leadership against socialist and left-wing militants in the UAW during the 1940s and 1950s, the attacks against rank-and-file miners by the Boyle leadership of the United Mine Workers in the 1960s and 1970s, and goon attacks by BLAST, the Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters, in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League, have been a particular target for such provocations because of our fight to organize a socialist opposition in the working class against the betrayals of the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy.

In 2005, SEIU leader Andrew Stern split with the AFL-CIO and, along with the Teamsters, the textile and hotel union UNITE/HERE, and the food and commercial union UFCW, formed the Change to Win coalition. Stern claimed the new federation would revitalize the unions with new organizing drives, greater union democracy and better representation.

In fact, there were no principled differences between the two competing factions of the labor bureaucracy. The struggle chiefly involved a turf war, as various unions competed for dues income from a dwindling membership base.

The SEIU, in particular, has sought to increase its membership among janitors, nursing home workers and nurses by signing sweetheart deals in exchange for employer backing for its union drives. Stern has appealed to employers, saying union organization will boost productivity by reducing employee turnover and stabilizing the low-paid workforce.

Earlier this year, SEIU Vice President Dennis Rivera intervened on behalf the governor of Puerto Rico to help bust an independent union representing 40,000 public school teachers, in order to force them to affiliate with the SEIU. Shortly after a meeting between Rivera and Governor Acevedo Vila, where the SEIU leader allegedly

pledged financial backing to his long-time friend in exchange for the governor's support for the SEIU-affiliated union, Vila decertified the independent union and suspended its dues check-off. This provoked a bitter strike by teachers, to which the governor responded with riot police.

In California, the SEIU struck a secret deal with a group of nursing home chains, in which the companies agreed to drop their resistance to organizing drives in return for the SEIU's agreement to lobby state politicians to pass a tort-reform measure that would limit patients' ability to sue over neglect or abuse.

The decision to attack the *Labor Notes* conference follows a bitter turf war between the SEIU and the CNA-affiliated National Nurses Organizing Committee over organizing Catholic hospitals in Ohio. The CNA said a deal between the SEIU and Catholic Healthcare Partners to hold a snap union recognition election—excluding the participation of other unions—set "a dangerous precedent of employer-union collusion." The CNA sent representatives to Ohio to urge nurses to vote down the SEIU. The SEIU denounced this as "union-busting" and said it led to the cancellation of voting at nine hospitals last month.

While the CNA has accused the SEIU of "company unionism," the SEIU has countered by saying the CNA had itself signed an election agreement with Tenet Healthcare four years ago in California which barred any strikes until 2010 in exchange for organizing jurisdiction over Tenet nurses. The CNA says its deal permitted other unions to compete in the union representation elections, and protected nurses' rights to publicly criticize their employer over patient conditions, unlike the SEIU's partnership accords.

The violent attack by the SEIU underscores the degeneration of the trade unions and the fundamental hostility of the labor bureaucracy to the workers they purport to represent. While workers should take no side in the sordid battle over dues income, they must unequivocally oppose the gangster methods of the SEIU and take it as a sharp warning of the type of violence the union bureaucracy will use to defend its privileges against the opposition of rank-and-file workers.



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