



## Win or Lose: Lessons from Two Contrasting Union Campaigns

By Ruth Milkman

**T**hese are hard times for the labor movement. Traditional organizing approaches, however effective in the past, are now simply obsolete. The few unions that have been successful in recent years are those that have developed new strategies tailored to the radically altered conditions of the neoliberal era that began in the 1970's. A look at two recent struggles – the iconic “Justice for Janitors” campaign that took off in the 1990's and last year's tragic supermarket strike and lockout – illustrates this point vividly. The unions involved are two of the largest AFL-CIO affiliates, the SEIU and the UFCW. SEIU membership has tripled over the past quarter-century to about 1.7 million today, while the UFCW has remained stable with about 1.3 million

members over the same period. (Both figures include gains resulting from mergers with other unions.) What accounts for the contrast?

First, consider what has changed since the 1970's. At the end of that decade, unions still represented one-fourth of all wage and salary workers in the U.S., and over 20 percent of those in the private sector. For four decades, beginning with the organizing upsurge of the 1930's, unionized workers' wages, fringe benefits, and working conditions had steadily improved. Many unorganized workers enjoyed parallel gains in these years, as their employers tried to ward off unionization by matching the compensation level of the organized sector. In the

nation's leading industries, firms competed on the basis of quality and productivity, rather than by squeezing labor. Strong unions were accepted as a fact of life by corporate management, if only grudgingly, and labor wielded extensive political influence as well. Thanks largely to the leveling influence of unionism, inequalities between rich and poor were reduced to the point that millions of working class people could plausibly consider themselves "middle class."

But that is the world we have lost. Starting in the 1970's, employers launched an aggressive assault on the major fortresses of union power, driving private-sector union density down into the single digits in a few short decades. Real wages collapsed for the non-college-educated workforce, pensions and other fringe benefits evaporated, and inequality skyrocketed. The "race to the bottom," so ubiquitous today that it is already a cliché, began in the nation's manufacturing sector, as production was outsourced to sites where labor was cheap and unorganized. But union density also declined precipitously in place-bound sectors like construction, communications and transportation, as well as in many service industries, thanks to business' successful effort to impose deregulation and to a simultaneous employer attack on unionism in the legal arena.

The SEIU's spectacular expansion over this period of turbulence was predicated on a strategic reorganization it undertook in response to these transformations. By contrast, the UFCW's stagnation reflects its continued adherence to traditional approaches. The UFCW has fared better than some, to be sure, managing to maintain a steady level of membership while many other unions have suffered dramatic declines. But now the employer attacks that emerged in other sectors decades ago are exploding with a vengeance in the retail food industry, posing a grave strategic crisis for the union. The comparison between the UFCW's efforts to defend its turf in last year's massive strike and lockout, and the SEIU janitors' campaign, which included a contract strike in 2000, is telling.

For over a decade and a half, the Justice for Janitors campaign has been on the move, scoring a series of stunning victories in Los Angeles and other cities around the nation, and helping to propel the SEIU into its current

position as the AFL-CIO's fastest growing union. With this organizing success, the union took back territory that it had lost in the 1970's and early 1980's, when employer-driven restructuring led to rapid deunionization in the building services industry. During those years, janitors' wages collapsed, working conditions deteriorated and fringe benefits evaporated in cities like Los Angeles, after savvy employers effectively eliminated the union from the industry. But then the SEIU began to regroup. After a few years of intensive organizing among the low-wage immigrants that dominate the industry, culminating in a strike and a brutal police beating, the big breakthrough

came in 1990 when SEIU won union recognition for janitors in Los Angeles. The union then built on this initial victory, winning steady improvements in wages and benefits over several contract rounds. By the time of the 2000 strike, 90 percent of the area's janitors were unionized, and SEIU had divided the local union that previously included both hospital workers and janitors to create a new regional janitors' local.

Meanwhile, in the grocery industry, union strength has been deeply eroded in the past few years. Concession bargaining in various UFCW jurisdictions chipped away at hard-won wages and benefits during the 1990's, and then the battle was joined in last year's massive strike and lockout, which put some 59,000 southern California grocery workers on the street for four months. Facing determined and newly emboldened employers, the UFCW poured enormous energy and resources – \$1 million a day – into this struggle, but ultimately capitulated to management demands for a two-tier contract that radically altered the industry's employment structure. When Doug Dority, then UFCW President, declared immediately after the debacle (and a few days before his retirement) that the conflict had been "one of the most successful strikes in history," no one was fooled. Instead, friend and foe alike saw it as labor's greatest defeat since the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike.

What explains the stark contrast between these two dramas? It isn't geography. Los Angeles, which in the 1990's acquired a well-earned reputation as a center of labor movement innovation, was at center stage in both cases – although both struggles had national visibility and national repercussions. Nor is the explanation tied to

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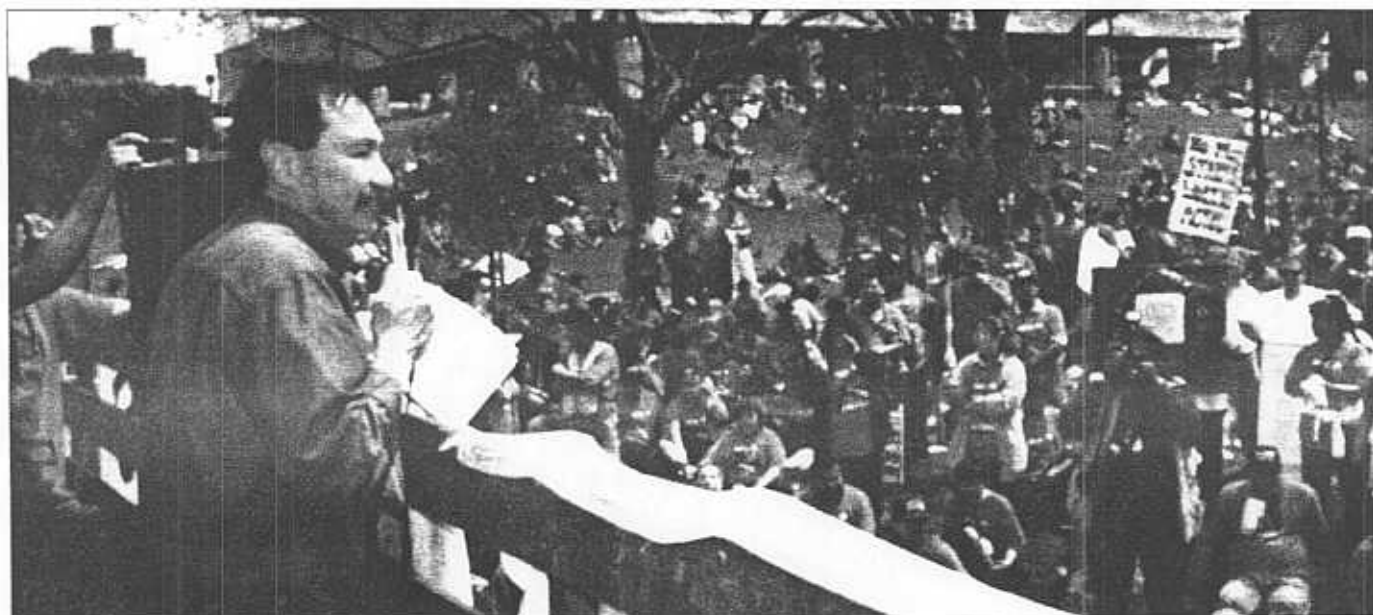
globalization, the megatrend so often invoked as the cause of labor's current woes. Both building services and supermarkets are place-bound industries in which jobs can't be outsourced. Both are long-unionized sectors made up of old-fashioned blue-collar service jobs held by non-college-educated workers for whom unionization meant decent wages and fringe benefits as well as job security and protection from employer abuse.

In both industries, the power structure has changed over the decades. Once locally and regionally-based, today the big players in both the building service and grocery industries are giant corporations for whom unions are anathema. In the office cleaning business, restructuring began decades ago when nonunion cleaning contractors – some of them part of “double breasted” companies with both union and nonunion divisions – entered the field in the 1970's and 1980's and rapidly undercut union standards. The SEIU quickly lost its grip on this highly competitive, labor-intensive industry, which by the mid-1980's was almost completely deunionized in Los Angeles and several other large cities.

Restructuring came much later in the grocery business,

and as last year's strike and lockout revealed, the UFCW (almost two-thirds of whose members work for retail grocers) was ill-prepared for this day of reckoning. Until 2004, the supermarket industry in southern California had an unbroken record of labor peace going back 25 years, with a master contract guaranteeing uniform wages and benefits across firms so that competition focused on service and quality. But when the UFCW's regional contracts expired in 2003, Safeway, Albertson's and Kroger – the industry's Big Three – suddenly shifted gears, invoking the specter of competition from Wal-Mart (even though that nonunion behemoth had yet to open a single store selling groceries in the area). The companies joined together to launch an all-out war on the union, demanding enormous concessions on health care as well as a two-tier wage and benefit structure.

The employers, who knew perfectly well that no union could accept these demands without a fight, deliberately provoked the massive strike. When the union belatedly chose to target only Safeway, the other grocery chains immediately announced a lockout. All three had meticulously prepared for the conflict, hiring thousands of replacement workers well ahead of the strike deadline,



Justice for Janitors rally in Los Angeles, CA.

obtaining commercial drivers' licenses for their managers, and even recruiting truck drivers to replace Teamsters who might go out on sympathy strikes. They geared up for a public relations effort as well, with an endless stream of ads to persuade the public that their demands were reasonable.

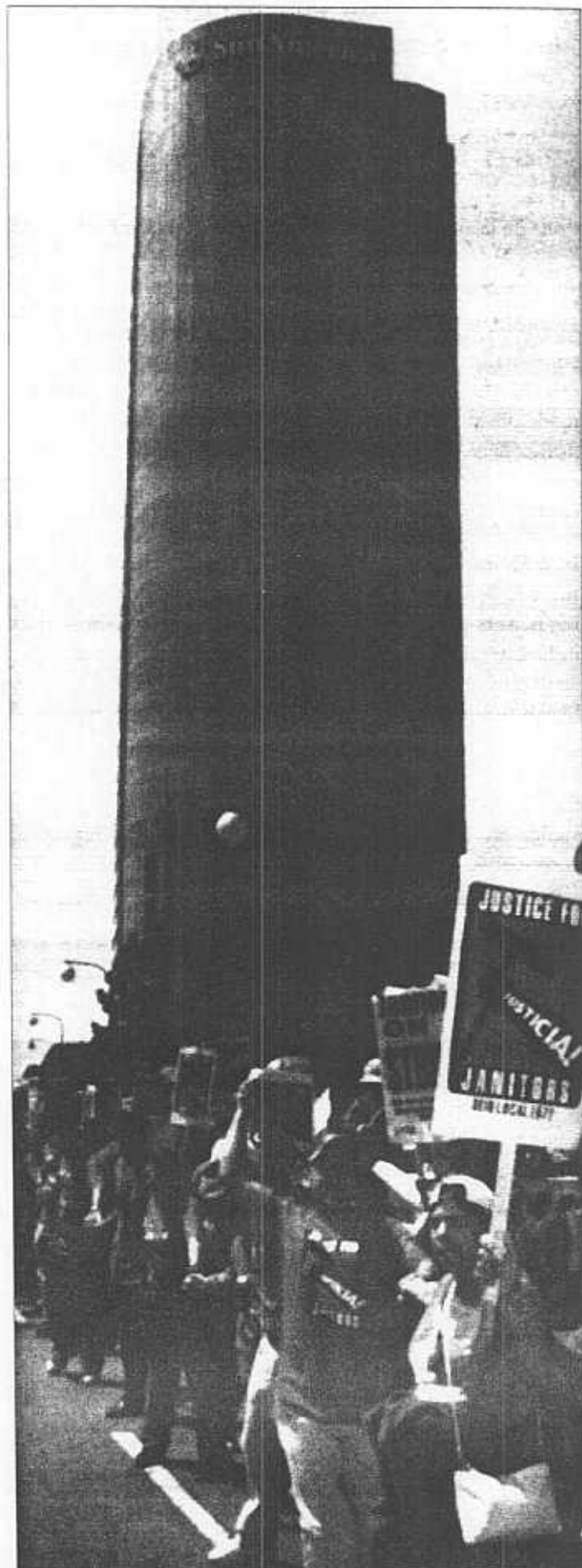
The stakes were enormous, as southern California had the best UFCW contracts in the country at the time, and everyone knew that the outcome would set the national pattern. The determined employer offensive would have been a formidable challenge for any union. Yet management didn't hold all the cards. The picketers were greeted with huge public support when they suddenly appeared in front of the stores. Almost no one crossed the lines, and many customers cheered on the UFCW for its resistance to the employers' efforts to force workers to absorb more of the rising costs of health insurance.

But the union failed to capitalize on this public sympathy. Even its own members entered the fray with limited information about the strike issues, and there was surprisingly little effort to communicate with the wider community until very late in the game. Seven separate UFCW locals were involved, which proved a major impediment to a coordinated strategy. And the union rebuffed offers of support from other unions in the

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region more experienced in the innovative tactics that have been used to effectively confront hostile employers in recent years. Only in the endgame, after the UFCW treasury was virtually depleted and at a point of total desperation did they accept such assistance, but by then it was too late. The employers had achieved their basic goals, although they too lost billions of dollars and some permanent share of the market over the four-month conflict.

The janitors' campaign was also a response to employer aggression, but here the union gave as good as it got, launching an audacious, multi-pronged counterattack. The



March in downtown Los Angeles, CA.

SEIU's "comprehensive campaign" was relentlessly confrontational from the outset. It used all available means to build union power, including intensive research on the structure and dynamics of the building services industry, in-your-face guerilla tactics that put key players on the spot, media-oriented publicity efforts highlighting the social justice aspect of the organizing, building alliances with local politicians, litigation, as well as extensive rank-and-file mobilization. Above all, the union developed a strategy to take labor out of competition, reorganizing itself internally to maximize its leverage over the employers. This involved shifting from a collection of autonomous building service locals scattered across the country to a national building service division with a common strategy. The union also lined up contract expiration dates across the country, in recognition of the fact that the building owners and janitorial contractors are themselves organized on a national basis.

When the employers resisted the union's demands in the 2000 contract round, the SEIU was ready. It had spent the entire previous year preparing its membership for a strike, educating them about the economics of the industry and about the strategic options. Even before the strike began in April 2000, the union displayed its strength in a mass rally and a public membership vote rejecting management's most recent offer. What followed was a "rolling strike," with strikers marching in their colorful T-shirts, each day hitting the streets in a different part of sprawling Los Angeles. Local politicians marched alongside the strikers, and some even got arrested for participating in civil disobedience. Other unions as well as the L.A. County Federation of Labor were actively involved as well. The janitors won the hearts and minds of the public, spotlighting the plight of low-wage immigrant workers in a city of enormous – and conspicuously displayed – wealth. Their demand for a \$1 per hour raise seemed eminently reasonable to most Angelenos. Media coverage was highly sympathetic, and even the Catholic church got involved.

The 2000 strike was part of a long-term strategic plan to restore union strength in the building services industry, outflanking the employers and empowering an ever-growing number of janitors. In the supermarket industry,

by contrast, it was the employers who seized the strategic edge. They planned the 2003-04 southern California lockout like a military operation. The UFCW valiantly sought to defend its members' middle-class wages and benefits against this assault, but despite the best of intentions and a huge expenditure of resources, the conflict ended in an ignominious rout. Only after months of traditional picketing, as it became increasingly obvious that the employers would not budge, did the union begin to develop a strategy to exert pressure against the key corporate players through pension funds and other points of leverage. That was when bargaining finally resumed in earnest, but apart from a face-saving provision that

preserved the existing health insurance workers for current workers for two more years, the employers achieved all their goals in the final settlement.

SEIU, and its Justice for Janitors effort in particular, is often seen as an example of "social movement unionism," in large part because of the union's demonstrated ability to mobilize workers on the ground. That perspective is not so much wrong as incomplete. What really

differentiates the recent history of the janitors from that of the grocery workers, and the SEIU from the UFCW, is the strategic orientation of the two unions. The janitors' campaign was firmly predicated on an analysis of the ways in which the world has been transformed over the past quarter-century. As the grocery workers' story sadly illustrates, any union strategy that isn't based on an understanding of that transformation is doomed to failure.

*Ruth Milkman is Professor of Sociology at UCLA. She did her undergraduate work at Brown University and received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She has written many articles and three books: Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation During World War II, which won the 1987 Joan Kelly Prize from the American Historical Association; Japan's California Factories: Labor Relations and Economic Globalization (1991); and Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late 20th Century (1997). She also has published two edited volumes: Women, Work and Protest: A Century of Women's Labor History (1985) and Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California (2000).*

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