

The Best Anti-Poverty Program Needs an Overhaul

By Andrew L. Stern, Service Employees International Union

Meet John Wilson, Alma Hernandez, and Angenita Tanner—the faces of a new union movement that provides the best hope for empowering working families in today’s global economy to lift themselves out of poverty.



Angenita Tanner, a Local 880 shop steward, represents childcare workers in Chicago.

- John Wilson is an African American security guard at a big office building in Los Angeles—one of a million workers in that industry in the U.S. Until recently, most security officers in L.A. made near minimum wage without health benefits, sick leave, or paid vacations. Now, Wilson and more than 5,000 others in L.A. have won recognition of their union, a training fund, and the right to negotiate other improvements. Their campaign relied on the financial and political support of the mostly Latino immigrant janitors union in their city. In addition, they drew on alliances between their union—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—and counterparts in Australia that were able to put pressure on a major Australian bank that owned some of those L.A. buildings, as well as with Scandinavian unions that influenced America’s largest security company, owned by a Swedish multinational corporation.
- Alma Hernandez, an immigrant from Mexico, is one of 5,000 janitors in downtown office buildings in Houston who more than doubled their take-home pay and won their first affordable health coverage after a month-long strike. These Latino workers received crucial support from African American religious leaders, elected officials, and community organizations, while SEIU’s union allies in other countries organized actions to pressure multinational building owners in Italy, Germany, Mexico, and other countries.
- Angenita Tanner is an African American childcare provider in Illinois, one of more than 49,000 who receive payments from the state to care for more than 200,000 low-income children in their homes. For years, providers like Tanner made as little as \$9.48 per day per child without health care and as individuals had no way to negotiate with the state for improvements. Now, they have won the legal right to form a union and have negotiated their first contract, including pay increases, health coverage, and new training opportunities.

These are just a few examples of how unions can continue to be the world's best anti-poverty program—provided that they rapidly adapt to today's economy. The 21st century service economy is as far from the era of the New Deal—when the great industrial unions emerged in the mass production factories of that time—as that era was from the craft and farm economy of the Civil War period. Globalization has produced the greatest wealth gap in history, but also provides a new opportunity to improve the lives of working people around the world, if unions are able to change fast enough to meet that challenge.

Since the labor movement's peak in the 1950s, it has dropped from 33 percent of the workforce to less than 8 percent today in the private sector. The result has been a decline in living standards and opportunity not only for union members but for all working people. In addition, the drop in unionization has contributed to a reduced focus on economic issues in American politics and less support for politicians dedicated to alleviating poverty and rewarding work. In 2004, for example, while regular churchgoers voted for George Bush by a 21-point margin, churchgoers who were union members voted against him by a 12-point margin—a 33-point difference. A similar disparity applies between union and nonunion gun owners, union and nonunion white men, and so on. Unfortunately, though, there just aren't enough union members anymore to decide many elections based on economic issues.

Yet while the union movement as a whole continues to shrink, SEIU has nearly doubled in membership in the past ten years, from one million to nearly two million members. Here are some of the lessons learned from that experience:

A focus on the jobs that can't easily be moved overseas. There are at least 50 million such jobs in industries such as health care, construction, retail sales, hospitality, transportation, property services, and food production and distribution. These industries are the focus of the seven unions that in 2005 left the AFL-CIO to form a new federation, Change to Win, which is dedicated to building a reenergized workers' movement in the service sector.



Andrew Stern, the president of the Service Employees International Union, walking with nursing home workers from Local 4.

New models of organization. Winning the legal right for childcare workers like Angenita Tanner to form a union and win improvements for themselves and the families they serve is just one example of innovative ways to empower the millions of workers who have nontraditional employment situations. Since 1999, about 400,000 home care workers in such states as California, Oregon, Washington, and Michigan have also won that right. Home care workers provide vital services so elderly or disabled people can stay in their homes and communities instead of being housed in institutions. Paid by the state to care for low-income seniors and disabled people, but with no legally recognized “employer,” they traditionally had no way to join with other home care workers to win improvements. By forming unions, they have made it possible for more of them to provide continuity of care to their clients, reducing the high turnover caused by workers having to leave for jobs at places like McDonald’s that have paid more.



New global alliances. As more service jobs are controlled by global corporations, the union movement is learning to become global as well. Recently, unions from Europe and the U.S., along with the nongovernmental organization, War on Want, have joined with counterparts in Africa to expand a campaign to win a global agreement for 500,000 workers employed by Group 4 Securicor, the largest private security corporation in the world and the largest transnational employer

on that continent. A University of Malawi study of Group 4 Securicor guards in three cities in Malawi found that they are barely subsisting on average wages of \$27 per month. At the same time, Union Network International, a global union federation, has coordinated actions on six continents to support organizing by airport janitors and security guards and the kick-off of a campaign to organize hundreds of thousands of security officers in India.

New relationships with employers. Empowering workers to lift themselves out of poverty requires a new ability to partner with employers who are willing to reward work—and hold accountable those who are not. Building on models with Kaiser Permanente and New York’s League of Voluntary Hospitals, more than 19,000 service workers for Catholic Healthcare West, the largest hospital chain in California, mounted a four-year campaign that resulted in a new relationship with management that involves SEIU members in decisions such as staffing levels that greatly affect the quality of care for patients, while providing affordable health care coverage for the workers themselves.

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Innovative approaches on social policy. Some problems are so big that they can't be solved employer by employer. One example is an immigration policy that forces an estimated 11 million people to live in the shadows so that their hard work is not rewarded and pay and benefits are dragged down throughout the economy. Rejecting the exclusionism of many unions in the past, SEIU and unions such as the hotel and restaurant workers have joined with grassroots organizations across the U.S. in sponsoring the huge rallies and marches that have helped shine a spotlight on the need to create a clear path to citizenship for hard-working, taxpaying immigrants.

Another key issue that requires a national solution is health care. As the nation's largest union of health care workers, with one million members in that field, SEIU's strategy has been to help create the political will to finally get our elected leaders to act to ensure quality, affordable care for all, without regard to employment status. Those efforts have included creating Americans for Health Care, the largest grassroots organizing project on the issue, with campaigns to win improvements in 20 states and nearly 500,000 committed "Health Care Voters" signed up across the country. SEIU has also joined with community groups to shine a spotlight on inadequate employee health care coverage at Wal-Mart, which as the world's largest private employer sets standards for the whole economy. At the same time, SEIU has joined in several different coalitions with the leaders of Wal-Mart, AT&T, Intel, Kelly Services, the Business Roundtable, and AARP to call on the nation's elected leadership to act.

There is no one magic solution to empowering the working poor to lift themselves up. For unions and their allies, it will continue to require a combination of innovative approaches and the courage to change. As security officer John Wilson said, "The reality is that we protect lives and multi-million dollar properties, but we go home to our city's most impoverished communities and earn poverty wages. With our union, we now have a clear path to improve our lives and improve our communities."

Andrew L. Stern is president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which with 1.9 million members is the fastest growing union in the U.S., the largest union of health care workers and of property service workers, and the second largest union of public service employees.

