

report of the workgroup on

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

*Adopted by the International Executive Board
June 10, 2001*



Workgroup Process

The Workgroup on Social and Economic Justice was appointed by President Andrew L. Stern at the September 2000 International Executive Board (IEB) meeting. The IEB recognized the need to bring together a cross-section of leaders and activists from across Canada, Puerto Rico, and the United States and is representative of the caucuses and constituencies in the union.

The workgroup, composed of 13 leaders and activists from within the union, was appointed to help set a direction and define the scope of work for a Social and Economic Justice Committee of the SEIU Executive Board.³

More specifically, the work group was asked to do the following:

- Articulate a vision of how social and economic justice work gets integrated into the overall agenda of the union.
- Define standards and accountability for structures in the union that do social and economic justice work.
- Define and clarify the challenges and job of the Social and Economic Justice Committee.
- Propose principles that should guide the committee's work.

The workgroup's discussions were frank and wide-ranging. Every issue raised by any member got a respectful hearing. By the end of our time together, the area of agreement and consensus expanded considerably. This report reflects that consensus.

The biggest and toughest challenge lay in struggling with a vision of how social and economic justice work gets

integrated into the New Strength and Unity Plan.

It was clear from our discussions that finding the right balance will not be easy and there is no fixed formula. Our social and economic environment changes constantly—and the translation of these forces through the expectations of members about their union are also constantly in flux. What we need is not a fixed blueprint—but rather a *framework for conversation* to ensure that our social and economic justice agenda remains relevant to our members and the overall strategy of the union.

It's a discussion that must be ongoing and constantly renewed. When this conversation is robust, healthy, and well informed, then union leaders will be able to arrive at strategic decisions that reflect the best balance at any given time. If this discussion is allowed to become stifled, intermittent or one-sided, then our strategies will be less effective and our members will suffer.

Another charge to the workgroup was to define standards and accountability for structures in the union that do social and economic justice work. While the work of promoting social and economic justice should factor into the decisions of everyone in the union, certain specialized structures have evolved to address these issues. These include the local union Civil and Human Rights Committees, SEIU caucuses, and the AFL-CIO constituency groups.

Because caucuses are under the aegis of SEIU and work with constituency groups aligned with the AFL-CIO, it

³ The Workgroup held two meetings. The first was in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 13-14, 2000, and the second was in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Jan. 22-23, 2001. Workgroup members are listed in Appendix A.

seems reasonable to clarify our expectations from the union's perspective.⁴ This question cannot be answered in isolation from a consideration of the union's overall approach to social and economic justice. Furthermore, it should also be noted that it is not fair to impose either a higher or lower level of expectation on these structures as compared to union-funded structures.

When an area of work is deemed to be of strategic importance to the future of the union, we must ensure ongoing input from the leadership, especially the union's elected leaders. Our workgroup was also asked to think about a future Social and Economic Justice Committee.

This workgroup is intended to be a preparatory step to the creation of just such a committee. What challenges face such a committee? What should be its focus? What are some of the principles that should guide its work? With this report, the union pauses to reflect on our overall framework for social and economic justice. Accordingly, we will also make some recommendations as to what the committee should focus on and how it should go about its work.

What Is Our *Vision* of the Role of Social and Economic Justice Issues In the Life of SEIU?

"Winning for working families" is not just about winning on the job; it is also about winning in our communities and in the larger society. If SEIU has a vision of improving the lives of working families and building a better society, then we must have a mission that includes working on social and economic justice issues.

In the past some have argued—and some still argue today—that too many social justice issues are divisive and undermine the unity of the membership. Because member unity is at the very root of our union's effectiveness, this issue cannot be taken lightly—indeed, the answer is central to our vision of the labor movement.

We believe that the labor movement has always been most successful when it is organizing in the context of a broad social movement. Union rights exist because of social struggles that changed the balance of power in society. There is no way that union members can advance their economic and political interests while the rights of women, people of color or other groups suffering from discrimination are being rolled back. The reverse is also true—the struggles for social and economic justice cannot be fruitful while the labor movement shrinks and grows weaker.

We believe that social and economic justice struggles are the seeds of potential broad-based movements and are essential for SEIU to organize on the scale required to achieve the goals of the New Strength Unity program. When working people are in motion around a social and economic justice issue, it may present an opportunity for SEIU to provide a vehicle and a voice.

We believe that social and economic justice issues can attract unorganized workers and activate and engage organized members. As trade unionists, we tend to view the world through the lens of the employer-employee relationship.

⁴ The SEIU Constitution and Bylaws does not recognize SEIU caucuses as "official" chartered bodies of the union; however, local union Civil and Human Rights Committees are mandated in the SEIU Constitution.

But not every worker sees their vulnerability in those class terms—nor are all of their problems traceable to their employer.

Unions must be able to demonstrate to workers who suffer from some form of discrimination—a group that is, after all, the *majority*—that the union can help them to address their frustrations. And the union must demonstrate its commitment not only in word, but in deed as well.

We believe that where leadership diversity is lacking, the quality of strategic decision-making suffers. Members of groups that have suffered discrimination and social exclusion are understandably sensitive to changes in union policies and programs. Having a leadership and staff that reflect the membership is about ensuring that decisions are made and implemented in ways that members will understand and support.

We believe that social and economic justice issues are key to the union's continued vitality. An organization is strong and vital when it is open to new influences and changing circumstances while preserving its core identity. This is especially important for a union because the constituency we aim to represent—the service workforce—is constantly changing.

We believe that the labor movement needs to lead on these broader issues. The labor movement's near-death experience in the 1994 election was instructive in many ways. Since then, two important, but quite different, political lessons have become clear. The first is that unions must strengthen their relationship with their own members. Despite our minority status, we must be able to demonstrate

to hostile politicians that we can defend ourselves by mobilizing our members and the community to provide the margin of victory or defeat in an election.

We believe that we cannot win the positive changes our members need without building a majority electoral coalition. We are stronger together. Our coalition partners and unions working together are our formula for success. Together we bring organizing experience, dedicated activists, and a broader resource base.

We believe that effective member education programs are a critical component of a social and economic justice strategy. As we all know, every member doesn't view the world the same way. Here, education is critical. Members may disagree strongly about some issues. Otherwise, these issues can be more divisive for the union than they need to be. Sometimes we will need to engage and struggle with our members to unite them around some social and economic justice issues.

We believe that not every issue is of equal value and importance to the union. Some issues demand more intense involvement, others less. The union needs a method to distinguish between those issues that will build the union stronger and those issues that lead to internal divisions.⁵ (We have proposed some criteria that will help.)

Caucuses

A caucus provides a *voice* for a specific group of members who feel that the union's formal governance procedures do not give them an adequate means of expression. SEIU has developed guide-

⁵ The issue of firearm regulation is an example. In our society, this issue has been inflamed by partisan politics. Many of our members feel strongly on both sides of the issue. Both opponents and proponents of firearm regulation are strongly motivated by personal belief. In the 2000 election, labor's opponents used this issue to attempt to undermine our election mobilization effort.

lines to promote caucuses and clarify their role. SEIU presently has two *national* caucuses—the AFRAM and Lavender Caucuses.⁶

We believe that caucuses can make the Union stronger. Caucus leaders know they can't do their job—provide an authentic voice—if they become too dependent on the union. In other words, to speak independently and advocate effectively on important issues, they must be independent.

We should encourage caucus vitality and development because caucuses help the union to become stronger, more unified, and more relevant by advancing issues that are important to members. At their core, caucuses bring issues and concerns of caucus members to the International level. Not only do caucuses help identify problems—they can help find solutions. Caucus leaders should be driven by a desire to make their union stronger and better—not by any desire to weaken or divide it.⁷

We believe that caucuses can help to unite all workers. While a goal of the labor movement is to unite all workers as a class, the specific concerns of groups within the broader class must be addressed for such unity to become a reality. Although social and economic exclusion often has an economic dimension; we must take care that appeals to working class unity are not seen as a way to marginalize the real concerns of groups within the class.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination serve to divide workers and make it harder for

them to see their common interests and work together. But we can't wish those ideas away with simple appeals to "class unity." Only by acknowledging and working through the differences that divide us can we achieve that unity.

We believe that caucuses can advance communication within our Union. Caucuses have an advisory and advocacy role on both internal (to SEIU) and external issues. Internally, they make sure that what must be heard is heard. Externally, they demonstrate SEIU's commitment to the issue and link up with groups outside the union that share their concerns. This external advocacy function is important in organizing and in politics.

Caucuses struggle to put issues at the "center" of SEIU's agenda. Advocacy by caucuses helps to ensure that the agendas of SEIU, State Councils, and local unions should reflect fully and in an up-to-date manner the concerns of our members.

One natural consequence of the advocacy role is a "tension" between the caucuses and the official bodies of the union. This tension can form around both internal and/or external issues that caucus members are "pushing." The issue agenda of caucuses will normally be "ahead" of the union. Furthermore, much of the energy for the work on these issues must come from caucus members.

We believe that social and economic justice issues should not be seen as just the "property" of the caucuses. But the caucuses have a special role in helping make the emerging issues central and to ensure that the concerns expressed are authentic and current. Therefore, SEIU

⁶ See Appendix B for the "Caucus Guidelines" adopted by the International Executive Board regarding their activity.

⁷ The positive role of caucuses can be undermined through involvement in activities that can be construed as interference in the affairs of local unions. SEIU's guidelines discourage such activities.

benefits from caucuses that promote concern and education about emerging issues.

We believe that it is important to respect the caucuses' need for autonomy when considering the increased resource needs that come with "institutionalization". While SEIU can (and must) provide some support to caucuses, the workgroup believes caucuses need to be able to raise most of the resources they need on their own.⁸

If caucuses are to be authentic rank-and-file membership groups, then they must be allowed to come into existence as the support arises—and go out of existence when their support declines. The larger organization should not artificially encourage or prolong the life of any caucus.

SEIU Caucuses—Recommendations

Where caucuses exist, we want them to be vital and have the opportunity to develop. That support for programs consistent with the Union's goals should take the following forms:

- We recommend that caucuses take advantage of opportunities available through SEIU to facilitate the flow of information about their programs and activities and the process for contacting and joining caucuses. This could take the form of notices in *SEIU Action*, or a Web site posting.
- We recommend that SEIU continue to provide support for caucus conferences and other programs. SEIU staff can help provide educational materials and secure presenters. The Social and

Economic Justice Committee should review, on a periodic basis, whether there is a need for additional technical support based upon increased caucus activity.

- We recommend that SEIU affirm the desirability of participation in caucus programs and activities that advance the Union's program. SEIU support for caucus activities should be communicated to leaders and members at union gatherings and through SEIU communication vehicles aimed at the general membership—not only to the caucus members themselves.
- We recommend that each caucus be encouraged to develop specific goals and objectives that advance the New Strength Unity program.
- We recommend that caucuses should be able to apply for a "base" financial resource to *help* support communication and outreach to current and potential caucus members, along with support received from local unions and individual members. The Social and Economic Justice Committee should develop uniform standards for determining both the amounts of resource that is available and the accountability that will be required.
- We recommend that SEIU consider making program resources available based upon contracting for specific activities in support of the Union's program (e.g.—developing a network of translators for the organizing department). There would be accountability for each of these contracts.
- We recommend that SEIU maintain

⁸ SEIU Caucuses do not receive administrative funding from the Union's per capita tax or its equivalent.

