THE PUBLIC SECTOR

SEIU Local 1000 is attacked as being antiunion and antiworker

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Locals of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) revel in attacking public employers for attempting to contain labor costs, especially in connection with retiree health benefits and wages. A recent exposé in the *Sacramento Bee* shows that in a heated battle lasting three years, a major local of the SEIU whose workers are represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) followed the same strategy the SEIU condemns public-sector management for pursuing. (See "The State Worker: When Unions Collide," *Sacramento Bee,* November 17, 2015.)

Unions go head-to-head

The SEIU is the largest union in the United States that represents public-sector workers at all levels of government and schools. All too typically, SEIU locals thrive on fomenting conflict with public-sector management. In our experience, the SEIU's approach to representing its members vis-à-vis public employers is often the antithesis of labor-management cooperation, instead featuring vituperative attacks on management and aggressive and provocative conduct during negotiations whenever management seeks concessions (and even in many cases when management is willing to offer modest wage and benefits increases).

The SEIU's ability to contribute mightily to the campaign coffers of elected officials—enhanced by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United*—gives it added punch in its efforts to undermine public employers' attempts to strike a proper balance between labor costs and funding important public services.

The SEIU's attacks on public employers have reached a zenith when public employers attempt to economize by proposing to reduce retiree health benefit costs or holding the line on wage increases. In rallying the troops on these issues, the SEIU uses derisive propaganda to accuse management of abusing its workers and union busting. In the recently reported matter, the shoe was on the other foot.

SEIU Local 1000 represents 95,000 state workers in California, drawing in tens of millions of dollars annually through dues and agency fees. The union employs 135 administrative and support staff workers to provide services to its members. The SEIU's workers are themselves unionized, represented by the UAW. And therein lay the rub.

For three years, Local 1000 was locked in a battle with its own workers' union over its efforts to both roll back retiree health benefits and contain wage increases. In a classic "hard-bargaining" move, the SEIU unilaterally implemented a package that made modest wage and pension contribution increases but ended its employer match for 401(k) contributions and halted health insurance benefits for retirees and their dependents. In lieu of continuing its retiree health benefits program, the union imposed a policy of paying $600 monthly in retiree medical costs until employees became eligible for Medicare, with no coverage for dependents.

Representing SEIU workers, the UAW cried foul repeatedly, with the UAW president pointing out Local 1000's evident hypocrisy. In the final analysis, however, the unions resolved their differences, perhaps leading the way to the sort of enhanced labor-management relationship that often eludes public employers in their dealings with the SEIU.

Bottom line

Over the past 10 years, the SEIU has changed dramatically. It has substantially restructured its operations, consolidating a diffuse group of union locals into larger, more manageable parts, imposing centralized oversight, reducing its own labor costs, and engaging in a high degree of bloodletting vis-à-vis its field representatives. The union's efforts were viewed critically by the labor movement as being akin to the sort of cutthroat mergers of corporate America. They have also led to the SEIU becoming a far less effective organization in many key areas like San Francisco and to widespread reports of member dissatisfaction.

The SEIU's long-term strategic priority is to increase the number of new members in public-sector workplaces. In that strategic endeavor, the union makes no secret (really!) of its preference for youthful organizers. Hence, the SEIU doesn't see retiree health benefits as part of any relevant recruitment or retention plan for its own employees. That is in direct contrast with public-sector employers' goals of affording job security and promoting retention.

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