

## **GROWTH OF A MODERN UNION LOCAL: A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF SEIU LOCAL 880**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the growth of one of the fastest-growing union locals in North America, the Services Employees International Union Local 880 in Chicago. As union membership has declined nationally, Local 880 has achieved exponential growth over the last twenty five years by being among the first to organize extremely low wage home based child care and home care workers. The article highlights the tenets of the local's organizing philosophy, including community organizing and political activism, as well as other strategies and tactics 880 has utilized in growing its membership to more than 65,000 members. Along the way, it has secured notable victories on behalf of its members, including winning the largest organizing campaign of home childcare workers in U.S. history.

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**T**he day Chicago police arrested Armean Allen turned out to be a pivotal one in the history of one of America's fastest-growing union locals. An 80 year old home care worker from Chicago's Southside, Allen and five other SEIU 880 members were arrested for singing in the lobby of the State of Illinois building. It was June 12, 2002 and Allen, along with 150 fellow SEIU members and community allies from Illinois ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) and Chicago's disability community, had come to the state office building to protest \$50 million in cuts to Illinois' homecare program and draw attention to the low-wages and lack of health insurance faced by Allen and tens of thousands of homecare workers just like her.

A year and a month later Allen was back. On July 15th, 2003, newly-elected Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Illinois' first Democratic governor in nearly 30 years, welcomed Allen and the other members of the "Stop the Cuts Six" into his office a few feet from where the octogenarian and her fellow union members had been arrested. On that day, Blagojevich became the first U.S. governor to recognize the right of homecare workers to form a union and collectively bargain

by signing legislation creating bargaining rights for more than 20,000 homecare workers.

From the jail house to the governor's house in 13 months, Allen's story helps explain how a scrappy union local that started as an offshoot of a community organizing group in 1983 became the largest union local in the mid-western United States. Today, Local 880 counts more than 65,000 members, most of who work in separate locations, with no common employer and no coverage under existing labour laws. Local 880 continues to grow by organizing these invisible actors in the increasingly homecare driven U.S. health care system, as well as another group off the radar of many traditional unions – home based childcare workers. Local 880's story is illustrative of how the 1.9 million-member SEIU International has grown to be one of the most powerful unions in North America.

From arrests to elections to grassroots organizing, a combination of ground level community organizing, constant political participation and a range of creative organizing strategies have propelled 880 from its hardscrabble roots into the fifth largest local of the fastest-growing union in North America.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO LOCAL 880**

SEIU Local 880 was an outgrowth of the national community organization ACORN. At its founding in 1970 in Little Rock, ACORN organized low-income people into membership based groups at the neighborhood level. The organizing model required people to pay dues upon joining for the right to participate and vote on group decisions.

In 1978, the ACORN National Board founded the United Labour Unions (ULU), and developed an organizing model similar to ACORN's. The ULU's express purpose was to organize low-wage workers that traditional unions would or could not organize.

Between 1978 through 1983, five locals were chartered by the ULU's National Board, including Local 880 in Chicago. ULU started out organizing employees of school bus companies, but moved into organizing homecare agencies because other AFL unions were actively organizing (and fighting) over the non-union bus drivers. In Chicago, 880 started to organize homecare workers in the private homecare industry before expanding to organize homecare workers directly reimbursed by the state.

At its height, ULU numbered no more than 20-30 organizers nationally. Many present-day labour organizers cut their teeth with ULU. Although bold and aggressive, it lacked the resources to become a self-sufficient national union. But ULU had been noticed by many international unions for its plucky determination and its ability to mobilize workers many thought unorganizable. ULU had been approached by a variety of international unions wanting to

affiliate. But until SEIU knocked on the door in 1984, the ULU chose to remain independent. SEIU was different. The international union brought resources (in the form of organizing subsidies for the local operations, legal assistance, political assistance, etc.), and a healthy measure of local autonomy for its locals. SEIU also shared a commitment to “organize the unorganized” under its then newly-elected national president John Sweeney, the man who later ran a successful insurgent campaign to take over the leadership of the AFL-CIO. By the time Local 880 affiliated with SEIU, homecare organizing in Chicago was proceeding at a quick pace.

### **LOCAL 880’S ROOTS: COMMUNITY ORGANIZING HOMECARE WORKERS**

Prior to the 1970s, the homecare “industry” in the U.S. was relatively unknown, a polyglot mix of private-pay homecare workers, who laboured for upper income families. The modern homecare industry grew with the expansion of homecare “waivers” the federal/state-run Medicaid health care program approved in many states by the early 1980s. The waivers allowed state Medicaid programs to save money on the long-term care of seniors and people with disabilities, allowing people without severe medical or post-acute care needs to leave nursing homes and stay in their homes. In moving to homecare, many politicians saw an opportunity to cut costs and set-up a system that relied almost entirely on home healthcare workers paid a poverty wage and living without healthcare benefits themselves.

When we started organizing in 1983, the homecare industry was among the lowest paying jobs in Illinois. The nearly all female workforce helped older and disabled individuals remain independent by offering custodial services, including cooking, bathing and other activities of daily living, as well as certain assistive health services. McMaid, a regional for profit home care company, was then one of the largest agencies in Chicago. McMaid’s wages and benefit package was typical of the industry: workers were paid \$3.35 per hour with no benefits and no path for advancement.

Two main homecare services delivery models were prevalent under Medicaid: 1) the Independent Provider (IP) or Personal Assistant (PA) model had the state acting as payroll agent to homecare workers hired by Medicaid recipients: and 2) a private-sector model, whereby the state or county subcontracted homecare services to private companies, which bid on the work, then hired, trained and assigned workers to provide services to the consumer. In Illinois, the system primarily was funded under a “competitively bid” process by the state Department on Aging. For-profit and non-profit agencies of all sizes would bid to provide services to low-income seniors under the program. The trick was to bid enough beneath the department’s \$5.90 per hour ceiling for

chores and \$6.40 for homemaking, in order to win the contract but still preserve a healthy profit margin on the contract.

Prior to 1983, only a handful of union locals were involved in homecare worker organizing, typically on a small scale. Local 880 was determined to change that. With paltry reimbursement rates, the industry was constantly in flux. Turnover in the program was rampant as companies and non-profits constantly underbid each other to get the state's business.

The obvious question for us in 1983: where do you start as a small, independent union with no members, few staff and resources to change a large and growing mix of players in the homecare industry? We opted to go "metro" after all of the contractors, both for-profit and non-profit, in order to organize the whole industry. This would provide us the strength to raise wages and benefits through direct action, legislative campaigns and political muscle in an industry where a strike was not an effective weapon.

We narrowed our organizing targets by focusing on where we had better access to workers - mainly companies that held weekly or bimonthly cheque pickups at the company's offices. In cases where workers' cheques were mailed we would try other things like going to the company's in-service training or to the senior buildings themselves to build up a list of workers in the unit. "Dumpster diving" became a time honored tool for list building. We spent a lot of time rummaging through dumpsters at all hours of the day or night frantically looking for that golden nugget: an intact employee list.

With our first target, Mc Maid, we used all of these tactics and more. We departed from the National Labour Relations Board organizing model used by many unions and pursued an organizing model more rooted in our experience as community organizers. Organizers made initial contact with workers right on the street in front of the agency, as workers came in to pick up their cheques, drop off their hours, or attend in-service training. Workers were asked to sign up right then and there and most did. Follow-up house visits were then done to identify leaders, collect dues and inoculate card signers against the anti-union push-back tactics of their companies were likely to employ. Over time workers would then help get other workers to sign up as well. An organizing committee meeting was held the following weekend and the campaign timeline mapped out, with leaders taking responsibility to run a "recognition action," during which the organizing committee and workers would walk in on the boss on cheque pick-up day and demand he recognize the union.

The first part of the campaign went well, but Mc Maid pushed back quickly with a harsh letter to the workers and attempted to cancel the cheque pickup to deter contact between workers and organizers and among the workers themselves. Worse, the company presented the NLRB board agent with a list stacked with former workers, phony names and addresses meant to frustrate our attempts to contact and recruit a majority of the current workforce. We pushed

back at the NLRB and worked out a formula that limited the election to only the most recent employees. To collecting the cards we needed and hold onto our majority, we relied on our community-organizing background. In some case we went door-to-door identifying workers in the projects where we had only building addresses but no apartment numbers.

The election was held eight weeks later and despite minus-60 degree wind chill, we had folks handing out flyers and talking union as people went in to vote. With a little more than 200 workers in the unit, we won by a solid 107-76 vote. At the time we didn't know it, but this was the first win in a 20-year fight to organize America's homecare industry – a fight which would eventually lead to tens of thousands of new union members in Illinois and hundreds of thousands across the country. After McMaid, members of Local 880 pushed on, using a combination of union strategies, tactics from the community-organizing playbook, as well as guerilla tactics that included sending busloads of members to the home of owners and managers of homecare companies in our sites.

While Local 880's campaign against McMaid was unique for its time, it came about at a moment in American labour history where unions like SEIU were returning to the direct action models of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Added into the mix were the lessons of the civil rights movement and the lessons of community organizing that influenced so many of our early organizers.

Just as direct action and community organizing tactics shaped our approach to homecare, SEIU began a nationwide effort to unionize and raise standards in the building service industry. Justice for Janitors was not a typical union drive. Like our homecare campaign, it was a movement that sought to force employers to capitulate and transform an industry borrowing from the best of the 1920's and 30's with the lessons of the late 60's and early 70's.

Both campaigns used direct action to bring pressure and build leverage not just against the employer but secondary targets – government agencies that contracted with homecare companies and landlords that hired out building services work.

Both campaigns relied on living wage campaigns to add a public moral aspect to the fight which engaged allies and transformed a story of labour conflict into an extension of the civil rights struggle for two work forces composed overwhelmingly of low-income people of color. Both campaigns brought labour back to its roots and closer to the struggles of the civil rights movement. Both campaigns became fights about poverty and race and justice and inflicted a degree of reputational damage on primary and secondary targets of a wholly different nature than typical labour-management fights at that point in America's history.

## Opening DORS

By the mid-1980s, as we were stretching the budget to the limit and moving from one private drive to another, we kept hearing about an employer called DORS, only to discover it was the state 's Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS). Through DORS, the State of Illinois contracted with more than 2,000 personal care attendant (PCA) workers. DORS provided homecare services to thousands of people with disabilities. Here was a totally separate state agency whose workforce equaled the size of all the private Illinois Department of Aging vendors put together. We immediately got the list of PCA, started house visits and began to experiment with using direct-mail to contact workers in their homes about the union.

The model concentrated on house visits to homecare workers, while simultaneously sending mailings to and calling thousands of workers. As a result, we collected cards much faster and contacted many more workers. We also held regional meetings of homecare workers throughout the city, building up an organization. It was at these meetings, run by homecare workers identified through the organizing drive, that we built the culture of the organization.

Meetings were run by members, dues were collected on the spot, while members signed up to house visit other members, man volunteer phone banks, contact workers at other non-union companies or signed up for other political or campaign work. At the regional meetings, members elected volunteer stewards, and all attended a monthly area-wide organizing committee of workers from union and non-union companies in various stages of organizing drives. Officers elected at these meetings served on a local Executive Board that met, discussed, and approved the policy and program for the union. This model let members know this was their organization, one that would allow them to fight to win recognition and ultimately higher wages, benefits and respect.

The direct action model led to one of our first economic victories in 1984 when the state struck down the practice of paying PAs a \$1 per hour "supervisory" rate, instead of the \$3.35 per hour minimum wage. The lower "supervisory" rate was paid for the time workers spent running errands for clients, taking them to doctor appointments or not performing what the state considered "real tasks". As a result, many workers would tally 100 hours per month at the then-minimum wage of \$3.35 per hour, and another 20-30 hours at \$1 per hour. Our campaign forced the state to nix the \$1 per hour and paid all future hours at the "straight time" of \$3.50.

Once we had built the organization and had collected enough cards to file for an election under the new state collective bargaining act, we took two busloads of workers in March 1985 to the DORS offices in the state capitol in Springfield to demand recognition. We had two other targets that day: the governor's office, just blocks from DORS, and the offices of the newly-appointed

State Labour Relations Board. Besides filing for an election, we also wanted to highlight the workers' low wages and lack of benefits and garner media coverage to pressure the governor.

It was the first time we had taken a recognition action on a target so big. Arriving at the DORS offices, we unloaded the buses, designated leaders, seized the front doors and marched, singing and chanting, into the offices of the department secretary. He was not there, but our members presented a box of signed cards as proof of our majority support. We had served notice on the department that we were organized and would not stop until we won our union. Next was the governor, who was an ally of SEIU. We did a short sit-in to dramatize our right to organize and the low wages and benefits homecare workers were paid and held a quick press conference. Then we marched onto the State Labour Board offices and sat down singing and chanting until an agent came out to accept our cards.

This action was one of our first as the newest affiliate of SEIU, and it ruffled feathers. The governor called SEIU's Illinois state council leader, and in exchange for agreeing to no further surprise actions at his office, we won reforms in the homecare system. The governor, for example, set up a Commission on Homecare that revolutionized the IDOA Community Care Program. Local 880 won two seats on the commission and fought for reforms that stopped the competitive bidding process. Instead of competitive bidding that drove wages to the bottom, the state began to set the rate at a fixed amount, and had agencies compete on the quality of service rather than on low-bids that pushed down wage and prevented companies from providing benefits. The state rate increased from \$5.90 in 1986 to \$13.62. These reforms led to regular rate increases which translated into improved wages and benefits. Because of our prodding, the state required companies to pay 73 percent of the rate to workers. We used this during other organizing drives and negotiations as leverage to win wage increases and benefits. 880 also won seats on the IDOA's Community Care Program Policy Advisory Committee and was able to exert pressure from within and without to impact policies that impact our members.

But recognition for the DORS workers was not so easily won. The State Labour Board decided that because the worker was directed by the client/consumer on many of the day-to-day supervisory tasks, the state was merely a "co-employer" of the worker, thus the worker was not afforded the protections and collective bargaining rights of the State Labour Act—a totally spurious argument, but one that stood for years. Still, the actions on that March day were part of the first steps in a 20-year organizing drive to be recognized by the state.

In the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, the local saw both wins and losses, but overall continued to push forward increasing membership and building an organization. Besides collecting membership dues, we raised money in various

grassroots fundraising events like raffles, selling dinners, holiday parties, canvassing and tag days helped keep the lights on when the International subsidies and other external funds were low. Our ability to adapt grassroots fundraising techniques to a union setting allowed us to survive these very lean years.

While the legal route for DORS recognition did not work for us, and decided to go another route – minority unionism – rather than just disappear. We would organize with a minority of workers and build and maintain an organization. In other words, we acted like a union, even if we did not have formal union recognition or a contract. That attitude was essential to our growth and victory. We continued to do what unions do, building our own culture of membership dues, regular meetings, direct action, events and parties, leadership trainings, and community and political campaigns. All of this allowed us to grow until we were strong enough to win an election, pass legislation to win raises and eventually pass legislation giving us collective bargaining rights.

At the same time we continued to ramp up our political organizing. Local 880 and Illinois ACORN members worked together to fight for better conditions in public housing, improved mass transit and funds for heating assistance. These fights kept our members engaged, put the union at the center of their daily struggles and helped to transform us into a bigger political force. Through our coalition and political work we were able to build our first organization outside of Chicago – 300 miles southwest in East St. Louis. Working with local organizers on political fights introduced us to the community and allowed us to build a strong organization there.

### **PLAYING POLITICS: ANOTHER ESSENTIAL STRATEGY IN 880'S SUCCESS**

We kept up the pressure for change locally and in Springfield through the 1980s and 1990s. While the labour movement was bleeding members, we fought to grow by continuing to build our political operation. Without collective bargaining rights for DORS homecare workers, we sought to play politics on the inside and the outside to win a chance in state law. On the inside, we worked the legislative process to pass a bill, while on the outside we continued to engage in hard hitting direct action against state bureaucrats, legislators and other leverage points.

This kind of inside – outside strategy: the pursuit of legislative aims while engaging in direct action was really a back-to-the-future moment for the labour movement. The first decades of the twentieth century are ripe with stories of teachers unions primarily, and later SEIU and AFSCME using legislative and political action coupled with direct action and majority unionism to lift standards in advance of formal recognition by public employers.

For 880, our first major legislative effort was a campaign to pass a state “Homecare Workers’ Bill of Rights”. The Bill of Rights was formulated at monthly membership meetings around the city and presented to state elected officials at follow-up accountability sessions. Representatives were asked to attend, listen to our demands and sign on to support the Bill of Rights. Even though the state refused to recognize us, we were able to win raises by forcing lawmakers to recognize us as a union.

The legislative process enforced its own discipline on our organizing and forced our staff and leadership to learn how to pass legislation in order to receive a raise. 880 organizers and leaders also added another twist: injecting direct action at crucial points in the process. We knew a little targeted direct action could go a long way toward achieving our goals. For example, when one legislator refused to attend one of our regional Homecare Bill of Rights meetings, we took the meeting to the representative’s home, with the press in tow. The lawmaker was not home, but we posted the Bill of Rights on his door for him to see. Afterward, he met with our local leaders, agreeing to sponsor our legislation. Instead of being at the mercy of a legislative process designed to make one feel powerless, we had learned to use the process to flex and wield membership power.

It was during the Bill of Rights campaign in 1987-88 when we got the state to stop the \$1 per hour “supervisory pay” in lieu of DORS workers’ regular rate. In the succeeding years, rate increases were won using similar inside-and-outside tactics on behalf of workers at DORS and those employed in the private sector. Local 880 also won a limited form of collective bargaining in 1990 when then Gov. Jim Thompson signed a short three-page “meet and confer” agreement we negotiated. The agreement allowed members to “cheque off” their union dues from their payroll voucher; it was not a union shop, where everyone had to join the union as a condition of employment, but it was a start. By granting limited recognition and cheque off, we now had a way to build up our union membership over the next four years, until we were strong enough to demand direct union recognition. We also increased our legislative capacity and hired our first lobbyist during this period.

The agreement gave us the first foothold we needed to seriously ramp up our membership at DORS. Now, instead of having to rely on unsteady dues payments and other grassroots fundraisers, we had automatic payroll cheque off, making dues payment more reliable and far easier. As a result, we could build a more sustainable direct action organization. With the “meet and confer” firmly in hand, the International now stepped, in offering increased organizing resources with which to hire the staff. As a result, we increased membership in the unit from 1,218 in December 1990 to 3,132 in December 1991—a 250-plus percent increase. We went from only a handful of organizers on the street to ten organizers, and opened offices in St. Louis, East St. Louis, and the Quad Cities.

We improved our mailing and telemarketing operations and soon had both a professional and volunteer phone bank. Between December 1990 and September 1994, we estimate SEIU Local 880 staff and member volunteers knocked on 50,000 doors, signed up over 10,000 new members on dues authorization cards, and ended up with over 5,000 net new members, in a unit that nearly counted 10,000.

SEIU 880 had been involved in political action since its 1983 founding, from running phone banks with labour and community allies to get out the vote, to conducting voter registration and door-to-door campaigns. Each campaign helped to build and cement important relationships. One example: Local 880 and Illinois ACORN joined forces with a newly-invigorated voter registration group, Project Vote, run by former community organizer (and current Democratic presidential candidate and U.S. Senator) Barack Obama, to bring other community groups under the Project Vote umbrella and move a large-scale voter registration program for U.S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun.

Meanwhile, Illinois ACORN and Local 880 members won unprecedented wins on local school council positions in 1988. In 1992, the SEIU Local 880 board voted to form the SEIU Local 880 Political Action Committee (PAC), which makes donations to political candidates or issue campaigns that help Local 880 members and their communities. The fund is overseen and run by Local 880 members who served on the PAC. In 1993 and 1994, we decided to get involved more directly in politics by running "one of our own" for state representative. In the early 90s, 880 and Illinois ACORN joined with other community, labour and political organizations to start the experimental New Party, a serious effort by political organizers nationally and in thirteen states to create a third party as an alternative to the existing Democratic and Republican parties. The New Party's successes were many: electing over 200 progressive candidates across the country to public office and working on progressive issue campaigns, such as living wage, anti-sprawl, rent control and others, before a U.S. Supreme Court ruling and lack of major funding led to its demise.

Local 880's involvement in the political process also helped deliver a real union contract with a "Fair Share agreement," with then Gov. Jim Edgar's support. Fair Share allowed a worker to become a member and pay union dues through a payroll deduction, or remain a non-member and pay a "fair share" fee to help support the union and win future wage and benefit improvements. The Fair Share win allowed us to grow from a mid-sized local to a large one with more than 10,000 members. Growth was so steady that when 880 was recognized at the SEIU International Convention in April 1996 as one of its fastest-growing locals we had 12,000-plus members. We also broke new ground: Local 880 was the first union to win direct recognition on a homecare unit from a state government in the U. S., and our continued organizing and negotiating efforts with private companies got one of the nation's largest homecare temporary

worker firms, Interim, to pay for workers' time traveling on errands or doctors visits on behalf of client. This became a model for future contract and organizing fights.

On the DORS front, we saw wage increases, kept up with displays of direct actions, including "Homecare Worker for a Day" campaign that had lawmakers doing the work of homecare workers for a day, and faced setbacks. By the mid-1990s, Local 880 had enough authorization cards to be recognized as a union and negotiate a real collective bargaining agreement. However, the governor refused to negotiate, so we set about finding a governor who would recognize the workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain.

Things broke our way when in 2001, then Gov. George Ryan, plagued by federal investigations, announced he would not seek reelection. One candidate, Congressman Rod Blagojevich, stood out to us. Local 880's connections to Blagojevich went back to the early 90s, when we supported him in his first run for state representative from the northwest side. In 1996, 880 members and staff worked on his race to overthrow Republican Michael Flanagan. Blagojevich was elected governor with support from 880 members.

In February 2003, one month after his inauguration, Blagojevich signed Executive Order 2003-8, granting the more than 20,000 personal assistants employed by the state the right to organize and bargain collectively over wages, hours and working conditions. With this stroke of a pen, homecare workers realized their biggest success. Most importantly, Blagojevich also supported and signed HB 2221, which codified his executive order. With that, the governor ordered his labour relations staff to sit down and bargain in good faith with SEIU Local 880. Within three months, a new agreement was approved, granting a 34 percent wage increase over four years—from \$7 to \$9.35 per hour—back pay, unemployment coverage, a real grievance procedure, a Fair Share union security agreement and more.

Just this winter, we won significant victories on the health coverage front for both private homecare and public homecare workers. Through a combination of legislative maneuvering and collective bargaining, \$55 million from the state will start to flow towards a union health care fund that will provide DORS workers and private sector home health aides with a health plan for the first time. The legislation includes language that creates funding incentives for homecare agencies to agree to collective bargain.

This victory couldn't have happened if we hadn't fought in 2006 to pass America's first living wage law for big box retail stores. Nine city aldermen, who voted against the city council proposal, were targeted by SEIU and Big Box coalition partners for defeat. We crafted a message, "You vote no, you've got to go." We won the day, as all nine were ousted. That kind of effort put the Illinois Legislature on notice when we took our campaign for healthcare for homecare workers to Springfield last year.

The support of the International Union and the SEIU Illinois State Council were essential in helping us move public policy to win organizing rights and victories at the bargaining table. At the same time, SEIU and our State Council would not have been able to move their own political agenda without locals like 880 producing. That is the philosophy of the new SEIU: the locals drive the organizing and the politics in coordination with the International and state council. In the case of Local 880, the organizing came first and drove the politics. If we did not have members organized on the street every year winning recognition in the private and public sectors, doing actions against targets, meeting one-on-one and in group settings with political leaders, marching en masse into the state capitol, and organizing around community issues, we would have dried up and blown away a long time ago. Such actions allowed us to be taken seriously in the rough and tumble of Chicago politics.

### **GROWTH OPPORTUNITY: EXPANDING TO CHILDCARE WORKERS**

In the mid-1990s, Local 880 was continuing to look for opportunities to organize low-income caregivers. While so much of our work had focused on caregivers for seniors and the disabled, home based childcare was emerging as a massive source of employment for many people in 880 neighborhoods. Like “independent” homecare workers, childcare providers received their cheques from the state. Childcare providers received a daily rate per child, which varied by region and a child’s age. In reality, these workers were totally dependent on the state for their income, hours and working conditions. They received no support except for the monthly subsidy cheque from the state, often way too little and many times too late.

After years of organizing, homecare workers now had their federal and state income taxes deducted and were covered under minimum wage laws, but childcare providers had none of these taxes deducted, could not depend on Social Security for their retirement, and were ineligible for the minimum wage. In fact, many were paid well below the minimum wage once overtime was figured in. Childcare providers were divided into “licensed” providers, who could have up to sixteen children and were highly trained and regulated, and “license-exempt,” which were limited to three children and were not as highly trained or regulated.

Angenita Tanner’s story was typical of what childcare providers were up against. In 1996, Tanner was one of our first childcare providers to sign up. She had earned a degree in early childhood education, but kept missing work as an employee in the Chicago Public Schools. The reason: one of her own kids had chronic ear infections, so Tanner had to constantly take work off to care for her daughter. That led her to get into home childcare. She could care for her own child and make a living caring for other kids. From her savings, Tanner paid for

all of the expenses of starting her home childcare, which included caring for seven children, most subsidized by the state. After six months, she still had not received a cheque from the state. She was nearly broke. That's what inspired Tanner to join the union.

The ranks of childcare providers were about to explode. The state of Illinois greatly expanded both licensed and license-exempt home childcare through the late 1990s after President Clinton bowed to the Republican Congress and signed a sweeping federal welfare "reform" law with stringent work requirements that forced many recipients into the workforce. Most states, including Illinois, moved a portion of what had been their welfare budgets into subsidized childcare to accommodate these changes. With former welfare mothers returning to the workforce with access to state-subsidized childcare, the ranks of home childcare providers grew quickly. To labour leaders who worked with a moderate-income constituency, home childcare was not even on the map. The workforce was poor, almost entirely female and of color. There was no real employer, boss or traditional workplace. It all sound very much like our organizing campaigns of the previous decade in homecare. So we got to work.

Our childcare organizing drive began in the summer of 1996, with one Local 880 organizer and interns. We obtained a list from the state with more 10,000 licensed home childcare providers on it, estimating about 5,000 were current. At our annual lobby day we met with state officials and pushed them to do better on delivering childcare cheques on time. We were able to resolve hundreds of grievances about late payment by getting involved in the fight.

Childcare workers were fired up and ready to organize. They were highly motivated and extremely active in the campaign. After pushing to resolve the issue of late payment, we came together with child care advocates to push through a rate increase for both licensed and license-exempt providers. In early 1999 the newly-elected Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, under pressure from Local 880 childcare providers and advocates, raised licensed reimbursement rates in Illinois by a whopping 50% (from an average of only \$13 per day per child for Chicago-area licensed providers, to \$18-21 per day per child), one of the largest rate increases in Illinois history. License-exempt providers received a nominal raise.

Providers were ecstatic. We had won the highest rate increases ever in the history of the program, positioned ourselves as key players in early childcare reform in Illinois, and used the victory to solidify our support amongst childcare providers. Increasing membership and turnout brought more victories, and in 2000 we won an informal grievance system through which childcare providers could get their problem with the state addressed more formally. We coupled such creative actions with political campaigns, such as "Home Childcare Provider for a Day, which had elected officials spend a day as a home children care provider in their districts. Meanwhile, the media coverage came easily.

These actions and subsequent joint work on legislative and issue campaigns like rate increases and healthcare for childcare workers helped set the stage for a historic win. On Feb. 17, 2005, Governor Blagojevich, true to his word, signed the Executive Order granting the 50,000 home childcare providers the right to organize and bargain collectively over wages, hours and working conditions. It led to the largest childcare election ever in U.S. history and the largest union election in Illinois' history.

In our first contract childcare providers won an average 35 percent pay raise, health insurance in the contract's third year, as well as pay incentives for training. More importantly, we blazed a national trail that is quickly becoming a model in other states for organizing independently contracted childcare providers. By adapting its unique community-labour organizing model developed over years of struggle, Local 880 was able to win recognition for tens of thousands of workers that had been written off as unorganizable.

## CONCLUSION

There is an old saw in our trade: you're either busy organizing or you're busy dying. If you stop organizing, growing and gaining new members, you inevitably start to wither and die. We have seen this with the labour movement. In the mid-1950s, more than one in every three workers were in a union; today, barely one in eight is in a union. At some point in its history, organizing was no longer a priority, and improving the contract for the present members became the priority. We have shown that you can do both, and that in many ways, you can't do one without the other. If we had stopped organizing once we won our first contract at McMaid in 1985, we would not be here today. If we had stopped organizing in 1994, when we won our first DHS contract, we would not be here today. And likewise, if we stop organizing today, we will not be here in another twenty years.

Today, we have 69,000 members – 35,000 private- and public-sector home care workers, 34,000 childcare workers. And we're continuing change so that we can adapt to rapidly changing organizing challenges.

The community organizing and majority unionism techniques borrowed from the earliest days of labour history coupled with the lessons and legacy of the civil rights movement that shaped Local 880 has been exported to SEIU locals across the United States. Our model has helped our international union organize more than half a million new childcare and homecare workers in the past decade. Once a workforce that people thought you couldn't organize, homecare and childcare workers are among the fastest growing sectors of our union. And as we grow, we are winning living wages, health insurance and benefits that had for decades been unheard of in the industry.

Recently we decided to change again. With the goal of increased bargaining power and organizational strength, the members of our union and the members of SEIU Locals 4 and 20 voted in April to unite and form SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana-- a 90,000-member union representing hospital, long-term care and child care workers in two states. Together, the new union will be the largest in Illinois – with more than half of its membership in Cook County. The health care and long-term care industries continue to consolidate. To meet that challenge, we believe we need the combined strength of these three unions to amplify the voice of our collective membership and continue to win concrete victories.

The new union follows the June 2007 formation of SEIU Healthcare, a nationwide initiative of SEIU that brought more than one million healthcare workers in separate locals across the country under one umbrella in the international union.

SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana will fight for improved care delivery throughout the health care and child care industries, and will work to improve conditions for caregivers.

Over the past decade, the three locals that will make up our new union have set national standards for nursing home and child care workers, organized doctors to have a stronger voice in patient care and begun the long march to lift home care workers out of poverty.

Our new union will continue to focus on the Armean Allen's of this world and will leverage our combined strength to organize the half a million caregivers in Illinois and Indiana who are not yet union members. As we go forward together as a new union, SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana, we will continue the fight to raise standards and ensure that every family in Illinois and Indiana has access to quality care.