

## Union Organizing among Low-Wage Suburban Immigrants

by Niev Duffy

As the fraction of workers unionized has continued falling in recent years, the immigrant share of the work force has steadily risen, creating both new challenges and new opportunities. One union that has built a remarkable record of successfully organizing new immigrant workers is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), now the largest union in the United States. One of SEIU's most widely celebrated campaigns has been "Justice for Janitors," whose early organizing successes in California were dramatized in the recent film "Bread and Roses." In April 2001, the first "Justice for Janitors" campaigns were launched on the East Coast. SEIU Local 32BJ now represents over 70,000 building cleaners, maintenance workers, doormen, and other service employees. Its ambitious goal is to pursue a novel region-wide strategy to organize the entire industry of over 15,000 nonunion building service workers in the New York metropolitan area.

Shirley Aldebol is Long Island Campaign Coordinator of Local 32BJ. Raised in the Bronx by Puerto Rican parents, she first worked in the public sector in New York City as a public assistance caseworker. She became active in her local, the Social Service Employees Union (part of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFSCME) as a shop steward, but eventually rose to become executive vice president in 1995. Over the next two years, she worked in Puerto Rico to help put together a grass-roots worker campaign to back a new law ensuring collective bargaining rights for public employees. Once the new law was successfully passed, she returned to New York to lead AFSCME's regional "Change to Organize" program on the East Coast. One year ago, she moved to her current position at SEIU. She was interviewed in June at Local 32BJ's headquarters in lower Manhattan.

### Q: How did you become a union organizer?

SA: My mother, later in life, was in a union, but she did mostly work that was nonunion all the time I was growing up. She worked in a factory; as a seamstress. She worked in a restaurant -- all kinds of odd jobs. She really wasn't in a union until after I was in union. So I don't have a union background,

in terms of my family. My mother did a lot of community organizing. She organized tenant rent strikes and stuff like that. So I guess organizing is in my blood, but not necessarily union organizing. When we were little kids, she used to take us door knocking to talk to the tenants and tell them that we had to stop paying the rent because the landlord wasn't doing what he was supposed to do. And, in the South Bronx at the time, they were just letting buildings deteriorate or they would burn them down, just to collect on insurance. My mother was trying to organize the buildings and the tenants on her own time -- like she had so much time to do it! So I guess that's where I get my desire to organize people.

I got involved with the union because I just saw that there were things that were not right in the workplace or in the way workers were treated. And so I organized my old workplace. Even though we were in the union, I organized the workers in my building and we would do stuff like sit-ins in the director's office. We worked for [the New York City Agency of ] Child Welfare and we were in situations where we were sent to investigate dangerous cases on our own and we would ask for a partner and they would deny us an escort or a partner and we'd all go: "We're just not going." So we had to organize folks around those issues. The public sector's different, 'cause you organize around policy as opposed to wages and stuff like that.

### Q: What kind of training do organizers get?

SA: I got no training when I was an organizer. I was sent to the field and they said, "Go organize these workers." And so, I guess, after I had been organizing for a while, they decided, "Hey, we should have some formal organizer training." I would call folks to say, "You're an organizer, right? What do I do about the situation?" I had some good mentors who helped me along the way and you'd learn by making mistakes and trial and error? At least that's how I learned. I did not learn organizing in the classroom. I learned it by just being out there, talking to workers, making mistakes and just trying to figure it out.

**Q: What would you say to youth today who are considering becoming organizers?**

SA: I guess there's probably a more formal practice that young people would go through if they were coming out of college and looking for a job as an organizer. At least 32BJ and a lot of other unions are focused on organizing and want to do it and want to do it better and want to invest in it. I think they are investing more in training organizers and recruiting people and young people. This is young people's work. I don't know if I can continue to do it any more! But I think there's more formal training and there's a lot of opportunity to organize. I mean, there's a lot of work to be done. It's hard work. You have to really, really be committed to it. It's almost a mission. It's not like any other job that you can have. It really isn't. It's kind of hard to describe.

**Q: For a young person who's interested in going into organizing, would you suggest that they pick a union that already has a good training program? Or should they be more interested in the specific organizing drive itself in a particular sector of the economy?**

SA: Well, again, I think it kind of goes hand in hand. We and other unions are organizing by industry, so if you're interested in organizing in a particular industry, figure out what union is organizing in that industry. And then just go and say, "I want to be an organizer."

You know, I think the unions make a mistake by just going after any worker that calls and says, "I want a union." I think that we have to think about the world differently and think about industries differently. We can't continue to go after little shops here and there. Corporations are going national and global and the unions are going to have to do the same thing. So, to organize and to do it right, you have to look at those unions as really taking a more national and global approach to organizing than others. And it's going to

require some research: you have to look and see who's doing what. I know that SEIU's taking that approach and other unions like UNITE are taking that approach. We're competing with multibillion-dollar conglomerates, multinational corporations and we're going to have to deal with that.

**Q: Do you find that you have jurisdictional issues with other unions?**

SA: We have a couple of jurisdictional issues. Our biggest problem is a company union just coming in and really trying to break the union and trying to lower our density in places like Long Island and Jersey. I mean, they're not big anywhere else. They are a nuisance, But, at the same time, you're spending resources fighting them off; resources that can be used to organize workers are being used to fight off these company unions that are coming in. Local 713 is one of them. They're part of an organization called NOITU, which is National Organization of Industrial Trade Unions. It's this bizarre organization that is supposedly organizing janitors in Long Island. We ask the workers, "Well, did you ever sign a card? Did you ever vote for the union?" And they're like, "No. You know, when I took this job, they told me that there was a union in here." And that's the end of it.

One of the big problems in Long Island is union density. We don't have enough union density in the janitorial industry on Long Island. So we have serious issues with getting good contracts and companies would rather hire a nonunion contractor 'cause it's cheaper than a union contractor. "Why should I pay union rates when 60% of the market is nonunion?" So it lowers standards for everybody and it lowers standards for the union contracts, because you're competing with people who make \$6 an hour. You're trying to get folks to pay \$10 an hour or \$11 or \$12 an hour. They're saying: "These guys are paying half. You want me to go union?! That's just not going to happen easily."

*The steep decline in union membership rates has unquestionably been one of the most important economic trends of recent decades in the United States. How are those on labor's front lines – organizers – struggling to revitalize the union movement today? This interview is the first in an occasional series – called "Union Organizing Today" – in which young organizers in different sectors of the economy are asked to explain both why each one has chosen such a difficult job and how they try to accomplish it – the strategies and tactics that make up the day-to-day process of modern organizing.*



**Shirley Aldebol**

So these company unions come in and they say, “Okay, we’ll pay the workers, you know, \$7.50 an hour.” And then, when we go in there and we’re saying: “Your workers make low wages,” then their argument is: “Oh, but they’re union. They have a union contract. This is not a bunch of nonunion workers trying to organize. This is a dispute between two unions over jurisdiction,” So they throw that at us, and it just creates a lot of problems for us.

**Q: What do you do in that kind of situation?**

SA: We go to community partners or legislative folks and they say, “Well, we called the company and the company says they already have a union, so we don’t know what your problem is.” So, we explain to them: “Look, this is a company union. The workers have a union contract which they don’t even get a copy of, in most cases. They claim to have benefits, but they’re not accessible. And they say, “Oh, we provide the workers health benefits.” But, they have a clinic somewhere in Queens that the workers can’t get to because they don’t have transportation to Queens to go to this one clinic where they supposedly can get their health benefits. And, of course, the wages remain low, so they go from making \$6.50 an hour to \$7 an hour and then they remain at \$7 an hour for however long this contract is. It seems like these contracts never have an expiration date. They don’t know what their rights are, there have no grievance process. So, they can get fired and the union doesn’t have a grievance process or a process for appeal if they get fired.

**Q: What do you do in that situation? Do you just leave that situation and look toward organizing elsewhere or do you fight?**

SA: Well, what we’ve tried to do is organize the workers. We try to get the building owners to bring in a union contractor. That can be a very long and frustrating process. We have one contractor, North Hills Office Services, that we’ve been trying to get out of these buildings for 2 years.

**Q: You approach the owner of the building rather than the contractor?**

SA: The union tried to approach the contractor. The contractor, of course, said, “No, way, I’ve got a good deal going on here. There’s no way I’m going to go union.” We go to the owners and say, “You have a bad contractor here. They treat the workers badly.” We go to the community and get the community to write letters, get legislators to write letters. We organize the workers, the workers leaflet the building, they get petitions to the tenants. They appeal to the tenants to talk to the building owner saying, “We clean your building, we’re good employees, we deserve better.” And it creates a a nuisance for tenants, who say, “We’re tired of these people in front of our building trying to get us to sign petitions and trying to get us to take their leaflets and all this activity that’s going on in front of our building. We just want to come here and work and not be harassed by people constantly.” And delegations of workers go to the contractor and say, “You know, we want better wages, we want a union – a real union or a union contract. We want 32BJ.” We just surround them with activity and letters and petitions so that tenants start to say, “Fix this problem!”

**Q: Recently on Long Island, Suffolk County legislators including David Bishop, Brian Foley, Bill Lindsay and Paul Tonna, walked the picket line with you and many workers outside the Newsday building. Why?**

SA: Those workers are in our union. Their contract expired in December of last year and they have since been without a contract. Mayco Building Services are the contractor that’s hired by Newsday to clean their building. And they do not want to sign the contract, because they don’t want to pay the healthcare costs. The workers are at risk of losing their health insurance at some point, if the employer does not sign the contract and doesn’t pay health insurance. So that’s why we were out there. The workers were wearing stickers and signing petitions and leafleting the building and Mayco came down on them, threatening to fire them, threatening to suspend the workers if they continued to wear stickers. A sticker said, “I’m willing to go on

strike for my healthcare.” It’s their legal right to wear these stickers on the job. Mayco turned around and said, “If you don’t take the stickers off, you’re going to be suspended.”

The last thing they did was to offer the workers a health plan. They said, “When the union takes your health insurance away, we’re going to give you a health plan.” So they were dealing directly with the workers and basically saying the union is going to take your benefit away. It’s not the union that’s going to take it away; it’s the company that doesn’t want to pay for it. So we filed unfair labor practice charges and the workers decided that they were going to strike in protest of these unfair practices of the employer. And the workers went out for two days in protest of that.

But Mayco hasn’t budged. They still haven’t signed the contract. When the workers came back from their strike, they added an extra half-hour of work to their time, so workers who work 4 to 12 now have to work ‘til 12:30. They were told that, during their break, they could not leave the building at all. They went to get paid yesterday and their checks were withheld. So we’re going to continue to file charges and we’re going to have to heat up the campaign there, because, at some point, they will lose their health insurance if the company doesn’t pay. I think what the company wants is for the workers to go out on strike, on an economic strike, so they can replace them and go nonunion.

**Q: Has Newsday taken a stand on this?**

SA: No, they haven’t. Newsday’s position with us was “Well, this is a dispute between the contractor and the union.” Newsday can fix this problem. They can say to the company, you know, “We don’t want labor problems in front of our building. Either fix your issue with the union or we’re going to find a more responsible contractor,” but they haven’t done that. They haven’t done that and it doesn’t look like they will unless we turn the heat up. I mean, we’ve done stuff in front of the building. Yesterday, we had a big rally. We had legislators there, a bunch of union people from about 25 different unions there. We had the big [inflatable rubber] rat in front of Newsday. Newsday actually covered the story, which I thought was amazing. But the message was generally: “Mayco is a bad contractor,

get them to sign the contract.” So Newsday covered the story so that they wouldn’t be the story, I guess? But they’re still not budging, so we’re going to have to do something to turn the heat up on them pretty soon. And we will.

**Q: What other major drives do you have on Long Island?**

SA: We are still organizing North Hills Office Services. And what we’re trying to do on Long Island now is really strengthen our steward structure and our membership base, so there’s some internal organizing that we’re trying to do as well. We’ve got a great group of workers at Nassau Community College who work for a contractor, and they have some serious issues of how they’re treated by management on site. So we’re figuring out a plan with the workers of how to get this company to stop treating the workers the way they’re treating them.

**Q: What are they doing?**

SA: We’re thinking about sending a delegation to the company to start with, circulating a petition, have a group of workers from Nassau Community College deliver it to the company and maybe to the college to say, “We’re not going to allow the company to treat the workers this way,” and we’ll escalate from there if they don’t back off. I mean, the workers are willing to rally, do whatever it takes to get the contractor to treat them with respect and treat them fairly.

**Q: Are there labor violations occurring on site?**

SA: You know, we’ve filed grievances because they’re asking workers to do things that it’s not their job to -- they’re telling workers to unload trucks. They’ve singled out two particular workers, right? So that a truck comes in with supplies and they’re telling the cleaners that “It’s your job to unload this truck.” Now, they’ve singled out two guys, one’s a 65-year-old man who had a heart operation not even a year ago, who has medical documentation that he’s not supposed to be lifting heavy loads. He’s doing his job, right? He cleans. But now they’re telling him, “Well, you have to unload those trucks when it comes,” and he’s like, “I can’t unload the trucks.” So they’ve written him up. They’ve written him up for refusing to do his job.

**Q: Is it included in his job description?**

SA: No. They don't even really have job descriptions, but they're cleaners. It's pretty clear: your job is to clean, not to unload trucks, you know? And this guy is very pro-union. He was a volunteer, a political organizer for the union. He's a steward, so it's going to get to the point where we're going to have to file unfair labor practice charges there, too, because they're messing with him. We believe they're messing with him because he's the steward and because he's very outspoken about the union. And, the problem is, when you file unfair labor practices, you have to have definitive proof that that's where they're doing it, right? So we haven't gone that route, but we're going to take the route that we think works best and use direct action on the job site.

We have a lot of work to do there, because there are a lot of union members who have a contract and we need to get them involved in all kinds of different activities, even get them involved in our organizing campaigns. Because we don't want to be in a situation like we are now with Mayco where we've had to basically organize those workers to go on this contract campaign and to go on strike, because they were, you know, they were happy workers. They were working, they had their contract and then one day they had a contract and, the next day, it was like, "Your employer doesn't want to sign the contract and you're going to lose your benefits," and they're like, "Well, what's the union going to do about it

So, we spent two months going to buildings, house-visiting workers, meeting with them at 6 o'clock to morning to 10 o'clock at night every day 'til they started to understand that they needed to take action to save their contract and to save their union, you know? Because we told them, I said this is more than just about your health benefits. Because if the employer, decides he wants to not sign the contract and he may offer you benefits, but if you don't have a union, he can take 'em away tomorrow and he could fire all of you and they're like, "Well, you know, we want our union and we want a contract." But it took a lot of work to get them there. People take it for granted. You've got these benefits, you've got a contract, you call the union when you need 'em, you know. And now it's like, "Okay, this is not about you making a phone call to the union and the union filing a grievance. This is about you fighting! So we had to reorganize these workers to go out there and fight.

And they've been fighting, it's been hard, they've been fighting. I mean, the employer's been doing all this stuff to them and, at one point, we thought we were going to lose the workers when we decided we were going to go on strike. The employer sent a letter saying to the workers that, if they went on any kind of strike, they were going to be permanently replaced.

**Q: They put it in writing?**

SA: They put it in writing, which was even better, because it makes it easier for us to file unfair labor practice charges, but it scared the workers, right? They were like, "Oh, if we go on strike, we're going to get fired." So we had to explain to them, you know, "You're going on an unfair labor practice strike. They can't permanently replace you." And we had to go through this whole process with them, explaining to them we can't continue to allow them to violate your rights here. If you go on strike, you're protesting their violations of the law.

**Q: What has your experience with the NLRB been? Is it effective? Are they responsive and, if they do respond, do employers pay any attention to the NLRB?**

SA: Here's the thing with the NLRB. One, it's a very slow process: we've been filing ULPs [unfair labor practice charges] since April; we still haven't gotten anywhere. Workers went to testify, to give statements at the board three weeks ago and we still haven't gotten a response yet. Employers violate the law because they know that, by the time it gets resolved, the dispute is either over or we've lost the workers, because the workers just get tired of getting stepped on. And then, what do the employers lose? That they have to post a sign! "Oh, we broke the law and we have to post it in the workplace." Employers are looking at it like, "Big deal." I believe that they know they're breaking the law. They just keep doing because they know they can get away with it. We file charges because we can't let it go, right? We file the charges and we take it to where it needs to go, but the NLRB is not helpful. It's not good for workers.

**Q: Are public actions on the part of union members more effective?**

SA: Absolutely. Public action is more effective. Getting other people to understand what's happening is more

effective. Getting legislators to make those phone calls and stand with you on a picket line is more effective. All of that is more effective.

**Q: That actually raises another question. How important is community involvement to your organizing efforts?**

SA: It's very important. We have a lot of folks that we work very closely with, community organizations that we work closely with, religious organizations. ACORN, for example always bring people to whatever activity we have. They write letters, they put pressure also on political people to do the right thing. So I think we'll work it out. I mean, you know, we have to work it out. Neither organization has enough resources to be fighting with each other, you know? So we're going to have to come to some agreement of how we're going to proceed in Long Island, how we're going to do business in Long Island and work together in Long Island.

**Q: How important is organizing immigrants to 32BJ?**

SA: It's essential for us to organize immigrants, because the workforce in our industry is all-immigrant. I really have not come across a non-immigrant worker in this industry in Long Island; they're all immigrants, either from Latin America or from Haiti. So it's essential for us to organize immigrants and to deal with the issues around immigration and immigration law and immigrant rights.

**Q: Justice for Janitors has been one of the most talked-about union organizing efforts in the country, since it began over a decade ago. Your East Coast drive only began in 2001. How is the organizing in the New York area going so far?**

SA: I think our density is pretty high in New York City. Our focus now is in the outside of the metropolitan area, so we're doing a lot of organizing in the suburbs, like Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut, New Jersey. 32BJ has also grown and expanded, so whereas before it was pretty New York City-based, now we've basically taken over a lot of little locals that were out there. Like Long Island had a local 307 at one point, the Bronx was a separate local, Westchester. They were all part of SEIU, but they weren't 32BJ. They were all like little independent local unions. So, what SEIU had done was that they consolidated and they've taken all these little organizations and brought them all under 32BJ.

**Q: And has that been helpful in organizing?**

SA: It has been helpful in terms of contracts. And it's been helpful in terms of organizing, because you can figure out how to best-utilize resources and you don't have these little local unions out there doing their own thing. So you can have a much more strategic approach to the organizing. You can look at the suburban market, as a whole as opposed to, like, your little pocket over here, right? So we're looking at Long Island, Westchester, New Jersey. We're looking at that density here and we're going after these companies now.

**Q: You mean on a regional level instead of one here, one there?**

SA: Well, in New Jersey, they've done a pretty large organizing campaign and they've signed up, like, 4000 workers. But our focus now is outside of New York City and the suburbs as a whole and on trying to increase the density in this industry there.

**Q: How is organizing on Long Island different from organizing in the city?**

SA: Organizing Long Island is like the South: in Long Island many people don't want immigrants in their neighborhood, they don't want to see them. They'll employ them, as long as they don't have to see them. They want them to be invisible. They don't like them standing on the corner, waiting for the trucks from these very rich contractors who live on Long Island to come and pick them up. They don't want them hanging out at the 7-11, waiting for work. They don't want to see twenty people coming in and out of a house, because they can't afford to live on Long Island.

**Q: So how does this affect organizing efforts?**

SA: It affects us, because it just makes it a little harder. When we go to legislators and political people and try to get that level of support, they're saying, "But these are immigrants that we don't want in our neighborhood, anyway, so why are you trying to organize them?" So, we have to reeducate or educate legislators about what the issues are and what the right thing is, because they don't see things from our point of view, necessarily. Our message has to be different. Compared to New York City, where you can get every City Council person to stand with us, here we got only five legislators.

It's hard, when you're organizing workers that most residents want to disappear, you know? We were organizing workers who work for a company who is an affiliate of Mayco, a company called American Maintenance. We were leafleting at that building and one of the tenants walked right up to me and she said, "Are these people even citizens?" And I said, "Well, what's the difference?" She said, "Well, if they're not citizens, they don't even need to be here, you know, much less get paid." Like they shouldn't get paid for their work?! I read an article about what they were calling the "labor parade," which is basically the immigrants and the trucks picking up the immigrants on the street and how the communities are outraged. Not by the contractors who are exploiting these people. They're outraged that these immigrants have the nerve to be standing on their street corner.

**Q: So what are your most effective arguments in terms of overcoming that kind of anti-immigrant sentiment?**

SA: I don't think we overcome the anti-immigrant sentiment, we just don't. I think what we do is we don't go away. We're just there until they get tired of seeing us and say, "Okay, what is it that you want us to do?" I think that's the only thing that we can do. I don't think people are going to change their minds that easily. For example, at Newsday a lot of those folks have worked there for a long time. One guy worked for Mayco for eighteen years and worked at Newsday for twelve years. So, the folks that work at Newsday see these people every day and, when they saw them outside picketing, they were like, "What?! I know these people. I see them every day." But we said, "Well, these people that you see every day that clean your offices are going to lose their health insurance." And they'll say, "Well, did they have health insurance before?" And I'm like, "Yeah, they've had health insurance the whole time they've been with this company, and, all of a sudden, the company doesn't want to pay." So that outrages them, because they're also union; they're Teamsters people.

**Q: So, the Newsday workers are more sympathetic than the general public?**

SA: Right, because they see these people every day and they have some kind of a relationship with them. But it's hard, it's hard.

**Q: Is it possible that there could be collaboration between you and the Teamsters?**

SA: Yes, when we were picketing they've helped us and they've supported us and they've come out for the workers. And they'll continue to do so, because those are good union people. But, in general, it's just really hard to get the message across that this is just not the right thing and the way to fix the problem is not by exploiting people. Give them a decent wage, give them benefits and maybe they won't be twenty families living in a house. But, you know, we manage to get it done. Two years fighting one company – that just says a lot about where we are.

**Q: What are the main problems on the job that are driving workers to join the union?**

SA: It's usually pay. A lot of these workers are part-time workers and they usually have two or three jobs, so wages are an issue. But it's also fair treatment: they want to go do their job, get paid a decent wage and go home and enjoy their lives. They don't want to be beat up on the job or be told, "You're here today and, because I don't like the way you looked at me, you're going to be fired tomorrow." There's so much instability with these workers that they just want to feel safe.

**Q: So, the union basically provides stability, because the employer has to follow certain guidelines?**

SA: Right. They have to follow the contract. Without the union contract, the workers are basically at the will of the employer.

**Q: How often does health insurance come up? Is it a big issue?**

SA: Our contracts provide for employer-paid health insurance for full-time workers. It's a huge issue, because healthcare is just so expensive. And workers who don't have healthcare end up either without it or they go to the emergency rooms or, with a lot of undocumented workers, they get whatever crazy medications and they self-medicate with them. And they end up being a drain on the system, because they can't afford health insurance, so they end up in the emergency rooms. It's just this cycle that keeps going around and around. I think that (and this is just me thinking out loud) if we don't solve the healthcare issue nationally, it's just going to become harder and harder for unions to negotiate good contracts for workers. Employers are increasingly screaming about

the cost of healthcare. When I worked with the city, the last contract that was negotiated before I left, the main issue was that the mayor wanted the workers to pay a portion of their healthcare, something that had never happened before.

Employers are just saying, “It's too expensive,” and they are right – it is expensive. We take the position, “You can afford it. You make \$6 million with all these contracts you have – you can afford health insurance.” But it is expensive and it's going to keep getting expensive. Workers can't afford it and it's going to get to the point where companies are going to say, “We're not just going to pay any more.” Employers are going to force the union to have the employees pay for their health insurance. We're trying to maintain what we have with some losses to the workers. The workers, right now, are paying higher co-pays for doctor visits. They're paying higher co-pays for prescription drugs. There are now certain drugs that aren't going to be covered by this plan, all to keep the cost of the plan low enough so that we can go to these employers and say, “You know, we need you to sign this contract and keep paying for this health insurance.”

**Q: Sometimes employers will require monthly contributions into the health plan, knowing that a lot of workers won't be able to afford it, and then will drop the plan.**

SA: Right, which is what we are trying to avoid. I mean, you're talking about workers who, in New York City, took a wage freeze in order to preserve the fully employer-paid health benefit. In Long Island, we negotiated a 25-cent-an-hour raise, to try to preserve the health insurance. It's going to get worse before it gets better and I just think that organizations like the AFL-CIO and the international unions have to take the lead and figure this problem out. I just don't see it getting better and workers are going to suffer.

**Q: Is it eating up a lot of resources fighting for health benefits now?**

SA: We've been at this campaign for like two months. It's this one employer – all of my staff and my resources and my energy and time have been spent fighting this one employer who doesn't want to pay for the healthcare. Three years from now, when we're back to negotiating the contracts and the health insurance is even more expensive, it may be more than just this one employer. So, instead of

organizing workers, which is what I'd rather be doing, we are fighting to get a contract signed.

**Q: How about employers cutting full-time into part-time jobs?**

SA: That's a problem. We fight with employers all the time because a full-time worker leaves and then they want to bring in two part-time workers or three part-time workers. It's cheaper for them to bring in two part-time workers and not have to pay the benefits. Big problem. We constantly have to be vigilant about even union contractors who try to slip in the part-time workers.

**Q: What do you do?**

SA: We have agreements with them that their full-time workforce can't fall below a certain number, so that kind of gives them some flexibility. They can hire some part-time workers, but, once the full-time workforce goes below a certain number, they have to bring in full-time workers. But it happens mostly in the commercial sector. In the residential sector, we don't have as much of a problem. What we have in the residential sector is them getting rid of a handyman and saying, “Well, we're not going to replace the handyman, 'cause we really don't have a need for a handyman.” But then they distribute the handyman work among the porters. They'll backfill positions and they'll leave the position vacant for a long time and so you have to get on them about it. But the tenants like their services, so they have porters and cleaners and handymen and supers and, when the tenants don't get their whatever fixed in their apartment for a long time, they get on the management and say, “Why is my building falling apart?” So it's a little easier to deal with that.

**Q: Is there ever a two-tier system, where new employees get fewer health benefits or they have a different health plan than somebody who's been there for five years.**

SA: Right now, everybody gets the same health plan. So once you're employed for thirty days and you're in the union, you can enroll in the health plan.

**Q: Do the women janitors with small children have an especially hard time, when they work at night, arranging childcare and so on?**

SA: Women tend to get disciplined more for not coming to work because they have childcare issues and can't leave the



kids alone. They use up all their sick time or all of their vacation time and it's a problem. They get suspended, they get fired, because of excessive absences. They have a hard time.

**Q: What are the most common violations of union organizing rights that you've seen committed by employers?**

SA: Threatening the workers with suspension, with termination, with writing them up and they single them out. You'll have workers who support the union and then, all of a sudden, they give 'em a harder workload. "I used to clean offices and I support the union so they switched me to bathrooms" which nobody likes to do. They have a right to do that, but they've singled out this person or these people because they're supporting the union. They threaten workers, they harass them. We have two workers who support the union who were being sexually harassed by one of the managers who was just awful. He was talking about how "Oh, she sleeps around." Her husband works with her in the same building. So he [the manager] spreads a rumor that she was sleeping with these other guys who work there! To another worker, he said he was going to follow her home. And her daughter, who works in another building, said he knows where she works and he's going to go after her. They hold captive audience meetings, so they get the workers all together and say, "We can't have a union here; the union's bad. Don't sign a card, or you won't have a job tomorrow." The workers, when we first get there, sometimes they'll run away from us!

**Q: How do you manage to build employee organizing committees inside nonunion companies?**

SA: Long Island has been especially challenging, because access to these workers is very hard. A lot of these buildings are surrounded by these huge parking lots – I call them "moats." It's like you have the castle in the middle and then these huge parking lots around them and everything is private property, so we have to be very, very stealthy about talking to workers as they're either leaving or coming out of the building, to try to get names and addresses. We try to get at least one contact in there and then we'll home-visit them and then try to get more information about other workers through that contact. Most of the workers are coming to work in vans. So we'll follow the van, we'll wait for the van to come out at 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock when the workers get out and we'll follow the van as they drop people off in their homes and we'll write down their addresses and then we go visit them.

**Q: Are the workers receptive to that?**

SA: Some workers are frightened. But we explain to them who we are, what we're doing, that we're talking to workers. We explain to them, "We obviously can't talk to you at your workplace, because we don't have access." We gotta get in the door with them, and we tell them, "Well, we talked to another coworker and they gave us your address, they thought you were maybe a person that we could talk to." We find a way. It's not like we can call up the employer and say, "Hey, give us a list of employees and their addresses and phone numbers 'cause we want to organize them now." That doesn't happen, so we have to find creative ways to get names and addresses. To get information about the contractor and information about the workers, we've had organizers go into the management office and say, "I'm looking for a job as a cleaner, can I apply for a job here?" And then they'll tell 'em: "No." That gets them in the building, at least, and then they kind of like hang around and wait for the workers to show up. But we go public pretty soon after that and start doing public activity and that requires us really to strengthen that group of workers in there that's going to not be afraid to confront the boss.

**Q: How long does that take, usually?**

SA: It depends. Getting the information is hard. Trying to get workers to sign. I mean, once we start talking to workers and we see them in their homes, it doesn't take that long, I think, to get the workers to move. It's getting the employers and the building owners to negotiate, that's the hard part. Like I said, it's taken two years with this one company and the workers get frustrated.

**Q: What do you say to workers who are worrying about being fired because of union activity?**

SA: Well, the thing is you have to be honest with workers and say, "It's illegal for them to fire you for organizing a union or for participating in union activity, but they do it all the time. The more people involved in the union organizing, the harder it is for them to fire you, right? The harder we fight, the harder it is for them to fire you. You know, if they fire you, we'll bring 'em up on charges." That doesn't make it better, because it takes a long time for people to get back to work. We have to be honest with people and say, "This is going to be a fight and they're going to fight back. If you want respect on the job, if you want

dignity, if you want a better life, you have to fight for it, they're not going to give it to you. And part of the fight is employers will come after you, they're going to harass you, they're going to threaten to fire you, they may even fire you. All this is possible. All of that's illegal, but it's possible." And they have to make a choice. But, if we don't tell them that and they do get fired, then our credibility is shot.

**Q: Is that a big hurdle?**

SA: Yeah, people don't want to get fired; they don't want to lose their income. They have families to support. That's why only 13% of the country is organized. Workers don't want to organize in a union, because they're getting beat up for doing it.

**Q: Is weak enforcement of labor laws a big part of the problem?**

SA: Yes, the enforcement of the labor laws is poor and it doesn't really protect workers. It really doesn't. You know, if you're going to be fired and be off the job, even if you won your case and the workers return to work, how long does it take for that to happen? It takes a really long time for workers to get justice in this system.

**Q: Does the union assist workers that have been fired, in any way?**

SA: We bring some charges to the labor board, we try to get them back to work. It's all part of the organizing campaign. We do tell workers, "If you get fired, we will bring your case to the board, we'll defend you, we will fight to get you back to work." If a worker gets fired, then we organize the workers around, "Okay, now you gotta go out there and leaflet and picket and make a lot of noise about this person being fired for exercising their legal right to form a union." So we go outside the legal system and organize around those issues, too, which is what we did also at Newsday. We went on strike because they were messing around with the workers' rights. We'll put a big rat in front of your building and we're just going to mess with you until you do the right thing. It's beyond the normal way of, "We're going to file ULPs [unfair labor practice charges] and wait for the National Labor Relations Board to respond." We have to go out there and make a stink about it and, hopefully, we raise enough of a stink for the employers to say, "Okay, all right, we'll bring the worker back to work." But it's not easy.

Workers get scared. If a worker gets fired because of union activity, the workers are going to say, "I don't want to do this any more," and you have to start again from zero. You gotta start from scratch half the time.

**Q: If a worker gets fired, does it have a big impact on an organizing drive?**

SA: Oh, yes! It could have two effects: either the workers are already so pissed off at the company that it pisses them off even more and they'll say, "What do we have to do?" Or they'll just say, "Uh-uh. I'm done. I'm not getting fired for this," and it just chills out your campaign.

**Q: Do workers get rehired if the employees take that up as an issue and do public actions?**

SA: I think it's rare. I think it's good for the workers' morale. It makes them feel like they're fighting and they're doing something. I've done it with workers where I've had workers make noise and do all kinds of stuff and eventually the worker got brought back to work, but it was mostly because the board ordered the company to bring them back to work, but it makes the workers feel like they won. Which is good, because it keeps the organizing going, too. It's just another issue to organize workers around. "This worker got fired. We're going to fight the company!" "The boss had a meeting yesterday with all the workers, we gotta fight!" We have to always make the company the target and make the workers organize around whatever issue it is. That doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to get the worker back to work, but it helps move the campaign and it helps the boss understand that the workers aren't going to tolerate that stuff, so he'll think twice about firing another worker.

**Q: So, once you've organized the workers, what kind of demands does the union usually make? What are some of the top priorities?**

SA: The top priority is usually better wages and, obviously, benefits. Part-time workers get benefits, too. I mean, they don't get health benefits, but most of these workers, right now, without the union, they don't get vacation time, they don't get sick time. When they don't work, they don't get paid. So that's a big issue for part-time workers, especially for women who have children. They mostly take sick days

off because of either childcare issues or if a child got sick. Workers will go to work sick, so as not to use a sick day, so that they can use it for their kid, unless they're like in the hospital or something. But the nonunion employees don't get any of that, even if they're part-time. We are able to negotiate that and that's big. Holidays, holiday pay, all of that's huge for people who don't have it. We would like to negotiate some kind of health benefit for part-time workers, but we're having a hard enough time getting it for our full-time workers. But we recently negotiated getting a drug card for part-time workers, which I believe lets them get drugs at lower cost, like 60% off or something like that. So that's good, that's something that they didn't have before that we were able to get for them.

But, in this industry, it's largely a part-time workforce; there aren't too many places that hire full-time workers. Newsday is an exception and a couple of our institutions, like colleges hire full-time workers. We have one hospital that hires workers full-time, usually 'cause it's a 24-hour operation. But most of the work in the commercial sector is part-time. So the biggest issue for workers is, obviously, wages and days off.

**Q: The national AFL-CIO is today going through an historic internal struggle over how best to improve organizing efforts to reverse the downward trend in union density. The SEIU has gained a reputation as being one of the unions most successful at adopting an organizing perspective. About what share of local 32BJ's budget actually goes to organizing today?**

SA: I have no idea. I mean, this whole operation here is organizing. The political operation is to support organizing, the research operation is to support organizing. I think the budgets and the resources of the union are moving more towards organizing than servicing members. In Long Island, even on the servicing side, they want us to look at growth. Even the delegates have to do some organizing. So if there are buildings that have turnover, then we have to look at making sure that those are union contractors coming in and signing up those workers. So the focus, even in the servicing side, is about organizing. Even though you might not have a budget line that says, "This money is devoted to organizing," I think just in terms of the philosophy of the union is everything is about growth and about increasing density, union density

and organizing workers. So whether it's internal or external organizing, that's become the focus of the union. I would say 75% of the focus is about organizing and then the rest is servicing the members.

**Q: How about organizing young people? Can you tell us something about the Youth Brigade?**

SA: Oh, the Youth Brigade is great. I mean, I had my first experience with them last year. During the summer, we basically hire mostly children of our members, seniors in high school, first- and second-year college students who come and participate in different organizing drives that the union is having. So we say to them, "Okay, we have this campaign in Long Island and we need the Youth Brigade to come out and help us make noise in front of a building or develop a campaign for this week, for this contractor and at these buildings." So they'll go and they'll develop a street theater, they write up their own chants. They're very talented. They'll do all this stuff and then they show up and they wreak havoc on these buildings! And they mobilize workers and they go to rallies. They have so much energy that they can just keep going. They'll go from building to building to building to building, all day long.

**Q: How many youth do you have each summer?**

SA: Last year, I think we had close to twenty. It was a big group of kids. A lot of kids apply, though, to do this. I think they had like 600 kids applying to be in this program. And it's fun for them! They get to talk to unorganized workers, they get to talk to members.

**Q: Have you recruited any organizers from that program?**

SA: I know they recruited two folks that came out of that program, once they graduated from college. I think one of them is actually here and he's in charge of the Youth Brigade this year. So what we do is that we have graduates from the Youth Brigade who come back the following year and they actually run the brigade the following year. They do the schedule for them, like what campaigns they're going to be working on, where are they going to be going, what types of things they should be planning and doing. And we also have classes, so they get some labor history and we have people come in and speak with them. We get groups of maybe workers that we're organizing that are not

in a union to talk about what their situations are. So they get to see a different perspective. Because their parents are in a union and at the end, they say, "You know, my parents, I never realized how important it was for them to be in the union, because they have health insurance, I'm able to go to college, because my parents make a decent living and I live in a nice house" They see labor movies. We, of course, show them Bread and Roses. We take them on field trips. Last year, we took 'em to a coal mine in Pennsylvania and they got to talk to the union -- they got the whole history of the miners and how that union started and they loved it.

**Q: Do the jurisdictional disputes, in any way, affect broader regional collaboration between unions to support each other's organizing drives?**

SA: I think it does, to some extent. Because if you're fighting with this union over jurisdiction over here, why should I help you -- why should I help you organize over here if you're fighting me over there?

**Q: Recent years have seen a sharp increase of interest in many young people in political issues and in social justice movements. The presidential election saw a big jump in the fraction of youth voting and new organizations have sprung up to support unionization drives on college campuses, to defend immigrant worker rights, and to protest sweatshop labor conditions at foreign factories supplying American clothing. What do you think unions can and will do in coming years to try to attract more young people?**

SA: You really think that there are more young people interested in this stuff? I don't see it. I know that there are organizations on campus to support UNITE's anti-sweatshop drive. But I just don't see a lot of young people nowadays involved in social justice movements.

**Q: Is it harder to organize young people than workers who've been working for ten or fifteen years?**

SA: I think so. I think young people think that unions are obsolete. Not young workers, necessarily, but you're talking about college students and young people in general?

**Q: So what do you think unions can and will do in coming years to try to attract more young people?**

SA: We have to talk to young people more and involve young people more.

**Q: Do you think the unions will do that?**

SA: I don't know. It's hard for a young person -- I consider myself relatively young -- to go to a union meeting or a Long Island Fed [the AFL-CIO's umbrella federation of many local unions] meeting. All you see, I'm sorry, is old white men sitting at the table. So it's not relevant to me as a young person, it's not relevant to me as a young Puerto Rican woman. The only reason I'm involved in the union now is because it affected me personally, so I got involved in the union. But, as an outsider looking at the union movement, on TV and at these rallies that we have out here? The union leaders don't look like me, they don't speak my language. They don't understand my issues as a young person and I'm not that young, right? But, if I'm an eighteen-year-old or a nineteen-year-old, I'm looking at this saying, "This is not relevant for me." We're not organizing in communities or recruiting in schools where young minorities or Latinos, black, Haitian, whatever are going to school. They go to colleges to try to recruit people to come to work for the union, but what about those kids that may not be able to go to college?

I think we have to start younger and we're not doing it. I think that starting this Youth Brigade is a good thing and I think we can do more. But, again, it becomes a resource question. It takes resources to go out and organize young people and energy and people who can talk to these kids and not get too frustrated. It's not easy to do, but I think it has to be done.

I think that more and more young people are not looking at changing the world. They're looking at "What am I going to get -- what's in it for me?"

**Q: Do you think that, if union leadership was more representative, so that it wasn't just older white males, do you think that people would be more receptive to unionization?**

SA: I think it helps. I don't think that's the only answer. I think it helps for them to see people that look like them and talk like them and can be more understanding of their issues and concerns. "If I'm the union, then why don't you

look like me? Or why don't you understand my language?" I mean, young people aren't thinking about pensions and retirement, right? I didn't when I was twenty years old, right? I needed a job and I went and I got a job and I started thinking about pensions a little later, you know.

**Q: What would you say to a young person you were trying to organize about the importance of joining the union?**

SA: Well, the thing about organizing is that it's not for me to tell a worker what I think their issues or their problems are. It's for me to get from them what their issues and their problems are and then try to figure out how the union could help resolve that, you know? So I can't tell a young person today or a young immigrant person today what I think is important for them, because I'm not in their shoes. Growing up today and working today, as a young person, is much different than it was twenty, thirty, forty years ago.

**Q: So why should they join a union?**

SA: Because I think the union, when it comes to their place of work and even their community, gives them power. In this country and in the world, people who have money have power. For those of us who have to work for a living, the only power we have is by collectively joining together and fighting for whatever it is – respect, dignity, better wages, a better life – whatever it is that people want out of their work. The union is really the only way for people to have that power; otherwise, they're powerless. And I think that message resonates with anybody, whatever age you are. So that's why the union's important. It's about power, it's not about money; that's the ultimate thing. It's power to get health insurance, power to get better wages, the power to not let employers step all over you. The law aside, there are things that we can do to fight and, unfortunately, as poor people and as working people, all we have is our fight. You know, Wal-Mart has \$600 billion and we've got to organize however many millions of American workers and Latin American workers and European workers. That's what we've got to do, because that's the only power we have.

---

*Dr. Niev Duffy is a Research Associate of the Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, and is President of Eastern Economic Research, Inc.*