

Union Summer Ends and Labor's New Season Begins

By Rosemary Fantozzi

There she was, sitting at the table by herself with a medium coffee and glazed donut. After talking to registered nurses on the phone for weeks, I finally had my first chance to meet Kathleen Toscano in person. Even though I was still a brand-new organizer, I could see that her eyes looked deeply tired, as if she had seen it all in three decades of nursing. At that moment, I somehow knew I had found my place in the battle of Miami nurses to win respect.

My path from college graduation last May to my current, very non-traditional career as a union organizer began last July when I enrolled in the "Union Summer" program. Little did I expect then that I was to witness the last days of that program and a major split in the national union movement. Union Summer was launched with great fanfare by the national AFL-CIO union federation after its big leadership shakeup in 1995. The new President, John Sweeney, pledged to recruit a new generation of organizers to initiate new organizing drives across the country to revitalize the shrinking union ranks. Union Summer was designed to be an opportunity for college level junior and senior students interested in economic justice. The internship served as an opportunity to expose students to the labor movement and the importance of union organizing. Union Summer also served as a feeder program for graduating seniors into the Organizing Institute, a program through the AFL-CIO that recruited and trained people to become union organizers.

I heard about Union Summer in my senior year at Hofstra University on Long Island. For many years when I thought about my own and my friends' work experiences, I felt fooled by the media and confused by my own lack of understanding about employers' behavior toward workers. One day in class, my sociology professor, Les Abrams, posed two questions: How is it possible to work and not have enough money to live? Who creates wealth? As we explored possible answers, I realized that laborers create more wealth than they get paid for by employers. And the farther away workers are from top management positions, the more replaceable they are. I became frustrated from what I learned, and I wanted my first job to give hands-on experience in what role unions played as a solution for economic injustice. I learned that we must look at the substructure of the companies we are working with in order to understand and negotiate with them effectively. From what I learned as a sociology major, I wanted my job to have a purpose by making a positive difference in the lives of people through their working conditions. I was eager to see how a union was formed, worked, and operated. I was also interested how management responded when a union demanded a legitimate voice in decisions at the workplace. In my final semester, one of my Labor Studies professors, Sharryn Kasmir, told me about Union Summer and I decided to take a chance and apply.

Ten unions and 180 interns participated in Union Summer in 2005, a five-week internship that included a one-week training in Chicago for all the interns. Interns were then placed into groups and sent out to their four-week assignment. At the end of the assignment, we all returned to Chicago to give reports on our diverse experiences with different participating unions.¹ My internship assignment was with the Graduate Employee Organization (G.E.O.) at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (UIUC). The G.E.O.'s first contract expires in August 2006 and they were preparing to negotiate with the Administration for the second contract.² The employees negotiated around issues that included tuition waivers, the anti-discrimination statement, workload grievances, and healthcare.

¹ The unions that participated in Union Summer included United Food and Commercial Workers, UFCW (working on a Wal-Mart campaign), Union of Needletrades, Industrial Textile Employees, Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees, UNITE/HERE, the Painter's Union, the Central Labor Council in Maine, and the Denver Labor Council.

² The five senior university contracts include: University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Michigan, Michigan State, UMASS, and Oregon State University.

My second day at UIUC, I took an eight-hour road trip to Madison, Wisconsin for a Coalition of Graduate Employee Union conference (CGEU). Over 30 universities were represented including Yale, Michigan State, and Washington State. New to the work, I was excited to witness the negotiation of a first contract as well as the planning and preparation for a first union election. With the guidance of my supervisor Nicole Holtzclaw, it did not take long to jump into my work. Nicole gave me clear instructions about how to perform my tasks. My first impressions when I started with the G.E.O. were that of an outsider in the Midwest. After my first day, I knew I was going to like it and the four weeks would fly by.

I prepared a report for the bargaining team to help identify other graduate employee unions at other universities. UIUC is a new union in the sense they have only had one contract. By comparing the UIUC's with mature contracts, I found that when a union gets its first contract, they tend to not have very strong language. The first contract is the union's foot in the door, while the administration is still grieving and does not want to let go of the power. By looking at mature contracts, I could analyze how strong they are. It is especially obvious when the subject comes to healthcare. Organizations' progress and implement those advantages into the next UIUC contract. My assignment goal was to compare these five senior contracts to UIUC's and change and use stronger wording such as "shall" rather than "may" in parts of the contract. I prepared a report for the bargaining team. During this organizing campaign we visited employees at their home to discuss their concerns. This was a new and tiring experience. The days were long: lots of walking in and out of neighborhoods and driving in your car, only to find that many graduate employees not being home when you got there. When Nicole and I did reach someone they were usually polite and willing to take time to fill out the survey. It was a pilot survey and after reasonable suggestions, Nicole shortened it to fewer than 30 questions for the fall semester employees to complete. I did not like house visiting because I felt it was too much time and effort walking door to door, hoping members will be home and willing to fill out the survey. But the survey was a valuable means for G.E.O. members to voice how important issues in the contract were and what they would like to see changed. Writing contract language for the bargaining team was, I found, most exciting because I was taking part in providing boundaries of what the administration could and could not do.

During my research, we discovered that Michigan State covered 95% of an employee's healthcare cost from a preferred insurance provider and 85% of the cost from a non-preferred insurance provider. In a disappointing comparison, UIUC covered no healthcare in the first year and \$50 per semester in the second year.

I did have my criticisms of the program. One was that, at the end of the internship, there was no formal job fair nor a list of opportunities to pursue. Others complained of housing conditions being dirty and too small, though they were soon relocated. Some of the host unions did not have a good plan and some interns felt like they were not able to utilize their time. Also some unions had an active campaign going on and did not take advantage of the ability to have Union Summer interns to help.

But my experience was educational and sparked my interest to become more involved. One of the positive benefits of the internship was being able to travel to the Midwest, somewhere that I had never gone before. I was able to see a new way of life, and communicate with people that I normally would not have. And I worked with professionals. UIUC's graduate employees are graduate students who are teaching, performing research, or some combination of the two. A graduate employee is typically pursuing a Master's or PhD. They work long hours with little compensation. Here are ambitious driven graduate students who are so resourceful in their subject they are teaching an undergraduate course or assisting a professor.

Critics of labor unions have long claimed that they are only for blue-collar workers, led by corrupt individuals, and are no longer necessary in today's society. However, it doesn't occur to many people that today unions are organized for professors, graduate students, and nurses: highly educated and hardworking people. In my short experience I have seen that unions are not extinct and are becoming more aggressive. A commonly believed consequence of unions is that they protect lazy workers from being fired or will harm American competitiveness. The truth is: where management fails unions will succeed. It is management's job to hire and fire employees. Even the AFL-CIO break itself has been a positive change in the labor movement. There is now competition between the two umbrella union federations. Secondly, management sees the break as bad for them and large corporations feel threatened because they are aware the union strategy has changed.

Because of my work with Union Summer, I decided to pursue a career in the labor movement by working as a union organizer. The role of an organizer is to mobilize people to act on their own behalf. I decided to become an organizer because I have wanted to help gather, educate, and empower working people to live better lives and to instill hope. Also, because of my internship I was able to have a foundation and solid ground to enter the labor field. Because of the internship I was able to get my feet wet and get first-hand experience of what unions are about. Last fall, I went to work on the international staff of the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU).

There are two parts of SEIU: local staff and international staff. Local staff stay in one area and specifically work with that campaign. Being on international means that you travel all over the country to work on various campaigns. SEIU International staff has offered me the opportunity to work on various campaigns. Already I have worked in Washington State for a childcare campaign, Ohio for a political campaign, and Houston for a city employees campaign. My current job focus is in Miami for the Florida Healthcare Union (FHU). What many Floridians do not know is that the individual hospitals located in their community are actually owned by HCA, Hospital Corporation of America, the most profitable and largest hospital chain in the world.³ Because of the arduous agreement reached by both HCA and SEIU, we have the opportunity to organize 6 Florida hospitals in 90 days! This agreement marks a historic moment in the labor movement because no union has ever attempted to challenge the leading corporation that has made it acceptable for healthcare to be a for-profit industry. The success of this campaign will impact 4,500 workers in Florida and has the potential to transform the modern healthcare industry.

In preparation for this task, I was trained at the Nurse Alliance of Florida, an organization funded by SEIU nurses, for union and non-union nurses to work together and to give nurses across the state a deeply unified voice to improve patient care and protect the nursing profession. In this training I met Kathleen Toscano, a nurse for thirty-six years. In our two-hour meeting in Dunkin Donuts, she told me about her working conditions: being understaffed to the point where she could not do complete assessments, having four more patients that adequate to give proper attention to each patient, and leave the hospital saying, "Thank God no one died tonight." Her comments about being a nurse in South Florida were overwhelmingly consistent with every other nurse I met with or spoke to on the phone. After that meeting, I was able to show her more about the Nurse Alliance of Florida and she is now actively involved in leading nursing meetings because of her honesty, passion, and feeling of being disrespected as a nurse.

The South's anti-union legal system is a major obstacle to workers' democratic rights to join a union. Most are "right-to-work" states. A right to work state is a state that has only "open shops." In other words, yes, a company's workers can vote to form a union, but then there is no requirement that all employees respect the majority will and pay union dues in order to have the benefits of the contract. Trying to organize in a right to work state is very difficult in that workers are scared of the word union. They feel they will be fired for speaking about it. Right now, there are five unionized hospitals that have contracts with management. Another negative aspect of a right to work state is that even when a union is won, people who have not signed up to be union members, will still reap the benefits of union membership because they are in the department protected by union representation and a contract. A right to work law is a tool to keep the union weak.

Union organizers, I now realize, are a remarkably diverse crowd of people in their racial, ethnic, religious, political, economic, and intellectual backgrounds. For example, my co-worker, Caroline Muglia, is a 2004 graduate of Bard College in Annandale-On-Hudson, New York. She majored in historical studies with a minor in Labor Studies and, unlike myself, was very active in college. She was secretary of student government, senior class officer, student representative for the Board of Trustees as well as involved in women's' groups and political action. She then was an archivist at the University of California-Berkeley for political collections, worked for the Aspen Institute think tank and was a public policy researcher. She decided to move beyond the "intellectual activism" of documenting labor issues and "cultivating relationships with ideas" to actually

³ The SEIU research team report from November 2005 showed that HCA pocketed more than \$311 million in profit in Florida alone. HCA Tampa hospitals brought in \$69.4 million in profit in 2004. As a system, HCA hospitals had a 6.2% profit margin, while the average profit margin for all hospitals was just 2.9%.

experience them. Caroline had read about unions being on the decline, but SEIU stuck out to her as an active union. She found out about applying for the union organizer position by the Internet on www.seiu.org. At her one-day screening for the job, she was told to be prepared for the investment of a long day and that an organizer's schedule reflects that of the workers schedule -- which means you will usually be overworked! She was also told to be prepared for a transient lifestyle, required to move from place to place at anytime. In two weeks, Caroline moved from Oakland, California to Boston to start her first campaign in childcare. The positive aspects of being a union organizer is that she would directly see change and will be making a contribution to middle-class society. In her months of experience she came to feel that her job helped her frame an honest portrayal of American workers. It connects her to a long working class history, as well as bringing a humbling responsibility to build on that legacy today. And it is the most direct way to make genuine social change.

Why, then, did Union Summer end? I had the opportunity to gain insight into this question last fall when I met Nancy Lenk, the last director of Union Summer. Nancy now serves as the National Field Director for SEIU as well as the Director of the Deputy Marketing Company for SEIU. I recently asked her why she felt that Union Summer did not survive the split. One reason she gave was that SEIU, the largest contributor to Union Summer, left the AFL-CIO last summer with several other large unions to form the new "Change to Win" federation. A main reason for the break was over disagreement over members' dues money. Union dues come out of a union member's paycheck to support the union and build financial resources. Nationally, the dues rate is 1.5% or a \$1.50 removed for every \$100.00 a worker makes. The workers themselves decide, through union elections and meetings, how much dues will be and what to spend them on. Critics of the AFL-CIO leadership argued that too much dues money went to funding political campaigns. Some unions, such as UNITE HERE, UFCW, SEIU, Teamsters, the Laborers Union, Carpenters Union, and the United Farm Workers, felt much more funding should go into union organizing rather than political support. Now, Change to Win, spends 75% of its resources in organizing more members.

Another reason for Union Summer's demise was that there was no longer any recruitment being done for it since the Organizing Institute no longer does external recruitment. Once the AFL-CIO began restructuring, they had to do a cost benefit analysis and change their focus, which meant cutting some programs like Union Summer. Funding for Union Summer has been redirected towards cultivating union organizers from current union members. In other words a college student interested in labor can no longer participate in the five-week internship; secondly, the host unions with have also redirected their efforts to form "Change to Win", a coalition of unions devoted to hands on grassroots organizing. Nancy Lenk and others do see hope for a new version of Union Summer in the future. It may take a few years, however, now that the AFL-CIO has changed focus and the new Change to Win coalition is seeking to expand.

In the meantime, organizers like me work consistently long hours with erratic schedules week after week. Being a union organizer can be exhausting mentally and physically. I have given up control over my life! I do not determine where I will live, or what specifically I will be doing. The hours are long, very long. Many times I work at least nine days in a row, each day being an 11-hour or more day. It is sometimes a sacrifice of a union organizer's own employee rights for the betterment of the workers. Working predominantly in the South, I am rejected daily by workers who lack any class consciousness and do not seem to want to improve their lives -- or perhaps are too confused or hopeless about how to do so. That is the most frustrating aspect. On the other hand, I meet people who have touched my life by their courage and anger to stand up for themselves. I have learned how to communicate with people, listen and challenge them to step out of their comfort zone and step up for their career and build self-esteem. I am convinced that unions, while certainly imperfect, continue to serve a vital purpose today. Now more than ever, workers need protection from corporate and governmental wage and benefit cuts and they need to assert their democratic right to a meaningful voice in the workplace.

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