

Case Study: SEIU Janitors for Justice Campaign, Los Angeles

Between 1983 and 1986, building owners in Los Angeles increasingly chose to hire recent Latino immigrants, many of whom were undocumented, rather than continue to hire union janitors, who were citizens and largely African American, to clean their buildings. This caused wages to drop from more than \$7.00 per hour with family benefits to \$4.50 per hour with no benefits. It also caused tension to rise between Black and Latino workers and between native and non-native workers.

The Union was concerned that if they did not include undocumented workers in the union, the union's effectiveness would continue to erode. Eventually, the union decided to invite undocumented immigrants into its ranks. This decision not only reduced Black-Latino tensions, it increased their collective power by changing how the two groups were situated relative to each other and to their employers. This joint effort was able to bring Janitors wages back up to \$6.80 per hour with full family benefits. Unfortunately, by the time new agreements were made, most African American janitors had left that sector.

More recently, SEIU janitors, who are now mostly Latino, have been instrumental in raising standards for the mostly African American security officers who work in the same buildings. The security officers are now organized in their own union, SEIU SOULA (Security Officers United of Los Angeles)ⁱ.

The outcome of changing the structure of the union revealed the silent structure that had been operating to divide workers. The real beneficiaries from tensions among workers were the corporations, not the workers. By joining forces, the workers' situation was changed, interests were changed, and the structure was changed.

¹ SEIU and Closs, W. (2010) *Justice for Janitors: A Look Back and A Look Forward – 20 Years of Organizing Janitors*. Retrieved from <http://www.seiu.org/a/justice-for-janitors/justice-for-janitors-20-years-of-organizing.php>

Silent Structures that Divide

Instructions: With members of your community, think through the following questions.

EXAMPLE: SEIU JANITORS FOR JUSTICE

A. Are there tensions between groups in your organization or community? Who benefits **most** from these tensions?

African Americans and Latinos in our community weren't getting along: African American janitors' jobs were threatened by undocumented, immigrant Latino/a workers, and undocumented, immigrant workers were not allowed to join the Union. This was creating tension between African American and Latino/a citizens. The building owners were benefiting from these tensions because they could force wages down.

B. Are any of these tensions structural? Are there ways that you could remove or reduce these tensions by changing the structures? (i.e. change membership requirements, so that interests and structure change)

Many of these tensions were structural. When SEIU changed membership requirements so that undocumented immigrants could join the union, Latino and African American workers united their efforts to protect job security and wages. Now the janitors (mostly Latino) are working to organize the security guards (mostly African American) who work in the same buildings.

Developing Strategies for Intervention

Matching Problem Analysis with Intervention

Instructions: Referring to the discussion of *dignified working conditions*, think about different levels of analysis you could use to understand the problem. Brainstorm possible interventions for each level of analysis. Try to focus your efforts on Institutional and Structural levels for this exercise.

EXAMPLE: NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

Level of Analysis:	Problem:	Intervention:
Internalized <i>Beliefs within individuals</i>	<i>Domestic Workers don't always value their work and themselves.</i>	<i>Leadership development, story telling to lift up and validate experiences and the importance of their work.</i>
Interpersonal <i>Bigotry between individuals</i>	<i>Domestic workers treated badly by their employers. Lack power, work in isolation, often new to U.S.</i>	<i>Make sure that domestic workers know their rights, how to document unfair treatment, service to find better employment when necessary.</i>
Institutional <i>Bias within an agency, school, etc.</i>	<i>Long history of employer abuse of domestic workers in the U.S. Domestic workers are often recent immigrants and don't have language skills needed to get help.</i>	<i>Raise awareness about the importance of domestic work & dignified work conditions. Make it socially unacceptable to abuse workers through demonstrations, lawsuits, etc.</i>
Structural <i>Cumulative among institutions, throughout society</i>	<i>Federal policies exclude domestic workers from collective bargaining and other worker's rights, a continuation of the U.S.'s racialization of domestic and agricultural labor. Many domestic workers' immigration status is precarious and thus, workers are at risk if they seek help.</i>	<i>Federal labor and immigration policies must be changed to give domestic workers the same rights as other workers and other people who reside in the U.S. Advocacy on this issue must target domestic workers, employers, and policy makers on community, state, federal, and international levels.</i>

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