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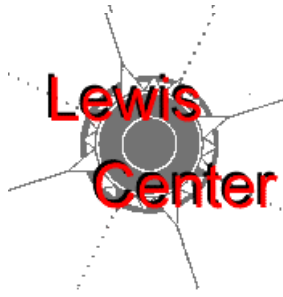
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***Helots No More: A Case Study of the
Justice for Janitors Campaign in Los Angeles***

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INTRODUCTION

On June 15, 1990, striking janitors and their supporters held a peaceful march and demonstration in the tony Century City district of Los Angeles, where Local 399 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was seeking a union contract for the workers who clean the huge, glittering office towers that dominate this part of the city. The SEIU's "Justice for Janitors" (JfJ) campaign had been underway in LA for about two years, and this was one of many such demonstrations that had been launched over that period. But this time, the LA police brutally attacked the marchers, seriously wounding several people and causing a pregnant woman to miscarry. Organizers had initially feared that the police violence might put an end to their effort, instead it proved a turning point in the campaign to unionize LA's janitors, most of them immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Widespread outrage at the police action, both locally and in SEIU offices around the country, led International Service Systems (ISS), the cleaning contractor for nearly all of the Century City buildings, to sign a union contract soon afterward. It was the largest private sector organizing success among Latino immigrants since the United Farm Workers' victories nearly two decades earlier.

Southern California hardly seemed a likely setting for this drama. Never as strong as in the northern part of the state, organized labor in the region had lost legions of well-paid, blue-collar members in the 1970s and 1980s. With the decline of heavy industry, first in the civilian sector and later in defense, union density in this massive manufacturing center had declined sharply. Meanwhile, a new world of labor had emerged in LA: a burgeoning immigrant population employed in low-skilled, low-paying manufacturing and service jobs. For a while, it seemed that the advent of these new helots would still any protest: so long as the newcomers compared a minimum-wage job in the garment center to an unyielding plot of land in Mexico's central plateau, not to mention a visit from El Salvador's death squads, employers could count on their workers' quiescence.

But the tide now seems to be turning, with militant union activity among newcomers in a variety of industries suggesting that the days of the immigrant helots are over. Emblematic of this shift is the JfJ campaign, which successfully re-organized the building services industry, ultimately bringing over 8000 largely immigrant workers under a union contract, in what has become a model for JfJ's national organizing efforts. This paper analyzes the recent growth of janitorial unionism in LA against the background of the previous history of unionism's rise and decline in the city's building service industry, asking how and why JfJ succeeded in LA, and whether its success will last.

ORIGINS AND EARLY GROWTH

JfJ may be a bright new star on the otherwise dim labor firmament, but in many ways organizing janitors today does not differ much from the circumstances under which JfJ's parent organization, then called the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), first emerged in Chicago

in 1920. The union's "founding members were drawn from society's poorest ranks. Then as now, building service workers were disproportionately first- and second-generation Americans and minority workers" (Service Employees International Union 1992: 1). Of course, this continuity begs the very question with which this paper is concerned, namely how poor immigrant workers built a successful and enduring organization. Historically, the phenomenon of immigrant organizing is not an oddity, but the labor historiography does not usually suggest that an old-line AFL union like the Building Service Employees would grow by recruiting "the dregs" -- as one veteran union official put it (Piore 1994: 529).

Whatever the original impetus to organize, the BSEIU took on many of the defining characteristics of the old AFL. Among them were high levels of local autonomy, on the one hand, and a relatively weak, underfinanced, thinly staffed International, on the other -- the reverse of what we have seen in the organizing of janitors today. Locals were autonomous in part because building services was a local industry: the employers were the building owners, most of whom were hometown capitalists, so that the relevant market had relatively narrow geographical bounds.

In the 1930s, with the depression as the catalyst for expansion, the union spread beyond Chicago. New York organized in 1934; San Francisco followed shortly thereafter; and from that bastion of labor radicalism, janitorial unionism was exported to LA just after World War II. At that time, Local 399 recruited in-house janitors who cleaned downtown buildings housing the entertainment and financial industries, as well as movie theaters.

Starting in the 1950s, commercial real estate took on a different ownership mix, with local owners increasingly replaced by national and even international investors. These new owners found it more efficient to purchase cleaning services from specialized vendors, rather than directly organizing a cleaning workforce in their diverse and scattered buildings. Initially, the advent of contracting had an adverse effect on Local 399's membership, but the structure of the industry was such that the union was able to recoup its losses. The largest cleaning company, American Building Maintenance, was 100 percent unionized; the union successfully concentrated its efforts on other large janitorial firms. As the city grew, the union chased the employers, gradually recruiting workers beyond downtown, first in the Wilshire Corridor, and then elsewhere on the west side of the city and in various pockets of the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys. By the mid-1970s, nearly all of the large downtown buildings were under union contract, as were most of the large buildings in Hollywood, Pasadena, and Santa Monica (Mines and Avina 1992).

This expansion allowed Local 399 to significantly upgrade conditions. The workforce had been deployed largely on a part-time basis until the mid-1960s, but then the union successfully pressured the companies for full-time jobs. The next decade was the union's heyday, with membership peaking at about 5000 in 1978. But, as Richard Mines and Jeffrey Avina (1992: 436) note in a case study of California's janitors written before the rise of JfJ:

Neither the union leadership nor its militant labor force. . .[was] entirely satisfied with the job conditions that prevailed in 1975. Wages had more than doubled from those available a decade before, but still were only \$3.75 an hour. Members also felt that benefits were too low and an eight-hour day too long.

Consequently, the local pushed hard to further improve conditions and compensation. Between 1976 and 1983, union wages rose an average of 50 cents a year. Union contractors ultimately provided a benefit package that included 11 paid holidays and full medical, dental, vision, and prescription coverage. By 1982, total compensation in the union sector had risen above \$12 an hour, as opposed to \$4 an hour in the non-union buildings.

DECLINE

But then the bottom fell out. By 1985, janitorial membership had fallen to 1800, a sharp drop from the peak of the late 1970s. The sources of decline were various. First of all, the local's push to improve conditions and compensation motivated cleaning contractors to explore non-union options. Cleaning is highly labor-intensive, with direct labor making up the single largest part of a company's expenses. Moreover, the unionized part of the industry -- the larger, more heavily capitalized firms -- was under particular cost pressure. Big operators suffer from discontinuous economies of scale; once a firm meets a certain size/asset threshold (needed to cover large payroll and insurance costs), there are few economies of scale, and none on the labor side (Building Service Contractors' Association International 1994). As the head of one unionized firm put it, "There's no leverage on the basic product: labor." Nor can contractors easily pass on wage increases to building owners, for whom maintenance is the third-costliest operating expense, behind insurance and utilities. Thus the industry is fiercely competitive. As one informant told us:

"You see buildings charge [cleaning contractors] over half a penny per square foot." The profit margin is very narrow, maybe 3-5%, which means that there's not much room for contractors to play with. A nickel an hour increase can kill profits; they have to go to the building owner, who can say "I don't care whether you've signed a union contract, you're out of here and I'm bringing in XYZ contractor"

The industry's previous drift away from building owner-management made for increasingly fragile relationships. Owners write contracts so as to permit very short notice of termination -- often within the space of a month. Consequently, union members can lose work almost overnight if a building owner switches from a union to a non-union service.

Under these circumstances, motivation and opportunity made for murder. By early 1983, as Mines and Avina recount, "a small group of mid-sized, aggressive firms sensed the union's vulnerability

and made their move." Some of the new operators were actually veteran managers, with experience in large, unionized firms. Others were direct or indirect offshoots of a unionized parent, dressed up in non-union garb. Whatever the provenance, the new, non-union entities proved to be formidable competitors. Cheaper, more flexible labor arrangements helped: whereas the non-union contractors could import large part-time crews at minimum wages to clean a building quickly, the unionized firms, bound to their full-time, relatively well-paid workers, were bound to charge more to clean the same space. Cheating didn't hurt: one worker told us that she received eight hours' pay, in cash, for twelve hours work, and the clipping file is filled with many similar incidents.

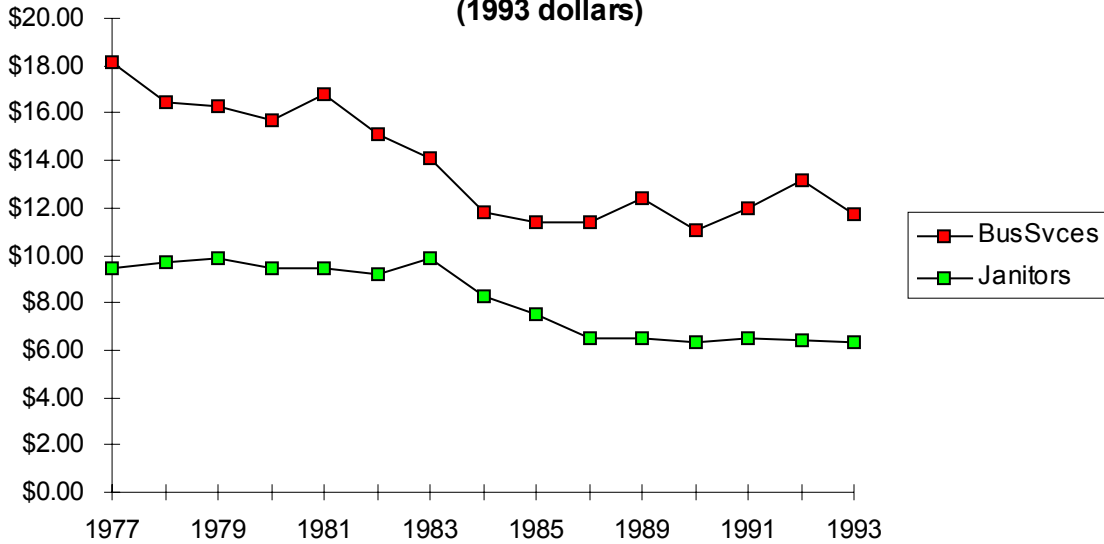
The local tried to fight back with the election route, but to little avail. There was "a period when we were trying to respond, when we were doing board elections in the 1970s," one union informant told us. "You'd get one unit in one building, but you'd never get a contract." The last master agreement was signed in 1983; shortly afterward, all increases in wages and benefits were frozen because the city was going non-union. The desire to retain members at any price led to a proliferation of concession-ridden side agreements, so that by the late 1980s, as one union organizer recalled:

A contractor would come in and say, "I'm about to lose such and such a building. You gotta give me a break on the health and welfare, and I'm sure I can keep it if I just get that break on the health and welfare." So there'd be then, all of a sudden, a side agreement for such and such a building. . . [by the late 1980s] there were maybe 50 buildings left union and 50 separate agreements. Most people hadn't had a wage increase since '83, most people in fact had their wages cut because almost all the buildings got rolled back.

Only downtown retained a unionized workforce of measurable proportions, and even there, union ranks barely attained 30 percent. County-wide the situation was more dismal still, with barely one janitor in ten a member of Local 399. The union had failed to keep up with the city's rapid growth. In the 1980s, downtown LA -- until then, a collection of old, obsolete structures -- underwent an extraordinary building boom, and office construction in the outlying areas grew even faster. But it was not simply that union density fell as the industry grew; the *absolute* number of janitors in Local 399 also declined. The local had been recruiting Kaiser hospital workers during this period, however, so that its total membership continued to grow. But its janitorial membership was hemorrhaging, as employers mounted their counterattack. And with the union all but broken, wages plummeted, as Figure 1 shows.¹

¹ The figure shows earnings in constant dollars for Los Angeles County from two different series, which overlap only in part. One illustrates the trends for *all* workers in the building services industry, from payroll data reported in the annual *County Business Patterns*; a second illustrates the trends for all *janitors* in private sector, non-manufacturing, from the annual Bureau of Labor Statistics wage survey. We suspect that the BLS data are more accurate, and they are certainly closer to the very modest \$6.80 minimum that Local 399's contract currently guarantees. In any case, both series present a consistent picture of precipitous decline occurring in the early 1980s, just when Local 399 fell upon very bad times.

**Figure 1: Wages, Janitors, Building Services, LA, 1977-1993
(1993 dollars)**



Source: Business Services: County Business Patterns; Janitors: Area Wage Survey, Occupational Compensation Survey

ENTER THE IMMIGRANTS

Scratch a low-paid service worker, find an immigrant -- so it goes in the evolving caste society that is late twentieth century LA. But even southern California once looked different -- and not so long ago. In 1970, service work was still largely the province of the region's African American population, which had expanded substantially during the prior twenty-five years. African Americans then made up 33 percent of the region's janitors -- which means that they were over-represented by a factor of 4.6. In contrast, Latino immigrants were a small presence, accounting for barely 7 out of every 100 janitors. Though a menial job, janitorial work was beginning to generate economic dividends for its black incumbents: up until the early 1980s, African Americans comprised half of Local 399's members, and they were both the cause and the beneficiaries of the improvements in compensation that the local delivered during the 1960s and 1970s (Grant, Oliver and James 1996).

But now immigrants were moving into southern California, and it was they who would supply the workforce for the emerging non-union cleaning contractors. Eight percent of the region's population had been foreign-born in 1960; thirty years later, the proportion was 27 percent, with an immigrant concentration 10 percentage points higher in the city of LA, where Local 399 has its employment base. Moreover, the immigration flow accelerated rapidly during the 1980s -- precisely the period in which the non-union sector of the industry began to burgeon. As of 1990, more than half the region's immigrants comprised those who had arrived within the preceding decade; and more than half of these recent arrivals had moved to LA during the final three years of the decade. LA also

attracted a distinctive immigrant mix, with a relatively large number of undocumented individuals and a disproportionate number of newcomers with very low levels of education. The region accounted for a third of all the undocumented immigrants estimated to have been counted in the 1980 census and for roughly the same proportion of the population who obtained amnesty under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996).

Like immigrants everywhere, newcomers to LA gravitated to the jobs where their kin and hometown friends were employed. By 1970, there was already a significant presence of Latinos among the city's janitors, although the absolute level of employment was still relatively small. But even without initial contacts, the expanding janitorial occupation was an easy port of entry for immigrants with little formal education, in part due to its casual hiring practices. "In our industry, they go into a building and ask the foreman, do you need any janitors?" one informant explained, They work a week and then get an application."

The job had an additional attraction, namely the relative security it offered for undocumented immigrants fearful of the INS. Since janitors work at night, in small numbers, and in buildings likely to be locked up after business hours, the industry was a time-absorbing, inconvenient target from the standpoint of the INS; far better a single day's raid on a factory with 200 workers, than a series of nights spent on sweeps on scattered buildings from which even a Federal agent was likely to be locked out.

Meanwhile, as wages fell and the union's power waned, blacks moved out of the occupation. And with lower wages came higher turnover: "Companies figure on 50 percent turnover," one of our informants claimed. Thus employers did not have to strain to replace established workers with newcomers. "It wasn't that they would actually fire the blacks; [but] with attrition, the replacement pool was Latinos." Mines and Avina comment:

US-born janitors strongly resent low wages and excessive managerial supervision.

In 1984, Doral [a non-union firm] broke with past practices of hiring exclusively Hispanic immigrants in order to acquire a government contract requiring domestic workers. The firm complained of 75 percent monthly turnover and had difficulty fulfilling the contract. (Mines and Avina 1992: 433)

But these reports should not be read as aversion to janitorial work as such; after all, the occupation of janitor remains the single largest occupational concentration for LA's black population (Grant, Oliver and James 1996). The public sector, moreover, held on to its black workforce. Money was surely a factor here, as government always paid its janitorial employees better than the private sector. And though employed in a menial occupation, black janitors were relatively well-educated -- more than half possessed a high school degree or more as of 1990 -- which must have made the prospects of deteriorating pay and conditions in the private sector all the more unattractive.

"The non-union firms almost exclusively hired Latinos," explained one union organizer. That the immigrants would work for lower wages was only part of the motivation to recruit among the foreign-born: "I think 'cheap' was less of a question as sort of 'cheap' in addition to 'controllable.'" By virtue of its past history, Local 399 was ill-equipped to respond to the influx of a new type of worker. "The union had done a good job of being representative of membership and had black reps. Then the industry switched to Latino workers and disconnected the work force from the union because the union couldn't fire its reps the way management could change its workforce." As in other situations, the contacts between veterans and newcomers gave employers greater freedom to deploy a more exploitable labor force as they wished. As Mines and Avina explain, the new middle-sized contractors that emerged in the late 1970s delegated decision-making power to Latino crew leaders, who recruited, hired, fired, and paid workers. In some cases, the contractors created a piece-rate payment scheme, taking advantage of the immigrants' desire to maximize short-term earnings in order to expedite the return home. The use of immigrant networks could also reduce turnover, while also providing ready access to new labor as needed.

At the outset, new arrivals from Mexico furnished the bulk of the immigrant recruits streaming into the industry. By the early 1980s, however, events in Central America yielded a new element, as refugees fleeing civil war and violence in El Salvador and Guatemala began converging on LA. The region's Central American population, which had grown from 43,400 in 1970 to 147,500 in 1980, quadrupled over the next decade. The Central Americans quickly filtered into janitorial work, for all the reasons noted above, plus one: geographical proximity to the city's Pico-Union neighborhood, which became the principal point of absorption for the newest arrivals to the city. It was walking distance from the downtown office complex and also convenient to the bus routes to Century City and other office centers on the city's west side. As one union organizer told us, "People traveled from Pico-Union to Century City down Olympic Boulevard. The buses were filled with janitors in the afternoon and at 2 a.m." By 1990, Central Americans were over-represented among the region's janitors by a factor of 3.7, compared to 2.4 for Mexican immigrants (Lopez, Popkin and Telles 1996).

By 1990, then, the face of janitorial work in LA had been utterly transformed. Spurred by the building boom of the 1980s -- one third of LA's office space was built after 1980 -- the industry burgeoned, employing 28,883 janitors by 1990, more than twice as many as in 1980. As Table 1 shows, almost all of the new jobs went to Latino immigrants, whose share of employment rose from 28 to 61 percent. Among the newcomers, Central Americans grabbed the biggest gain; by 1990, Central Americans comprised 26 percent of the workforce, just under the 31 percent share held by the Mexican foreign-born. The industry's expansion meant that net black employment essentially held steady. But relatively, (native-born) blacks slipped badly, declining from 31 to 12 percent of the workforce. Native-born whites also lost share, dropping from 24 to 11 percent.

TABLE 1: ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF JANITORIAL WORKFORCE

	<i>Private Sector</i>				<i>Public Sector</i>	
	Building Services		Other Private		1980	1990
	1980	1990	1980	1990		
Hispanic						
Native	8.91%	7.03%	10.44%	8.91%	16.97%	16.06%
Foreign	28.36%	60.63%	29.81%	54.21%	9.17%	19.61%
Asian						
Native	0.16%	0.59%	1.29%	1.13%	0.36%	0.75%
Foreign	4.54%	4.86%	2.79%	4.54%	2.18%	3.66%
Black						
Native	30.63%	12.15%	20.92%	12.08%	40.38%	38.89%
Foreign	0.49%	0.53%	0.39%	0.35%	0.45%	0.34%
White						
Native	23.66%	11.44%	30.15%	16.09%	27.22%	17.51%
Foreign	2.27%	2.26%	3.78%	2.02%	2.27%	1.96%
Total employment	12,340	28,803	46,560	58,333	22,040	19,369

The influx of immigrants coincided with a change in the gender composition of the janitorial workforce, presumably also a result of the occupation's dramatically reduced wage rates. "Early on," as one union organizer told us, "the non-union workforce was more female." In 1980, 60 percent of the Central American janitors were women; the huge gains made over the next ten years left that ratio virtually unchanged. Women comprised 30 percent of Mexican immigrant janitors in 1980, and this grew to 43 percent a decade later. Meanwhile, among those black workers still in the occupation, the proportion of women actually fell, even as earnings for the shrinking pool of black janitors rose. The industry did poorly by all the women it recruited: between 1980 and 1990 real earnings declined substantially among women of all ethnic groups, yielding a universally large male/female earnings differential (US Census Bureau 1990).

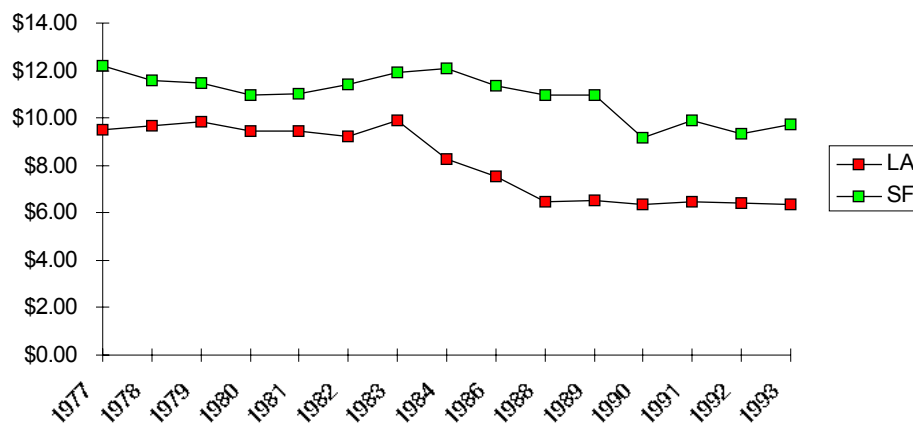
In this situation, there were many obstacles to union organizing. In building services, as in so many other immigrant-employing industries, network recruiting served both to mobilize labor and to keep it under control. Front line supervisors often oversaw their relatives. One union activist described a foreman who employed his brother and his cousin and "treated them well." Regardless of ties to kin and relatives, the ethnic mix often proved combustible, as Central Americans and Mexicans did not always perceive the affinity that labor solidarity would prescribe. "I've been into buildings where the Salvadorans and the Mexicanos don't like each other," explained one experienced, Mexican-born union organizer, "and they hate and they are separate and they eat separate."

Gender differences were another complicating factor, though not in the stereotypical way: "Women took the lead in Century City," explained a lead organizer. "Men were the meeting folks; women were the action folks." Still, it was not always easy for women to take action, especially as many often worked a day job as housecleaners. The influence of *machismo* and the prevalence of patriarchal family relations was another stumbling block. As the same organizer explained, "Sometimes for the Latino women, if they're married, you have to sometimes be sensitive to start talking to the men. Sometimes you have to organize the husband and then the wife comes around." The immigrant influx coincided with Local 399's troubles, but it would be misleading to suggest a causal link. The building services industry recruited immigrants in virtually every city where they were to be found, but with quite varying consequences for both wages and union shares. In New York, for example, immigrants comprised 60 percent of the building service workforce, just under the level in LA; nonetheless, the immigrants in New York's building services industry earn \$7,000 more than their counterparts in LA (U.S. Census Bureau 1990) and New York never experienced the deunionization of janitors that LA suffered in the 1980s. Closer to home, San Francisco also saw an immigrant infusion, but wages and union density did not take the battering they did in LA. As Figure 2 shows, San Francisco janitors always enjoyed higher wages than their LA counterparts, but the early 1980s saw janitors' wages in LA slip even further behind.

THE UNION RETURNS TO TOWN

While Local 399 was crashing, its parent was taking on a new form. SEIU had grown during the 1960s and 1970s, largely through diversification into health care and public sector jurisdictions. In the first years of the Sweeney regime (which began in 1980) these trends continued. But before long, as Michael Piore has recounted, Sweeney "transformed the organization, especially after

Figure 2: Janitors' Wages, LA and SF (1993 dollars)



Source: Area Wage Survey, Occupational Compensation Survey

1984." He doubled the per capita tax, historically the lowest in the AFL-CIO, and increased the national staff from 20 to more than 200 between 1984 and 1988. The new staff members were

recruited from the ranks of the not-so-new left; as few unions were hiring staff during the 1980s, the SEIU "had its pick of these 'new' labor militants," in Piore's view. These changes were part of a new organizational structure and strategy, one that Piore (1994: 524, 528) characterizes as follows:

The planning process the SEIU has instituted involves considerable staff and leadership training. And another distinguishing characteristic of the SEIU [has] been its willingness to invest in this training. Ironically, and most notably, the union has contracted with the American Management Association to provide it. . . . It is an integrated structure, self-consciously devised and instituted by Sweeney and his staff. The ideas that underlie it were drawn from the business management literature. The staff read widely in the business press and the more scholarly literature as well. Their single most important source was probably the *Harvard Business Review*.

In effect, the institutional changes made the SEIU a more sophisticated and more militant union, and infused it with at least some of the spirit of the old CIO.

But it was not until the mid-1980s that the SEIU focused its efforts on its home base -- building services. Though the founding locals (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco) were still holding fast, the rest of the building services division was in deep trouble, losing ground to non-union competitors and getting battered by unionized employers in search of concessions. What is now a codified set of campaign practices under the rubric of "Justice for Janitors" emerged gradually. The name emerged in a "fight back" struggle in Pittsburgh, in which the local SEIU successfully defeated employer efforts to wring concessions with the "in-your-face, confrontational militant direct action" that has since become JfJ's trademark. The first offensive campaign, in Denver, came shortly afterward. As one organizer recounted:

We went to Denver in 1986. It was a real small city, with a part time workforce of 1200 downtown. We did it in one year. That was the first laboratory for our campaign. It was non-Board, a matter of diving in, raising enough hell in the downtown Denver area that the industry caved. A lot of demonstrations, legal stuff, wage and hour stuff, OSHA standards. What we did in LA was based on what we did in Denver. Denver became the model. Denver was the first place where we utilized the method and got new members.

JfJ arrived in southern California in 1988, but not without trepidation, if only because "It was really huge. . . going from little Denver to monstrous LA was like, 'are we ready for this?'" The campaign began in the downtown area, taking responsibility for both representing the remaining union base and organizing the nearby non-union buildings.

Our first effort was to go out and meet the workers, build committees, get people

pumped up and . . . do some education around. . . Look across the street. Look down the street. Those are all non-union buildings, and as long as there's more of them than there are of us [you]'re not going to be able to get the wages and work conditions.

The plan involved targeting the non-union wings of the "double-breasted" companies (firms with both union and non-union operations under different names) and taking advantage of internal company competition, by letting the unionized companies pick up work at low rates, with the understanding that they would move to union standards once half of the market had been organized. But before the union could launch its attack on the non-union cleaning contractors downtown, it stumbled onto another target -- the Gas Company, which had suddenly abandoned its decade-long practice of contracting cleaning to a unionized firm. Not a good strategic fight, it was nonetheless one in which the union "could pull in a lot of allies." As a regulated utility, the Gas Company could neither run nor hide, and the union successfully generated negative publicity to force the company to defend itself. Materially, the campaign failed to generate a win: the Gas Company rehired all of the original janitors as in-house workers, making them members of the Utility Workers Union, as a result of which they lost up to 30 years of seniority. But the organizers learned some valuable lessons:

The fight was very good as a laboratory for us, from an organizational perspective. It was really important that the staff and the organization get an experimental base of awareness of how to do this. We gained an awareness of how to learn from one another. Because this was a really focused fight in the heart of LA it was a great way to get started. It was a good place to be creative.

With the Gas Company campaign behind it, JfJ returned to its original target, Century Cleaning, a small local player with union and non-union components and an owner whom "they could get a handle on. In some respects, the campaign proceeded along traditional lines: contacting workers, making house calls, signing cards, identifying leaders in both the union and non-union buildings. Otherwise, the game plan was different. Most importantly, there was no expectation that the drive would eventuate in an election. Part of the thinking on this matter reflected what has since come to be a counter-conventional wisdom: Elections are controlled by the bosses and set up for them. It's an alienating process for workers, and takes the concept of power between workers and bosses and separates the union from the workers. The union *is* the workers. But the aversion to traditional procedures was also influenced by considerations specific to the industry, namely an awareness that the employer was little more than a straw boss, and that decision-making power lay in the hands of the property-owners, whose interests the Board process concealed and protected. As one union organizer put it:

We can have an election with cleaning contractors, and the building owner has a right to change cleaning contractor at any time. And you can't file a ULP against a building owner, since he's not the employer. . .so there's nothing about a board

decision that allows us to go after the people who have power in the market.

While the Century campaign never ended up reaching the people who have power in the market, it successfully engaged the company on a variety of fronts. One involved the in-your-face protests for which JfJ has since become well known, doing street theater at a well-known restaurant that Century's owner frequented, or taking a group of workers to the owner's golf club where they "raised a ruckus, chanting and screaming. They got all freaked out, of course, it's not what they're used to at the country club."

But the union also learned that it didn't take a contract to redefine the relationship with the company. JfJ pressured the employer by activating agencies, such as CalOSHA or the other state agencies charged with worker protection, but that had heretofore turned a blind eye to contractors' lack of compliance with the law. Incidents like when a building manager had to come down at 11 p.m. because OSHA inspectors were there proved that the union could effectively intervene for workers without a contract, and in ways that reduced employers' leverage. Similar tactics could be used with the NLRB. If we got a company to take a warning out of a file, that was a tremendous victory, one organizer recalled.

In the end, the continuing battle took Century's owner out of the fight, with the union redefining victory as: "if the owner would bounce Century Cleaning from the building -- a claim that was not entirely hollow since some of Century's contracts slipped to union firms. The next major target, Bradford, the non-union wing of the national firm American Building Maintenance, proved a formidable enemy -- in part, because its president was vehemently anti-union; in part, simply because of its larger size. Yet the campaign registered slow but steady progress. By April 1989, Local 399 had negotiated a master agreement, the first in downtown LA since the early 1980s.

Then, in the summer of 1989 the campaign's focus shifted to Century City. Although the decision to target the area was made before the union realized that of the 400 janitors working there, 250 were employed by a single cleaning contractor, ISS, this proved a big advantage. "One victory in downtown meant one building; whereas in Century City, if we can get one owner to go union, we're going to take the whole thing," an organizer explained. "But also it meant they had a lot more investment in fighting us. So it was a knock-down drag-out battle." In addition to the concentration of ISS-cleaned buildings, the union found the geography of the area worked in its favor as well:

The other good thing about Century City, which we hadn't found in downtown, was that there was sort of a natural organization already, because people all rode the buses together from Pico-Union. Plus it was a sort of self-contained area. At lunch time downtown, there's like six or seven lunch trucks that circulate around to all the different buildings; in Century City, there's one lunch truck, and everybody goes there, or they bring their own food. It had just a natural sense of organization, with

everyone working for one company. So we started working with the people out there. . .

JfJ marshaled a variety of tactics to put pressure on ISS. As one janitor told the *Los Angeles Times*, "the strategy is attack, attack, attack." (Nazario 1993) For example, knowing that ISS was an international company based in Denmark, the union arranged for a visiting delegation of Danish trade unionists to meet workers involved in the organizing effort, and to witness firsthand the hostility of the employer. "We couldn't have paid for a better experience for these guys to take back home to go meet with the head of ISS and say, 'I don't know what you're doing in the U.S. but we don't like it. . .' you know," an organizer recalled. The whole thing is to get the people with power to make decisions to feel the pressure." As it had done downtown earlier on, JfJ also staged various "in your face" publicity stunts to draw the attention of Century City building tenants to the janitors' plight. "The denizens of Century City were not interested in having a bunch of Latino janitors out there in the day time screaming and yelling. It's fine for us to come in at night and clean their buildings, but they didn't want to look us in the face during the daytime." Indeed, tenants often complained to building managers about JfJ activities, indirectly intensifying the pressure on ISS. Other tactics took a different approach to win public sympathy.

We did a lot of marches and demonstrations. I remember we did a Secretaries' Day demonstration where we brought huge boxes of carnations, thousands of them, and we passed them out as a sort of token of appreciation from janitors to secretaries. We said, "There's been five demonstrations, it's probably very difficult for you, but we ask for your support as we fight for our rights." And it turned out to have a positive impact, because you know, here are these people that make nothing, that come in and clean up every night, and they're giving us flowers! What are we doing for them?

In 1990, as union support grew stronger among the rank-and-file, "we started talking about whether we could do a general strike in Century City, could we pull one off? This was something we had never tried before." The union took a strike vote and announced the results through ads in the local newspapers, explaining that employer intransigence gave the union no alternative but to strike. Then, on May 29, "we pulled the buildings -- everybody that we could pull." From that point on, the pace of activity escalated sharply.

The rule was, if you're on strike, you have to come out and do actions. We had daily actions, every morning we walked along the median strip with human billboards, traffic was really tied up. And on some days we had big actions. On the first big one, we stormed through every single building in Century City, every single one. We had a lot of community people, it was about three or four hundred people. We went marching through the buildings, chanting and banging on drums, saying, "What do

we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" Pretty simple, straightforward things. . . The LAPD called a citywide tactical alert that day. They just completely freaked out. They were getting panicked calls from every building in Century City, which was the power center of the westside, and in some ways the power center of the city.

This set the stage for the events of June 15, when the LA police attacked a peaceful march of JFI strikers and supporters as they walked from nearby Beverly Hills to Century City. In full view of the media, and recorded on videotape, the police charged the crowd, injuring many, including children and pregnant women. Organizers feared that workers would be intimidated into a retreat, but at a strikers' meeting shortly after the event, it became clear that the police action had only strengthened workers' resolve. "It was like, ' Let's go back on Monday. Put the word out, we're going back on Monday, and we're going to be bigger, we're going to be badder! You can't scare us out of Century City.'" This was not the organizers' message to the workers, this was the workers' message to the union.

Public outrage at the police attack (this was before the Rodney King beating) also added fuel to the campaign. Then-mayor Tom Bradley came under pressure to act. And in New York, after seeing a video of the LA police beating strikers, Gus Bevona, the powerful president of SEIU Local 32B-32J, previously unwilling to exert any pressure on ISS, which was unionized in New York, was moved to lend a hand.

Bevona called the President of ISS (headquartered in New York) into his office, and after making him wait in the front office for two and a half hours, threatened that if he didn't recognize the LA union, all hell would break loose. The contract with ISS was signed that day.

We lack evidence on the motivations that led Bevona to act when and as he did. But bringing ISS to the table undoubtedly involved the expenditure of considerable political capital. As one Local 399 official told us, "People are always calling him [Bevona] up saying, 'I can't solve my own problem, you solve it for me.' He's a powerful guy in New York, but there is just so much he can do." In this case, successful mobilization in LA created the context in which Bevona was motivated to cash in his chips. And without that mobilization, pressure from afar would not have had much impact:

Gus Bevona could have done this earlier. But if we weren't in a position to hang on to our membership, if the building owners said, "We don't care what Gus Bevona says, you're out of here," there's not much that Gus Bevona can do about real estate developers in LA. . . Unless we're in a position where we can use that help it would have been a meaningless gesture on his part.

With ISS brought to its knees, JfJ won the battle for Century City, and this in turn paved the way for other successes in LA and nationwide.

THE INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESS

As in any social movement success, many factors -- some of them unique to the particular moment -- combined to produce victory. But we can identify three key ingredients in JfJ's dramatic success in LA: centralized union leadership; an industry-specific strategy and tactics; and the presence of a critical mass of class conscious immigrant workers. The first two elements are typical of JfJ nationwide, and indeed the campaign also succeeded in some cities where immigrants were not present in large numbers. However, JfJ's more spectacular showing in LA was due to a special dynamic created by the presence of vast numbers of immigrants from Central America and Mexico in its janitorial labor force.

Centralization

JfJ is widely seen as a bottom-up campaign. That it is, but it also has a crucial top-down component. In part, the importance of centralization comes down to a matter of dollars and cents and the "money thing," as one organizer explained "is not cheap by any stretch of the imagination." While SEIU has its origins in AFL unionism of the most traditional, decentralized type, it has since evolved a different structure, which effectively redistributes resources from organized to unorganized workers. The *Wall Street Journal* (Ybarra 1994) reports that 25 percent of SEIU's budget goes to organizing, as opposed to an average of 5 percent for the rest of organized labor, and only passing familiarity with the JfJ campaign indicates why. The campaign is labor-intensive, requiring substantial personnel. The staff includes at least one researcher, from whom there can be no immediate payoff. It involves a substantial legal component, costly in itself. And the high-visibility tactics are also high-risk tactics, especially when the union runs up against owners or developers with particularly deep pockets. Its Atlanta campaign landed SEIU in a legal battle with John Portman, who sued for \$435,000 in damages, for example (although this matter was eventually settled out of court).

While only the International would be likely to possess the resources required for such a campaign, a fat treasury is not sufficient. In addition, the campaign requires perseverance. The payoffs are always uncertain; they were surely more so at the early stages when no one could have known how things would turn out. After the first two years of organizing in LA (prior to the Century City breakthrough), the yield was not very promising -- namely, the addition of only a handful of buildings' janitors to the union fold, at the price of half a million dollars a year.

Moreover, local leadership has been less than enthusiastic; indeed, effective organization has often

meant taking matters out of local leaders' hands. "The leadership in 1987 was old school, conservative," reflected one of the lead JfJ organizers on the mood at the onset of the campaign. "There was concern that they would bail when things got hot." Indeed, the local head of 399's building division was completely cut out of any responsibility for organizing, and JfJ became the downtown building service union, with responsibility for organizing and representation. Political problems were not slow to develop, especially with the local picking up a large share of the tab.

While X [the former head of the Building Service Division] was inside the local, in his own way, there was a lot of red-baiting. I'd be at the computer writing a leaflet and he would say, "Where's that going. . .Moscow?" He would always ask, "How many workers have you brought on, organizers?"

In early 1989, the LA local put a halt to its material support for the campaign, and had the International not intervened by "picking up the whole kit and caboodle," it is unlikely that janitorial unionism in LA would have developed as it has.

Nor is LA unique in this regard. JfJ has frequently been exported through trusteeships, which were imposed on the San Diego, Atlanta, San Jose and Santa Clara locals. One seasoned union source with experience in several cities reported that local staff and leaders were frequently resistant to the JfJ model, and often threw up roadblocks to organizing. While local conservatism may reflect economic considerations, other factors are also likely to be in play: it is not difficult to imagine that an incumbent leadership will opt for the status quo, especially in light of the political ramifications of a sudden infusion of new, possibly ethnically distinctive, members.

Thus a centralized structure which allowed the International to bypass local decision-makers and make direct investments in organizing was a necessary condition of JfJ's success. On the other hand, it was not a sufficient condition: the very considerable resources that the International devoted to organizing could have been misspent.

Strategy and Tactics

JfJ's basic strategy is to seek control over all the key players in a local labor market, with the goal of taking labor costs out of competition. "One industry, one union, one contract" is the slogan on a union leaflet. JfJ seeks to compel employers "to fight *on our terms*, not theirs" -- as Stephen Lerner, former director of Building Service Organizing for the SEIU and the architect of the strategy, has described the basic plan (Lerner 1991: 8). If management is not unappreciative of just how much that strategy has changed the rules of the game -- "brilliant" was the term used by one informant to describe the union's modus operandi -- it understandably describes the strategy in somewhat different terms. "You can't fight the SEIU in the gutter. They are good at that."

JfJ deliberately abandoned the traditional NLRB election approach to organizing, in part because of the peculiar structure of this industry, as we already saw. Instead, JfJ developed the idea of a "comprehensive campaign," -- in the words of a key organizer, "a war against the employers *and* the building owners, waged on all fronts [without] leaving any stone unturned." The war-plan had several key elements.

(1) Intelligence: Along with its 1930s-style spirit, JfJ has brought 1990s-style organization and technology to the cause of janitorial unionism; indeed, the union's strategy began with a business-oriented understanding of the industry. "We always try to understand the industry as it understands itself," an organizer said. From its inception, the LA campaign, had a full-time research/corporate person. They don't have worker responsibilities, they're information-gatherers and utilizers. They do all the property deed research and that kind of stuff. Also the rest of us did as much company research as we could do: talking to workers, talking to supervisors, try to profile out as much as possible.

Local information was supplemented by data supplied by researchers at SEIU headquarters in Washington. As one impressed management informant put it, SEIU had the ability to "ferret out the weaknesses" of the ownership/management structure in any particular situation.

Intelligence plays still another role, having to do with activation of the membership base. "Our economists know how to crunch the numbers. . . the real numbers. Someone will get pissed if they learn that it costs the owner 1 cent to give them a raise." Understanding the industry also becomes a tool in the hands of the workers, allowing them to see how and why they have the potential to turn things around.

When you meet with workers you don't say 'let's raise hell.' You have your whole market analysis of the relationship between the janitors and the building owners and how we think it works. We try to educate them about how their industry works and how they can have an effect on it. It's not like a course in real estate finance, but they can see that there's a plan that makes sense.

The effective gathering of intelligence requires the appropriate personnel and technology as well as the investment needed to bring these human and capital resources together. Consequently, access to and mobilization of highly skilled, often college-educated organizers and researchers, combined with the ability to command the technological resources that enable them to be effective, were essential to JfJ's effectiveness.

(2) Guerrilla legal tactics: While abandoning the election route, JfJ found instruments in the NLRA and other legal protections that could be used to gain leverage over employers. JfJ filed complaints with the NLRB over employer violations, such as discrimination against union activists and other

"unfair labor practices" prohibited by laws the NLRB is charged with enforcing. "If the company violated Section 7 rights then we could file Board charges, and we aggressively used the Board for those kinds of things," an organizer explained. This approach also permitted janitors to go on strike under certain conditions with legal protection against being permanently replaced.

Use of such guerrilla tactics served two ends. First, as one management informant told us, they "beat down the contractors economically," a statement he supported by showing us a stack of NLRB unfair labor practice cases filed by SEIU which had cost his firm \$75,000 in legal expenses. Of course, some contractors, like ISS, were prepared to "spend a fortune on lawyers;" but those that couldn't "settled pretty quickly." Secondly, guerrilla tactics transformed the union into the effective, if not the legal, representative of the workers. "An extra weapon was being utilized against the company that we didn't have to wield," a key organizer recalled. "We called it 'acting union without a contract.' That was what we tried to do with the workers of the non-union companies. It didn't require a contract for them to redefine their relationship to their employer and to defend their rights."

SEIU's proclivity for "in your face" media-oriented events corresponds with management's description of a "fight in the gutter." In addition to the examples recounted above, there was a demonstration conducted at the building profiled in the TV show "LA Law"; as the building was cleaned by a non-union firm, the union targeted the building as the "Home of the LA Lawless" in a publicity stunt that focused on various legal violations. Such tactics brought public embarrassment to key individuals in the industry while also making life difficult for building tenants. Of course, the ability to carry off such efforts depended heavily on the union's research capacity.

While some tactics were deliberately cultivated by JfJ, others had to be carefully avoided to guard against employers' ability to force the union into an NLRB election. "We've never had an election filed on us," noted one of the key organizers, and he went on to recount all that the union did to prevent employers from filing for elections:

We never picket for recognition. We can picket for unfair labor practices, we can do fair labor standards picketing, we can do all kinds of informational picketing around abuses and that kind of stuff, as long as we don't ask them [the employers] to recognize the union. And so we were careful to avoid that. And also we never made a demand for recognition, like an official "We represent the majority of your workers," you know, "we demand that you recognize us."

In addition, the legal prohibition against secondary boycotts means that "in your face" activities must be gingerly handled. SEIU has generally been successful in walking the thin line distinguishing acts of free speech protected by the First Amendment from those activities that would trigger Board action to protect such "innocent" parties as building owners:²

² We are aware of one case, from the San Francisco area, in which the NLRB specifically addressed JfJ

The law prevents us from picketing against the building owner, so we made a snowman with a picket sign. We can't go around with picket signs saying John Smith building owner is unfair to workers, but we can hand out handbills saying the same thing. We can go into his office. We can have a couple of people go into his office, but if we send a lot of people it's over the line. The same with people handing out leaflets. If we have 50 people handing out leaflets, it will get us into trouble. But we can do street theater. . .

(3) Coalition-building: Yet another means of targeting owners involved the political realm. Of particular good fortune for JfJ was the fact that it began in the halcyon days of the 1980s, when investors were falling over themselves to build property in downtown LA. As construction could not begin without approval from the city's Community Redevelopment Authority (CRA), the union had a powerful lever on which to lean.

There was lots of access to the development process, for the union to get involved around social costs of development, and move against developers who had propensity to hire non-union contractors. We didn't prevail [in these fights], but the last thing the developers wanted [was to hear charges like these go public].

During most of the 1980s, the head of the LA County AFL-CIO sat on the CRA's board, as did other potential allies; consequently, no office tower built after 1987 opened up without a unionized cleaning crew.

Another source of pressure involves identifying a key source of capital with both the motivation and the means to exert pressure on developers and owners. Not every owner or manager is equally vulnerable to the tactics that SEIU can apply. "It depends on who the players are. . . Hard-core bottom dwellers who buy a building cheap, and hold till the value goes up [are] impossible to change." Most owners, however, are not so hard-boiled, since "the only people with money to own buildings are banks, insurance companies, and pension funds, " as one organizer noted with only slight exaggeration. And these institutions often find themselves vulnerable to the leverage that JfJ has learned to apply:

The ARCO center [in downtown LA] was built with pension fund money. The owner didn't call us back. We found out that the pension funds that invested in the project came from Ohio PERS. We called the union rep in Ohio, who called the real estate administrator, who then called the development partner, who then called the

tactics aimed at owners and issued a cease and desist order against the union. That case, *Trinity Building Maintenance* 312 NLRB 715 (1993), now stands as a potential threat to JfJ tactics.

union.

In LA the JfJ campaign also reached out to a variety of organizations important in the immigrant community. This effort, which seemingly "dissolves the line separating union from community or union worker from non-union worker," strikes many observers as something that, if not radically new, has not been seen since the early days of the CIO. Thus Andy Banks (1991: 23) reports that "a group of community activists became so attracted to the JfJ cause [that] they formed a totally independent group," which ran its own meetings, did its own fundraising, and conducted its own activities to help janitors.

While community involvement did indeed distinguish JfJ from the run of the mill campaign, its importance should not be overrated. Our interviews are only suggestive on this point, but those workers with whom we talked had but a vague notion of who, if anyone, from the "community" was providing help. One of the staffers saw things much the same way: "I remember seeing a lot of people [at demonstrations], I didn't know where they came from or how it happened." Clearly, some of the friends of JfJ turned out to be the usual suspects, namely students from UCLA and other schools, who have certainly played this role before. Organizers described community involvement in morale-boosting, not strategic terms -- "It's sure nice to know that someone's out there," said one. And consideration of the constraints impinging on the desired allies in the immigrant community makes it clear that they were in no position to provide aid:

These groups are often very beleaguered. People in these communities are economically distressed. And the people in these community groups are dealing with a tremendous variety of problems. Immigrant rights groups are helping out people with very little resources. It's not big powerful organizations, so that I think it is helpful especially in terms of moral support.

The union seemed to benefit more from its ability to connect with and move its friends in high places; of particular importance were linkages to local political leaders. It was not a matter of ending the marriage between LA's political establishment and real estate interests, but simply altering it so that the deals that political leaders cut with property owners would occasionally yield dividends for someone else. As we have noted, SEIU's allies on the CRA played precisely this role during the late 1980s. In 1990, after the savage police beating at Century City, the union, with help from the County AFL, was able to mobilize then-Mayor Bradley, who phoned the principal ownership interest at Century City to voice his concern over the incidents that had arisen in the course of the organizing.

Another important source of strength was support from unions representing janitors in other cities. When janitorial unionism declined in LA and other metropolitan areas, it remained strong in such traditional citadels as New York, Chicago and San Francisco. Most of the key players on the

industry side are made up of nationally- or internationally-operated firms that do business with the union where they must, and such firms are vulnerable to pressure from their unionized employees. But as we have already noted, SEIU has a tradition of decentralization; and while things have changed since the union's early days, negotiations still occur at the local, not the national level, leaving solidaristic actions subject to local considerations. The story of Gus Bevona's role in securing a contract with ISS after the police beatings at Century City is revealing on this score; only when mobilization had reached a boiling point was he willing to intervene.

(4) Mobilizing the rank and file: Ultimately, the ability to pressure employers derived from the union's success at striking a chord among the rank and file and moving them to action in ways that generated legal charges, caught the attention of the mass media, and forced the hands of other actors, including politicians and such SEIU leaders as Gus Bevona. As one of our informants emphasized:

The reason that LA is the shining star of the union is that we've had the highest percentage of workers' participation, have the highest worker turnout, and the highest percentage of workers going to jail and getting arrested. At heart and soul, there has to be a mobilized workforce.

This brings us to the third and final ingredient in JfJ's LA success: the role of immigrants.

The Immigrants

In the period of Local 399's earlier decline, employers had used the social structures of immigration to evade the union and to secure a more compliant labor force. But the fact that the workforce was bound by a series of interlocking networks meant that now the same structures could be put to a different purpose: "If you can get into the [hiring] chain, then the chain works both ways." The convergence of ethnicity, residence, and occupational concentration made the union's task easier. An organizer recalled, "I would go to a building in Pico Union looking for someone from Premier [a cleaning contractor] and someone would say, 'Oh, she's downstairs -- with someone else from Premier.'"

Moreover, the peculiar conditions of building service work created a sense of occupational community: working at night, when few others did, the janitors formed a somewhat isolated group. Isolation was heightened by the peculiar geographic conditions at Century City, as already noted. Thus, "even though LA is famous for no community. . . we found a community of janitors." Other common experiences seem to have made that community particularly organizable. One organizer reported a "high level of class consciousness," apparently rooted in the societies from which the immigrants came.

One of the good things about organizing Latino workers is that there is a positive

view of unions. They know what they are. There is a saying that is much more common there: "La union hace la fuerza". Everyone knows it. If you ask, "Que piensa de la union?", they answer, "La union hace la fuerza. If the rest of the people want to be in the union, I want to be in it."

Among the Central Americans there was also a sizable component of seasoned activists with a background in left-wing or union activity back home. That experience did more than impart organizing skills or a proclivity toward making trouble; it also put the risks entailed in an union drive in a totally different light:

With the Salvadorans, you find different attitudes. Sometimes you found people you fought there. And there, you were in a union they killed you. Here, you [were in a union] and you lost a job at \$4.25.

True, the janitorial workforce included former activists along with their prior enemies -- "you find other ones, 'I was the one who killed that trade unionist'" -- and erstwhile members of the middle class as well as peasants and proletarians. But the organizers reported that "no matter what their political background in their country, here they were working class and understood the idea of sticking to your class."

Compared to the situation in the early 1980s, when Local 399 collapsed, by the decade's end, the immigrant janitors included many with considerable U.S. experience. For these veterans, the prospects of returning home -- a plan that often inhibits organizing -- must have seemed increasingly dim. And, if one can generalize from the experience of one rank and file leader who described herself as having "learned in the university of daily life and gained a diploma in exploitation," settlement in the U.S. may also have played an embittering, and thereby catalytic, role. Certainly the estrangement and stigmatization that the janitors underwent as a result of immigration, and the sensitivity to class differences to which their job exposed them, added to the union's appeal:

We have to go out into the streets, and raise our voices [gritar], for only in this way will people, will the world, take notice of us, law or no law. . . .The world of money, the owners of the buildings. They have pretty and clean buildings in the day, where they receive people with lots of money, but at night, it is a place where they have slaves, [doing] a lot of work for little money. These are the two faces of these people. At night, they have slaves and in the day they have shiny offices.

As one key rank and file leader put it, "We Latino workers are a bomb waiting to explode."

There is other evidence to suggest that Latino immigrant workers are demonstrating a militancy and commitment to labor "not seen in many years" (McMahon, Finkel-Shimshon and Fujimoto 1991).

The notable examples include a spontaneous, ultimately successful, walkout by 800 Latino workers at a wheel factory, and a similarly self-organized strike held up and down southern California by immigrant drywallers. Nonetheless, the case is not decisive. While immigrants are an increasingly important component of the building services workforce nationwide, their presence is not pervasive. The JfJ campaign has indeed done well in cities where immigrants predominate -- as in San Jose, Denver, or San Diego -- but it has also scored success in a city like Milwaukee, where the workforce is almost all African American. The most notable failure, Atlanta, does involve a case where the great majority of workers were native-born blacks. But in the views of an organizer involved in that campaign, Atlanta's janitors showed no lack of willingness to enlist in the union drive.

Moreover, the social structure of LA's janitorial workforce is probably a good deal more fluid than the notion of a "community of janitors" would suggest. While the workforce does contain a larger complement of long-settled immigrants than was true fifteen years ago, one-third of the Latino immigrants working as janitors in 1990 had entered the United States during the prior five years (U.S. Census Bureau 1990). As in many other immigrant-dominated industries, the workforce is prone to instability. Mobility from garment or domestic work to building services and back appears to be common; likewise, there is much circulation within building services itself. "The immigrants go from company to company to company," noted one organizer, who thought it not unusual to find someone who had worked for five different cleaning companies.

As we have already noted, the workforce is also criss-crossed by ethnic and gender tensions that may be submergible during the course of a campaign, but that probably weaken cohesiveness on an ongoing basis. And all immigrants do not arrive predisposed toward unionizing. "When you're working in factories with unions" in Mexico, commented a Mexican-born organizer, "you have bad, bad experiences. So sometimes we do have people coming from Mexico with terrible experiences." If we can agree that the Salvadorans were more likely than the Mexicans to respond positively to a union campaign, then the fact that the JfJ campaign started in Downtown and in Century City -- precisely those locations where the Salvadoran presence was highest -- may have been a particularly fortunate accident, allowing the union to build up momentum which then proved irresistible. And one should not discount the dampening effect of poverty: struggling desperately to keep body and soul together, the campaign created a demand for time and commitment that many among the immigrants were not able to meet.

In the end, the immigrant presence was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of success. While immigrants are certainly capable of spontaneous outbreaks, the power relations in this industry are simply too uneven to imagine that immigrant janitors could have unionized without the extraordinary financial and human investment of the SEIU International and without the strategy the JfJ leadership developed. Nor are immigrants uniquely disposed toward organizing -- or else JfJ would succeed only in cities where immigrants are a sizable presence. On the other hand, few if any organizing campaigns succeed without mobilizing rank and file workers. And, in this respect,

for all the reasons adduced above, the JfJ campaign was probably better off with the immigrants than without them.

DEFEAT SNATCHED FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY?

In the aftermath of JfJ's successes in the early 1990s, unrest has moved from the streets into Local 399 itself. The local union leadership, made up of people highly supportive of the JfJ effort, was turned out of office in the spring of 1995. The International SEIU responded by placing the local in trusteeship. It was not possible to fully determine the nature of the dispute; but this turn of events raises the distinct possibility that Local 399's future may not be as bright as its recent past.

A pessimistic view would suggest that the union's hold on the industry is very precarious, and that the earlier collapse of Local 399 may be recapitulated in the future. Notwithstanding the gains generated by unionization, wages remain very modest, too low to cement attachment to the industry, which means that the workforce will continue to turn over at high rates. Instability is an inherent source of union weakness, requiring the local to continually re-organize the workforce, lest the contractors supplant union members with non-union workers and then go non-union before anyone is the wiser. Some employers claim that if they pay workers union rates, they can take any given workplace non-union and that the "union will never know." While this may be largely bravado, the union's internal preoccupations would suggest that it may be more than an idle threat.

Moreover, there may be less to today's pacific relations with employers than meets the eye: since wage increases in the five-year contract signed in 1995 are back-loaded, employers may grow restive when faced with the 30 cent an hour raise due in 1999. As some of the non-union contractors have not yet been brought to heel, even a marginal decline in Local 399's strength might swing the balance of power back to the non-union side.

The possibility that employers might turn more obstreperous has much to do with the currently depressed state of the real estate market; and a revival of demand for office space in LA may well bode ill for janitorial unionism. Owners differ in their degree of exposure to the types of pressure that JfJ can apply. For the past ten years, JfJ has had the good fortune of confronting institutional investors who find themselves highly vulnerable to the tactics that it deploys. Moreover, bad times make all owners concerned about occupancy; they may be more likely to succumb to union pressure when tenants are scarce and difficult to replace. But if and when good times return to LA, institutional investors may sell out to more hard-nosed owners who are less concerned with sullyng their public image and less fearful of losing tenants who will, in turn, have fewer options.

But there is also an optimistic interpretation of today's internal travails. In this view, the union's current problems are a normal, perhaps even inevitable result of such a massive organizing effort. As in other similarly competitive industries, unionized employers have been quick to find virtue in

a union that can take wages out of competition; as long as it does so, they may be quite willing to bid non-union times good-bye. Stable relations are eased by the presence of the large national, even international contractors, who live with unions wherever they must, and who have accommodated to janitorial unionism's return to LA. While it is true that workers in an industry like building services have to be continually re-organized, this was always true in labor-intensive, small-establishment industries like restaurants, garments, and construction. For much of the twentieth century, these were environments in which unions thrived. And as the pessimist would never have predicted the very considerable success that JfJ has achieved so far, we suspect that one would do better to listen to what the optimist has to say.

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