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Unions and Education Justice: The Case of SEIU Local 1877 Janitors and the “Parent University”

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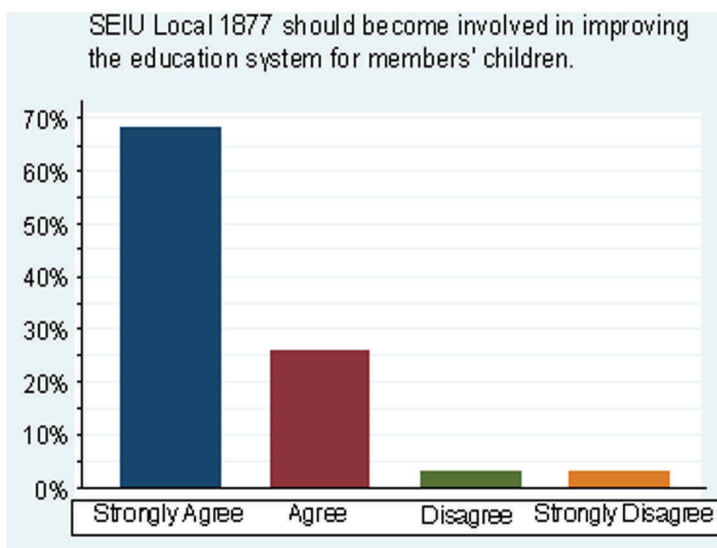
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Over the last five years, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877 - the “Justice for Janitors” union - has recognized educational improvement as a key quality of life issue for its predominantly Latino immigrant Los Angeles membership. Most Local 1877 members with children send their children to low-performing public schools. Yet many view their children’s education as the key to securing the future well-being of their families, especially since economic gains obtained through a janitors’ union contract can only go so far. Union members believe that SEIU Local 1877 should become involved in efforts to improve educational opportunities for their children.



Source. Local 1877 survey of union members, winter 2007

The UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment supports faculty and graduate student research on employment and labor topics in a variety of academic disciplines.

The Institute also sponsors colloquia, conferences and other public programming, is home to the undergraduate minor in Labor and Workplace Studies at UCLA, and carries out educational outreach on workplace issues to constituencies outside the university.

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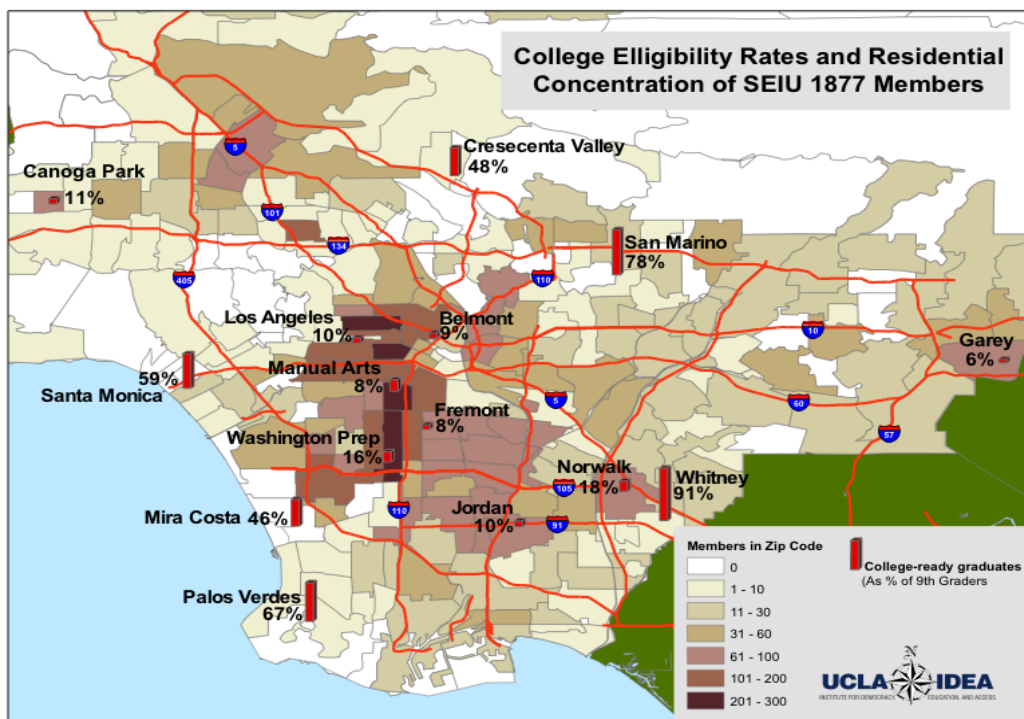
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Education as a Union Issue for Local 1877

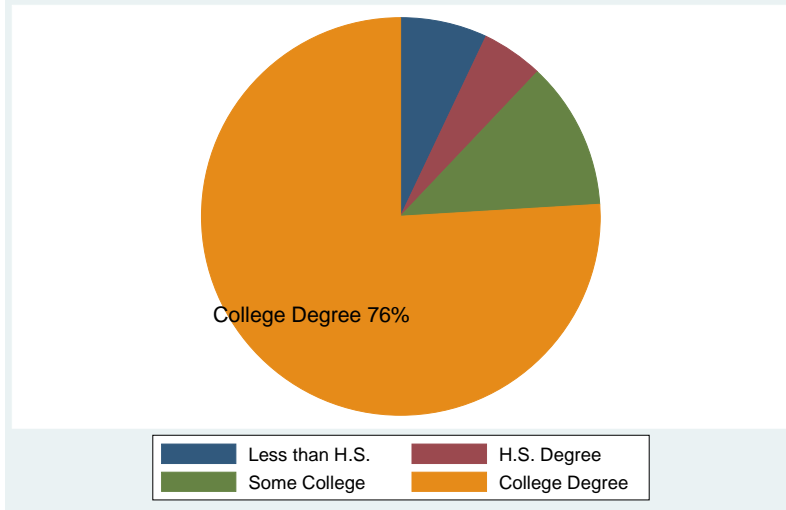
SEIU Local 1877 has taken several steps to respond to union members' interests in their children's education. The union has partnered with UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (UCLA IDEA), the UCLA Labor Center, and UCLA School of Law's Program in Public Interest Law and Policy to understand the educational issues facing union members' children.¹ UCLA's research findings show that the union's Los Angeles membership is residentially concentrated in low-income Latino and African-American communities, near high schools that disproportionately suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers, overcrowding, and insufficient college preparatory courses. In these high schools, less than one half of entering students graduate.



Such conditions and outcomes do not match the aspirations of Local 1877 members. Most union members expect their children to graduate from college. These parents invest great hope in the ability of public schools to encourage educational success and economic mobility. Yet, too often school conditions reproduce the poverty experienced by union members' families and others in their communities.

¹ Between 2006 and 2009, research conducted through this collaborative effort included: 1) a worksite survey focused on members' interest in school reform and education-related programming; 2) a random sample parental school involvement phone survey; 3) semi-structured interviews with rank and file union members, leaders, and staff; 4) focus groups on the educational needs and interests of members; 5) maps illustrating the residential concentration of labor union members; 6) analyses of school quality in communities with high concentrations of labor union members; 7) and interviews with labor union members, civic leaders, and business sector stakeholders about the role of service sector unions in school reform.

Please think about your oldest child that is still in school in grades K-12.
How much schooling do you expect him/her to complete?



Source. Local 1877 survey of union members, winter 2007

To provide members with a better understanding of how to support their own children’s academic success and advocate for school improvements, Local 1877 has sponsored “Parent University” workshops. Workshops are geared to meet the learning needs and interests of janitors, many of whom have limited formal education themselves. Parents discuss and learn about educational issues in interactive sessions. Topics covered in workshops include: parent rights; school governance structures; understanding report cards and standardized tests; English Language Learner classification and testing; resource inequalities in the public school system; the California education budget; the college application process; and college access for immigrant children. Workshops take place at the union hall, but short informational sessions also occur at work sites during janitors’ lunch breaks.

Local 1877 has used labor contract negotiations to help fund the “Parent University” and other adult education programming for union members. Employers covered under the janitors’ master union contract contribute three cents per hour worked per employee to a fund for the education of workers and their families. These funds flow to the Building Skills Partnership (BSP), the Local 1877 affiliated education non-profit. The BSP staff work with the union to implement Parent University workshops.

SEIU Local 1877 has further supported parental school involvement through the union contract. In the past, Local 1877 members often have found it difficult to participate in their children’s schools due to their work schedule. UCLA IDEA has found that employers at some work sites deny janitors permission to take time off from work to participate in children’s school-related activities. Janitors must be resourceful to find time to participate in school-related activities, especially since their busy schedules typically limit their sleep (In a UCLA IDEA survey, Local 1877 members reported that, on average, they get 4-5 hours of sleep daily). To facilitate parental school involvement, the janitors’ 2008 master contract references the California Family–School Partnership Act, which affords parents and guardians the right to take time off from work (up to 40 hours each year) to participate in activities at their child’s school or

day care. Through the Parent University, the labor union trained members on the Act, and distributed a brochure to further educate members on their right to attend children's school functions. By inserting the language from the Act into the contract, Local 1877 members have been able to create a process to ensure "rights" that otherwise have no enforcement mechanism.

To build on its education programming, Local 1877 has participated in the Labor and Education Collaborative, facilitated by UCLA IDEA and the UCLA Labor Center. The Collaborative brings together labor unions and key community groups to discuss shared goals of developing parents' capacity to engage in school reform and to share research on educational equity. Through the Collaborative, Local 1877 has worked with participating groups to expand upon and refine its Parent University workshops. Other unions in the Collaborative have drawn on Local 1877's experience to explore implementing parent education workshops of their own.

The Importance of Children's Education for Labor Unions

SEIU Local 1877, as well as other non-teacher labor unions, potentially benefit in several ways by focusing resources on educational issues facing the children of working families. First, union members with little prior involvement in the union's workplace or other political campaigns may be drawn to participate in activities related to children's education. In the case of Local 1877, janitors became connected to the union's other services and campaigns after attending the Parent University. Given that in any labor union there are significant numbers of members who rarely participate in union activities, programs pertaining to other quality of life issues such as children's education can create bridges to otherwise disconnected members.

Second, a union's investment in educational issues may strengthen ties to its members' communities. Because non-teacher labor unions may not have the technical expertise to provide trainings on educational issues, they must form relationships with educators (including members of teachers unions) and community organizations focused on education justice. These relationships may prove useful to unions, as well as their community partners, through the development of new coalitions and stronger labor/community ties.

Más que nada lo que quiero es que mis hijos vayan a la universidad. Quiero que tengan más oportunidad que uno no tubo.

More than anything, I want my children to go to a university. I want them to have opportunities that I never had.

–SEIU Member, father of three

Muchos padres como yo necesitamos más información, más apoyo para asegurar que nuestros hijos sigan adelante en sus estudios. La union esta en una posición para ayudarnos entender el sistema, la política, para mejorar las escuelas de nuestros niños.

Many parents like me need more information and support to make sure that our children are progressing with their education. The union is in a position to help us understand the system, the politics, so we can improve our children's schools.

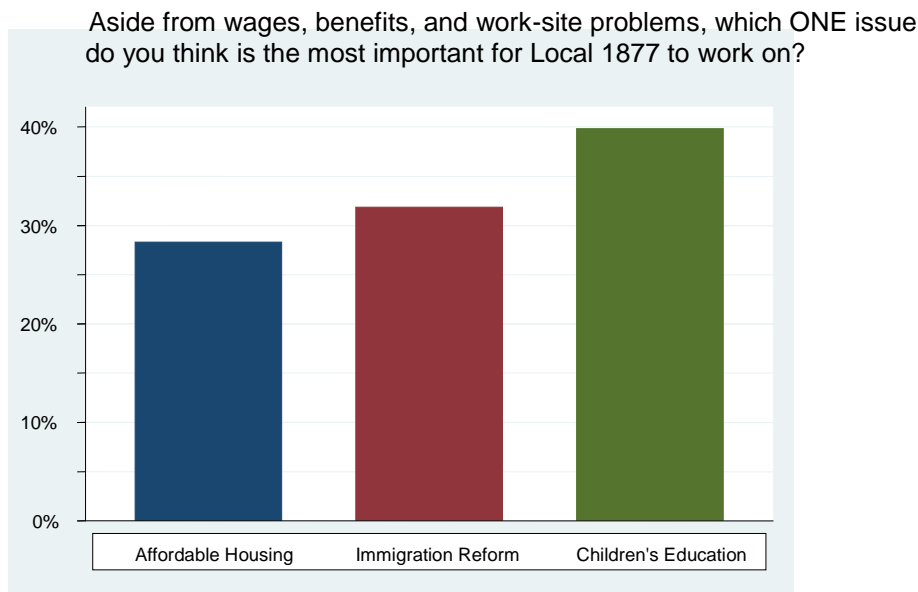
–SEIU Member, mother of three adolescents

Nosotros, los padres, tenemos que luchar para que los hijos reciban una buna educación. Estaría super-bien si tuvieramos el apoyo de la union.

We, the parents, have to fight so that our children receive a better education. It would be great if we had the support of the union.

–SEIU Member, mother of two school-aged children

Third, union involvement in children's education may demonstrate organizational commitment to address broader concerns of working families, thus gaining more widespread support for the labor movement. Research sponsored by the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment found that both union members and the public are more supportive of unions if they perceive them as being concerned with issues of broader public concern that go beyond the self-interest of members. Public education generally ranks near the top of any list of public concerns. To the extent that unions are seen as contributing to improvements in opportunities for all children, not just the children of members, those unions can expect to enjoy wider public support.



Source. Local 1877 survey of union members, winter 2007

Addressing concerns about public education has largely been the purview only of the teacher's union. Yet there are many reasons for unions like Local 1877 to work with their members who are public school parents, grandparents and guardians. This work helps member parents support their children's learning. It strengthens ties among members that extend beyond the workplace as they identify collectively as parents of children in public schools. And finally it infuses the often-neglected voices of working class parents into public debates about education reform.