

NCFO and Coalition Battle To Save Public Education in Philadelphia



Local 1201 President Thomas Doyle (front right) sits in at a Philadelphia street corner with other community and labor activists to protest a dangerous school privatization scheme. Also shown (2nd row, 2nd from left) is NCFO President George Francisco.

Pennsylvania's Republican governor has declared war on public education—and public workers—by turning over more than 40 Philadelphia schools to a profit-seeking corporation with a blemished record.

The unions representing the city's school employees—led by NCFO Local 1201—and a broad range of parent, community, civil rights and student organizations have come together to fight the rip-off on many fronts.

At a mass rally outside the State office building, Local 1201 President Thomas Doyle told the crowd of thousands that 96 percent of the children of Local 1201 members—who drive school buses and clean and maintain school facilities—attend public schools.

“If the state wants to help the children of Philadelphia it should equalize school funding,” he explained. “Philadelphia receives about \$5,900 per pupil each year from the state, but some suburban districts get up to \$13,000 per pupil.”

Returning to her native Philadelphia to address the rally, SEIU Secretary-Treasurer Anna Burger forcefully defended public education and the school system she attended. She pledged the continuing support

of SEIU for the anti-privatization struggle.

Other speakers, including state legislators and the head of the local teachers union and NAACP chapter, warned that bringing in Edison Schools, Inc., violates community wishes, will not improve education for the 210,000 public school children and poses other dangers.



SEIU International Secretary-Treasurer Anna Burger reiterates the full support of our 1.5 million-member union to the Philadelphia struggle. SEIU backing has been critical to the campaign.

“Leaches like Edison make their money by neglecting school repairs and by turning school bus driver and cleaning positions into minimum-wage, no-benefit, high-turnover jobs,” adds Doyle. “Our members, their children,

and all the children of Philadelphia will lose with them. That's why we will never stop fighting.”

Huge Organizing Win in Kentucky

Some 1,400 direct care workers in Kentucky state hospitals chose NCFO to be their voice at work in a recent election, giving them



plenty of reason to celebrate. But not all the people smiling are Kentucky state workers. See page 4 to find out why.

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Ask President Francisco

Q Would you please explain the role of the conference in the current structure of the union? I think this would be helpful to many members.

Ronald Bryant, Local 64
Washington, DC

A The term “conference” is relatively new in the long and proud history of our union, which spans more than a century. For most of that time we were a separate international union. When we negotiated and implemented our merger into SEIU in 1995, we formally became the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers (NCFO).

This new structure has now been in place for seven years. Being part of SEIU has greatly expanded our political clout in Washington and placed considerable research and training experience and resources at your service.

We hope that more and more NCFO members can sense the increased power we have, and the even greater positive influence we can have through organizing and political action. Hopefully, the average member does not *feel* any of the distance and remoteness that can be associated with being part of a 1.5 million member union like SEIU.

That’s one of a number of ways in which the Conference is crucial. Each and every NCFO local leader and member can pick up the telephone and reach Secretary-Treasurer Dan Anderson or me if they have a problem or concern they want to raise. *The Journal* is another way we stay in touch with you. We’d like that communication to be more “two-way.” Your letters to the editor in response to my comments



or to other articles are encouraged.

NCFO continues to work and fight on a variety of fronts for our members, as the F&O have always done. A strong voice in the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department, we stand up for the concerns of close to 10,000 NCFO members in transportation—from city bus drivers, mechanics, school bus drivers and aides to workers in the railroad yards and maintenance shops of a number of commuter lines, short lines and all of the nation’s major railroads. The fight for railroad retirement improvements is but one example of this.

Our members in the industrial and commercial sectors have been able to count on many decades of help and support from their local leaders in organizing, corporate campaigns and bargaining.

Public employees represent the largest single sector of our membership, and here the Conference has worked hard to provide coordination, help in internal organizing, consolidation to build clout, and support on specific campaigns.

With the big organizing victory among Kentucky state health care

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employees (see pages 4-5) our public employee ranks will soon swell.

Something else happened in this recent organizing victory—our biggest in decades—that captures what NCFO is all about. A former Kentucky railroad worker led the organizing drive and several Kentucky railroad workers worked full-time in the last weeks of the campaigns. A Kentucky manufacturing worker took a leave to put in months of 20-hour days to bring dignity and a voice at work to Kentuckians who work for the state.

There was lots of help from SEIU in that organizing victory too. The diversity and unity of purpose within NCFO, aided by strong support from our international union, made for a great victory.

That’s a recipe for success—for all of us.

How They Did It Rail Workers Win Pension Improvements with Grassroots Effort

An estimated 200,000 communications from NCFO and other railroad workers, retirees and union supporters were key to winning passage of the Railroad Retirement and Survivors Act of 2001.

As a result, some 75,000 widows and widowers of railroad workers will receive an average pension hike of \$300 per month, and thousands of current railroad workers will be able to retire earlier.

“All the letters, telephone calls and emails had a powerful impact in Congress, combined with the unity of railroad unions, skillful lobbying and effective political action work,” explains NCFO President George Francisco. “Whenever we needed union members to turn up the heat on lawmakers, they did.”

“It’s a recipe for victory that can be repeated in future battles to fight for working families,” adds Secretary-Treasurer Dan Anderson.

Thanks to a persistent grassroots lobbying campaign by railroad workers and their supporters, NCFO railroad widows like Mildred Craig (left) will get a hefty boost in her pension, and veteran rail members like Jerry Gross will be able to retire at 60 with health insurance and full benefits.



September, 1998 – House subcommittee holds hearing on proposal by railroad unions—and introduced by Rep. Jack Quinn (R-NY)—to improve pension benefits for rail widows.

January 14, 2000 – After two years of negotiations, railroad unions and employers sign agreement on a package of railroad pension improvements.

Winter, 2000 – Rail union lobbyists work with committees in House of Representatives on specifics of legislation.

September, 2000 – After getting 305 co-sponsors in the House, bill passes, 391-25.

November, 2000 – Close election for President. George W. Bush subsequently given the job by US Supreme Court. Democrats make gains in Senate, leaving Republicans with one-seat majority.

December, 2000 – After 83 Senators urge passage of the House bill and the Senate Finance Committee backs it, three reactionary Senators—Domenici (R-NM), Gramm (R-TX), and Nickles (R-OK) prevent the Senate from voting on bill before Congress ends. Behind the scenes, Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) supports them.

January, 2001 – 107th Congress convenes and similar legislation developed and later introduced.

May, 2001 – Sen. James Jeffords (R-VT) leaves Republican Party and announces he will vote with Democrats, who take control of Senate, weakening Lott’s power.

July, 2001 – House passes the railroad pension reform measure, 384-33.

November 28, 2001 – Same Republican diehards try to kill pension bill. Lott offers amendments allowing oil drilling in the Arctic wilderness and banning cloning.

December 3, 2001 – Senate rejects Lott amendment by 94-1 vote and backs motion by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) to proceed to a vote, 81-15.

December 5, 2001 – Senate passes railroad retirement legislation, 90-9.

December 8, 2001 – House votes 369-33 to send the legislation to President Bush.

December 21, 2001 – President George W. Bush signs the Railroad Retirement and Survivors Act of 2001 (H.R. 10) into law.

1400 Kentucky State Hospital Workers Choose NCFO Voice at Work

Political Action, Member Organizers, Strong Commitment

Michael “Huggie” Phillips is a railroad worker in Corbin. Gwen Estes has punched in for years at a manufacturing firm in Lexington. Chris Burton doesn’t even live in Kentucky. He works at a private water company in Indianapolis, Indiana.

None of them work at Kentucky state hospitals—where direct care employees voted overwhelmingly to make NCFO their voice at work. But all of them toiled tenaciously to help those workers.

They are members of the NCFO Organizing Blitz Team—and they feel that they, *and you*, won an important victory when some 1,400 direct care workers at Kentucky state hospitals won NCFO representation in a recent election.

That’s music to the ears of NCFO Organizing Director John Thacker.

“Organizing is critical to the future of every NCFO member and their family,” says Thacker. “The more workers organized in any city, state or industry, the better the contracts that can be won. The greater our numbers and the more we are involved politically, the more elected officials will listen to the concerns of working families.”

A case in point, he says, is the executive order signed by Kentucky Governor Paul Patton (D) allowing state workers to choose bargaining representatives.

“Locals and members around the country are getting excited about organizing and about how we accomplished what we did in Kentucky,” adds Thacker.

In the captions that follow, the Blitz Team members mentioned above and a few of the many state workers involved in the organizing, tell you more about it.



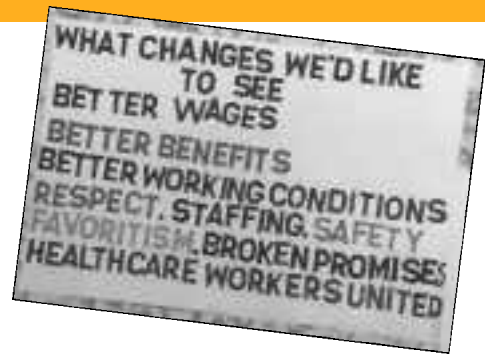
▲ Organizing Committee members and other union supporters, staff organizers and Blitz Team members celebrate together after some 1,700 direct care workers in Kentucky state hospitals voted for representation by Health Care Workers United—a coalition of NCFO/SEIU and the State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Some 300 Registered Nurses will be represented by AFSCME and 1,400 other direct care workers by NCFO.



◀ “Members of my local in Indianapolis are getting excited about organizing because of the victory in Kentucky and my participation in it,” says Local 131 member and part-time business agent Chris Burton (left), shown here during Blitz Team organizing training in Florida early last year. “I’ve learned a lot about organizing here and want to put it to good use back home.”

Hospital Workers Work

Provide Blueprint for a Better Future



◀ Kentucky Local 320 Vice President Gwen Estes was funded by her local to work full-time on the campaign. Her local will be greatly expanded as it takes on the representation of the state hospital workers. “It will give us a bigger voice in everything—negotiations, politics and the labor movement,” she says. “And it’s a great feeling to help others see that getting a voice at work can make a big difference for them.”



▶ Kentucky railroad worker and Blitz Team member Michael



“Huggie” Phillips spent a month helping in the organizing. “It was great working with and learning from NCFO and SEIU organizers. I appreciate more how much SEIU means to us,” says the 25 year Local 362 member. “I got cold chills when we won. This victory won’t only help the state hospital workers. As we grow in Kentucky, all working families here will benefit.”



▲ Organizing committee member Kristi Slavey participates in a planning meeting early in the campaign. Strong committees for each shift at each hospital were crucial to the victory.

▲ Organizing committee member James Alexander (right) signs the first union card after the vote, as NCFO Organizing Director John Thacker looks on. “I talked to my three kids about what this means for all of us: better pay and benefits and most of all dignity,” says Alexander.

Is There Organizing In Your Future?

Do you want to help improve things for working families—including your own—by helping other workers in your area organize to win a voice at work?

Contact your NCFO local union to volunteer for your local’s organizing activities or to find out how you can help get an organizing program going.

▶ “I had a lot of questions at first to the organizers about what they could do for us. Now the question for me is what can we all do for ourselves,



together,” says organizing committee member and patient aide Julie Dick, who volunteered in the organizing office every evening after work for months.

Around The Conference



School Workers Fix Pay Errors With Million Dollar Settlement

These Local 1227 members—maintenance employees in the Palm Beach County schools—are among the 1,260 maintenance workers, custodians and mechanics each getting about \$750 due them because of miscalculations in a previous contract. Local 1227 won an arbitration back in June 2000, but had to file a lawsuit and keep the pressure on to get the school system to finally pay up. “It’s about time,” says Local 1227 President Sharon Munley. “We’re happy to have it finally settled.”



Photo: Karabelle Pizzigati

NCFO Members Illustrate Art of Work

NCFO Secretary-Treasurer Dan Anderson welcomes attendees at the opening of a photo exhibit, “SEIU/NCFO: A Celebration of Diversity at Work for America.” Some 38 20X30 color photos of NCFO working members from 16 locals, were on display at the gallery of the George Meany Labor Archives in Silver Spring, Maryland through January 2002. The exhibit is on permanent display at the NCFO office in Washington, DC.

Mergers Build Stronger Union

The members of three SEIU locals have voted to merge into nearby NCFO locals, setting the stage for better service and increasing union clout.

SEIU Local 362 members working for Lake County (Florida) Board of Education, the Orange County Library and Hillsborough Community College, voted overwhelmingly to merge their local in NCFO Local 1220.

The membership of NCFO Local 1221—who work for the Pinellas County school system—also voted to merge their local into Local 1220.

“This is great news for public employees in our area, and we’ll be able to organize,” says new Local 1220 Vice President Van Church, formerly of SEIU Local 362.

“This unity will be felt politically right away and make a difference for our members,” adds Local 1220 President Fred Winters.

Across the state in Palm Beach County, the union also grew larger and stronger when the members of SEIU Local 747, who work for the City of West Palm Beach, mandated the merger of their local into NCFO Local 1227.

“We now have full-time professional representation and more political clout all over the county,” says new Local 1227 executive board member Bonnie Kamp.

In Indianapolis, some 200 workers making graduation rings for Hurff Jewelry, voted to merge their SEIU local into NCFO Local 131.

Though no rings were exchanged at the ceremony, former SEIU Local 127 Secretary-Treasurer Lorrie Kellie was excited about the marriage.

“We feel like we’re already getting such great support,” says Kellie, a welder.



Local 1220’s new Vice President, Van Church, is excited about the organizing potential of the merger of his SEIU local into NCFO.

Francisco Column Nabs Award

A column by President Francisco answering a question put to him by Local 634 member Wayne Knute, has won a prestigious award from the International Labor Communications Association (ILCA).

Appearing in the Convention Special 2000 issue of *The Journal*, the Ask President Francisco explanation of how the deck is stacked against unions in organizing—and what to do about it—won the second place award in the Best Editorial category.

Overall, there were over 1,200 entries in the ILCA Journalism Contest.

Is There a Right to Unemployment Benefits?

In the wake of the September 11 bombings and the economic havoc and climate of fear caused by these and subsequent events, hundreds of thousands of Americans lost their jobs in an already worsening economy.

At last year's AFL-CIO Convention, that body's president, John Sweeney, reiterated support for the war on terrorism, but

blasted President Bush for his domestic policies. "He and his corporate backers are waging a vicious war on working families...and we condemn them for that," Sweeney charged.

Bush's failure to make helping these jobless Americans a priority is a case in point.

It is generally assumed that *most* workers who lose their jobs through no fault of their own get benefits under the unemployment compensation program.

But the reality is that most unemployed workers do not get benefits: *only 35 percent* of the unemployed in our country are getting unemployment insurance benefits.

Some union contracts provide for severance pay and/or supplemental unemployment benefits, but the average victim of a layoff has no such additional safety net. The thin one they do have is frayed.

The nation's unemployment insurance law was passed as part of the Social Security Act of 1935. An employ-



er tax funds the program, which is run by the states—with benefits and eligibility rules varying by state.

Today, the *maximum* duration for receiving benefits is only 26 weeks. By law, the program can replace a maximum of 62 percent of salary. But on average, unemployment insurance now replaces *less than one-third* of lost income.

Unemployed workers have a much better situation in other industrialized countries.

Compare the 35 percent of the unemployed getting benefits here with 80 percent in Sweden or the 90 percent in Denmark

German workers can get benefits for a full year (twice as long as American workers). If they're over 47 years old, they're eligible for two full years; over age 57 it's 135 weeks.

The maximum income replacement figure (of 62 percent) cited above is low compared to other industrialized countries even without considering the other benefits the

unemployed receive. These include support for housing costs, child support, and because all of these countries have universal health care, unemployed workers don't lose their health benefits.

With all of this as context, some of the actions of the Bush

administration and its allies in Congress have been particularly outrageous:

- \$15 billion to bail out airlines but not a dime to help laid-off airline workers with extra unemployment benefits or help with health insurance.
- A Republican "economic stimulus" program with \$70 billion in tax rebates to the largest corporations, but a deaf ear to Democratic proposals to expand unemployment benefits an additional 13 weeks and provide some financial help with health insurance to the 750,000 added to the unemployment rolls after September 11.

After months of stonewalling, Bush and other Republican leaders finally started talking about doing *something* to help the unemployed. Perhaps it's time to make some of these politicians experience unemployment come the November elections.

What Is the American Spirit in the Wake of September 11?

Self-proclaimed patriots like House Republican Leader Dick Armey say helping suffering working families is *"not commensurate with the American Spirit."*

So they give \$15 billion to airlines, but not a dime to 140,000 laid-off industry workers.

They praise firefighters and police officers as heroes while killing legislation guaranteeing them the right to collective bargaining.

Show the likes of them what the American Spirit is all about.

While they want to write government checks to General Motors and Chevron, write one of your own to the **SEIU September 11th Relief Fund**, c/o SEIU, 1313 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005.



Every dime of it will go directly to help the families of the 63 SEIU members killed on September 11 and other families suffering because of the tragedy.

And demonstrate your American spirit by joining the fight for working families. Make a contribution to the **Firemen & Oilers Political League**, SEIU/NCFO, 1023 15th ST NW, 10th Floor, Washington, DC 20005.



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