

America's Fight for a Fair Economy starts right here in California

By Yvonne Walker
President, SEIU Local 1000

The time is now to Fight for a Fair Economy—one that puts the interests of each of us, middle class working families—first. Recent events from Sacramento to Wisconsin to Ohio to New Hampshire have shown us the depth of the struggle we are in.

We have supported the governor's budget proposal for California. It is a reasonable plan to address the \$25 billion fiscal crisis we face through a mix of program cuts and revenue extensions.

By opposing the proposed budget and not engaging in real negotiations with the governor and looking for compromise, Republicans are going to force larger class sizes for our children, limit access to higher education and jeopardize public safety.

Our budget battle in California is part of a national struggle in which working people—the middle class—are under attack. The middle class is shrinking while corporations and their interests are getting rich off our backs.

Fight for America's future

It's time for a new and dramatic course of action. Despite the strength of Local 1000 and other public employee unions in California, only 7 percent of private sector workers are protected by a union—leaving people more and more vulnerable to the whims of employers. With no bargaining power in the economy and a weak voice in the political arena, working families are feeling squeezed in their household budgets at every turn.

More than 65 Local 1000 members joined 1,500 SEIU members from all over the country to gather in Los Angeles, on March 26-28, to map out a campaign designed to change the nation's focus.

In Los Angeles, our members heard from middle class families all over America who are under siege. In Wisconsin and other states public employee unions are being stripped of the power to bargain for their members.



Here are more examples:

- In Ohio, the state is adopting a plan that would prevent public employees from joining unions
- In New Hampshire, the legislature is trying to gut the political power of public employee unions
- In New Jersey, the governor has announced he will eliminate pensions for teachers and other employees

Middle class under siege

As you can see on the chart on the back page, as union membership plummets, middle class income declines. Unions do not just improve the lives of their members; organized labor is a catalyst for growth of the entire middle class. On the other hand, as unions are weakened, the entire middle class gets pinched.

We can't solve this national crisis piecemeal—one bargaining fight, one organizing campaign, or one political election at a time. We need a comprehensive plan that tackles the fundamental imbalance of power in America and puts the needs of working families squarely at the top of our national priorities. This is exactly what the Fight for a Fair Economy is all about.

We will engage and energize working families on a scale never before seen. We will go wide and deep to mobilize forces strong enough to take back America for the middle class—one neighborhood, one city, one state at a time.

As SEIU President Mary Kay Henry put it: "We are not the reason for this crisis, but we are the team that takes back this nation for the middle class because this land is our land—it doesn't belong to anyone else."

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UNION UPDATE

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On the front lines of Fight for a Fair Economy

More than 65 Local 1000 members have volunteered to be leaders in the Fight for a Fair Economy campaign; they attended a three-day workshop in Los Angeles along with 1,500 other SEIU activists from all over the nation. Here are two members' stories.

Cindy Doyel: 'It's a national fight for the middle class'

Cindy Doyel first became a union activist because she was simply curious about Local 1000. Now, as a volunteer in the Fight for a Fair Economy campaign, she is passionate on a national scale.

Doyel is part of a huge mobilization to change the direction of our nation to become more focused on the middle class.

Like many Americans, she was shocked when Wisconsin legislators rammed through a series of new laws in March to roll back the rights of working families, including legislation expressly designed to neuter unions politically and prevent collective bargaining.

Doyel has closely followed the stories of workers in Wisconsin and Ohio and other states losing their rights, but it was powerful for her to meet people from those states who were harmed by the changes to their state laws.

"It was astronomical—so powerful—to hear from workers in other states about their struggles," Doyel said. "Number one is you realize we are not alone in this struggle. Next you realize that this is a national fight. We are all in it."

Wisconsin wake-up call

"When Wisconsin happened, it was like a clarifier—a wake-up call—proof that our opponents don't even want to give us a chance to unite," said Doyel, a staff information systems analyst at the California Technology Agency. "Let's see, unions fought so we could have the eight-hour day, the guaranteed lunch break, and the opportunity to take a short break when you sit at a desk all day."

Doyel found herself energized and inspired by meeting so many activists but sobered by the challenge ahead.

"There is a concerted national effort to destroy unions," Doyel continued. "There are wealthy political forces that resent that working people can join together through a union and become stronger. It's tough. But we have to win."

Tamekia Robinson: 'Step out of your comfort zone'

Local 1000 activist Tamekia Robinson was one of the first people to become involved in the Fight for a Fair Economy—last December she was one of five member leaders recruited nationally to plan the kickoff conference in March.

To prepare for her role as a co-emcee of the event, she was in contact with labor activists from all over the country. But she was still struck by how bad conditions have grown in other states, where hostile legislatures are aggressively trying to weaken public employee unions.

"If collective bargaining can be taken away in Wisconsin—where it began—then it can be taken away here and in every state if we don't fight,"

Robinson said. "Every day in California there is an attack on state employees. We can't take for granted what we have here because California elected a Democratic governor and legislative majority."

Take nothing for granted

"The Republicans in the Legislature used the two-thirds requirement to demand cuts in pensions—cuts that would not save a dime in this budget," Robinson added. "They are using every tool they can to weaken us and divide us. Imagine if they had more power."

"In order to win, union members need to think way beyond the next contract or the next election," she said. "Local 1000 members need to take the fight to other states and we need to enlist allies outside of organized labor."

"We need to step outside of our comfort zones and have real conversations with our neighbors, our families, our friends, our churches and in our communities," Robinson said. "This is a fight for the future of middle class families."

"If we do nothing we are going to wake up soon with two classes in America—rich and poor. "

As union membership decreases, middle class income shrinks

