

Patricia A. Ford
Remarks at International Symposium on Social
Welfare Services and Status of Workers Concerned
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Good Afternoon!

My name is Patricia A. Ford. I am an Executive
Vice President of the Service Employees
International Union (SEIU).

On behalf of the officers and members of the
Service Employees International Union, I want to
first of all thank the National Welfare & Childcare
Workers' Union for inviting SEIU to participate in
your conference. I extend fraternal greetings and
solidarity to the officers and members of the
National Welfare & Childcare Workers' Union and
convey best wishes for a successful conference.

International President Stern sends his sincerest apologies for being unable to participate in your conference due to scheduling conflicts.

I consider it an honor and a privilege to address you at this important International Symposium on Social Welfare Service and Status of Workers Concerned.

Despite our differences in ethnicity, languages, cultures, religious beliefs, and union histories, we are all connected to each other.

Given the pace of globalization and the common problems it poses for labor unions around the world, our challenges, our battles, and our victories should be viewed through a global lens as we find ways to support each other beyond our geographic borders. (Pause)

The situation facing unions calls for us to continually employ new strategies. We have a great deal to teach each other and to learn from international gatherings such as this.

SEIU's participation in this conference demonstrates our interests in learning from the experiences of unions like the National Welfare & Childcare Workers' Union and in addressing our common issues and problems.

On a personal note, I am here despite my dislike for air travel. I agonized over the long distance and many time zones to get here. Nevertheless, my exposure to Washington, D.C.'s beautiful cherry blossom trees, a gift from the people of Japan to the United States, made me excited to learn more about Japan and the issues and concerns of Japanese workers.

SEIU applauds you for sponsoring this symposium and for inviting us to share ideas about the social status and working conditions of workers in the United States. (Pause)

My union, the Service Employees International Union of the AFL-CIO, CLC has 1.5 million members in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

Our members work as nurses, doctors, social workers, building cleaners, police and security officers, librarians, child care employees, maintenance workers, lab technicians, and nursing assistants. A majority of our members are women, some twenty percent are African Americans, and I am proud to say that SEIU represents one of the largest groups of immigrant workers in the United States. (Pause)

Today, I'll speak briefly about the situation in the United States regarding workers who provide services to three of the sectors of the population who rely on social welfare services:

- nursing home residents who are mostly the elderly;
- pre-school-age children; and
- the sick and infirm who receive home care.

(Pause)

The past few decades have seen an explosion in the numbers of elderly Americans living in nursing homes, fueled by the changing demographics of the American society. Gone are the days of extended families living in close proximity and sharing in the care of older, infirm relatives. This has led to some 1.6 million Americans currently living in 18,000 nursing homes.

The typical nursing home resident is eighty- five years old, female, widowed and must rely on Medicaid, the state administered program that provides assistance for the indigent, to cover the costs of a nursing home stay. Yet forty-seven states cut Medicaid spending in 2002 or plan to do so next year. (Pause)

Not only do these government cut backs hurt nursing home residents, but this adds to the harsh conditions faced by our members who work in nursing homes. (Pause)

Let me touch on some of the struggles our workers face:

- Staffing in these facilities is too low because our federal government has no standard for the minimum ratio of nursing home workers to nursing home residents.

- Wages are grossly inadequate. Average wages are \$9.18 an hour and about \$15,275.00 per year.
- Workers lack affordable health care insurance.
- Due to low staffing and hard physical work, workers face high injury rates, especially back injuries. (Pause)

As we work to improve conditions for our members, we are finding it difficult to raise standards at any single nursing home. To qualify for public funding a facility need only provide minimum levels of care. (Pause)

At the same time that we face large obstacles, we have won victories in locations where we represent a significant number of nursing homes. (Pause)

Working with our allies, including community advocates, academic institutions, and even family members of residents, we have passed state legislation to improve staffing levels in Delaware, Florida, California, New Jersey, New York, West Virginia and Arkansas. (Pause)

I must interject here an example of what we're up against when it comes to the owners of some nursing homes. In Florida, our union fought determined opposition from nursing home owners. And do you know what lengths the opposition went to?

They actually accused the union of using "voodoo" to intimidate Haitian workers into voting for the union. That is so pathetic and ridiculous it is laughable. But it also speaks to the dishonesty and outrageousness of the tactics our adversaries will employ. I am pleased to report to you, though, SEIU won that fight! (Pause)

Let me share with you some other successes.

More than 300 aides and other staff at a nursing home facility in Wisconsin overcame a tough anti-union campaign of threats and intimidation by managers and voted to join SEIU in October. (Pause)

Since early June 2002, more than 1,700 SEIU members in New York state have won substantial contract victories in a coordinated bargaining campaign to improve resident care and working conditions.

In Connecticut, a federal court judge has ruled that the Governor of that state violated the law in 2001 when he authorized the use of state funds for replacement workers and other expenses in an attempt to break a strike by our members at 39 nursing homes.

Recently, 200 caregivers, including nurses and nurses' aides, negotiated salary increases of 18 percent to 25 percent over three years as well as contract language that virtually eliminates mandatory overtime. This victory came after a seven-day strike.

Through a multi-pronged approach that includes organizing the men and women who service the elderly living in nursing homes, working through the political process, and heightening the public's awareness about nursing home conditions, we are bringing about real change that not only upgrades the working conditions for our members, but greatly increases the quality-of-life for those least able to do for themselves. (Pause)

Another segment in the United States population least able to do for themselves is pre-school-age children.

SEIU has concentrated its organizing efforts on Head Start. The Head Start program is funded by the federal government to provide pre-school education and day care to 858,000 low-income children.

Each program is an independent, non-profit employer. However, the common federal funding stream does provide opportunities to raise standards for workers. (Pause)

Our goal for SEIU members is to turn low-wage jobs into long-term careers where workers can make an impact on the lives of young children.

This happens by winning union contracts with higher wages, paid health insurance, better staffing, and a strong voice on the job. Lowering staff turnover allows children to develop the strong relationships with caregivers that they need for a good start in life. Over the past several years, thousands of Head Start workers have joined SEIU to improve their jobs.

In Boston, SEIU Head Start teachers and assistant teachers are paid an average of \$3,000 more each year than nonunion Head Start teachers. Head Start workers in Houston won an immediate 16 percent wage increase when they formed a union.

The union contract for New Jersey Head Start employees provides 100 percent employer-paid medical, dental, and prescription drug plans, and average pay increases of \$750 a year.

Head Start workers in Ohio won a new insurance plan with a premium of only \$18 a month. Ten-month employees get year-round coverage, and all workers receive employer-paid life insurance. They also negotiated a union contract that makes the employer responsible for finding substitute teachers.

In Oakland, California, SEIU Head Start workers established an employee-management committee to solve staffing and workload issues.

And in Michigan, SEIU Head Start workers created special forums – including a union-management Health and Safety Committee – to ensure that teachers have regular input in decisions that affect their program.

In every state, we have won by uniting with each other, community members, elected officials, and parents. We believe the victories of our members provide a real model for organizing across the country. These workers have seen to it that children - those least able to do for themselves - are the greatest beneficiaries. (Pause)

Before I close I want to tell you about the strides being made in one other category of workers, those who perform home care.

Most home care aides receive poverty-level wages, little training, and no health coverage - conditions that result in nearly 100 percent turnover of the workforce each year.

SEIU is fighting to make Home Care a good career. With over 195,000 members in home care, SEIU is the largest union of home caregivers in the United States.

Since joining with SEIU, home care workers in New York City have secured 100 percent free health coverage for themselves and their families - meaning no co-payments for doctor's visits, hospitalizations, prescriptions, dental, or vision.

SEIU home care workers in Sacramento, California are receiving wage increases of \$2 an hour over two years, while SEIU home caregivers in Illinois have raised their pay by 31 percent in recent years.

SEIU home care members in New York have two weeks vacation, ten sick days, a pension, access to continuing education and training, and free summer camp and college scholarships for their kids.

(Pause)

Through union organizing, home care workers gain input in decisions that affect home care work and they are able to advocate for the best quality care for clients.

SEIU is promoting a new structure for home care that meets the needs of both consumers and workers. In California, Oregon, and Washington, home care workers have joined with SEIU, clients, advocates, and elected officials to create a new model for home care service that provides quality, choice, and stability. This is called the Quality Home Care Council.

The Home Care Quality Council does not seek to make profit from taxpayer dollars and uses that savings to increase pay and training for caregivers.

The Council makes it easier for clients to find a caregiver they can depend on because consumers get to choose a home care aide themselves from a registry of carefully screened workers. This registry shows experience, training level, and references.

Seniors and people with disabilities who understand the issues facing clients run the Council.

The Council allows workers to collectively bargain to improve wages and benefits and ensures that front-line caregivers have input into making the Council as effective as possible. (Pause)

In 1992, California became the first state in the country to begin establishing Quality Home Care Councils.

They have made significant strides:

- Worker retention rates in the San Francisco area have improved by 16 percent since 1998.
- Wages for 9,500 home care workers in Sacramento will increase by \$2 an hour over the next two years and workers now receive health care benefits for the first time ever.
- The Los Angeles home care registry provides matches to thousands of consumers every year.

- Grant-funded projects are helping to develop career opportunities for California home-care workers.
- Consumers hold the majority of seats on public authority advisory councils.

(Pause)

More states are on their way to improving home care service through the quality council model. Oregon and Washington state recently passed laws to create Home Care Councils.

By joining together with SEIU and pioneering new models for care delivery, home care workers are professionalizing their jobs by improving wages and benefits, raising standards for training and screening, and enhancing clients' choice and direction over the care they receive.

I have highlighted just a few examples of workers' victories in the delivery of social welfare services. Through these battles we have learned important lessons about solidarity and collective action. (Pause)

The only way we make gains is by standing up and standing together. We've learned what we are sure our brothers and sisters in Japan have also come to know, that being a union member is not just about a fatter pay check.

It is about being part of a movement that believes in the worth and dignity of every human being—particularly those among us least able to challenge and change social injustice. The skills one learns fighting for justice, are the same skills one needs to build a strong labor movement.

We stand ready and extend ourselves to you to help
however we can. Though oceans separate us, the
struggles make us one.

Thank you.

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