

## **Our Brother's & Sister's Keeper**

Good evening! It's so good to be here.

All of you are to be commended for the outstanding work you are doing on behalf of not only our members, but for working men and women in your local communities, your state and around the nation. [This opening may be adapted for particular audience and/or venue.]

I applaud you for understanding the importance of unity and the power of the beautiful SEIU rainbow – with its many hues of black and brown and white. Through our union activism and our embrace of issues on the job and in our communities, we are bridging the many divides that separate us based on gender, race and cultural background.

We are all connected to each other in some way, shape or form. That is our philosophy, and it's no accident that SEIU is the fastest growing union in the labor movement. It's no accident that we've gained 63,000 members in the first six months of 2002.

Our numbers give us the potential for power. But the large number alone, is not enough. Unity gives us strength. For this reason we must be committed to making “stronger together” more than a catchy slogan.

[Pause.]

As the founding fathers and mothers of our great union understood, it is not about race or gender. It's about upper class and lower class. It's about the haves and have-nots.

Truly, we are the changing face of America. Because of that, it's also no accident that our ranks – 1.5 million strong and growing – include such a large number of immigrant members.

We have seen how the demographics are rapidly changing in the nation and in our union. This makes it essential for all of us to guard against falling into that divide-and-rule trap. We cannot forget the importance of unity – especially black and brown unity.

[Pause.]

Since 9/11 we're experiencing a new kind of racial profiling. We still have the traditional garden variety type, like the New Jersey turnpike highway patrol stops or the baseless police harassment of young African-American males in urban centers across the country. But now, under the guise of anti-terrorism, airport security means open season on people who look foreign.

Immigrants are being rounded up and held for months at a time without charges or access to lawyers. Citizens are turned over to the military as “unlawful combatants.”

It's a bit alarming when I hear some of my brothers and sisters say, 'That's O.K.' In order to prevent another terrorist attack, this kind of racial profiling is acceptable.

Others may say it doesn't affect them or their family, because they're not Muslim or Arab or from a foreign country.

Rest assured that whenever they get through fighting terrorism, they won't stop there. Who will be the next target?

That's right, Us!

Some of you might be too young to remember the days when trade unionists were the terrorists. We need look no further than the 30's, 40's and 50's to remember a time when our rights and civil liberties were under attack.

Union organizing could get you shot, or at least branded a Communist.

Brothers and sisters, please keep in mind, that you don't have to be "foreign" to be stamped an enemy of the state.

The organizer of the Sleeping Car Porters, A. Phillip Randolph, was once labeled the most dangerous Negro in the country.

He was targeted, not only because he was organizing exploited sleeping car porters, but because he was uniting black men – isolated because of racism – into a larger movement with whites who also shared the common struggle as workers. Their struggle went beyond the color of their skin.

[Pause.]

While the demographics have changed, that reality is no different today.

Employers and politicians will play workers against each other. They will use wedge issues to keep us fighting against each other; blur our vision to prevent us from being clear on who we must stand with to win dignity as workers, as taxpayers and as equal members of this society.

In the African American community, there's a long tradition of being judged by the color of our skin -- even within our own race.

Blacks were subjected to a caste system. Who remembers the old tune, “If you're light, you're alright. If you're brown, stick around. But if you're black – get back! Get back!”

The darker your skin, the less acceptable you were even within certain circles in the Black community.

There were the so-called brown bag parties. That meant if you were the color of a brown bag or lighter, you could get in. But any darker than the brown bag, forget it!

[Laughter. Pause.]

In the larger society, “they” determine who’s “colored” when it suits them.

For instance, at one time, Irish and Italian immigrants were not considered White until it became convenient for them to be pitted against the real colored folks.

In the 60’s and 70’s, baseball players of African descent from the Dominican Republic were considered Black. Now, ball players of African descent from the same country are considered Latino.

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, we have seen Africans bought and sold; native Americans stripped of their ancestral lands; signs that said Irish and Italians need not apply; special taxes paid by Chinese immigrants; Japanese Americans locked up in concentration camps and Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe denied entry into neighborhoods and social organizations.

Uniting people who are similar is easy. What’s really hard, is uniting people who are different.

That, brothers and sisters, is our challenge. That is what makes our union experiment a winning exercise in human rights and social justice.

[Pause.]

Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable when we examine our own attitudes. But we have to be honest and aware so we don't fall into that trap.

The Bush administration has put a lot of emphasis on trying to expand the Republicans' base by reaching out to Latino voters.

They will try to find issues that they believe separate Hispanics from other people of color, especially from African Americans.

And within the Latino community, we sometimes hear suggestions that because 'we're becoming the largest minority' that somehow means that so-called "Hispanic issues" should have greater importance than the concerns of the once dominant but on the decline African- American union members.

First, no ethnic or racial group has a lock on any issue, especially not injustice.

Blacks and Latinos are both struggling for decent wages, adequate health care and quality schools for their children.

The incarceration rates of black and brown young people are both higher than the percentage of their kids in college. Both groups still experience racial discrimination in housing, employment and education.

There is no monopoly on racial exploitation. Nor should there be a monopoly on the fight for racial justice!

[Pause.]

What does it mean to be the largest minority? Being a minority group by itself is still a minority –whether large minority or smaller minority.

You are still out-ranked by whatever, or whoever, is defined as the majority.

As single and separate groups, we cannot achieve victories. Together we are not a minority. We are the majority!

Our fight should not be over who has less power – the African American security guards against the Filipino nurses against the Mexican janitors against the Haitian nursing home attendants.

It's not about more or less power for each individual group, but how we come together as a united front and a force to be reckoned with.

[Pause.]

Martin Luther King Jr. understood this. When he left Alabama and went to Chicago, he quickly realized that it was not only about racial justice but it was also about economic justice. That's why he started the Poor People's Campaign.

Caesar Chavez also understood this. He united the Filipino, African-American, Mexican and even Arabic-speaking farm workers into a great movement.

And Jesse Jackson understands this. He always reminds us that the majority of poor people in this country are not Black or Latino. They are White. And they don't all live in Appalachia.

[Pause.]

Recently, Attorney General Ashcroft announced the restructuring of the INS -- a move that is sure to have Congressional support and will give the federal government even more power to infringe on immigrants' civil rights.

One of his goals – above the objections of virtually all law enforcement organizations – is to use local police for immigration enforcement.

Imagine the Ashcroft vision. The same police who've been blamed for racial harassment and brutality in the Black community now become storm troopers for the INS.

[Pause.]



Let there be no mistake, immigration is a union issue! Immigration is an SEIU issue! And immigration is a Black issue, just as it is a Brown issue.

Eleven percent of the Black population in this country is immigrants.

The new workforces are largely immigrants from Mexico, Russia, Poland, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But most importantly, we are a nation of immigrants.

Undocumented immigrants pay taxes and work hard. A recent study estimates that they contribute at least \$300 billion to the U.S. economy annually.

Aren't they paying their fair share?

Over 50,000 immigrants are serving in the arm forces, protecting this country.

Don't they deserve the right to become U.S. citizens?

To address this inequity, we are participating in the million postcard campaign. We are calling on the Bush administration to fix the immigration laws, and keep families together.

Our campaign is aimed at ending the immigrant worker's fear of being swooped on at their job and deported back to countries they left for good reason.

And we are collectively issuing a call to arms for our government to reward hard work by allowing immigrant workers to earn legal status.

I urge you to support the million postcard campaign for legalization for hard working, tax paying immigrant workers.

When we win this victory, it is not only immigrants, but all of us, who can celebrate a victory as a stronger, more unified force.

[Pause.]

The issue of immigration is but one of many, many examples of why you are so important to SEIU. Being a union member is not just about a fatter paycheck. It's about being part of a movement that believes in the worth and dignity of every human being.

We are a movement that answers, “Yes, I am my brother's (and my sister's) keeper.”

Our union cannot be successful in a society where your family's wealth and income are determined by the color of your skin – whether you come from Mexico, Poland, the Pacific Rim, Jamaica, West Indies or Jamaica, New York.

We cannot improve our conditions at work if we ignore the problems we all face at home and in our communities.

Many of us have struggled against injustice and discrimination that was based on the color of our skin, or where we came from, who we love or our legal status.

Through these many battles, we have learned important lessons about solidarity and collective action.

We've learned that the only way we get anything is by standing up and standing together.

Remember that you are making the world better, not just for yourselves, but for your children, their children and the generations of children that will come after them.

President Stern has often said, “The best social program this country has ever had has been the labor movement. We have done more to lift people out of poverty than any social program that has come from the halls of Congress.”

Through your union activism and embrace of issues like immigration reform, you become the conscience of our labor movement and the nation.

[Pause.]

In closing, brothers and sisters, remember to take the time to listen to each other. If we can listen and learn; if we can agree to disagree, and discuss the issues openly and honestly, then we will get it right.

Bothers and sister, thank you for listening to me today.