

**Patricia Ann Ford**  
**Executive Vice President**  
**Service Employees International Union**  
**SEIU Eastern Region Social and Economic Justice**  
**Boston, MA**  
**June 2002**

Good evening! It's so good to be here in Boston with my Eastern Region Brothers and Sisters.

I am so pleased and excited to see so many of you here. All of you are to be commended for the outstanding work you are doing on behalf of not only our members, but also working men and women as a whole.

We are all connected to each other in some way, shape or form – that's why I want to talk a little about the South. In April, I had the privilege of addressing delegates at our Southern Regional Conference. And

just like you our members in the South are making great strides.

The South is on the cutting edge of political battles; we saw that in 2000.

The South is also on the cutting edge of struggles for social justice. And the fate of Southern workers will determine the fate of workers nationwide.

We have seen how the demographics are rapidly changing in the nation and in our union. If we can change the South, then we can change the nation!

But we also have many challenges ahead.

Each of us has seen and felt the impact of George Bush's victory in 2000.

Massive tax cuts for the rich that will squeeze public service right down to the local schoolhouse.

No ergonomics protection to stop the epidemic of back injuries in our nursing homes or carpal tunnel syndrome experienced by clerical workers.

Massive assaults on civil rights and civil liberties led by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Bush is now calling on Congress to establish a new department with cabinet level status – Homeland Security Department.

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.”

Whenever they get through fighting terrorism, whom do you think they are going to come after next? **(crowd response)** That's right, Us!

Trade unionists were the terrorists of the 30's, 40's and 50's. The organizer of the Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph was once labeled the most dangerous Negro in this country.

*[Pause]*

And, just to show you the length that employers will go to to exploit workers, in Florida, Local 1199 fought determined opposition from nursing home owners.

The latest gambit was to accuse the union of using “voodoo” to intimidate Haitian workers into voting for the union. It is so pathetic, ridiculous and racist. (It’s laughable)! But then I thought about what Brother Malcom X would say “By any means necessary!” I’m pleased to report 1199 Florida won that fight.

But don’t think that it will stop there.

Employers will play workers against each other. They will use wedge issues such as school vouchers.

While, these people pretend to care about our children’s educational needs, they don’t appear to care if they have food to eat, housing, clothing or safe communities in which to live.

Another wedge issue is the racial divide. Some of us remember it was not so long ago that we were judged by the color of our skin even within our own Race.

**“They”** determine who’s “colored” when it suits them. At one time, Irish and Italian immigrants were not considered to be White until it became convenient for **“them”** to make them White.

In the 60’s and 70’s, baseball players of African descent from the Dominican Republic were considered to be Black. Now, ballplayers 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.

And recently we have seen an all out attack by the Bush Administration on our members working at airports in the name of national security and immigration reform.

Everybody talks a good line about “unity” but not everybody is ready to make the extra effort to make unity a reality.

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

Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable when we examine our own attitudes.

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.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this. When he left Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia 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, which, in my opinion, led to his untimely demise.

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 White – and they don't all live in Appalachia.

Recently, Attorney General Ashcroft announced the restructuring of the INS. A move that is sure to have Congressional support, which will give the Federal Government even more power to infringe on immigrant's civil rights.

And let there be no mistake, **immigration is a union issue!** Eleven percent of the Black population in this country are immigrants. The new workforces are largely immigrants from countries such as Mexico, Russia, Poland, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But most importantly, we are a nation of immigrants!

Over 50,000 immigrants are serving in the arm forces, protecting this country. These persons and others 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. I urge you to support the million postcard campaign for legalization for hard working, tax paying immigrant workers.

*[Pause]*

I would be remised if I didn't speak about politics.

Too often, we hear that politics is about money and greedy politicians. And that turns people off. But really politics is about people. People just like you and me.

It took politics to give us the right to vote. It took politics to bring us from the back of the bus to the front of the bus. It took politics to integrate our schools. It was politics that enslaved my people and a political compromise that rendered us three-fifths human. If you think this can't happen again, you are wrong! It won't be constitutionally written as it previously was, nor will they say it. They will just treat us as if we were three-fifths human.

*[Pause]*

In 2004, the Republican ticket could be Bush-Ashcroft. The only thing that scares me more than a Bush-Cheney ticket is a Bush-Ashcroft ticket. We have a chance to make a difference, to stop the Bush-Ashcroft ticket dead in its tracks.

Two states will be critical to Bush in 2004: Texas and Florida.

If Ron Kirk, an African-American who is running for the U.S. Senate in Texas has been in Congress, members of the Congressional Black Caucus would have been allowed to speak on the floor of the Senate in protest of the stolen 2000 presidential election. Better yet, if we had kept Carol Moseley Braun in office, that caucus would have been able to speak.

In November, we will pick governors for those states.

We saw in 2000 how helpful (and convenient) it was for President Bush to have “**Brother**” Bush to turn to.

*[Pause]*

SEIU is doing our part to make sure that what happened in 2000 never happens again.

We want to make sure that every vote is counted, and that every vote counts!

We are partnering with the National Black Caucus of State Legislators and community organizations to push for passage of legislation for voter reform.

The future of our political program lies in encouraging and supporting our members to run for elected office, developing our Member Political Organizers Program, increasing our COPE contributions and educating our members

on the importance of registering to vote...and then voting!

New Jersey is leading the way in electing wall-to-wall worker friendly candidates – Corozine US Senate and almost all of their endorsed candidates for Congress, McGreevy Governor, Sharpe James, Mayor of Newark, and the list goes on and on.

*[Pause]*

From the North to the South, east to the west, and points in between, we are moving beyond one-hit Lobby Days to develop regular, ongoing contact of members with their legislators. Member political organizers are our most effective lobbyists, no doubt about it.

Nationwide, the registration of our members is far below what it should be.

Simply by registering our own members, we can have a big impact.

Once they are registered, they vote the right way. They vote in the best interest of working families.

In 2000, over two-thirds of our members in Florida were unregistered. If they had all been registered and voted for Al Gore, then George Bush would not be president today.

And just as important as our political fight is, our fight for social justice is as equally important.

Not everyone in the labor movement is convinced that fighting for social justice should be a union priority.

Well, we at SEIU have a different vision of struggles for social justice.

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.

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.



Our union cannot be successful in a society where all the important decisions – about the economy, about war and peace and about our basic legal rights – are made by a tiny, self-interest elite group of wealthy white men like George Bush, Dick Cheney and John Ashcroft.

We cannot improve the lives of our members at work if we ignore the problems they face at home and in their community.

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.

The skills one learns fighting for justice are the same skills one needs to build a strong labor movement.

I am convinced that the struggle for social justice makes our union stronger.

And I know that President Stern agrees with me.

That's why he appointed a Committee on Social and Economic Justice last year.

The Committee includes local union leaders, like the Chairman of the Committee, Gerry Hudson, who you will hear from soon and staff and rank & file activists such as Rahman Muhammad, Monica Russo, Marchel Smiley, Mike Murphy, and Hector Figueroa.

They are developing a strategy that will make SEIU a leader in the struggle for social and economic justice.

We have heard a lot about terrorists and terrorism since 9/11. We have wrapped ourselves so tightly in the flag that we have choked ourselves to the point that we are scared

to speak out against the injustices and the bad foreign and domestic policies of George W. Bush. I am not going to let anyone question my love for this country or my loyalty because I'm critical of our leaders. I've been vocal about Bush and Cheney and I've been critical of Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice who stood silently by when people in Florida (many of whom looked like them) were denied the right to vote.

You know, I looked up the words terror and terrorism. Terror means to create fear, anxiety and worry. Terrorism is a systematic use of violence, terror and intimidation to achieve an end.

By Webster's definition of terror and terrorism, there is a terrorist living at 1600 Pennsylvania.

- When you have policies that allow 46 million people (many of them children) to go without health care, that's terrorism.
- When children go to bed hungry, that's terrorism.
- When families are homeless, that's terrorism.
- When women make 78 cents for every dollar men make, that's terrorism.

- When we will rather incarcerate our children than to educate them, that's terrorism.
  
- When we speak about abuse and domestic violence experienced by women abroad, but don't address it at homes in this country, that's terrorism.
  
- When law enforcement officers stop you because of the color of your skin, that's terrorism.
  
- When you are denied the right to join a union without fear of losing your job, that's terrorism.

Let's be clear about who the enemy really is.

And with the recent revelation that the Bush Administration was informed of a potential highjacking masterminded by Osama Bin Laden, it's clear to see who the real enemy is.

I am of the opinion that George W. don't want to find Bin Laden!

I know this labor business is difficult work. If it were easy, we would have figured it out long ago. But keep in mind, unionists died so we could have a 40 hour work week, and for child labor laws so our children would not be exploited. They sacrificed their jobs so we could have a 15-minute break, a minimum wage and the right to vote.

To paraphrase Dr. Joseph Lowry of SCLC, we have marched too far, prayed too hard and did too much to go backwards.

We must not let their sacrifices of loss of life and jobs be in vain. We have an obligation to continue the work they started. 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.”



Remember, you are the conscience of this union. As activists, you have a responsibility to make us leaders live up to our rhetoric or expose us for what we are.

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.

We will find the answers that our members, our union, our nation and our world need.

By your example, you are making “stronger together” not just a catchy slogan but a true means to an end.

Brothers and sisters, thank you for listening to me today.