

## **Voucher & Political Action**

Good evening! 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. [Opening to be adapted to audience and venue.]

We are connected to each other in some way, shape or form. That's why I want to talk with you about an issue that we all care about deeply and that is linked to our future – our children and quality education for them.

Politicians and the enemies of working people will play us against each other. They will use wedge issues like school vouchers. They will exploit the genuine desires and desperation of well-meaning parents to advance their interests.

As you know, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Cleveland voucher program, giving momentum to what has proven to be a divisive issue, pitting poor parents against organized labor and civil rights leaders.

This same voucher case was embraced and promoted by Bush during his presidential campaign.

They have ripped off the language of our movement, using words like “choice”, “opportunity,” “freedom.”

But let us not be tricked. The vouchers campaign is packaged in deceptive wrapping, made to look appealing for people who are looking for answers.

But the bottom line, the vouchers movement and all its rhetoric is no better example of the big lie.

It's not by accident that dozens of pro-voucher ballot measures have come up in one form or another in California and across the country.

Voters have consistently defeated the proposals because they know the supporters of vouchers are selling false promises.

Black and brown working parents want nothing more than to give their children the best education possible. I grew up believing that education was the key to a better life. I still believe it is.

[Pause.]

There's no disagreement from us at SEIU that our schools are in crisis. Fixing public education is the solution to a substandard system.

We need real improvements: smaller class size, increasing teacher training and raising standards in public schools.

For instance, SEIU is on record supporting the ballot initiative in Florida that would reduce class size. It will give all kids in the public schools a better chance at quality education.

None of this is the goal of vouchers. It's simply to drain our tax dollars and the scarce resources available to public schools.

The goal is to bolster, not struggling parents and their kids, but conservatives whose children are already in private schools.

Just do the math. There are not enough vouchers or private school slots in the nation to answer the massive needs facing inner-city schools and inner-city school children.

The voucher system gives the choice, not to parents, but to schools. Private schools can pick the privileged few, while the students in need of extra attention will be left behind in public schools lacking the resources to help them.

[Pause.]

To understand this big lie, let's look at the people who are behind it.

They're the same forces who've been pushing privatization, a sub-minimum wage, affirmative action roll-backs and union-busting.

It includes the likes of billionaire John “Wal-Mart” Walton; affirmative action foe Ward Connerly; and Lynde and Harry Bradley.

The Bradleys are billionaires who own a foundation that supports dangerous causes ranging from right-wing think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation to people like Charles Murray who wrote a book claiming that African Americans are intellectually inferior.

How can anyone believe that this cast of characters could support choice for Black and Brown parents?

[Pause.]

They have deep pockets for slick multi-million dollar newspaper and television ads. They even created an organization to try to fool the black community.

In August 2000, a group called Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) was formed with Walton and Bradley’s bankroll.

With millions from its right-wing sponsors, this group has set out to dupe Black parents.

They buy expensive ads in the New York Times and on local television. They hold so-called “empowerment” conferences in Black communities. And they spout appealing rhetoric even as they undermine everything that would empower our community.

We have an important job to perform, brothers and sisters. We must respond across the country as we have in California, in Oregon, in Michigan, and in other states the measure has been beaten back.

Proposition 226, the failed initiative that attempted to silence labor's political voice in California, was funded by the same forces that continue to unleash these voucher measures across the country.

They believed if they cut off our political activism, they would stamp out one of voucher's most fierce opponents.

They were wrong. We faced them head on and won!

[Pause.]

This is an important challenge that we must take up. It does not end with vouchers.

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.

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's about us flexing our muscles and exerting our power.

It is politics that will continue to drive the voucher fight. Your actions on the local level – electing school boards and city councils and state representatives – can determine whether those in charge are voices for the vouchers or real supporters of quality public education.

Politics and the legislative process control every aspect of our lives. You can't drive, die or get married without touching the political process.

Remember, 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. And we don't have to wait until the presidential election to do it.

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 had 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.

We saw in 2000 how helpful (and convenient) it was for President Bush to have “Brother” Bush come to the rescue in Florida.

In November, we will pick governors for those states.

SEIU is doing our part to see that what happened in 2000 never happens again. We’re making sure that every vote is counted, and that every vote counts!

We have partnered 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!

[Pause.]

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

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-third 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.

Right beside our political fight, our ongoing campaign for social justice is equally as 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.

[Pause.]

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

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

I know this labor business is difficult work. It if 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.

[Pause.]

President Stern has often said, “The best social program this country as 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.”

In closing, brothers and sisters, it’s up to you to engage your fellow union members, friends and neighbors in a discussion about what the voucher movement really stands for. Take time to listen to them to understand why they hold their position.

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.

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