

## **Breaking Down Barriers to Equality: Affirmative Action is Just the Beginning**

### Outline

Greetings, acknowledgements, purpose of remarks

Context of affirmative action in U.S.: need, effect on racism, political support (Bush, election year issue); drawing parallels to Brazil (Historically, racism has commonly accompanied slavery, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation and gross inequality. In other cases relatively powerless groups that have felt threatened by social and economic instability have blamed other powerless groups for their predicament.)

SEIU steps to encourage internal and workplace diversity

How SEIU has built a diverse union leadership

Affirmative action is necessary for:

Remediation

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination serve to divide workers and make it harder for them to see their common interests and work together

Social exclusion has an economic dimension

The labor movement in the United States is incredibly diverse, encompassing men and women of all races and nationalities. Despite our many hues and voices, we are united by our shared concern for humanity.

a domestic policy that has increasingly enriched the wealthy while plunging working people deeper into economic insecurity.

special responsibility to raise our voices and push for social justice at home and around the world,

The New Strength Union Plan requires all local unions to adopt and implement diversity programs. SEIU must do all we can to defeat attempts by management's to use diversity to divide workers. The involvement of the Social and Economic Justice Committee can only strengthen SEIU's diversity program.

For over 10 years, the caucuses have tackled crucial issues of civil and human rights and fostered solidarity with unions in other countries. They have also shone a light on injustices in North America that SEIU as a whole has striven to overcome. In doing so, they have expanded and deepened the unique SEIU culture of unity in diversity.

our union was founded by workers who decided they needed a union to win social and economic justice

Principles for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century SEIU include a recognition that “we are stronger and more united when union leaders, staff and programs reflect the diversity of our current, future, and retired members...”

WE believe that the labor movement has always been most successful when it is organizing in the context of a broad social movement. There is no way that union members can advance their economic and political interests while the rights of women, people of color or other groups suffering from discrimination are being rolled back.

As trade unionists, we tend to see the world through the lens of the employer-employee relationship.

Racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination serve to divide workers and make it harder for them to see their common interests and work together.

We don't do this advocacy in a vacuum. Our union has been proactive in developing internal mechanisms to promote social and economic justice within our union and to equip our members to demand social and economic justice...local union Civil and Human Rights Committees are mandated in the SEIU Constitution

“Winning for working families” is not just about winning on the job; it is also about winning in our communities and in the larger society. If SEIU has a vision of improving the lives of working families and building a better society, then we must have a mission that includes working on social and economic justice issues.

Promoting social and economic justice and ensuring that these issues are integrated into the union's strategy and agenda is the responsibility of all SEIU leaders.

This so-called “Racial Privacy Initiative” is a thinly-veiled attempt by lead proponent Ward Connerly and his conservative cronies to once again turn back the clock on civil rights. In 1996, he was able to cajole California voters into stripping away the use of affirmative action in higher education and employment with the passage of Proposition 209. It must have slipped his mind that he at one-time received benefits for having a small, minority-owned business. Two years later, he was able to convince voters in Washington to follow suit with a similar ban on the consideration of race and gender by state entities. Now his right-wing agenda is back on the ballot in California and he's also making plans to take on Michigan.

tools for achieving equal opportunity and equality

race still matters greatly in America and its effects won't be dissipated with the passage of a colorblind initiative. The U.S. Supreme Court confirmed this in June when it affirmed the use of race in admissions at the University of Michigan. Even when population and socioeconomic status are taken into account, great rifts in unemployment, education achievement and healthcare between whites and people of color still exist –

some 40 years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., called for equality and fairness on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Recent figures show that whites are still far ahead of the game in earning college degrees, unemployment rates for African Americans double that of whites, and African Americans are also 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease. Allowing Proposition 54 to pass would only create a false sense of equality and offer no system of checks and balances for the people of California to legally assess and address racial differences. It will dismantle years of progress won from the blood, sweat and commitment of civil rights and labor activists.

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.

SEIU has its roots in organizing workers that other unions did not want – immigrants, women, and people of color. Since its founding in 1921, SEIU has played a leading role in the struggle to secure equal rights for all workers. That has meant fighting to protect workers who are exploited, disenfranchised, and denied an equal opportunity for advancement. We have been creating a proud history and culture of organizing and representing the interests of immigrants, minorities, women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, the disabled, and others subject to discrimination in our society. We have also been building strong bonds with other movements seeking social and economic justice.

When we see that the overall wage gap between white and African-American workers is getting worse – 20 years ago Af-Am earnings were 81.8 percent of white earnings; in 1993, 77.4 percent ; white women earned 75.9 percent as much as white men, Af-Am men 73.8 percent, Af-Am women only 65.7 percent – then we know that affirmative action is a necessity.

SEIU has always been a union that has valued its diverse membership.

Collective bargaining is a powerful tool to achieve social justice and equality beyond the protection of existing laws.

“Affirmative action is the nation's most ambitious attempt to redress its long history of racial and sexual discrimination. But these days it seems to incite, rather than ease, the nation's internal divisions.

An increasingly assertive opposition movement argues that the battle to guarantee equal rights for all citizens has been fought and won – and that favoring members of one group over another simply goes against the American grain.

But defenders of affirmative action say that the playing field is not level yet – and that granting modest advantages to minorities and women is more than fair, given hundreds of years of discrimination that benefited whites and men.” – Washpost

“The debate over affirmative action takes on a particularly bitter tenor in the trenches. "Angry white men" blame affirmative action for robbing them of promotions and other

opportunities. And while many minorities and women support affirmative action, a growing number say its benefits are no longer worth its side effect: the perception that their success is unearned.

Judging simply by the results, the playing field would appear to still be tilted very much in favor of white men. Overall, minorities and women are in vastly lower paying jobs and still face active discrimination in some sectors.” – Washpost

Make no mistake about it: in the U.S., there are many who have coopted the language of the civil rights movement to move us back ... the bill outlawing affirmative action in Calif is called California Civil Rights Initiative, which amends the state constitution to say that public officials shall not "discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin."