

Why Our Union Decertified SEIU

Jerry Williams President, Culver City Employees Association

Dear Friends in the Labor Movement:

Our union decertified SEIU in November, 1999. I have been asked to explain why. There were 3 major reasons:

First, SEIU's dues were very high and we did not seem to receive any service for our money. We almost never saw an SEIU rep. When we called the Union office we were forwarded to a "call center." It usually took days – or weeks -- to get a response.

As president, I was told that I was supposed to represent my co-workers, as a "steward," but I was not provided any training for this. I was worried about making mistakes in legal matters and not comfortable going up against Management. This was not a job I thought I should be doing! Our members wanted to be represented by professionals, not co-workers. I was shocked that our dues didn't provide us with this assistance.

Secondly, SEIU didn't seem concerned with OUR needs. When we did see a rep (for contract negotiations) he did not seem very prepared, or very skilled. His speaking and writing communications were poor. He didn't remember our issues. He would not spend time with our members. He talked mostly about national politics and why we should contribute more to the COPE fund. In the meantime, we ended up with bad contracts. Our complaints to the Regional Office about this fell on deaf ears.

Third, with SEIU we felt as if we had no control. The dues went up without our consent. We had none of our own money. We wanted to get involved in local politics, with our own Council; but SEIU was no help. They are focused on national politics. The MOU was signed by a small group of people. People with grievances didn't get help – except from me.

Misinformation. SEIU talks a lot about power, but I don't think city management respected them at all. Even after we voted to decertify them, they tried to continue to take dues from us. CEA provided an attorney to finally get rid of them.

After we got rid of SEIU, we re-formed the Culver City CEA, we hired City Employees Associates to help with labor relations issues. Their assistance has saved us from disaster. They initially charged us \$14 a month. Last year, the fee went up to \$15. We collect a few dollars on top of this for other union business. CEA cannot raise our fee without our agreement. We can terminate them with 30-days' notice

We elect our own leaders and bargaining committee, but CEA does all the grievances and other legal work. When our members call their office, there is always a rep to help them. They come to our workplace to handle grievances or discipline cases. They provide a monthly report on all our issues and only bill us when the month is over.

We are bargaining for a new MOU right now, and our CEA attorney, Brian Neihaus, is a very competent negotiator. He also attends membership meetings, so **everyone** knows what is going on.

Brian doesn't TELL US what we are doing, the way the SEIU rep did. He ASKS us about our needs. He has no vote on the bargaining committee. He's simply our advisor and spokesperson. Bargaining was very hard last year. Brian stood up for us, knew the contract, explained the law and was completely honest. We don't have to worry about any "behind the scenes" deals as we did with SEIU.

Overall, I am positive that our members would NEVER vote to go back to any of the big unions. Our system is working well. We are happy with our current staff and are very glad that we got rid of SEIU.

Jerry Williams, past President,
Culver City Employees Association