Taking Action to End Poverty Wages in Minnesota

For the third time in less than a year, janitors who work for sub-contractors cleaning Target and other stores in the Twin Cities went on strike for fair wages and the right to organize without fear of retaliation. Strikers hit the picket line in front of the downtown Minneapolis Target store at 5:30 am on Black Friday. They were joined by hundreds of community allies, including Minneapolis City Councilmembers Elizabeth Glidden and Alondra Cano, and State Representative Ray Dehn, whose district includes the downtown Target store.

The janitors strike was part of a Week of Action by workers who play an important part in making the Thanksgiving holiday happen, yet are paid wages that are too low to provide the basic necessities for their families. Wal-Mart associates held a one-day strike at the beginning of the week, and workers at poultry processing plants in greater Minnesota marched on their employer the next day.

On the day before Thanksgiving, the busiest travel day of the year, a group of 200 airport workers and their allies led a march through the terminal to protest the poverty wages they are paid. "During my four years in the company, we haven't gotten any significant amount of a raise," said Abenezer Madde, who cleans inside Delta aircraft. "I started at $7.25 an hour and now make $8.10. That's the highest my pay can go."

Madde is one of approximately 600 workers who clean the planes and transport seniors and passengers with disabilities by wheelchair and electric cart. These non-union workers earn an average of $7.73 an hour with no benefits and are currently organizing with Local 26.

The following week in his speech about economic inequality, President Obama cited these problems, stating, "We know that there are airport workers who work their tails off and are still living at or barely above poverty."

These different groups of workers joined together with supporters on Black Friday in the afternoon, as 1,000 people marched on the neighboring Target and Wal-Mart in the St. Paul midway area. The march concluded with 26 people locking arms in an act of non-violent civil disobedience, sitting down in the middle of the intersection at Snelling and University and stopping traffic until they were removed by police. Among those arrested was LeRoy Graham a striking worker who cleans a Target store for Diversified Maintenance.

Newly elected Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges voiced her support, "At the start of this holiday
season, Minneapolis is thankful to the low-wage workers who drive our thriving economy. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. Now low-wage workers are united in courage, they are determined to lift their wages above poverty levels and protect dignity and respect in the workplace."

Join us for another week of action planned around the start of the legislative session which starts February 25th.

Make Your Voice Heard

We won stronger contracts last year but the companies our trying to take away our new rights. Some building owners have changed to “non-union” contractors or are hiring temp workers. Also, our families and community are still falling behind.

The only way that we can fight these problems is to get the ideas and participation of a large number of our members, not just the ideas of a few. SEIU Local 26’s executive board has proposed a process like when we prepare for our contract fights. We have started with a survey and also “education discussions/debates” at the worksites, the union hall, and online over the next 5 months to hear the ideas of as many members as possible. The results of this process will be voted on at our Leadership Assembly in May, to decide our plan of action for 2014.

The goals of this process are:
1) Get members ideas on how to make our union stronger so we can stop the abuses of the boss.
2) Deepen the education of our members about how our collective power works.
3) Strengthen the leadership of our union (staff, stewards, worksites, online, circles)

Schedule of events:
- January 11 & February 8: member meetings
  - Surveys need to be filled out and returned to the local (706 1st St. N. in Minneapolis) by March 1st. These can also be taken online at Seiu26.org
- March 8, 11am: member meeting:
- We will get Survey results, and form member committees to develop “recommendations” based on survey results.
- April 12: All member meeting: Get “recommendations” from member committees for worksite discussion.
- May 10: Leadership Assembly
  - Stewards discuss and vote on final “recommendations” and budget for 2014.

The executive board looks forward to hearing from all members to help make this process as successful as possible. So, stay involved!

Health Insurance Update

By now, everyone should have received their insurance cards from Cigna health, Delta dental, Caremark medication insurance and Cigna Vision. companies. If you or a family member covered by the plan has not received cards, please call our health & welfare fund at 1-800-251-1777.

Anyone with a smart phone (Android or iPhone) should get the myCigna app. This app allows you to gain access to your health insurance information. It includes the directory of in-network facilities and access to maps to allow for instant directions. The app stores your insurance cards, so you can simply hand your phone when checking in with your doctor or health care facility. You can also check any claims and account balances right on your phone.

Holiday Party 2013
Members’ kids had a great time at the Member Holiday party, where we made balloon animals, ate wings, sambusas and tamales, and celebrated a good year.

Member Circle Updates

Union workers have been uniting around common goals and using their best abilities to participate in a variety of activities. You can be a part of things as well or start your own circle. The following are updates from some of our member circles actively involved in our communities.

1) The Immigration circle has continued to focus on passing comprehensive immigration reform. The US Senate long ago passed a bill and is awaiting action in the House. Immigrants, Dreamers, and supporters began fasting in tents pitched across the street from the Capitol in Washington D.C. Contact Greg at gnammacher@seiu26.org.

2) The Women’s Circle is planning a celebration for International Women’s Day on March 1st at 11am at Local 26. (706 N. 1st St., Minneapolis). There will be food, raffles, and speakers at this event to commemorate the movement for equality. Contact cgomez@seiu26.org 612-978-7755.

3) The Work-Load circle is pleased to congratulate and recognize a group of janitors, at ABM’s UHG account, that made the decision to break the silence and fight together against workloads that were unreasonable. Their Steward Isabel Sanchez used the new Article 19 of our contract to solve the problem. All six affected workers requested a walkthrough review and written description for their 8 hour work day. After months of pushing, they got their walkthroughs, and at the end of the process negotiated a reduced workload for each one!

Now we have walkthroughs happening in many buildings, such as with Steward Ana Vasquez at Medtronic, and Victor at Lasalle. Organizing our co-workers and using our rights is the only way to stop these abuses. YES WE CAN. Are you also concerned about an unreasonable workload? Contact Gerrardo: gcajamarca@seiu26.org 612-386-6190.

4) AFRAM is planning their Central Regional conference here in the Twin Cities which runs June 20th to the 22nd. Currently, for Black History month, they are hosting a movie night and roundtable discussion of the blockbuster hit “12 Years a Slave”. Contact Harrison for more details: harrisonbullard@yahoo.com, 612-804-4388.

5) The Soccer circle has been meeting Saturdays at 4:30PM at Dugsi Academy, located at 1091 Snelling Ave. N. in Saint Paul. They are planning to have a Local 26 tournament in 2014. Brahmin Kone, ibrahimkone3@aol.com, 651-999-9950.

6) The Art/Music circle has a CD release party set for Saturday, March 8th at Gamut Gallery in support of increasing the minimum wage in Minnesota. 40 pieces of art from 5 individuals. Selling them for at least the current minimum wage. Mark Kreazy and Skip Grandz will be performing along with other local artists yet to be announced.
If you an artist or musician and would like to get plugged in to what we are working or have some ideas please contact S/O James Matias 651-347-5221 or at toodaysmusic@yahoo.com

7) Stewards Circle. Stewards are the most important individuals in a building because they help members resolve their issues right there. It’s the best and fastest way to rapidly resolve problems for your co-workers. If your building does not have a steward, you should elect one. We are redesigning the stewards training to make it more effective, Contact Ron Gulczynski at gulczynskironald@yahoo.com or 612-804-1266.

8) New Media/ Communications circle, help write this newsletter, Facebook, Twitter. Contact Gene gwasllc@gmail.com 651-964-9796 or Kevin Chavis-kevinchavis@gmail.com 612-276-2543.

9) African Circle, we are working to force the banks to re-open lines to transfer money to our families in Somalia. Contact Ibrahim Nur inur@seiu26.org 612-644-1717
Meet our new grievance center supervisor:

Francis Rojas

Francis Rojas was born in Bogota, Colombia and speaks fluent Spanish/English. She also speaks some French and Japanese, and is currently learning Arabic. Francis Rojas believes fairness, justice, and respect in the workplace are very important for an employee’s livelihood.

If you meet Francis, welcome her to the Local 26 family. We are very fortunate to have her fighting for us all!

Some recent wins from our grievance center:

ABM Audit (Impound Lot)
It was discovered that ABM was not properly paying employees at this site. Workers brought the issue up to the union, the company was audited, and the employees received back pay.
Mr. Steve Johnsrud will be receiving $1,534.06
Mr. Christopher Lee-Eide will be receiving $1,609.26.

ABM Airport Delta C
When Marsden took over this account, ABM had all of the employees sign resignation letters. We worked with the workers and ABM to make all of them void and we succeeded!
Retired Local 26 Members: Staying in the fight!

The Retiree Division of Local 26 met for their annual Christmas Party at Jax Restaurant on Thursday, December 5th. The elegant ambiance and first rate food and service of this top drawer establishment make a perfect setting for our yuletide gathering.

Our group numbers around fifty and we always enjoy seeing one another about four times a year. Recent gatherings have included river cruises, trips to the Arboretum, the Symphony, and Jax.

Retirees have been generous in their support of their brothers and sisters still active in Local 26. Two years ago we donated $4000 toward our contract struggle, and last year a further $8000! This year, at the conclusion of our Jax feast, about 60% of us jumped in our cars and drove a few blocks to a McDonald’s, where we joined in the national struggle to improve the lives and wages of fast food workers. We peacefully leafleted the place and were kicked out by the stunned management. We posed for a photo in the parking lot and went on our merry way. Our part in the action only took about 10-15 minutes, but it was fun and nice to know that we can still make a difference.

Joining the Retiree Division of Local 26 is easy for any retired member of the local. Just call Kim Houle at 612-843-6315 and she’ll enter you on our roll. Dues are minimal, about $36 a year. If you attend the Christmas Party at Jax, you get a Christmas card with a $20 bill in it, so your net cost for the year is only $16. Such a deal: what’s not to like?

Hope to see you when the time comes, meanwhile watch for our future plans and exploits.

John Graham - Retiree of Local 26

Our Legislative Priorities in 2014

The Minnesota legislature convenes starting February 25th. SEIU has a full agenda to push our elected officials on. The issues we will be advocating for at the state capitol are those that are near and dear to our members, and will help move our communities forward.

At the top of the agenda is increasing the state minimum wage to $9.50 an hour by 2015. Ideally it will be indexed to inflation, so that when prices go up, so do workers wages. Expect a lot of energy being put into this, including some actions at the beginning of the session.

Another issue we are focused on is improving Minnesotan’s retirement security by offering a state savings plan. Many workers are offered a 401(k) but not everyone has one. Further, these plans have inconsistent fees, some of which are extremely high. What we propose is a state run savings plan that will be run efficiently and allow everyone living in Minnesota the opportunity to save for their retirement.

We would all like to see increased enforcement and penalties for labor law violations. Employers
break our contract too often, and we would like to see that they honor our agreements and laws.

Paid sick leave is also something we want passed as well. We have some in our contract but if it became a state law, then we wouldn’t have to fight the bosses over this in future negotiations. Plus our friends and family members living in Minnesota would also benefit from not being forced to work while sick.

These are a few of the big things we are working on. Yet, there are many other things we would like to see change to help workers in this state. On Thursday, March 20th we will be having a lobby day at the state capitol in Saint Paul. Many members of Local 26 and other SEIU locals will be there to speak with members of the house and senate regarding these issues.

If you would like see these priorities happen, please join us! Contact Kevin at 612-276-2543 for more details.

**YOU CANT STOP MEMBERS WHEN THEY GET ORGANIZED.**

Janitors from Seagate went to ABM and met over their problems (see picture). For years they didn’t have a steward, but now have organized and won’t take no for an answer. Similar delegations from Lasalle got their Supervisor removed, and 4 hours additional work put into their building each night. Janitors from ABLE at City Center, and from SBM at Medtronic did delegations to talk to their managers, and got workload walkthroughs as a result.

**Stronger together:** ABM agrees to return 18,688 hours of vacation, equal to $250,000, to 681 workers! On January 17th, the union obtained documents showing that ABM had failed to calculate people’s vacation correctly, and for months members had reported that ABM supervisors flatly denied vacation requests, preventing people from using their rightful, earned vacation before December 31st. We filed a grievance immediately, and more than 35 janitors marched on ABM headquarters to begin two days of negotiations with our committee of workers and ABM. This resulted in a settlement that paid us back most of what was taken. Specifically, for all janitors who still had more than 48 hours of vacation accrual at the end of 2013, the amount you can “roll over” increased from 40 to 80 hours.

Keep in Touch

Visit Local 26’s website at www.seiu26.org

On Facebook? Stay up to date by “liking” us facebook.com/seiu26

Join our Facebook group pages: facebook.com/groups/SEIU26Janitors/

Security: facebook.com/groups/Local26SO/

Follow Local 26 on Twitter @SEIU26
If you'd like one of our representatives to visit your building or meet with you outside of work, call the call-center at 1-855-265-6225
Tell Congress that the time is NOW.

I am committed to help win common sense immigration reform by doing the following:

- phone calls May 1st March at 2pm Hiawatha y Lake Street, Minneapolis
- Meetings with Congresspeople
- Be a part of Local 26’s immigration committee

Name: _______________________________________   phone____________________________
Building: _________________________________  please send me text messages on this issue