Against All Odds: Civic Engagement and Power Building in an Invisible Workforce

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- Keys to U.S. Union Revitalization
  - Coalition Building
  - Develop members’ political skills
  - Promote member activism
  - Legitimacy/Symbolic Management

- Case study: SEIU Local 503 – 12000 home care workers in Oregon
Driving Forces

Unionization

Workers’ Self Interest

Ethic of Care

Occupational Improvement
- Wages
- Benefits
- Working Conditions
- Skills/Training

Restraining Forces

Market Failure

Legal Environment

Government

Public Perception

Nature of Work

HCW Motivation

Clients/Community
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Timeline

- 2000--Ballot Measure 99
- 2001 --House Bill 3816
- 2001 -- SEIU 503 Wins Certification Election
- 2003--Collective Bargaining Agreement Signed
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• Union Perspective
  – Unity & Voice
  – Broad-Based Coalitions
  – Political Support
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• Home Care Workers’ Perspectives
  – Lack of Work Recognition
  – Low Wages/Unpaid Work
  – Safety & Training
  – Lack of Benefits/Turnover
  – Ambiguous Employer-Employee Relationship
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• Building the Union: Challenges, Action, Results
  – Gaining power, voice, and recognition
    • “Twenty years of being unrecognized, underpaid, with no benefits and invisible to those other than the person I care for had made me angry. I honestly feel the union is the only viable alternative to changing this situation.”
  – Taking a Client-Centric Approach
    • “Since our clients come first with us, we want nothing for ourselves at their expense. Our elderly and disabled on state aid need our help.”
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- Owning the Movement
  
  - A Culture of Organizing
    
    - “They’re not used to having any rights or thinking that they could actually do things to make their lives better, so it’s a pretty easy sell, actually. Just talking to the home care workers, and they get into their problems and their frustrations with the job, it’s easy to go from there to how things will get better if they join the union.”

- Developing Member Leaders

- Going Public: Building Political Support
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- Outcomes: What Difference Does Unionization Make?
  - Individual Level
    - Improved working Conditions
  - Bargaining Unit level
    - Socialization
    - Empowerment
    - Support Mechanism
  - Community/State/National Level
    - Expanded Reach
    - Isolation → Connection
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• Conclusion
  – HCWs Politically Active/
    Engaged in Civil Society
  – Keys to success
  – Ongoing Challenges