

The Union Difference

Janitors point the way out of poverty

By David Moberg

During rush hour one morning in late April, 38-year-old Augusto Cuevas, wearing his red "Justice for Janitors" T-shirt, sat down in the middle of a busy intersection in suburban Chicago, blocking traffic for two hours before police arrested him and 50 fellow members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Later that day, the companies that clean commercial and high-tech office buildings in the booming "edge cities" outside Chicago returned to the bargaining table for the first time in 10 days and agreed to boost janitors' compensation by a dramatic 44 percent over three years. By the final year, Cuevas and his wife—also a janitor—will have family health insurance and each get paid \$8 an hour, up from \$6.65.

This victory—as in other recent SEIU triumphs in Los Angeles, San Diego and Cleveland—wouldn't have happened without the courage and zeal of workers like Cuevas, a recent immigrant from Mexico. A decade ago, most union leaders saw such immigrants as passive, frightened and unorganizable. Now many envision them as the militant heart of a renewed labor movement. "We got to do whatever we got to do to try to get our rights and insurance," said Cuevas, shortly after he was released by police. "Without insurance, we don't see any future for our families."

The janitors' struggle highlights an important dimension of poverty in the United States. In big cities like New York, Chicago and San Francisco, nearly 90 percent of janitors in major office buildings have been organized for many years, and their jobs provide health insurance, pensions and a decent, basic family income of nearly \$25,000 a year. But until recently, in cities like Los Angeles or in new suburban growth areas, janitors rarely had insurance and earned wages well below \$8.20 an hour, the poverty line for a family of four. Both groups did much the same work, often for the same national companies. The union made the difference, lifting hardworking but unskilled workers out of poverty.

In 1998, there were about 28 million workers, 27 percent of the work force, who earned wages under \$8 an hour. Few of them—estimates run around 6 percent—belong to unions. Unions have been weak in the service and retail sectors that together account for two-thirds of low-wage employment, and labor leaders often believed that low-wage workers were too difficult to organize, despite their abundant grievances. Now some of the best organizing unions—such as SEIU, HERE (hotel workers), AFSCME (public workers), UNITE (needle trades) and the UFW (farm workers)—focus much of their efforts on low-wage workers. In recent years, these unions have scored wins with home health care aides, nursing home employees, laundry workers, hotel room cleaning staffs, child care workers and airport baggage handlers.

Low-wage work isn't monolithic: most involves limited skills, but nearly 40 percent of low-wage workers have some college education. Many better skilled but poorly paid workers—child care and health care workers and graduate teaching assistants, for example—are now assertively organizing. While many low-wage organizing campaigns mobilize recent immigrants and minorities, nearly two-thirds of low-wage workers are white; though disproportionately young, 40 percent of low-wage workers are more than 35 years old.

All these jobs have one main thing in common: They don't pay well. That's partly because the workers who hold them lack market power and can be easily replaced. Increasingly, they are contingent workers—part time, temporary or supposedly independent contractors—or they may work for a subcontractor, while another powerful company holds the purse strings. The building owners, for example, set the rates for cleaning contractors, who employ the janitors. The contractors compete viciously for corporate crumbs and therefore are highly motivated to fight unionization. In many cases, from trash haulers to day care workers, government holds the purse strings, either hiring contractors or providing funds to reimburse all or part of workers' wages.

These masked employer relationships are only part of the problem. "The primary obstacle to organizing low-wage workers is how unstable the jobs are," says Allison Porter, outgoing director of the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute. Employers often are huge, deep-pocketed companies with widely dispersed sites, like McDonald's or Wal-Mart, which overwhelm isolated efforts with their anti-union tactics but are too big to organize easily on a national scale. In manufacturing, employers routinely threaten to move—and actually relocate—out of the country to avoid a union and find even lower wages.

Further, low-wage workers often feel little attachment to their employers: They vote with their feet about discontent, churning through a series of rotten jobs. At the same time, they may be living on the edge financially and fearful of losing what little they have. David Chu, director of strategic research at the AFL-CIO, says that the biggest issue in unionizing low-wage workers is "whether you can organize and get them a contract that makes a difference in their lives."

The janitors' strikes demonstrate that the power to make such a difference starts with strategy. After clawing its way back over the past 15 years to represent more than 70 percent of janitors in several regions, SEIU carefully planned its contracts to expire near the same time this year. This strategy took into account both the importance of local building service markets and the growing power of national cleaning firms and realty companies. The key to both the



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organizing and the strikes this year, however, was educating and mobilizing union members. The disruptions—both at the workplace, reinforced by unionized building engineers and truckers, and in the community, by blocking highways—created a broader crisis. The union then used community and political allies to increase pressure on both building owners and cleaning companies.

The battle was fought on favorable political terrain: Low unemployment gave workers confidence and clout, and the deepening gulf between the glittering rich techno-elites and the impoverished, hardworking immigrants—especially in Los Angeles and Silicon Valley—provided workers with the moral high ground. “There was a surprising nerve struck by the gross unfairness of people making \$6.80 an hour in Los Angeles,” says Stephen Lerner of SEIU. “There was no way to justify it. The strike was incredibly visible and disruptive. It’s not an image a lot of cities want, of workers in poverty amid incredible wealth.”

Five years ago, the union started training rank-and-file leaders on how to turn the inequity of their jobs into social power. “We got them excited about their union,” says Mike Garcia, president of the 22,000-member janitor local that stretches from Los Angeles to Sacramento. “We wanted to plug in our members every step of the way, in politics, in leadership development and understanding the industry. They feel the union is theirs to operate and make decisions. When the strike came, they were ready.”

The dynamic presence of the members helped create an incredible outpouring of public support, but it also reminded politicians of the growing importance of Latino voters, often mobilized for critical elections by the union. “You need to think creatively and strategically,” Garcia says. “You can’t be

afraid to take risks. Our decision to move the question of the disparity between the rich and poor is the key one. The general public is responsive to that kind of campaign. You can’t be just locked in battle with the employer and scabs, but have to think of what other pressure you can build, to know their business and their weaknesses.”

The campaign for low-wage workers succeeds when it is broadly political and unflinchingly moral. Unions have learned to reach out to allies in churches and the community in campaigns to require businesses with government contracts or subsidies to pay a “living wage,” for example. HERE has used local allies to demand that new, publicly subsidized hotels and convention centers not be antagonistic to unions. In its Silicon Valley contract campaign, janitors hope to forge a relationship with high-tech companies not only to win a healthy contract, but also to build affordable housing—without which even the best contract will be inadequate. A new coalition of more than 40 worker advocacy groups and unions, the National Association for Fair Employment, will be fighting for everything from legal restrictions on abuse of independent contractors to voluntary codes of conduct for temporary employment agencies.

Yet in the end, argues organizing consultant Richard Bensinger, “the only way to prove commitment [to low wage and immigrant workers] is to organize them. Legislative or policy positions don’t get it done. We have to put money, clout and organizers where the rhetoric is.” The janitors’ success in Los Angeles has already brought new organizing and contract victories for other low-wage Angelenos. Their example may yet inspire more of the militant, member-oriented unionism that is proving the fight against poverty may not be futile after all. ■

Ancient Daze

By Joshua Rothkopf

Gladiator is the kind of warm-weather bruiser you can have fun with—even while it's having its terrible way with you. It's a very proud movie: Only 20 minutes pass and we've

Gladiator
Directed by Ridley Scott

already been treated to a ferocious dog with orange eyes, a severed head flung in the mud, and the efficient devastation of a sizable forest in Germania. Those Roman legionnaires sure knew how to catapult a firebomb at their tribal enemies; so total is this opening rout that its only purpose is to wow us with crude imperial will. Says one commanding officer with the arrogance that comes with the scorched territory: "People should know when they're conquered."

In this picture, audiences are meant to be conquered too, not just thrilled but pummeled by its size, its cost, its thousands of extras—the mind reels at the catering alone. *Gladiator* is more than just a revival of the "sword-and-sandal" period epic, itself as dusty as a Roman coin; it's a return to the studio-driven colossus that throws a fortune at silliness just because it can. This excess used to have an ostensible justification in the threat of television, then in its infancy. Competitive innovations like the horizon-stretching Cinemascope made their debuts with the pomp and glory of *The Robe*; *Land of the Pharaohs* and *Ben Hur* chased ponderously after steadily dwindling receipts lost to the tube.

But the movie industry has long since given up the fight, edging ever closer to shortened attention spans and the emotional tidiness of *Friends*. Hollywood still knows how to spend money, of course. *Gladiator* assures us of this and tries to swap that for genuine engagement, not wholly in vain. But the grandeur rushes by impatiently; all too often the drama feels strictly small screen, like a video game. The script registers like a time-honored recipe that

has been undercooked: mix a dozen chariots with several gallons of fake blood, add the angst of a slave or two, a pinch of decadence—yet the dough doesn't rise. How can you have circuses without any bread?

The director, Ridley Scott, must have seemed a good choice on paper, a virtual guarantee of luster. Most famously, he turned artificiality and craft into an utterly persuasive, rain-drenched doomscape with *Blade Runner*, a sci-fi benchmark that continues to impress after 20 years of technological advances. Scott can even impart the air with tactility, fogging his interiors with motes of dust or, as in *Gladiator*, slowly

(*Alien*), or icons in a post-feminist Mustang commercial (*Thelma & Louise*). As in the arena, only the strongest survive this suffocating prettiness, and Russell Crowe just makes the cut as Maximus, our titular hero, despite a poorly developed role. Crowe deserves better: He pulled off a tour-de-force in last year's *The Insider* as the conflicted corporate whistleblower. Try to imagine that part with none of its outspokenness and all of the glowering and you'll come to a fair approximation of this film's Maximus—a general of few words who, through bad luck and the jealousy of the emperor's son, comes to be sold as a slave. Now a gladiator, he must fight his way to fame and a trip to the Colosseum for his vengeance.

That's basically it for the plot, which all but cries out in its thematic impoverishment. It underutilizes Crowe, a waste, and overtaxes Scott, who is



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Stand by your man.

falling snowflakes. "Rome is the light," we hear early on; Scott takes this literally, bathing the film in creamy hues of gold falling into darkest shadow under icy skies. The film never fails to look absolutely delicious.

More problematic is his tendency to turn people into objects as well, either as artificial replicants (*Blade Runner*), warm homes for parasitic monsters

required to propel the brunt of the momentum through showdowns of kinetic action—never his strong point. His precision falls apart in one choppy battle sequence after the next, each a blurred mess of microsecond edits and shutter-speed twiddling. For all his command, he can't seem to sustain a simple narrative of blows, sidestepping the promise of catharsis with an