

JUSTICE FOR JANITORS: HOW IMMIGRANTS ARE ORGANIZING FOR WORKER RIGHTS

Justice for Janitors
Los Angeles, CA

“No one is going to do it for you. We all need to put in our grain of sand.”

Rafael Ventura
SEIU organizer

Kamilo Rivera, Rafael Ventura, Dolores Martinez, Marisela Salinas
Local 1877, SEIU
Justice for Janitors
6421 South Victoria Avenue, #5
Los Angeles, CA 90043
Phone: 213-680-9567

SUMMARY: As part of a nearly **20-year movement to unionize janitors**, immigrant workers in the Los Angeles area have won significant improvements including wage increases, insurance benefits and job security. Their team of seasoned organizers includes many former janitors. The organizers enable workers to **overcome fear and apathy**, speak out about low-pay and workplace mistreatment, join or form unions and demand change. Their strategies include the following:

- **Educate Workers About Their Right to Organize:** Organizers must help the mostly immigrant workers to understand that they are free to participate in organizing activities, even if they are undocumented. Organizers must also address the skepticism of those who've experienced corrupt unions in their native countries.
- **Make Friend-to-Friend, Worker-to-Worker Connections:** Workers and former workers speak directly to other workers. This is essential to Justice for Janitors' success in turning people around.
- **Broaden the Goals, Engage Worker Allies:** The union movement targets broader policies to improve conditions for all workers. They also engage other workers, such as security guards, whose cooperation is essential for successful strikes.
- **Know What You Are Worth:** Organizers and activists use the confidence gained from speaking out and winning to solve other problems for themselves.

In the following case example, organizers from Justice for Janitors share what they say and do to engage workers in this successful movement for unionization and essential rights:

“YOUR HANDS MAKE THEM RICH”

Justice for Janitors

Writer: Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Kamilo Rivera, Local 1877, SEIU; Rafael Ventura, Local 1877, SEIU; Dolores Martínez, Local 1877, SEIU; Marisela Salinas, Local 1877, SEIU (Award Recipients) and Sonia Ospina (NYU/LCW)

"They worked me 10, 12 hours a day," says Dolores Martínez of her first job in the United States. "And they paid me for eight." If "pay" is even the right word. As part of a small army of immigrants who spend their late nights and early mornings cleaning office and apartment buildings throughout the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area for low pay, Martínez was experiencing first hand the grueling hours, the hard work, the low pay and the disdain with which janitors like her were treated by the cleaning company that employed her. "They were squeezing the work out of me," says Martínez.

That began to change just three months after she started work, when an upstart group of organizers from SEIU 1877 arrived at her building to try and convince the employees to sign on with the union. Some of the janitors were skeptical of the union's motives. Many of the workers were afraid, afraid of getting fired, or for those who were undocumented, afraid of being arrested and deported. But for Martínez, who came from Mexico to the U.S. just over 10 years ago, the choice was clear. "I was thinking that since these jobs are so easy to come by, that if they fire me it didn't really matter. What's so special about the job where they mistreat you, they scream at you? So we took the option of going to the union to tell our story and to sign union cards."

Martínez and her co-workers were stepping into a long and tough fight, one that not only would require perseverance, but the willingness to stand up very publicly for unionization. "We would go to the company owner's home in the morning to sing "las Mañanitas" (translation), to whistle, to listen to music, anything just to bother him because he had said he would go bankrupt before he had a union." After all, says Martínez, "They are your hands that are making them rich."

In taking on the cleaning company, Martínez and her fellow janitors were stepping up to answer a critical question of vital importance to low-wage immigrant laborers across the United States: How do immigrant workers move from a position of feeling afraid and vulnerable to feeling strong and committed enough to defend their rights and their dignity by organizing workers to support a union?

Can't raise their voices

For SEIU 1877, deciding to aggressively begin organizing mostly immigrant janitors through a program it now calls Justice for Janitors was controversial in some organized labor circles. There were long-standing tensions in the Los Angeles area between immigrants and native-born - and pro-union - Americans, many who viewed the growing immigrant population as little more than a threat to Americans' jobs. But given the thousands of immigrants who were moving to the area, it didn't take long for SEIU to see an opportunity to build its own strength by tapping the strength

of a growing new labor sector, a sector ripe for exploitation by employers and therefore potentially sympathetic to unionizing efforts.

But convincing immigrants to take a stand wasn't usually easy. The inability to speak English was one of the main barriers to activism, says a Honduran airport worker and Local 1877 activist. On the one hand, there was the problem of language. "People think that if they can't speak English they can't raise their voices." Probably the most serious barrier to being active was a fear of the consequences of speaking up. "Because we think that if we go speak to a judge or the police to complain about an employer, well the first thing that's going to happen is they're going to call the Immigration and Naturalization Service," says a janitor and an SEIU organizer. "That's why the majority of people here at first don't participate."

"Can't get rid of the anger"

It's a fear the employers work hard to instill and maintain. "The bosses tell you, 'These union people, coming in like this is against the law and you can't listen to them,'" says Martinez. "If you want to keep your job, don't listen to them." It was a constant threat. And being at work was like a headache and you just want to go home, but you need the work. It was like an illness. You're so unsettled so that you're yelling at your children, arguing with your husband. You can't get rid of the anger caused by your work."

"They rob you, they usurp you, they pay you a 'starving salary,'" adds the Local 1877 activist, "but you still have that fear of unionizing."

But for some it was flat out apathy that would get in the way of taking action. Another SEIU organizer who had done some organizing work in factories in Mexico before coming to the U.S. says, "I came here with the intention of forgetting. I didn't want to know anything. I didn't want any problems. I wanted to live in peace. I wanted to lay back and scratch my belly and not care about anything. Let other people fight for my rights."

Adding to the difficulty of organizing janitors was some deep skepticism of unions and their motives among many immigrants, some of whom had already had bad experiences with corrupt unions in their native countries. When organizers first arrive at a job site, people will frequently say, "'He's paid to do this. He makes money off of it,'" says Dolores Martinez.

"Sometimes the easiest thing to do is give up"

It's an initial suspicion that can be very tough to overcome, say Justice for Janitors activists. "At first people don't want to hear anything," says SEIU 1877 organizer Rafael Ventura. "They would slam the door almost in your face." Another SEIU organizer recalls trying to organize cleaners at a local mall. "It was as though you were wearing a sign on your chest that said 'wretch.' And they didn't want to know anything. And I told them, 'Well, sometimes the easiest thing to do is give up.'"

What Justice for Janitors has been remarkably good at, though, is turning people around. One key to that is making friend-to-friend and worker-to-worker connections, says Martinez. "The worker is speaking from personal experience and that is part of our success, getting the workers to talk to one another."

"What you need to do is make people understand that this is really beneficial for them," adds Ventura, "so we also talk to them about our own experience as workers. We say, 'When I worked in a job like yours I didn't have any benefits. I didn't have anyone to protect me. They could give me more work and I couldn't say, 'I won't do it,' because they would fire me and they wouldn't even say, 'Thanks. Bye!' And I tell them about the strike I was involved in as a janitor. They threatened us. They said it was the end of the line for us. And what happened? We won the contract. We went back to work and they didn't fire anybody because it's our right. So you try to raise people's consciousness."

"You tell them, 'You can fight. We're in a country where you can fight,'" adds another 1877 activist from Mexico who has worked both construction and janitorial jobs. "There are laws to protect us, even if we're undocumented. But sometimes it's still difficult to make people understand that we can organize ourselves."

Sometimes, says the Mexican activist who did not want to get involved, it takes a personal jolt to push someone into action. It was after the arbitrary firing of his wife that he decided he could no longer sit on the sidelines "scratching his belly." "I said, 'O.K., let's look into this. And we began talking. And we started getting together with friends and some were already members of the union." And the more he learned about the union, the more he realized how important it was to join and support it. He also became less patient with his co-workers who were balking. "Some would timidly say, 'Yes, I have heard co-workers talking about the union,' and they would timidly say, 'but... but...'" and I would slam the lockers with my hand and say, 'Hey, what's going on! Look at me! Listen to me!' And little by little I started convincing them."

"No one is going to do it for you," adds Rafael Ventura, "We all need to put in our grain of sand."

Losing the fear

"It's when you begin to know that you have the same rights as a person who is legal, who is a citizen, that there are human rights," says a Justice for Janitors supporter, "that you begin to lose the fear. You begin to lose the terror that INS is going to grab you, or that if the police grab you and you give them your name and address that you're going to be turned over to the INS and deported. If I'm not informed, then I can't struggle and you can't struggle if you don't have the guts." He adds, "To know you have rights. And now we don't have to crouch to ask for them. We can demand that they give us what belongs to us."

Which is why the nearly 20-year movement to organize janitors has not only been successful in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, but nationally, as more and more immigrants come to understand their rights under U.S. labor and immigration laws. And in getting active on the job site, more are also getting active in broader arenas, as well.

Immigrant activists in California, for example, were successful in supporting Senate Bill 20, which gives all janitors in the state the right to 60 days notice before being laid off. There is currently an effort afoot that would allow undocumented immigrants to get their driver's licenses. There is also a broader, ongoing effort to win citizenship for undocumented workers state- and nation-wide, in which Justice for Janitors has been active, as well.

Meanwhile, Justice for Janitors continues to fight for L.A.-area janitors, recently winning a more than 20 percent wage increase for its members, even as they continue to work to unionize not only more janitors area-wide, but other workers, as well.

Among the recent initiatives is going after "securys," building security guards, with whom striking janitors often tangle during strikes. "If we win the support of the securys, then when we strike, they'll strike," says 1877 organizer and spokesperson, Marisela Salinas. Instead of fighting with janitors, says Salinas, security guards "would grab a picket sign."

"You learn what you're worth"

Such a campaign, 1877 organizers know, will be long and difficult. But they also well understand the rewards that come with finally standing up to building owners and the cleaning and security companies that supply the workers without whom buildings couldn't operate. "In this community, I think we have unity and courage through the structures we create," says Kamilo Rivera, a former janitor, now union official. "If we need to get something done, we're all together."

In that respect, says Salinas, the work of Justice for Janitors has implications far beyond the gleaming office buildings in which 1877 members toil through the night. "It's not for us," says Salinas. "The push for drivers' licenses. A lot of us already have them. It's for the community, for other immigrants."

Knowing the union is behind you also offers a certain amount of personal independence, says Salinas. "If I have a problem and I tell one of our labor representatives about it, and they say, "Do you want me to help you?" I say, "No, I'm just talking here. I'm going to solve this problem myself." And because of that I've won the respect of my supervisor and my colleagues."

Dolores Martinez agrees. After a three-year battle, the janitors in the building where she first worked won the right to bargain, which came with insurance benefits, job security, better wages and more say in work and work conditions. That was all good, but it was the personal satisfaction that is the ultimate payoff for working in the Justice for Janitors movement, says Martinez – a satisfaction that ripples out every time the union organizes another cleaning company or another building. "Your bosses, they respect you. You can tell them things, how you're feeling and this changes your life. I have learned how to express myself. And the union has taught me to defend myself. You learn what you're worth. It's a great change."

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