



# 'Just Us' or 'Justice for All'?

## *History Demonstrates That 'I Got Mine'- 'Just Us' Unionism Has Hurt All Workers, Including Existing Members.*

### *Will Unions Make the Right Choice Now?*

"I Got Mine" or "Just Us" unionism has been a chosen strategy too often throughout labor history, and today unions face the same choice. The "Just Us" strategy has taken many forms, traveled under different names, and been focused on a variety of groups.

- Exclusive Unionism -- unions that excluded Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants; African Americans; Asians; Latinos; or women.
- Skilled or Elitist Unionism -- unions that weren't interested in organizing workers who were "unskilled" or low-wage service workers, or rejected public employees who were not considered to be "real workers."
- Members-Only Unionism -- unions that in good faith sought to win contract gains and legislation for their members even when that left behind other workers who do the same type of work, even in the same company.
- My Employer Unionism -- unions that organized only certain employers and not other nonunion workers working in the same industry.
- My Region Unionism -- unions that would not follow their employers or expend money to organize workers in other geographical areas such as the South.

It is easy to look back with hindsight and be morally outraged at unions that followed a strategy of **Just Us** exclusionism instead of **Justice for All**. How, we can ask now, could some union have been so racist or sexist? How could private sector workers think public workers did not deserve the right to organize? Or, how could a well-intentioned union just trying to do right by its members not have seen that it would lose strength if didn't incorporate a newly emerging workforce or organize the other workers who worked for the same employer or in the same industry?

But if we don't just look backwards and we are honest with ourselves, unions today -- including those who consider ourselves to be activist and progressive -- face similar choices:

\* Do we use our bargaining power, political strength, and financial and human resources to try to raise or maintain standards or at least slow the rate of decline in pay, benefits, and job security only for our current members in their company, industry, geographic area, or occupation?

\* Or do we focus the strength we still have on building a broader movement that also improves living standards and working conditions for all those who now have no union in our own or other companies, sectors, occupations, and industries, knowing that increased strength in numbers will eventually benefit and protect our current members as well?

Many unions today proclaim that we are building a movement and practicing some new model of "social unionism" or "organizing unionism" instead of the old model of "business unionism". But beyond the speeches we give and the rhetoric we use, are we actually following a **Justice for All** strategy instead of the **Just Us** approach of the past? What do we actually do when faced with choices like these?

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- A national employer, in response to an organizing campaign by nonunion workers, offers to give current union members a pay raise in return for not being pressured to respect the right of employees at the company's nonunion operations to form a union without management interference.
- A choice must be made in the legislature about whether to give priority to a bill that increases pay and benefits for current members or another that would lead to more workers having a union and a road to improving their lives.
- Our union budget has to give priority either to expanding campaigns that persuade employers to let more workers join the union or funding staff to process current' grievances and lobby for existing members.
- An employer is willing to maintain current members' pay and benefit levels, at least for now, if we agree to accept two-tier contracts with lower compensation for new hires that at least temporarily protects existing workers' standards.

This is not an intellectual exercise. Everyday, without much debate, the dominant choice, I believe, is the **Just Us** or **I Got Mine** strategy. In the overwhelming number of cases we mount the contract or comprehensive employer social responsibility campaign to protect or improve standards for the members we have and let workers who aren't in the union wait for another day, we take the legislation that helps our existing members, and we spend the money on grievances and lobbying for their issues.

These are natural short-term choices but with long-term consequences:

- It is logical for leaders and members to be reluctant to use employer relationships and political strength to help more workers form unions because we are afraid that employers will respond, as they often do, by taking a harder line with current members.
- This is even truer in today's increasingly global and technological economy in which employers are able to move ever more quickly to implement new strategies to undermine or replace workers who have created isolated pockets of higher wages and benefits.
- And isn't it union democracy that we give the current members who pay the dues and vote in union officer elections the final say?

Yes, there can be internal union political implications when leaders challenge employers to allow a free choice for their nonunion workers to unite with existing members. Employers oppose these efforts because they know a stronger union means greater opportunities for all workers to gain more justice and economic security. The employers get it, so why don't we?

Without leadership, strategic thinking, member education, and participation, members get no real chance to weigh and debate sophisticated strategies that offer real choices about their jobs and their future.

Members deserve facts about the long-term implications and chances of success of these two different choices so they can be empowered to make democratic decisions about their lives. They need to be able to consider the future economic realities American workers face, have an historical perspective on what has worked and not worked, and imagine the possibilities as well as the difficulties of a **Justice for All** strategy today. To offer them only the **Just Us** model, pretend it is in their best interest in the long run, and then cite their ratification of a contract as a democratic mandate for **Just Us** strategic decision making is a disservice to our members as well as to working people generally.

In addition, true worker democracy cannot exist until the 90 percent of workers in America who have no union gain a voice. To make decisions about union strategy in a given industry without taking into account the overwhelming majority of workers in that industry who have no union can hardly be defended on democratic grounds. Was America a true democracy when women or African Americans had no vote and more than half the population was excluded from the process?

While the **Just Us** approach may seem hard to defend, there have always been many rationales and excuses put forward for this exclusive and elitist strategy:

- “It is too difficult to organize unskilled workers.”
- “They aren’t really ‘workers.’”
- “Dues money should be spent on those who paid the dues.”
- “The unorganized workers aren’t our responsibility.”
- “They aren’t worthy of the gains the current union members have.”
- “There aren’t enough jobs or benefits to go around so widening the circle to include other workers would jeopardize what current members have achieved.”
- “Management will give current members more if they agree that other workers will have less.”

But I believe there are at least two fundamental problems with the **Just Us** route:

**1. Just Us ignores the fundamental mission of the union movement – to build a more just and humane society for all working people, not just a small exclusive group.** At a time when 7 out of 8 workers have no union (11 out of 12 in the private sector), to be a voice just for the few who do is to abdicate our founding mission and our moral center. If the first workers who organized the union had followed the “Just Us” policy, many of today’s union members would never have had a union. It is no wonder that fewer and fewer workers see unions as the solution to the current economic and social crisis they face if we don’t make the hard choices to use our strength on their behalf. If their voice and their needs aren’t heard at our decision making tables, where in our society will they be heard, and why will they look to us for leadership?

**2. History is clear---the Just Us, I Got Mine choice hasn’t worked for current members or for other working people.** The truth is that the apparent dilemma about serving current members or using their strength to include and win for other working people really poses a false choice. *It simply is not possible for current members to pull up the ladder, barricade themselves in a fortress, and continue to enjoy relatively high pay and benefits while the great masses outside are suffering*

### ‘Justice for All’ Has Worked; ‘Just Us’ Has Not

To better understand the choices that unions face today, it is helpful to learn from past experience. Academics could argue for years about the true intentions of particular leaders or particular unions at a given moment in history that faced the **Just Us** vs. **Justice for All** choice. Some unions tried thoughtfully to make what seemed to be rational choices in the face of political and economic constraints. Others more consciously practiced exclusionism and discrimination. For many, there was an underlying fear of change or of losing power within the organization if a wave of new members brought new energy, diversity, and expectations.

But regardless of how you judge the intentions or efforts of particular past leaders, one clear lesson emerges from a look at the history of working people in America – workers won when unions were more inclusive and used their strength to reach out to the unorganized, and lost when they didn’t.

**The Great Depression and the New Industrial Workforce.** The 1930s were a time of great economic and social crisis. Huge new national manufacturing corporations had emerged in auto, steel, coal, rubber, and other industries at the same time that millions of working families were facing unemployment, wages too low to live on, and the absence of any safety net for those most in need.

The existing union movement – the American Federation of Labor (AFL) – had a strong **Just Us** tradition. Most of its affiliates were craft unions that believed that power for their members came from job skills and from keeping the pool of skilled labor small and exclusive. In an auto or steel plant of that time, the skilled workers such as plumbers or electricians were in separate AFL unions organized by their craft, while the great mass of assembly line workers had no union at all.

It was no accident that the principal union to see that a new **Justice for All** model was needed was the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The UMWA was the country’s first successful national industrial union precisely because in most ways it had an inclusive model of building workers’ strength

and unity. In the early 1900s it united everyone who worked in the mines from the most skilled to the least -- an "industrial" model that included immigrants from all over the world. "The coal you dig is not Slavic coal or Polish coal or Irish coal," said the union's president, John Mitchell. "It is coal."

In the mid-1930s, the UMWA wanted the other AFL unions to join in a new strategy to organize the major manufacturing industries according to the same industrial union model. Most of the AFL unions saw this proposal as a threat to the special **Just Us** interests of their craft union members. UMWA President John L. Lewis was vilified by many AFL union leaders for being arrogant and divisive by insisting on using existing members' money and union staff to pursue a **Justice for All** model that would broaden the movement. Before long, the UMWA decided it had to split from the AFL along with other unions such as the clothing and textile workers in order to create the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The UMWA spent millions of dollars of coal miners' dues and sent hundreds of organizers not to grow themselves but to help form other unions: the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers, the United Rubber Workers, and many other CIO unions that represented not one craft or even one plant or one region; but all the workers in an industry.

History has validated that because of this **Justice for All** strategy working people gained the strength to turn assembly line jobs into middle class jobs that would provide health care, pensions, and a paycheck that would support a family.

**The 1950s and the Corporations' Southern Strategy.** By the mid-1950s, the union movement had grown to represent 1 out of 3 workers in America – a huge percentage by today's standards. But in response corporations began to shift industrial operations from the North to the less unionized South. Some union leaders were concerned that existing members' gains would eventually erode unless the union movement used its money, bargaining power, and political strength to unite workers in the South

In 1955, when the AFL and CIO merged, the UAW and other unions proposed that the united movement use its combined power and resources to follow the employers and newly emerging industries and organize the South. But unions generally chose again to focus on representing the narrow and immediate interests of their existing members, and today a much smaller movement in the North has far less leverage and resources to help southern workers organize.

**Just Us Unionism and Social Movements at Home and Abroad.** With few exceptions, American unions not only practiced **Just Us** or **I Got Mine** unionism at home but also abroad. In many developing countries in the global south, workers' movements emerged to challenge the huge disparity of wealth between a small elite and the mass of workers living on poverty wages. U.S. unions could have supported these movements and put pressure on American corporations that operated abroad, but U.S. union leaders with members receiving relatively good wages and benefits didn't want to upset the apple cart by confronting companies that were unionized in the United States.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, historic social movements reached a fever pitch in the United States on issues from civil rights to equal opportunity for women to peace and the environment. Some unions connected to those movements, but much of the labor movement missed the opportunity by sitting on the sidelines or actively opposing the aspirations of a rapidly changing workforce.

### **Workers Pay the Price**

Union leaders who were carrying out the **Just Us** model didn't notice the consequences of their decisions. The number of workers in unions in 1978 – 19.5 million – was actually a little higher than in 1955 although what many unions had not noticed was that as the U.S. workforce had rapidly grown, having about the same number of members meant that the percentage of the workforce with a union had dropped from 35 percent to 23 percent. In rough terms, the movement had lost a third of its strength.

In 1981, corporations saw their opportunity after President Reagan fired all 14,000 air traffic controllers and broke their union. The labor movement tried to protest, but the 4 of 5 U.S. workers who had no union felt no stake in the outcome.

Emboldened by Reagan's demonstration of the union movement's underlying weakness, corporations and their political allies quickly implemented a series of new strategies to boost profits, from concession bargaining, deregulation, and union busting at home to a rapidly accelerated shift of good union jobs overseas, where in most poor countries they would face no effective union movement at all.

**The 1980s and the Assault on Union Gains.** In deciding how to respond to the new corporate assault, unions once again faced the **Just Us vs. Justice for All** choice

In the auto industry, parts and other operations were outsourced and auto companies came from overseas to establish nonunion plants, mostly in the South. In 2006, there were more jobs in the U.S. motor vehicles and parts industry – nearly 1.4 million – than there were in 1983 -- 996,452 -- but the unionization rate had dropped from nearly 62 percent to 26.8 percent.

Yet, the union continued to focus most of its bargaining and political power – and its \$750 million strike fund -- on bargaining for its existing members at the traditional Big 3. While the UAW **Just Us** strategy seemed to make sense at the time, the industry became majority nonunion, the union could no longer protect its own members, and wages for new hires today are close to the nonunion rate.

In the trucking industry, newly deregulated freight companies created nonunion subsidiaries to which they shifted their new investment and growth strategies. Employers were willing to maintain Teamster pay and benefits for current members as long as the union didn't seriously try to organize the double-breasted subsidiaries. In the end, unionization dropped from about 60 percent to under 20 percent, and pay and benefit standards of the nonunion firms now drive concessions for the traditional membership.

A **Just Us** approach also took its toll in the construction industry, a majority of which, including the South was unionized after World War II. The history of racial, gender, and ethnic exclusion in the building trades is well known and well documented, but less publicized is that the result was not only to deny opportunity to millions of workers but to erode the strength of those who did have jobs. Today, the industry is about 13 percent unionized, and falling.

SEIU has its own examples of counterproductive "pull up the ladder," I Got Mine unionism. As office building construction spread out of the big unionized cities, SEIU's largest building service locals defended the higher wages of downtown workers but were unwilling to use their power or money to organize and raise the standards of suburban workers. As in auto, trucking, and construction, nonunion building service workers, increasingly Latino, soon outnumbered union members, and SEIU had to spend 20 years regaining membership, wages, and benefits that were lost as a result of adopting a failed **Just Us** strategy.

In each case we now have the advantage of hindsight and history to analyze decisions made day by day by people who in most cases were doing what they thought was right.

Those decisions cannot be undone but are reminders of a profound lesson -- regardless of motivations, when union members increasingly became a higher-compensation island in a growing nonunion sea; all workers – union and nonunion -- paid the price.

### **SEIU's Challenges and Choices Today**

As SEIU's elected local union delegates gather for our convention in late May to set strategy for the next four years, our union faces the challenges of change:

- **Hospitals and clinics.** Increases in hospital employment in the U.S. have not kept up with population growth in the past 15 years, but the number of jobs in clinics, often affiliated with hospitals as part of larger "health systems," has nearly doubled. Historically, those workers are even less likely to have a union than workers in hospitals.
- **National hospital chains.** Hospitals that used to be almost entirely locally operated are now often part of national chains, with much of the expansion taking place in the South and Southwest where few workers have unions. As the nonunion operations grow workers, including current union members, will have less strength to improve conditions inside the company.

- **Long-term care.** New long-term care sectors are developing rapidly, from home care to hospice, lifecare, and assisted living. Although some publicly funded homecare workers now have unions, virtually none do in the private or other sectors. Without unions, these workers have little chance to achieve middle class jobs.
- **Public services.** It used to be that the great majority of public services were provided by public employees, with good pay and benefits mostly in the northern and coastal states. Today, more and more services are being contracted out to profit-making firms and to nonprofit organizations whose budgets have grown to be nearly equal the total public services budget of all 50 states. Very few of the workers in either nonprofit agencies or contracting companies have union representation and union pay and benefits. Meanwhile, virtually all of the projected growth in the country for the next 25 years is projected to take place in the South and Southwest where most public employees don't even have the legal right to organize.
- **Property services.** Traditionally, SEIU has united cleaners in commercial buildings, as well as residential buildings in a few cities. But the commercial cleaning workforce is growing the least of any part of the property services industry. Growth is now in malls, universities, condos, food service, and security, increasingly involving large national contractors that operate all over the country and are growing disproportionately in the South and Southwest.
- **Buyout firms.** Corporate buyout firms are today's version of the corporate raiders who buy a company to drain away its assets, cut employee pay and benefits to pay for the deal, and reap major tax advantages. Through the companies in their portfolios, buyout firms are effectively five of the nation's top ten private employers. At least five million workers now work for companies controlled by such firms, including more than a million in SEIU's core industries.
- **Globalization.** Many workers who provide vital services in our communities are now employed by global corporations based in other countries. The security company, Group 4 Securicor, which is based in England and operates as Wackenhut in the U.S., has nearly half a million workers.

In each case we face the choice other successful unions faced of pursuing a **Just Us** strategy and hoping that these changes will not affect our existing members, or using our existing strength in bargaining, politics, organizing, and the community in a **Justice for All** strategy that can win for everyone.

The good news is members get it. When union leaders discuss the need for strategies based on **Justice for All** rather than **Just Us**, we see every day that SEIU members understand and support the inclusive approach. A professional poll in two SEIU local unions in California that together represent more than 135,000 public service workers found that more than 80% said their union should make it a priority to help not-yet-organized workers unite with us because "we have a responsibility to help improve living standards and working conditions everywhere." More than three-quarters agreed that "to win and maintain improvements for ourselves, we have to help raise pay and benefit standards for all working people or else ours will be dragged down."

SEIU members who have had the chance to work with nonunion counterparts in their industries or sectors have consistently come away from the experience more convinced than ever of the importance of uniting all workers, both for their own protection and for the benefit of the not yet organized:

- Hospital workers used their bargaining strength to win the right of others in the same chain to form unions without the usual all-out employer campaign of intimidation.
- Property services workers from Chicago helped more than 5,000 Houston janitors win their first union contract that more than doubled paychecks and provided first-ever health coverage.
- Property service workers and their local unions helped University of Miami workers win their first union contract with UNICCO and a national agreement making it easier for more workers to organize.
- Security workers from around country put pressure on Los Angeles building owners to accept their security officers' desire for a union.

- Public employees have sent millions of dollars and both staff and member organizers to help public workers form unions and win gains for themselves and their communities in Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Georgia, and other states in the South and Southwest.
- Child care and home care workers established a new model of organizing in one state and are helping to spread that model to others.

A good example of the success of pooling our strength and winning **Justice for All** is the gains workers from around the U.S. helped win in recent years in California that in turn made possible further gains for workers in other states.

In the more than 60 years from 1934 to 1996, SEIU local unions in California were able to help 141,480 workers gain a union to improve their lives. But in the past decade, SEIU members from throughout the U.S. poured millions of dollars and hundreds of staff into California to help workers gain a union in huge hospital chains and dozens of nursing homes, an achievement no single local union could have accomplished on its own. The combined organizing, financial, and political strength of all SEIU members won an historic breakthrough by gaining the right of 74,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles to form a union. That led to unionization for 125,000 more homecare workers in the rest of the state. As a result of national strategies and support from SEIU members outside California, what was once Local 250 with about 30,000 members became United Healthcare Workers West with more than 140,000 members.

At the same time, the combined strength of the national Justice for Janitors movement rebuilt the janitors' union in California and led to the right to a union for thousands of private security officers who often work in the same buildings, many of them African American men who now for the first time have a path to a living wage and affordable healthcare.

In all, the decision by SEIU members in the rest of the country to pursue a **Justice for All** strategy in California instead of just concerning themselves with their own states helped increase the membership of SEIU local unions in California from 141,480 to more than 660,000, making it possible to achieve major improvements both for workers in SEIU's core industries and for the communities they serve. That success led to the right to a union for hundreds of thousands of homecare workers in other states, and the homecare model then helped tens of thousands of childcare providers in other states to win the right to a union and important improvements for themselves and the children in their care.

Andy Stern  
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*As the fastest-growing union in North America, SEIU is focused on uniting workers in three sectors to improve their lives and the services they provide. SEIU is the largest health care union, including hospitals, nursing homes, and home care; the largest property services union, including building cleaning and security; and the second largest public employee union. SEIU members are winning better wages, health care, and more secure jobs at home, while uniting their strength with their counterparts around the world to help ensure that workers, not just corporations and CEOs, benefit from today's global economy.*