

Open Letter to SEIU Members and Leaders on the Violence at the Labor Notes Conference

by S.M.A.R.T.

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As SEIU members who attended the Labor Notes conference held on April 11-13, 2008 in Dearborn, Michigan, we denounce the attempts by SEIU International to violently disrupt a fundraising banquet on Saturday, April 12 attended by nearly one thousand labor activists from around the world who gathered to discuss ways to rebuild labor's power.

Seven busloads of SEIU staff and members (mostly from SEIU Healthcare Michigan and SEIU District 1199 WV/OH/KY) stormed the hotel to disrupt the event, allegedly to protest the scheduled keynote speech by Rose Ann DeMoro, Executive Director of the California Nurses Association. The CNA and SEIU have been engaged in a years-long conflict over organizing jurisdiction. The dispute has resulted in CNA efforts to undermine union elections with SEIU, and accusations that SEIU has sent staff to intimidate and harass CNA leaders in their homes and workplaces.

The violent action taken by some in SEIU on this night only worsened this inter-union dispute, in which workers are the big losers. It succeeded only in alienating many of the labor leaders at the event who did not agree with the CNA's actions in Ohio and Nevada.

When conference participants (mostly rank-and-filers from unions around the country) tried to stop protesters from disrupting the dinner, the protesters (including some SEIU staff) pushed their way through the crowd by throwing punches and shoving people to the ground. One UAW retiree who had organized strike support for American Axle workers that day was taken to the hospital with a head injury, and others suffered minor injuries. One protester rushed the stage and attempted to speak to the crowd.

Some of us saw an SEIU member, who had collapsed on the ground, being moved onto a stretcher by police and EMTs. On Sunday, SEIU's Michigan health care local posted an obituary for home healthcare member-David Smith. It informed Smith's co-workers that "he passed away...during a rally to give healthcare workers the right to organize in Ohio." It is tragic that a member died at this shameful protest.

This protest action by some in SEIU was an embarrassment to the labor movement. Rose Ann DeMoro had earlier announced she would not attend, a fact well-known by SEIU staff in attendance, some of whom later assisted protesters in their violent attempt at disruption. The action was unsuccessful at disrupting the rest of the conference, and the protester who spoke could not be understood by anyone. Most attendees were left offended and confused, and denounced the violence some protesters used against other rank-and-file workers. In the International SEIU's Orwellian press release, International Executive Vice-President Mary Kay Henry states:

"Open debate serves an important role as we work to strengthen our movement. The Labor Notes Conference is the right time and place to discuss our differences."

But this action was clearly intended to harass and intimidate workers, not to promote discussion and debate about the future of our movement. In fact, several workshops at the conference encouraged debate and discussion of the very issues of concern within SEIU, including the escalating war between SEIU and CNA. Among the dozens of workshops held were:

Solidarity Under Attack

Running for Union Office

Contract Campaigns and Bargaining Tactics Organizing Immigrant Workers;
Organizing Right-to-Work States Member-Driven Organizing Neutrality Agreements
and Organizing Deals Innovative Organizing Strategies: Building Unions from the
Bottom Up Patients' Rights, Workers' Rights Labor Media and New Technology
Democracy is Power

These topics and more were the subject of discussion and debate all weekend at the Labor Notes conference, with full participation by SEIU members and staff. Some SEIU members and staff were disruptive and rude in these discussions, and later participated in the violent attempt to disrupt the fundraising dinner, which honored striking American Axle workers in UAW, the New York Taxi Drivers' Alliance, United Workers Baltimore, and John Sferazo, an ironworker who helped search for survivors at the World Trade Center.

From our own conversations with SEIU protesters at the conference, we learned that many had no idea they were protesting an international labor activists' conference. Staff appeared to lead the action (sometimes wearing bandannas to hide their identity) with workers following in tow who may or may not have understood what and who they were protesting. The organizers of this action put their own members and other rank-and-file union workers in harms way for an action that was a humiliating failure without any message.

As SEIU members, we believe it was precisely open debate and discussion that were the target of this hostile attack. SEIU International does not want workers learning how to build real power in our shops and in our union. SEU International does not want an open debate about democracy or worker empowerment. The International wants us to know that we become targets when we talk about democracy, worker power, and the future of the labor movement. They will evidently embrace the crudest tactics, using violence to make their point.

SEIU International failed to disrupt the conference, and will fail to silence us as members.

We call on Mary Kay Henry and SEIU International to denounce the use of violence, and specifically denounce the violent actions taken against us and other rank-and-file union workers at the Labor Notes conference on April 12, 2008.

We further call on SEIU International and Executive Vice-President Mary Kay Henry to demonstrate that "open debate serves an important role as we work to strengthen our movement." An open debate has never been encouraged at an

International level in SEIU to discuss these issues, which are critical to our future. If Mary Kay and our International leaders want to demonstrate their credibility, they will entertain exactly such a debate and discussion among our membership at the 2008 Convention.

We also call upon SEIU's rank and file members to denounce the SEIU International's use violence and to tell the International Officers of SEIU that we will not tolerate the use of our union dues to attack rank-and-file union members. We are proud to be members of SEIU and call upon our International leadership to put SEIU back on the right path as a growing, dynamic member-driven union.

Sincerely,

Brian Cruz

City College of San Francisco
SEIU 2008 International Convention Delegate SEIU Local 1021

Joe Iosbaker

Chief Steward, University of Illinois - Chicago (UIC) Executive Board Member SEIU Local 73

Helen York-Jones

Chief Steward, CPMC Medical Center
SEIU 2008 International Convention Delegate SEIU UHW-West Executive Board Vice-President (Boycotted the fundraising banquet portion of the conference to protest CNA's actions in Ohio and Nevada)

Zev Kvitky

President and Executive Director, SEIU Local 2007 Higher Education Workers-CA
SEIU California State Council

Maya Morris

Steward, Saint Francis Memorial Hospital, CHW SEIU 2008 International Convention Delegate SEIU UHW-West Executive Board Vice-President (Boycotted the fundraising banquet portion of the conference to protest CNA's actions in Ohio and Nevada)

Randy Evans

Steward, University of Illinois - Chicago (UIC) Medical Center SEIU Local 73

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