University of Miami janitors campaign for economic justice, 2005-2006

Student Living Wage Movement (late 1990s - mid 2000s)

Fall
2005
to: Summer
2006

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Miami, Florida
Location Description: University of Miami
Goals:
Paid health insurance, fair wages, and better working conditions

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 016. Picketing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions • holding classes off-campus during strike
• 097. Protest strike

Methods in 4th segment:

• 013. Deputations
• 016. Picketing
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 034. Vigils
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Human chain
• 064. Withdrawal from social institutions › holding classes off-campus during strike
• 097. Protest strike
• 162. Sit-in
• 171. Nonviolent interjection › Human chain

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support › protest encampment
• 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 6th segment:

• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

• Janitors from the University of Miami
• mostly workers of Haitian and Cuban descent

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Justice for Janitors campaign by Service Employee’s International Union (SEIU), SEIU Local 11 president Rob Schuler

Partners:
South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice (SFIWJ), Students Toward a New Democracy (STAND)

External allies:
numerous student activists from the University of Miami, as well as Harvard University and Georgetown University, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), University of Miami faculty, and members of the clergy.

Involvement of social elites:
National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Charles Steele Jr., president and CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, politician John Edwards, James Hoffa Jr., and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Members of the clergy
- NLRB

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Barbara Ehrenreich
- Charles Steele Jr
- James Hoffa Jr
- John Edwards

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
University of Miami Administration, UNICCO Service Company

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The Justice for Janitors Campaign at the University of Miami was able to gain increased benefits for the janitors through a new contract. Wages were raised, health benefits were provided, and there was a more generous holiday plan. The contract also increased hourly wages in each year of employment: $0.25 the first year, $0.40 the second year, and $0.50 the third and fourth years. The health care plan of the contract involved the employer paying more than $250 a month per employee, leaving the employee only paying contributions of $13 a month. The contract also provided one week of paid vacation, three paid personal days, and three additional paid holidays of Christmas Eve, New Year’s Eve, and the day after Thanksgiving each year.
The movement started with angry janitors at the University, but grew to include SEIU, student activists, professors, members of the clergy, South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice (SFIWJ), and Students Toward a New Democracy (STAND).

In 2006, non-unionized janitors at the University of Miami earned as little as $6.40 an hour and received no health insurance. Demanding higher wages and better working conditions, these janitors of mostly Haitian and Cuban descent began a campaign against the University of Miami with leadership from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Many of the janitors were upset that while they worked long hours, only making as little as $50 a day, the president of the university was living a life of luxury. Donna Shalala, the president of the University of Miami, lived in a 9,000 square foot house, took exotic vacations, had a hired staff to make her bed each morning, and owned a 29-foot motorboat. What was most frustrating for the janitors was that Shalala was the former Secretary for Health and Human Services under President Clinton. As such, she was a longtime advocate for the poor, yet refused to get involved with the wage dispute. She insisted that the dispute was a labor dispute between the janitors and the UNICCO Service Company that employed the janitors.

When the janitors asked for higher wages from UNICCO, the company claimed that if it increased the wages it would lose business to rival companies that were able to pay lower wages. What followed was a campaign that culminated with a nine week period of nonviolent demonstrations by the SEIU and the Miami janitors to improve working conditions.

Though SEIU involvement with the Miami janitors did not start until 2005, there had been earlier attempts at increasing janitor wages at the University of Miami. In August 2001, a Chronicle of Higher Education article reported that the University of Miami ranked 194th out of 195 institutions in a survey of janitorial pay among United States universities. Two months later, the University of Miami Faculty Senate passed a resolution that recommended Shalala raise hourly wages for the janitors, as well as provide health benefits for the university’s full-time employees, part-time employees, and contract workers. Despite this, Shalala kept the janitor earnings at the Florida minimum wage of $6.40 an hour and provided no health benefits.

In the fall of 2005, the SEIU began organizing janitors at the University of Miami as part of a Justice for Janitors campaign that would stretch across seventeen southern and southwestern states. In Miami, the SEIU gained the support of South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice (SFIWJ), a coalition of clergy and members of the faithful community that were dedicated to activism on behalf of low-wage workers. The SFIWJ was an affiliate group of the Interfaith Worker Justice organization based in Chicago. The SEIU also reached out to gain support from student groups at the University of Miami. Students Toward a New Democracy (STAND) became an early ally in the campaign.

The SEIU paid for STAND’s members to be trained in direct action at the fall 2005 United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) conference in San Francisco. The SEIU also arranged for students from Harvard University that were involved in a three-week sit-in to raise the wages of UNICCO janitors in 2001, as well as student activists from Georgetown University, to come to the University of Miami and teach members of STAND in organizational tactics. STAND was successful in organizing the campaign very early; already having an e-mail list of over 300 students, STAND gathered 800 signatures from students in support of higher wages for janitors and created a website in fall 2005.

On October 6, 2005, the first action by the SEIU at the University of Miami was held. The SEIU organized a gathering of about twenty-five workers to protest their low wages and lack of health care benefits. This did not have a great impact on accomplishing the set goals of higher wages and health benefits. However, on February 1, 2006, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued a complaint against UNICCO, the University of Miami’s labor contractor, for illegal surveillance by supervisors of a union meeting, interrogations of workers, threats of punishments for union activity, and forced written disavowals of union support. On February 26, an unfair labor practice (ULP) strike against UNICCO was approved by the janitors. As a public illustration of support for the janitors, forty University of Miami faculty members held a send-off luncheon at the university’s central patio.

The janitors began their nine-week partial strike on February 28, the day before Ash Wednesday. The next day, hundreds of
striking janitors dressed in purple shirts received ashes at the noontime mass at St. Augustine’s Catholic Church and Student Center which stood next to the university campus. The SEIU intentionally chose the date of the strike to reflect the symbolism of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lenten renunciation.

In addition to the send-off luncheon held for the janitors at the university on the day of the strike vote, the faculty at the university continued to show their support for the janitors as the strike continued. Approximately seventy faculty members pledged to support the strike, refusing to cross the picket lines and holding classes off campus. This support spread as more than 100 professors began holding more than 300 classes off campus.

On March 16, Shalala announced that the wages would be raised by at least 25 percent for contract employees. Additionally, minimum wages for janitors were increased by a third, shifting the wage from $6.40 an hour to $8.55 an hour. The SEIU, students, and striking janitors celebrated this small victory, but also prepared for future demonstrations.

On March 28, clergy members and demonstrating students carried out a two-part nonviolent civil disobedience action. Seventeen activists, including eight union members, six clergy, two community leaders, and SEIU Local 11 president Rob Schuler formed a human chain across U.S. Route 1 outside the University of Miami campus. This drew significant media attention and also police intervention. As the police arrested the demonstrators, a STAND member announced to a crowd of reporters and onlookers that student activists and the campus chaplain had occupied the University of Miami admissions office.

Seventeen students and Father Frank Corbishley occupied the admissions office for thirteen hours. Outside the office, hundreds of students, faculty, workers, and members of the campus community held a candlelit vigil as a sign of support. When Shalala arrived to negotiate, the students debated with her for four hours until 1:40 a.m., when she agreed to attend a meeting with the workers, students, and union representatives.

Between April 5 and May 1, the workers held a series of hunger strikes and fasts to encourage an agreement between the university and the janitors. Although the SEIU initially discouraged the practice of hunger strikes and fasts because of the serious health risks, when workers continued to fast the SEIU began to support the hunger strikes by providing a nurse at the workers encampment outside the university campus to monitor the health conditions of those fasting. When workers began to be hospitalized due to the hunger strike, organizers created a “transfer of the fast” on April 21, in which workers, clergy, students, faculty, and other supporters volunteered to fast for designated periods of time.

While these hunger strikes occurred, there was also many celebrity visits in support of the Miami janitors’ cause. On April 12, Charles Steele Jr., president and CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, came to the University of Miami and joined student demonstrators who refused to leave the area they were occupying outside an administration building on campus. On April 25, politician John Edwards, James Hoffa Jr., and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich made appearances at the janitors’ tent encampment under the metro line near the University of Miami campus, which had become known as “Freedom City.”

What resulted from such demonstrations and media attention on the campaign was a new contract for the janitors at the University of Miami. Though Shalala had raised wages mid-campaign, the new contract also featured health benefits and a more generous holiday plan. The contract also increased hourly wages in each year of employment: $0.25 the first year, $0.40 the second year, and $0.50 the third and fourth years. The health care plan of the contract involved the employer paying more than $250 a month per employee, leaving the employee only paying contributions of $13 a month. The contract also provided one week of paid vacation, three paid personal days, and three additional paid holidays of Christmas Eve, New Year’s Eve, and the day after Thanksgiving each year.

Research Notes

Influences:
This campaign was part of the Justice For Janitors Movement, which included campaigns like "Los Angeles Justice for Janitors campaign for economic justice at Century City, 1989-1990" and "Houston janitors campaign for economic justice, 2005-2006". (1,2)

Sources:

“Janitors Strike at the University of Miami to Gain Living Wage and Health Benefits” Posted online March 16, 2006. http://www.democracynow.org/2006/3/16/janitors_strike_at_the_university_of

Additional Notes:
Edited by Max Rennebohm (11/08/2011)

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