

Speech - Fighting Bob Fest Event – 9/8/07, Baraboo, WI

1. Intro

I'm proud and honored to be here today representing the 150,000 members of SEIU United Healthcare Workers West in California. I understand I have the great privilege to be the first labor leader to speak here at this gathering. In a moment I'll share our point of view on where our country's headed, what we need to do to change this, and why this event is so important, but first I want to give you a little background on us, how we fit into the broader progressive movement in our country and some of the exciting work we're doing in California.

SEIU United Healthcare Workers West is one of the largest local unions in the country, with 150,000 members throughout California, all of whom are healthcare workers who care for our loved ones in hospitals, nursing homes, and even in their homes. We are a diverse and progressive union, and this is fundamentally important, driven by rank and file member democracy and member empowerment.

The history of our country is rich with examples of where this progressive labor alliance has created significant social change, and UHW has played a leading role in many of these movements. We were the first healthcare union in the United States, organized nearly 75 years ago. We led both with our employers and within the labor movement in fighting institutional racism and sexism, leading the fight to win equal pay for equal work. In the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS first appeared, we published the first educational material to educate healthcare workers about the illness so they could care for AIDS patients without fear. Unlike some politicians and many other unions, we early on took a firm stand against the war in Iraq. Now, because so many of our members are recent immigrants, immigration reform is something we're deeply concerned about.

Democracy is something that's fundamentally important to us. We have built a democratic, bottom-up union, activating our members, involving them in decisions at every level. We believe deeply that if we want social and economic justice for America, we must build it through real democracy, and that starts at home, within our own union.

2. Our POV – foreign policy, politics, priorities

And while healthcare is our focus, it's not all we care about. Healthcare is highly regulated and funded by the government, so that alone forces us to be very involved with politics. But also, in living out our commitment to improve the lives of our members, we inevitably take positions on

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foreign and domestic policy, electoral politics, and many issues that might at first glance not seem part of our scope.

As I mentioned earlier, we were at the forefront of organizations taking a position against the war. We saw that entering into this war would only draw us farther away from being able to achieve domestic priorities like reforming our broken healthcare system. That most certainly has come to pass.

In the past six plus years the Bush government has lead our country into a destructive war; an unprecedented consolidation of government power in the name of national security with sweeping attacks on personal freedoms and political dissent; a growing gap between rich and poor on a magnitude never before seen in this country; all the while the millions of American workers without healthcare grows daily.

This government continues the war in Iraq in the name of the 'war on terror' but at home it wages a different kind of 'war' on American working families. We have 47 million people without health coverage in this country, over 500,000 here in Wisconsin alone. 18,000 uninsured people die every year due to lack of coverage. Is it not 'war' when people feel their health, safety and livelihood are at risk? Our healthcare workers see unnecessary pain, suffering and premature death becoming normal because more and more lack access to healthcare. Twenty four thousand (24,000) veterans, who were asked to fight this war, have come home maimed and wounded only to find the horror of inadequate healthcare treatment waiting for them at home.

Meanwhile, the US government spends over \$200 million a day to pay for this war. Every dollar spent on this war is a dollar that could be spent on healthcare, public education, eradicating poverty and homelessness, rebuilding New Orleans – we could think of dozens of better ways to spend that amount of money. Imagine: if we could take the money we're spending on the war and direct it to improving our healthcare system, we could pay for an entire year of healthcare for everyone in just 60 days under John Edward's plan. It's simply a matter of priorities.

Change is near. With the Bush government on its way out, the question for us now is what direction do we want our country to go in? We're the ones who are going to make that change happen. In California, our members get very involved in politics at every level of government – from endorsing candidates to walking precincts, phone banking, and in 2004, even traveling all

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over the country to volunteer in swing states to maximize our impact. At the local level, we've elected candidates who support our issues. We play an active role now in shaping policy and politics in the state. You can bet that we'll be doing that again, and more, in 2008, on national and local races.

3. Our movement, our vision, how we see next year,

2008 will be a big year for all of us, but at UHW, we'll be especially busy. In addition to the 3 elections we have in CA next year, we're on the cusp of entering into a campaign of unprecedented size and scope. We've also launched several major organizing campaigns, most of them in largely Republican parts of the state where unions are less common. In addition, 150,000 workers in 200 facilities across the country that will be bargaining new contracts, making this likely the largest coordinated bargaining campaign in healthcare in history. This is not by coincidence.

We've organized ourselves as an industrial union, following the pattern of major auto and steel industry unions. We build power by building strength in our industries and with our employers. And for the last two decades, we've also been intentionally lining up the expiration dates of our contracts both with each other and with the presidential election cycles. That gives us maximum ability to push into the spotlight our issues, like quality of care, safe staffing levels for patients, and of course competitive wages and benefits that allow us attract and retain a skilled healthcare workforce. Our members have eagerly shouldered the responsibility of being a strong voice not just for themselves and their coworkers, but more importantly, a strong voice and advocate for our patients. We are quite literally the last line of defense against healthcare corporations that make decisions based on profit, not what's best for patients, and we take that responsibility very seriously.

Our coordinated bargaining campaigns began in 1996, and due to our parallel focus and success in organizing more workers into our union, they've since grown significantly in size. And this strategy has led us to accomplished amazing things, including winning what are recognized as the best contracts in the healthcare industry nationwide. Just last week we settled a contract in Burbank, California, with an anti-union, hostile employer. In addition to winning the right for front line caregivers to have a real voice in staffing decisions for patients, workers made other amazing gains. An Emergency Room Technician named Scott Teplin whose wages go up 93%, nearly doubling in just 3 years – talk about changing people's lives! What we are doing, in my

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view, is nothing short of making the American Dream attainable for thousands of hard working Americans.

And believe me, we haven't gotten there by sitting around or cutting backroom deals. We've had to fight for what we've won every step of the way. This in an important point, because there's a real spectrum of belief within the labor movement about employer relationships. Some say any alliances or partnerships labor makes with employers are fundamentally corrupt. Others say that these employer alliances are the only way for labor to succeed in our changing economy. Our experience proves that these aren't mutually exclusive, and as always, the devil's in the details. We have very hostile relationships with some ideologically anti-union employers. We also have partnerships with employers like Kaiser Permanente, where, after years of brutal struggle, we've come to the realization that a mutually respectful relationship is possible and benefits everyone, including patients. Of course, some principles – like member democracy and decision making and the ability of our members to speak out for their patients – are too central to our values and mission to sacrifice, and we would never enter into an agreement with any employer that compromised those.

#### 4. hc reform

But back to the bigger picture. At the national level, the issue closest to our hearts is healthcare and the need to fundamentally overhaul the system. How many of you all have seen Michael Moore's SICKO? He did a terrific job of helping everyone see what we've all been feeling for years – that the system is broken, possibly beyond repair, and we need fundamental change.

Health insecurity of working people seems to grow by the day:

- The rising cost of healthcare is far outpacing the growth in people's wages.
- Too many people face rising costs for co-pays and deductibles, so that even those who have insurance find that when they need care, they can't afford it;
- And too many employers are reacting to the high cost of health care by reducing benefits, extending the waiting period for coverage for new workers, or simply dropping coverage altogether.

In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Americans without health insurance jumped five percent in 2006, to 47 million people. Since 2000 the ranks of the uninsured have

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grown by 22 percent – any other president would be ashamed. And whoever our next President is, healthcare reform must be at the top of his – or her – agenda for 2009.

Because we are the people on the front line of this industry, healthcare reform is a very personal cause. We know better than anyone that we can't tolerate any longer a system that costs too much, covers too few, and produces health care outcomes much worse than most other industrialized nations. You go to an ER in California and chances are you'll be talking to our members. Every day we see too many people who live sicker and die younger because they do not have the health coverage they need. We believe access to affordable, quality healthcare for every person in America is a right, not a privilege.

And the public gets this. The public is far ahead of politicians in demanding access to universal healthcare as a right, and we need to help them catch up. We must make them accountable not to the needs of hospitals, drug companies, and the insurance industry, for whom the status quo is just fine. It's not fine for millions of Americans who are suffering because the healthcare system is not working for them.

That's why we're leading the fight in California with our allies to fight for universal access to high quality, affordable healthcare in California. We're supporting legislation to create a single-payer system in California. And, although public support for single payer grows by the day, it may take time to win given the well funded, powerful interests that oppose it. In the meantime, we are working to change the system in the direction of single payer by seeking reforms that expand coverage now.

#### 5. Partnership

We can't do this alone. We need to grow what we're doing to create real reform in California into a national movement. And that is why we're here, honoring and carrying forward the tradition of Bob LaFollette.

This is a great gathering, the sort of dialogue we need to be having across the entire country, bringing together people who share a gut-level commitment to progressive politics, social change and democracy. More and more we are seeing this happen – people coming together, fueled by a frustration with the trajectory our country has taken. In response, we've seen energetic, thoughtful, committed progressives like you find ways new ways to make a difference.

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The emergence of the netroots – progressive e-activists and bloggers – is just one of these developments. They've channeled their outrage at making a difference in new and exciting ways, and by doing so, have challenged us to follow suit.

Ultimately, this is about us – those of us here today and those who share our vision throughout the country – deciding the direction in which our country will go. It's about whose priorities will see the light of day and burn a path for our future and for generations to come.

The progressive movement and unions nationally share a common ground in healthcare reform. But we all know it can only happen if we do the work to build the movement that creates political will for progressive social change.

#### 6. Close

Friends, opportunity is before us. We have a real chance now to re-shape our country's agenda for the future. We must build a progressive movement where the needs of working people come first, including healthcare reform. Quality healthcare for every person in America is a right, not a privilege. In the spirit of Fighting Bob LaFollette, let me close by urging us to build that movement by deepening this labor - progressive alliance so we can live in a country that puts people before profits and war, so we can win, so we can change the direction of our country, so we all can be proud to live in a country where democracy, open debate, equality and social justice truly flourish. As my friend Jesse Jackson says, let's keep hope alive, but let's also do the work we need to, to make this vision a reality. Thank you.