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SEIU UNITED HEALTHCARE WORKERS-WEST

On the Record: Sal Rosselli

Sunday, May 29, 2005



With the merger in December of the Oakland and Los Angeles locals of the Service Employees International Union, Sal Rosselli became the head of the California's largest labor organization. Representing some 140,000 health care workers statewide, SEIU United Healthcare Workers-West is at the center of a number of labor disputes, most notably a campaign against the giant hospital operator Sutter Health.

Beyond that, SEIU and Rosselli have emerged as forces for change within the union movement and in the larger political sphere. Rosselli's union is pressing for a top-to-bottom shakeup of the AFL-CIO to make it more effective at attracting members. And Rosselli has taken an activist stance in opposing Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's economic policies.

Rosselli recently sat down with The Chronicle to discuss the merged union, health politics and the future of the labor movement. The following has been edited for space and clarity. A separate interview with Rosselli by Chronicle staff writer George Raine can be seen online.

Q: Are you now the largest local union in the country?

A: We are the largest local union in California. There's one larger health care union in New York City called 1199 New York. So we're the second- largest health care worker union. We're 140,000 and growing.

Q: Can you tell us about that merger?

A: It's been a long time coming. In fact, the executive boards of (Locals) 250 and 399 about six years ago actually voted to pursue merger and the international union wasn't ready for it.

It's hard work. We're integrating our systems and integrating our divisions. We're organizing statewide. We have a statewide political department and statewide communications, research and support departments organized by employer.

The value of it is to increase our strength with these particular employers. There's also increased political value with the work we do in Sacramento.

Q: SEIU is unique at a time when other unions and the movement itself have struggled. You've grown. Why is that?

A: Organizing and putting resources and talent into it and learning how to do it better.

Our union's mission and goal can simply be stated by uniting health care workers to change their lives, and winning health care reform so that everyone has access to quality health care. That's what we think about every day.

I was elected president of Local 250 the end of 1988, and there were 25, 000 workers then. We've more than tripled in size since then.

Q: You came up short with Proposition 72, which would have required California employers of a certain size to provide health coverage for their workers. What went wrong?

A: No one has ever come this close to passing major health care reform in any state in the country. We almost did it, and that, in itself, was extraordinary and gives us momentum.

The money that we raised, primarily, came at the end, when people started realizing that we actually had a shot to win. We would have been able to buy television at a cheaper rate, and I think we would have pushed it over the edge.

Also there were some in labor who didn't step up to the plate in terms of communicating with our members. Some could have done that better.

Q: Who could have done better?

A: Folks were so focused on beating George Bush. There were hundreds and hundreds of our activists that were outside the state of California, inside targeted states. That was another handicap. We didn't have the same base here. We didn't have the same team to do the member communication and internal organizing.

Q: Any chance of backing another type of employer mandate?

A: Yes. To be successful, we need to wait until 2008, because of the presidential election and turnout. But who knows?

Q: How would you define the crisis in looking at health care costs?

A: There are too many people uninsured without access to quality care. It's just such massive, unnecessary pain and suffering, premature death, all of those things are real in our society.

Q: Where do you point the finger? What's gone wrong?

A: It's so complicated. Clearly, some of us believe that there is enough money in the system. Far more is spent here in this country than anywhere else.

A big piece of it is: Where is the money spent? Obviously, there are some segments of the industry that have huge profits. That's definitely a problem. I think that there are political leaders in this country who don't believe health care is a right.

Q: Is health care really a right? To many people in this country, that's a very provocative concept.

A: Not to me. Education is a right. Why shouldn't health care be a right? Why shouldn't housing be a right? This country spends far more on health care than any country in the world.

It really does come down to political will. The amount of money that is being spent, I believe, is adequate to provide universal access to adequate care. It's just where the money goes.

Q: Within the realm of state politics, legislators have proposed a variety of solutions, from single-payer to mandatory health insurance on the individual level. What do you think of those ideas being floated out there?

A: We believe the best answer to the problem is a single-payer type system. I don't know if we will get there.

It's getting so much worse so fast that I think that people are going to rise up and force Congress to change. I think real health care reform, single-payer ... it's feasible as we thought civil rights was feasible in the 1960s.

It's going to take a lot of work, and organized labor is going to help lead it because of our resources.

Q: When you look at this crisis in health care costs, there are those who say labor unions like SEIU are part of the problem as well as part of the solution. The contract demands of the labor unions sometimes contribute to costs. How do you respond to those who say that you have your hands in there, too?

A: Some of our members make a fair and decent living, but not most of them. It's taken us decades to win fair wages and benefits and approaching a fair pension with Kaiser Permanente. That's probably our single best contract.

In the nursing home industry, it's not true at all. Our nursing home members have to work two jobs to make ends meet. We have a long way to go with long-term care workers and a long way to go with unorganized hospital workers.

We're not defensive about the right of all working people to be able to, if they spend their career with an employer, retire with a decent pension and have quality health care for them and their families.

Q: Speaking of Sutter, you've made it a mission to portray Sutter as an evil corporate entity. Is this due to an unresolved labor dispute, or is there something more personal here?

A: It's not personal. We have no expectations of Sutter that are not achieved as a standard in our contracts with virtually all of their competitors.

Sutter has a leadership that is philosophically anti-union. In our opinion, they are making some very poor choices. We want to work with them and collaborate with them on some levels like we do with these other providers.

All of these other providers have accepted committees where managers and workers sit down together by department and discuss staffing levels, for example, and work out problems. Sutter refuses to accept all those things.

Q: The principle here that's so important to you, is it that the management should value the opinions of workers?

A: Yes, absolutely. Listen to the people who do the work. Make decisions collectively. I don't mean every decision about hospital expansion or whatever, but about what happens in that department.

Q: Primarily, isn't the fight over the fact that you want a global contract covering various Sutter Hospitals and Sutter won't accept that?

A: It would be very efficient. We would spend less money on bargaining and Sutter would spend less money on bargaining. The money could be used for improving patient care, working with government and other providers to reform the system. It's not a strike issue. The strike issue is (about) having a real voice.

Q: Why is Kaiser so receptive to collective decision-making, and why is Sutter so adamantly against it?

A: It's an evolution. It begins with enlightened leadership at the top. In the early 1990s, our union had strikes against Kaiser in Oregon, Denver and Los Angeles. We were at war with the corporation.

The CEO at that time was David Lawrence. I remember meeting with David Lawrence in 1992, saying "Let's try to do something differently here. We have all these common goals." And we began a dialogue.

In 1997 or 1998, we reached agreement on a national partnership. It was a first step in figuring out how to work together and make decisions together. It's not perfect. We still have big disagreements, but it's better than anything else.

Q: Wouldn't you say that Kaiser is in a better financial position to do that compared with other hospitals?

A: When we signed the national agreement with Kaiser, they were going under. Enlightened leaders at Kaiser decided that they couldn't turn it around without us and collaboration. It's only

the last three years that Kaiser has turned it around and is making money.

Q: The head of Sutter Health, Van Johnson, is leaving in June. Is that going to affect anything, positively or negatively?

A: We don't sense any (change). Pat Fry (Johnson's successor) has acted the same way as Van Johnson. We're always hopeful, but don't have an expectation that things are going to change because of that leadership change.

Q: What is the state of labor now in California and the country? Where do you see the movement going, and what issues are on the table?

A: While we are growing here in California, and SEIU is growing throughout the country, that's not good enough. If we don't change the direction of the labor movement, we might be the last to go down with the ship, but organized labor will go down.

Q: Recently in Las Vegas, there was a meeting of the AFL-CIO Executive Council which took up the concept of reform as advanced by Andrew Stern, your president, and it failed. It was fairly close, right?

A: It got 40 percent of the vote. We're meeting with this coalition to try to establish a common platform. If that happens, in my opinion, the AFL needs new leadership to lead that change in rules and structure.

Q: Is it because the structure is antiquated or change is difficult to come by? What's the reason for the lack of agility there?

A: First of all, if we were to sit down today and build a labor movement from scratch without all the personalities involved, it would look a lot different from how we do it today.

That's not unusual for lots of organizations. I think that we, in our local union and SEIU, have a lot of extraordinary, enlightened, selfless leaders that make decisions based on what's good for our workers' movements, what's good for health care reform.

Unfortunately, I think that quality sometimes is extraordinary, and it should be the norm. I think that there are leaders in labor that don't make decisions that are based on what's good for the members.

Q: Would Mr. Stern want to take over the AFL-CIO?

A: I don't think so. For sure, that's not what's driving Andy. He doesn't have the ambition to take over the AFL-CIO. He has ambition to win bigger for workers and change the AFL so that we can do that.

Q: He threatened at one point to withdraw from the federation failing reform. Is that still on the

table? Is that still a possibility?

A: It wasn't him as an individual. It was the Executive Board of SEIU that discussed that and reached that conclusion. In fact, our convention last June voted to give authority to the Executive Board to withdraw if it were not successful at changing the AFL to be able to build something stronger. It's certainly a possibility that we will withdraw from the AFL to build something stronger with others.

Q: Wouldn't that defeat the concept? His concept is fewer but larger unions within the federation. If he withdraws, and you are the largest member union, with 1.8 million, doesn't that dilute the system?

A: We're not going to withdraw and not talk to other unions or the AFL. We'll have relationships and work on things together. We're not withdrawing to hurt the current capacity of the AFL.

We would withdraw because a majority of folks refuse to change what they do with our members' money.

We would put those resources in a more focused way on organizing and joining with other organizations, both in labor and without, other progressives and social economic justice organizations to accomplish our goals.

Q: There's been a sea change, politically, in this country. Is it difficult for you to come to terms with this conservative chapter in American history?

A: It's painful because it's slowing us up in accomplishing our overall goals of achieving social and economic justice for working people in this country. (Overall, though) I am encouraged, and this speaks to the importance of our work in the labor movement.

When I became president of this union, the vast majority of our members were in the seven, eight Bay Area counties.

Now our growth is in the Central Valley and San Joaquin, Fresno, and we're moving into Bakersfield and San Bernardino and Riverside (counties). It's so satisfying that as workers unite and join together and go through these struggles, people's political positions change.

As this progresses as we increase, politics will change. Where the more conservative red counties are, we're turning (them) blue.

This local union is also investing in other states. It has a vision before 2008 to organize in Nevada, Colorado and Arizona. I'm not a Democrat with a big D or anything. It's not about the Democratic Party. It's about struggling with and fighting back the right wing.

Q: Arnold Schwarzenegger was installed as governor on a platform that California has a climate that's hostile to business. He has tried to take some steps in workers' compensation and other

areas. To what extent has that been a setback for the labor movement?

A: It's a frontal attack by the governor on working people in this state and their unions. I think it is waking people up and giving people energy.

There is a growing movement in this state against him, and I think his popularity is going to go down. Six months ago, we were having conversations like: Who can possibly beat him?

Do we have to find an actor? Do we have to find some superstar? Do we have to talk Warren Beatty into running? It's that kind of a conversation because he was unbeatable. I no longer think that.

Q: Who could beat him?

A: Any one of the Democrats that are considering running could beat him now, because that invincibility of his is changing. People are really getting to understand that this guy is bad news. He really is anti-worker. He's hurting working people.

Q: Do you completely reject the argument that California has rules, laws and practices that make it hard to do business, or do you think that there are some points that are legitimate?

A: It's my understanding that during the last 10 years of this increasing rhetoric about California's climate being bad for business -- as far as I know, there aren't businesses leaving California.

I think it's a well-thought-out plan by the Chamber (of Commerce) and big business to get workers to think that to make their initiatives politically acceptable. I think that we have not done a good enough job of exposing that.

Q: There are those in the business community who say that California is trying to enact social democracy on its own, while the rest of the country follows a more strict form of free-market capitalism. We have paid family leaves. We try to establish payments for health care. To what extent can one state do those things when businesses have the option to expand facilities in other states to avoid the rules that California has enacted?

A: What we're leading on here in California in terms of the changes you talked about needs to be spread across the rest of this country.

The fact that businesses leave and take their work to one country and then to another country until they find a lower wage that they have to pay workers -- a race to the bottom kind of thing -- I don't have the answers.

The economy in this state is the fifth- or sixth-largest in the world. We're the richest country in the world. The fact (is) that we are the only industrialized country where workers don't have health care and access to preventative care.

The fact (is) that the current administrations in this country and in this state are trying to take

away defined-benefit pensions of public workers. Our president wants to privatize Social Security, and it puts that safety net at risk. I think we are going in the wrong direction. We are going to do all we can to organize to change that.

Q: Is it possible that your particular union is shielded from some of these concerns because you represent an unmovable industry?

A: To some extent, but it's more complicated than that. There are things in our industry that people have tried to move to India that we stopped. For example, call centers, radiology, advice through current technology and billing departments.

Q: When you get on the phone as a consumer, do you ask where the call center is located?

A: It hasn't happened to me in a long time. When I call Kaiser, I know where they are located.

Q: What is your daily regimen?

A: This job is my life. I feel very privileged. I'm the luckiest guy in the world, from my point of view. This is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week thing.

Q: Do you live in San Francisco?

A: I live here in the city.

Q: What brought you out here?

A: I got kicked out of college back East for being in the antiwar movement. I moved to the Bowery in New York.

I joined VISTA for a while, and that fell apart because of Nixon administration policies. They were trying to get us to do ridiculous stuff. With a buddy of mine, I decided to play "Easy Rider."

We bought a couple of motorcycles, and we got to San Francisco and ran out of money when we arrived here. I stayed and he went back to Vermont and bought 25 acres up on the Canadian border and raised a family.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was in 1971 or 1972.

Q: How has this city changed?

A: I don't think it has changed a hell of a lot. I loved it when I first came here. Its progressive culture, its tolerant society -- and it's beyond San Francisco.

It's the Bay Area. The Bay Area has an extraordinarily tolerant society, in addition to the weather and the beauty. Just the land itself. I don't think it's changed a heck of a lot.

On entitlement

"Why shouldn't health care be a right? This country spends far more on health care than any country in the world."

On the union's membership

"Our nursing home members have to work two jobs to make ends meet."

On the struggle ahead

"Our president wants to privatize Social Security, and it puts that safety net at risk. ... We are going to do all we can to organize to change that."

Beyond the boardroom

What's a typical day for you? Every day is different, except getting up at 3 a.m. and spending early hours in a gym.

Where do you do your best thinking? In the company of staff leaders of our union.

What book is on your bedside table? "Don't Think of an Elephant!" by George Lakoff.

Where do you go on vacation? Vacations are rare, but when I can, I go to Hawaii and Italy.

Briefcase

Name: Sal Rosselli

Age: 55

Job: President, SEIU United Healthcare Workers-West.

Birthplace: Albany, N.Y.

Affiliations: Member of the national board of directors of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH coalition; vice president, California Labor Federation; elected member of SEIU State Council, which represents 30 locals and 600,000 members.

Education: Attended "many" colleges but received an associate in science degree from City College of San Francisco.

Participating in this interview were Deputy Business Editor Al Saracevic, assistant business editors Sam Zuckerman and David Tong, staff writers Victoria Colliver, Birgitta Forsberg and George Raine, and editorial assistants Steve Corder and Colleen Benson.

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