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Organizing

On behalf of the Organizing Department at SEIU-West, I am proud to present this report highlighting our department.

Overview

The SEIU-West Organizing Department is first and foremost a resource for non-unionized workers to reach out to with the hope of forming a union in their workplace. This begins when an interested worker calls our department, and leads up to a campaign where a team of organizers is dispatched to ensure the unit organizes, and that all legalities are adhered to.

Currently, the Organizing Department is a team consisting of the Director of Organizing, Staff Organizers and the Organizing Committee.

Once a campaign has been launched in any part of SEIU-West's jurisdiction, our team is deployed and we start signing up membership cards.

During a campaign, the employer will engage in a counter-organizing campaign to dissuade their employees from joining SEIU-West. In most cases, they will violate their employee's right to join a union. Typically, the employer will try to scare employees from talking to organizers. This can include illegally terminating supporters, cutting hours, spreading lies about our union, and demonizing the organizers on the campaign. When this tactic fails, employers typically try to 'buy' their employees away from the union. Suddenly, the wage increase that took three (3) years to process will occur, or the facility break rooms will be updated. Another tactic used by employers is to ask for more time to change their behaviour. Guiding this process for the employer is the Union Buster, otherwise called a Labour Relations Consultant. These individuals work with employer-side lawyers to try and break the organizing campaign. They work with management of the facility to ensure management is actively campaigning against the union, while limiting liabilities from breaking their employees' right to join a union.

Once a vote has concluded, the union busting takes a legal turn. An employer can utilize many devices that delay the reading of the certification vote. They do this in an effort to make employees lose confidence in the union, become disinterested, and turn against each other. The organizing team must contend with fighting both a battle of morale in the unit and a legal battle at the Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board (SLRB).

After a vote is read, the campaign continues by preparing to transfer a group that has endured potentially months of union busting to the strange new world of collective bargaining and cooperative relations with their employer. This is quite a task because typically everyone is new to union membership, and many of the concepts we all take for



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granted are foreign to the newly organized.

When we are not on campaign, the Organizing Department turns to organizing internally within SEIU-West and provoking new external campaigns. Organizing is a creative passion, and we are always working to ensure our current membership remains strong and united. This can take many forms, but the direction always focuses on ensuring members are informed and participating in their units, and that departments have the resources to enable this participation.

2018/2019/2020 – Years of Uncertainty and Experiments

1. The Organizing Department has been sounding the alarm for the past few years that the Saskatchewan Labour Relation Board (SLRB) has been increasing its interference with certification applications and injecting itself in matters it has no business commenting on. However, the Saskatchewan Employment Act is vague, poorly written and gives the SLRB sweeping powers to make decisions, including decisions over its jurisdiction and where it is appropriate to act. This became extremely troublesome when the former registrar of the SLRB, Fred Beyer, left his position and a new registrar was appointed. The current registrar had tested getting involved in applications prior to his appointment in his former role and now as registrar, the Organizing Department finds itself asking "what choices is the registrar going to make with this one?" when we submit an application.

Case Study: Town of Herbert

SEIU-West was contacted by workers of the Town of Herbert because many felt the role of their council had become increasingly interfering and against labour relations regulations. In speaking with the workers, they were intent of giving their town administrator a heads up about the organizing campaign as a courtesy. The town administrator was accepting of the democratic decision and didn't intend to interfere with the process of forming a union. However, when we filed for certification, the SLRB acted unpredictably in the advice they were giving to the Employer. Normally, we expect the SLRB to inform the Employer of the vote and steps they are entitled to make. With the Town of Herbert we discovered that the SLRB was explaining the supervisory exclusion principle to the Employer and instructing them to list supervisors. As a result, the Town of Herbert listed several employees as supervisors. When we communicated with the Employer questioning this decision, they informed us they felt compelled to list supervisors by the board and were agreeable to limit the list they provided. In this case, we were fortunate to have an Employer that wasn't hostile to the organizing effort. However, it stands to question what would have occurred if they had been.



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2. With the SLRB at the very least demonstrating to Employers that they are willing to apply rules inconsistently, Employers are noticeably more willing to take actions during organizing campaign that risk them being accused of an unfair labour practice. Earlier in the decade, the SLRB loosened the rules around Employer communications about organizing campaigns which began to open this floodgate. Since then there has been murky rulings that have both restrained this behaviour and encouraged it. The best guess we now work off of is that the Employer is allowed to make statements that any "reasonable" worker can decipher, even if it is a straight up lie. The SLRB views workers as "not meek" and therefore, are able to assess the information their Employer is providing them. This is flawed because it doesn't consider the power the Employer has in controlling the paycheque or in the workplace established hierarchy. The SLRB appears not to care and Employers are pushing this with their communications to our new members.

Case Study: Greenfalls Landing

This facility in Regina contacted us over bread and butter issues like wages and benefits. We knew their Employer liked to have opinions because one opinion workers told us about prior to calling SEIU-West was the Employer's opinion that they had to volunteer their labour for a charity event that was coincidentally occurring on the Employer's property and wearing the Employer's uniform serving the Employer's residents. When it came time to file for certification, we expected that their Employer might have some opinions for us given this opinion on free labour.

The Employer issued more than 30 pieces of communication to Employees and held at least three (3) captive audience meeting over eight (8) working days that we know of. To put this in perspective, the Employer was average four union-related communications to Employees per day, in addition to staff meetings and individual meetings where they questioned members about the union. The sheer volume of communications is enough to say "we don't want you to form a union" yet alone the numerous notices that literally said "we don't think you need a union". As a result, we did file an unfair labour practice claiming the Employer was attempting to intimidate and coerce their employees with a hurricane of paper.

In the realm of the absurd, we were not confident that the SLRB would agree with us that this communication style was appropriate and we didn't want to risk creating even worse jurisprudence on Employer communications at the SLRB. Despite some communication being openly threatening, once the workers won the vote and entered bargaining, we agreed to withdraw our ULP.



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TREND ALERT: Unfriendly Labour Relations Board

It appears to be a rising trend that SEIU-West organizers find the Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board (SLRB) acting more as a barrier to forming a union than an institution where workers can exercise their right to free association. They rule that workers are not meek and can see through the Employer's lies and threats but then don't afford the same treatment when the union issues communications. The result is that Employers are becoming more bold with how they treat workers during organizing campaigns and with what they say about forming a union. The Greenfalls Landing case demonstrates what a panicked employer might do without the lingering threat of an Unfair Labour Practice. If ULPs become meaningless, what power will this give workers to protect themselves during organizing campaigns?

3. It's remarkable how individual privacy is constantly loosened and threatened over the internet and in various contracts we agree to in our social media lives and otherwise. The Government is reluctant to restrict these kinds of actions and in fact, they sometimes encourage loosening these laws even though we all know some Corporations have irresponsibly used collected data for profit. Enter the realm of union organizing and you will find some of the best guarded, secure and tightened privacy enforcement around! We are finding more and more than while Corporations worldwide can store your information on a thumb-drive and then subsequently lose that thumb-drive, the Government will leave no stone unturned if it means keeping union organizers from obtaining information. Increasingly, privacy arguments are being used to negatively affect worker's rights to free association. After all, how can a worker join if they lack the means to speak with an organizer?

Case Study: Spruce Manor

SEIU-West organizers never ask workers to violate any privacy rules or confidentiality documents they may have signed. We actually discourage against breaking these rules. However, the reality of a campaign means that workers must put themselves at risk by connecting their colleagues with our organizers. While we do not think a company policy should affect worker attempts to freely associate, the reality is they do. The Spruce Manor campaign demonstrates the barrier to organizing the LRBs new privacy practices are but also how resilient and strong our organizing team is when crossing these obstacles.

The new trend that has emerged at the SLRB takes privacy practices one step further and restricts union access to workers even after we have filed for representational



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rights. Previously, once the SLRB had confirmed that the majority of workers wished to secure their membership with SEIU-West through a vote, the SLRB would release contact information for these workers so that both parties could give them information to make an informed choice. However, this has ended and the SLRB is now saying they will not release any information to SEIU-West for the protection of worker privacy. We know this is interference with worker's rights to free association as the majority have already signed authorization cards by this step. However, privacy laws are still subjective enough that we want to ensure we win when we do eventually challenge this anti-union, anti-worker interpretation.

With Spruce Manor, we saw the impact this will have on our campaigns. This campaign was a larger facility with multiple departments in a rural setting. It didn't take long to figure out the effects of new privacy practices. First, with so many workers at the facility, organizer never got the chance to speak with a good number of them because we simply couldn't obtain their address. SEIU-West wasn't able to verify that everyone got a ballot because we didn't get any address information from the SLRB. Second, because this is a rural facility, workers lived across that entire section of the province and in some cases had a mailing address in other provinces. This created chaos as we were unable to confirm the address list given to the board by the Employer and relied on word of mouth to ensure these workers received their ballots.

SEIU-West prefers workers to make an informed choice because with the correct information, joining a union is a no-brainer. However, contacting all the workers also allows us to remind workers that they are entitled to a private vote even if some of their friends are voting together and that they really do need to follow the board's voting instructions. Without this communication in place, some Spruce Manor voters spoiled their ballots because they didn't follow instructions and SEIU-West thinks everyone deserves to be heard. Overall, this case shows the struggles those forming a union and those helping them face thanks to the barriers put up by the SLRB. It was solid organizing and sticking together that led to this facility overwhelmingly voting to form a union.

4. We are living in increasingly weird times. From pandemics to pro-employer policies, all workers and especially non-unionized workers are facing a variety of pressures that make their working lives difficult. We've seen technology create an environment where the boss can spy on their workers at any time of day and "slip-ups" from the board where they mail out ballots without return postage. The number of union busting lawyers is increasing and the tactics they deploy are confusing to us all. Despite it all,



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we've seen worker after worker rise to the challenges and unite with their colleagues to achieve their goal of forming a union. While a union won't solve every problem in the workplace, we know that this goal ensures they will at least have a spot at the table when the world serves up the next unique challenge.

Case Study: Riverbend Crossing

There are many points that this case could bring out to demonstrate how odd campaigns are getting but it is worth demonstrating particularly the effect that short-staffing can have during a campaign. In one of several instances, organizers received a phone call from one of our leads in the facility and could instantly hear alarms going off in the background. When we inquired into what this was, we were told the member was alone in the workplace and was unable to perform duties that require more than one person. Management, keen to the plight of healthcare, took to short-staffing union supporters in an effort to exhaust them into giving up or pressure them into violating policy (which could result in termination). In this instance we all had to think quickly with the emergency alarm sounding off. We knew we had think quick to inform the lead to contact emergency services or else risk their job. In this case, the instinct was correct. Management's tactic failed as the next questions were why was this worker alone and why had management suddenly disappeared when this was going down?

Case Study: City Centre Bingo (CCB)

This case clearly demonstrates the amount of pressure an employer is willing to push against their workers when threatened with a union. From cornering workers in secure areas for quizzing to the monitoring of cameras leading to investigations for minor infractions (like dropping a dish towel), we were told by members there that this Employer did it. It is further worth noting that CCB has argued that the entire gaming side of the facility is ineligible to join a union because the Employer intends to cross-train them all to supervise each other and supervise volunteers. To summarize, this Employer has engaged every tactic they could to delay the process used to form a union because they know that the SLRB will book a hearing for almost any reason as long as it is written in an email.

It's an effective tactic! While an Employer's tactics are sometime comedic in their sloppy approach, the fact this new unit still has a case before a judicial review shows that the process is flawed in allowing groundless objection after objection. Meanwhile,



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while the organizing department awaits the decision from the judicial review on this supervisor matter, new anti-union rulings on supervisors are being issued that make us wonder if our argument is as rock-solid as it originally appeared.

In this case, the weird, anti-union tactics taken by the Employer had the result of uniting the workers behind their choice to form a union. However, we could see a scenario where this would have the opposite effect; therefore, it is a risk to keep an eye on.

Case Study: Southwest Homes

To end on a lighter note, Southwest Homes posed many serious challenges to the organizers and workers struggling to form a union there. The great news is we had a dedicated internal committee there who have been fighting to join for years and were prepared. What nobody was fully prepared enough for was the effect religion might have on the campaign.

Going into the campaign, we knew from previous card-signing campaigns that workers here take their faith seriously. We respect all faiths at SEIU-West and took efforts to make it clear that joining a union isn't against their faith. Anecdotally, we had been told by organizers long retired that our presence would create prayer groups to help workers determine their position on forming a union. What we didn't expect was for this to affect the vote in the way it did.

While scrutineering the vote, a number of ballot packages appeared thicker than expected. Since this was a secret ballot vote the reason wasn't apparent. However, after several of these packages revealed a number of cast ballots that subsequently had to be spoiled, even the Employer scrutineer was remarking that there must have been group prayer on the question and that they must have put them in the same envelope! While we can only speculate that this is the cause of the over 10 spoiled ballots, we think it's a great example of no matter how organized and mobilized a workplace can be going into the vote, the organizing team cannot control everything! Luckily, this facility voted overwhelmingly to join the union and the Employer had no argument to make that would create a challenge to the result.



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COVID -19 & Organizing

Unions are formed on the shop floor and the doorstep. We rely on one-on-one contact with workers to hear their stories and help them form a union. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, the entire union movement had to hit the reset button and SEIU organizers across the US, Puerto Rico and Canada were left having to rebuild what had been in place for decades. Since the earliest days of elevator engineers and janitors in New York City going from apartment building to apartment building to organize their colleagues, the face to face conversation has been a staple in organizing and now it is gone. We've worked tirelessly with the International and the local to create online platforms, create trainings, and create an entire digital space for the organizing conversation. It also requires us to take bolder moves in how we organize a workplace. The days where our organizing team can take on the majority of the risks of forming a union are gone, at least temporarily. We now work digitally with workers while they take the risks as we mentor them anxiously hoping the Employer doesn't catch on and lash out. The only serendipity to this all is that with COVID-19, most Employers are also at a breaking point and can't afford to risk the dissent busting individual workers could create.

These strategies are not ideal. The face to face conversation has been the main feature in organizing for decades for a reason. However, SEIU is an innovative union and these adaptations show why we are the strongest union in North America. This department is proud that we have filed to certify two units since COVID-19 took the world, and we're proud to have successfully held one of the first digital organizing unit meetings ever in Saskatchewan. It is the innovation and dedication to taking smart risks that make SEIU-West strong. This is thanks to bold members like you.

TREND ALERT: Workers enduring deep turmoil to form a union

The above case studies demonstrate that while labour relations and organizing is getting more obscured by laws, politics, the economy and technology, the workers united will never be defeated. Yes, these barriers do result in less successful organizing attempts, but they also result in really successful victories. In all of the cases mentioned, the workers formed strong units with SEIU-West and perhaps their Employers regrets some of the actions taken. Other new units have not been mentioned but are equally strong, including forming a union within a very vulnerable sector (Parent Aide) and forming a union during the pandemic (Spruce Manor and "Workplace X"). The workplaces we see form strong units are the ones that grow close because of the challenges faced and we salute this trend.

Summary

These cases embody the 2019/2020 experience for the organizing department. Workers are terrified of being harassed, if not fired for calling us to organize. More workers need a union, but are hearing stories of what happens to tall grass (it gets cut). This isn't just the



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case for SEIU-West, but all unions operating in the private/public sectors. When new laws create added bureaucracy for urgent questions (like joining a union or not) it is unfortunately the workers who pay the freight, not the employer. As a result, workers are not only scared to call but are finding when they do call and engage the process, they are confronted with barriers, new risks, a lengthy process, and more time to be intimidated by their employer, and now the SLRB .

The act of organizing a group of workers is difficult. We find there is now an expectation that workers will be jeopardized by the process of forming a union, and this reality is somehow endorsed by the Saskatchewan Labour Relations Board. Legal questions about the status of particular workers are partially answered but only add to the burden of making sure they feel supported throughout the process. Lastly, we find ourselves organizing without a map as the organizing team will never see a list of workers with contact information throughout a campaign. Even when all the hurdles have been jumped, we now find the SLRB interjecting in certification applications to ask questions and create issues where previously there were none. The delays for workers in forming a union are increasing, and this in turn increases the demand on our department exponentially. The SEIU-West organizing department has always been strong, even in the face of a conservative downward spiral designed to stop our will to organize. The COVID pandemic caused the world to stop and for our department to change the entire way we do things. Where some unions have stopped organizing the not-yet unionized, SEIU-West has adapted to survive.

It's sardonically optimistic but we need to remember that the pandemic will end and that the union busters and Government bureaucrats are the failures who cannot stop our members, even during a pandemic, from crushing their barriers to form a union and this is cause for all of us to celebrate.

Community Organizing

Part of the mandate from SEIU members through the International is to build a broad based, more inclusive union movement to fight for social, racial and economic justice. We reach out to create social movements of every type because we need to organize our communities at their level and not expect them to come to us at our level. In this regard, our department operates in high gear. Below is a sample of the types of communities groups we have helped build:

Regina Public Interest Research Group

Social justice collective funded by students at the University of Regina with a broad mandate of building social justice movements and creating the next generation of activists.

Filipino Community Association of Saskatoon (FILCAS)

We were approached by members who are involved in the association for support and



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when we see members dedicating their time to build movements and their community, we get inspired. We are building a long lasting relationship with the community association because it is reaching a broader section of workers. We are listening to issues the union doesn't always have access to and we are organizing with the community in their spaces to ensure SEIU-West is adapting to the society around us and not expecting society to change and adapt to us.

Southwest Saskatchewan Pride/ Moose Jaw Pride/ Queen City Pride/ Saskatoon Pride
SEIU-West members sponsored and participated in creating the "Rainbow Crosswalk" in Swift Current to promote acceptance and awareness of LGBTQ+ issues especially in a part of our province that is falsely stereotyped as being more socially conservative on these issues than the rest of the province. This was paired with SEIU-West member participation in Pride events across Saskatchewan to stand in solidarity as members of these communities celebrate acceptance and make it clear we are all united for equality.

Part of the plan continues to be organizing with allies across workplace boundaries. On top of a continued relationships with students, charities, and local organizations like the Regina Public Interest Research Group, we are developing relationships with immigrant associations, community associations and other unions. We are all community organizations that are under attack by those currently in power. Only by supporting each other can we grow under a climate of cuts. *We're Stronger Together*

Moose Jaw COVID-19 Community Response Group

Our department participates in monthly meetings of this coalition of community organizations dedicated to help the community. When COVID-19 hit, there was a lot of confused messaging from our government and now we see more of the same with vaccine efforts. This group combined efforts to create consistent messaging for non-profits around COVID-19 protocols, masking, sanitization, vaccination and is now moving towards the after-effects of COVID including increased evictions, addictions, and mental health. While our role is limited, there is potential for SEIU-West to lead these topics in pro-worker, pro-community directions.

Department News

The SEIU-West Organizing Department has a staffing complement that works tirelessly to defend all workers against having their rights trampled on by management. The Department also has a pool of member organizers who are just as eager to help spread the word of how we are all Stronger Together with SEIU-West.

Stacey Lolacher brings an extensive history in community organizing and law to our department. She has been working on building relationships with local organizations, organizing new members, and ensuring workers are informed about the tools they can



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access when they need help. More recently, she has worked on campaigns at Riverbend Crossing, Greenfalls Landing, City Centre Bingo, the Town of Herbert, Southwest Homes and an unnamed "Workplace X". She is an asset to the department, and is even willing to play Santa if it means getting into a non-union facility to hand out pamphlets to the workers there.

Tara Hessie currently occupies the Community Outreach Worker role in the Organizing Department. This role has the primary focus of external organizing with an additional lens of organizing within the community and our established units. She is an organizational master and has the quick wits to adapt to any adverse situation. Recently, she has worked on campaigns at Spruce Manor, City Centre Bingo, and the unnamed "Workplace X". She is also liaising with various community groups and working with established units within SEIU-West. Tara is somebody who works tirelessly for SEIU-West members and takes a keen interest in finding new ways to agitate non-union workers into action.

The Director of the Organizing is Shane Stewart. Shane has been working on campaigns, advertising developments, organizational development, and of course directing the Organizing Department, and Organizing Committee.

Highlights of this year have been working to expand our union into new workplaces, new communities, and towards new approaches. These past two years have marked the most successful external organizing campaign run in recent times, and we are anticipating our team's latest victory as workers at "Workplace X". Aside from this, there are several facilities where we continue to mentor curious workers into leaders. We continue to advertise in new forums including electronic billboards, with community groups, and in support of community initiatives. Lastly, we have been working to adapt to the barriers created by COVID-19. These are approaches we hope to develop further and expand because the unspoken elephant in this report is that it's clear this government doesn't like ordinary working people and that they will continue to make life difficult. The ultra-rich continue to get richer and use their power to make life harder for workers. Worker power and struggle must continue to grow, even in the face of the global pandemic; we must let them know we are a problem that won't simply go away.

There would be no direction and significantly less boots on the ground without the Member Organizing Committee. SEIU-West is strong and able to climb over the barriers mentioned in this report because we have a team of leaders that drive us to do what we do better, and drive the workers in campaigns to do better. It's in the organizing committee war room that the tools are developed, and the plans are made to continue our reputation as the organizing union in Saskatchewan. Neil Colmin, Lois Camacho, Lou-Ellen Murray, Lynette Pinfold, Carol Thurston and Kate McDaid are militant activists when it comes to defending the rights of the unorganized. Jason Monteith is the chair of the organizing committee and brings a curious but militant activist approach to organizing. Under his leadership, the committee has trained the next generation of member organizers that will



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ensure SEIU-West grows into the future. Already, together we've organized hundreds of members to join SEIU-West, which means hundreds of families are now enjoying better wages, job security and benefits because of this work. When we say organizing is an exercise of passion, this is what it's about!

Conclusion

The SEIU-West organizing department continues to do what SEIU does – innovate, fight and win. When workers call us, it is because we are visible, easily accessible, and have an undefeated reputation for winning organizing campaigns. It is with these tools that we are able to give workers the confidence to defend themselves both against union busters, and the complacent, complicated legislation that make it more difficult to organize. We continue to develop new approaches, new skills and new ideas in organizing that set us up to win. Regardless if the barriers come from employers, union busters, the pandemic or the SLRB, we came to work and we will win!

Every campaign starts with a conversation, and we ultimately rely on you to inform your friends and family about the benefits of joining SEIU-West. Every workplace could use a union, and your job as a leader is to mobilize workers towards this direction.

If you know of anyone who could benefit from the gains and protections of a collective agreement, invite them to inquire with me! Sometimes one quick Zoom meeting with an organizer is all it takes to improve hundreds of lives.

In Solidarity,
Shane Ellis, SEIU-West Director of Organizing

