

# Change to Win to concentrate on organizing and politics

CHICAGO (PAI) — The Change to Win labor federation set future plans for strategic organizing campaigns and approved a 10-cent-per-capita assessment for politics for the 2007-2008 election cycle at its second biennial convention Sept. 25.

In a press conference after the one-day convention, CTW Chair Anna Burger said the federation's Strategic Organizing Center would step up its services to member unions by helping to train organizers, coordinate campaigns and marshal financial resources, among other things.

But the political assessment was a new move, given CTW's prior emphasis on organizing rather than politics — that was a reason which led seven unions to split from the AFL-CIO in 2005. The seven — Service Employees, United Food and Commercial Workers, the Teamsters, the Laborers, the Carpenters, United Farm Workers and UNITE HERE — felt the older labor federation put too much emphasis, relatively, on politics.

CTW's new emphasis on politics means in some states CTW will set up its own statewide political/organizing operations, while in others its unions' locals will continue working under "Solidarity Charters" with AFL-CIO state federations and central labor councils on joint operations. "In some

of these states, the AFL-CIO operation is our operation," Burger stated. She singled out New York, Nevada and California. As for the Solidarity Charters in general, she added: "Wherever locals want to work together they can, and where they don't want to, they won't."

[In Oregon, only the Laborers and UNITE HERE are affiliated with the state AFL-CIO. Other Change to Win unions have Solidarity Charters at various central labor councils.]

The 10-cent surcharge, which could raise up to \$14 million over the two years, will be used "to build a state-of-the-art coordinated political program to ensure the election of a pro-labor president in 2008 and pro-labor majorities in the Senate and House in order to pass the Employee Free Choice Act," according to a resolution passed by some 1,000 delegates.

CTW said the Employee Free Choice Act — a bill that would level the playing field between workers and companies in union organizing drives — "will serve as the focus of all of Change to Win's political work leading into 2009." The Employee Free Choice Act passed in the Democratic-controlled House earlier this year by a bipartisan 241-185 margin, but it fell victim to a Republican filibuster in the Senate, though it had majority support

there, too.

Besides the political assessment, Change to Win delegates set out other goals for the next two years.

One was "continuing to realign our unions into the same industries" for the same groups of workers and increased emphasis on organizing in core industries, Burger said. "We adopted a set of strategies around organizing and structure."

One such organizing drive already under way is focusing on 90,000 port workers and drivers. It's a national campaign, but most of the workers are in Los Angeles-Long Beach. The Teamsters are leading that campaign, but CTW's Strategic Organizing Center is providing training, research and recruiting new organizers.

The Organizing Center will get three-fourths of CTW's \$18 million budget, said Burger, whom the group's Executive Board elected to a new two-year term in August. Other strategic industry-wide organizing drives will be in construction and transportation, but have yet to start.

Joe Hansen, international president of UFCW, said in the morning session that since the 2004 Southern California grocery workers' lockout-and-strike, it has changed to devote most of its budget to organizing.

"We raised organizing spending by

28 percent and we're looking to hire 50 more organizers," he said.

Hansen identified one key area where the Strategic Organizing Center can help its member unions: Finding qualified organizers to run nationwide campaigns. "We couldn't have big campaigns. We didn't have the capacity," he admitted. So the center helped UFCW's national grocery workers' drive — and that drive led to this year's contract settlements with the

three big grocery chains in Southern California and St. Louis which rolled back the two-tier wage system and health care cuts the grocery chains won in L.A. in 2004.

"We didn't have a national strategy then. We have one now, and Safeway, Albertsons and Kroger knew it," Hansen said. "They realized that if anything happened in Southern California, it would quickly spread. The results there bear that out."

## UFCW backs Merkley for Senate

United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 555, Oregon's largest private-sector union, has endorsed Oregon House Speaker Jeff Merkley's bid for the U.S. Senate. The Democratic primary isn't until May 2008, but campaigning has begun early in an effort to unseat Republican incumbent Gordon Smith.

Local 555 President Gene Pronovost pointed to the success of House Bill 3339 in the last session of the Oregon Legislature as an example of Merkley's commitment to working families. That bill guarantees unemployment benefits to employees in multi-employer bargaining units who are locked-out by their employers during a labor dispute through no fault of their own.

"Without Jeff's leadership, that bill probably would have died once again this session," Pronovost said. "But his refusal to let big corporations run over workers means Oregon families won't face financial ruin as a result of a lock-out."

UFCW Local 555 represents 18,000 workers in Oregon and Southwestern Washington. Their membership is comprised of workers in retail, manufacturing, health care and other industries.

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