

Single mom, former waitress to lead SEIU Local 503

Fourteen years ago, Heather Conroy was waiting tables at a diner in Northwest Portland. On Nov. 12, she'll take the reins of Oregon's second-largest union.

In mail ballots counted Sept. 29, Conroy won a majority in a three-way race for executive director of 45,000-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503. She succeeds Leslie Frane, who left in August to head the national union's public sector division.

Local 503 represents public employees, in-home care providers, and nursing home workers. Conroy, a 38-year-old single mom, will be responsible for directing a staff of 120.

Conroy was born and raised near Pittsburgh in a working class Catholic family, her father and uncles belonging to Asbestos Workers Local 2. Her brother also followed the trade.

At one time, asbestos was widely used as a flame-resistant and sound-proof insulator. But asbestos fibers entered the lungs of workers who handled it, and led to degenerative and fatal lung diseases. Employers knew, yet continued to expose workers. Growing up, people Conroy knew were dying of asbestos-related lung diseases.

"It was all around us, almost as if it was a family gene," Conroy recalls.

Asbestos-related lung diseases claimed her great-grandmother, and later her grandmother — exposed by washing their husbands' and sons' clothes.

Conroy's working class upbringing made her a



HEATHER CONROY

fish out of water in the business program at Pennsylvania State University. The first in her family to go to college, Conroy majored in business, not knowing what else to do. But she soon felt unhappy with that choice.

"At a gut level, I knew I didn't belong there," Conroy said. Some things she was taught went against her values, Conroy said. A class in industrial psychology, for example, taught students to design work spaces that keep workers apart.

Conroy thought of dropping out. Then she met professor Frieda Rozen, an old-time unionist

from the New York textile industry. Rozen introduced Conroy to Penn State's labor studies program, and set her up with internships that helped her stay in school.

Conroy left Penn State in 1994 with a degree in labor relations ... and began waiting tables. Living on tips and a \$2.13-an-hour minimum wage, she saved to buy a car and move to Oregon, where a childhood friend was also working as a restaurant server. Conroy's friend told her that unlike Pennsylvania, Oregon doesn't let employers count tips as part of their obligation to pay the minimum wage. Conroy got a job at Fuller's, a Northwest Portland diner. Then in 1996, she threw herself into gathering signatures for a ballot measure to raise Oregon's minimum wage. She joined Portland Jobs With Justice. She campaigned against anti-union ballot measures sponsored by Bill Sizemore.

Then she found temporary work as a union organizer at United Food & Commercial Workers Local 555, where she helped workers unionize at nonunion Fred Meyer locations — and learned how hard it is for workers to unionize in America. She was shaken when, at a nonunion Fred Meyer in Columbia County, a pro-union worker she'd worked with was fired.

"I knew union organizing was about people putting their livelihoods at stake so they can make a change in their lives," Conroy said. But seeing an employer actually fire a worker took that notion from rhetoric to reality, Conroy said. It gave her a sense of how much workers risk to organize a union.

When the UFCW job ended, Conroy went to work for SEIU Local 503 as an internal organizer. That was 1997. In 2001, a year after giving birth to a daughter, she was promoted to Portland field coordinator. In 2005,

she became statewide field director.

At SEIU, Conroy helped workers at non-profit Parry Center for Children win a 59-day strike. She helped custodians at Portland Public Schools regroup when the Oregon Supreme Court declared that their jobs had been illegally privatized. As state worker contracts came up for renewal, she put together field campaigns to support bargaining. That included on-the-job actions, and community support events like the union's massive 2006 march on Salem. She also worked to recruit union members for the SEIU-backed political campaigns, like the fight to pass Measures 66 and 67, which raised taxes on rich individuals and large corporations.

Now her job will be to coordinate all the work

of her union, from organizing non-union nursing homes to bargaining state worker contracts to advancing the economic program of the national union.

"This economic crisis is going to be a catalyst for change," Conroy said. Some want to use the crisis to take away retirement security for workers, privatize the public sector and de-unionize the private sector, Conroy said, so it's vitally important that the labor movement come together to take up the mantle of change.

"We need to rein in the greed and recklessness that got us into this situation, and that allows for such a disparate distribution of wealth in this country."

Change to Win taps Hansen, Hoffa

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Change To Win executive board on Sept. 30 elected United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) President Joe Hansen as the labor federation's new chair and Teamsters President James Hoffa as secretary-treasurer. Hansen succeeds founding chair Anna Burger, who resigned both that post and her secretary-treasurer's position at Service Employees International Union. Hoffa succeeds Edgar Romney, whose union, UNITE HERE, rejoined the AFL-CIO.

Change To Win now includes SEIU, Teamsters, UFCW, and United Farm Workers. The Laborers Union left Oct. 1 to rejoin the AFL-CIO and the Carpenters Union departed more than a year ago and operates independently. Change to Win has 5.5 million members, primarily in the service sector.

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