

A view from Massachusetts on public employees

A "New Reality" of cuts, furloughs, privatization

The delegates to the 1994 Leadership Conference were afforded a chilling glimpse into a possible near future — yet one containing some familiar visions — from Sandy Felder, a dynamic and popular president-executive director of SEIU Local 509, a 9,500-member public employee local in Massachusetts.

She described "life during wartime, when you're at war with your boss, and others in politics."

Felder said, however, that organizing and building power within a coalition, the approach OPEU/SEIU Local 503 is taking, can achieve significant victories.

While calling OPEU/SEIU Local 503 "on the cutting edge of change in the labor movement" and saying "my local has looked to you all as a role model," she gave us sage advice about political "warfare" and how to survive it.

"We face a New Reality" in the 90s, she said. "The 60s and 70s were times where social movements brought about the hope and reality for real and progressive change. The women's movement opened doors and ideas. The civil rights movement brought about new freedoms. And the labor movement saw real gains for public workers. Government was looked at as a way to solve society's problems. Programs for the poor and disabled were created. Affirmative action and equal opportunity were considered the order of the day. People believed in community, social reform, and the collective good."

"The backlash of the 80s... saw a move towards individual concern over collective well-being. Antigovernment and antitax programs were led by government officials. Literally, government officials got elected to power by promising to 'tame the beast called government.' The almighty dollar became king and profit was accepted as the mantra. The wealthy saw tax cuts while the middle class saw no economic relief. The middle class saw only more of a demand on them



SEIU Local 509's Sandy Felder described the "New Reality" to delegates at the Leadership Conference.

to fund the programs put into place in the past decades. No wonder there is a tax revolt."

Felder described how the New Reality of the 90s has played out in Massachusetts during the administration of Governor William Weld, whom her members call "Governor Wealthy."

"Our governor has taken the rhetoric of reinventing government and given it a new meaning:

- "We have seen union contracts vetoed and workers who have gone without pay raises for four and one-half years;

- "We have suffered a so-called furlough program that really

meant our members had to work for up to two weeks without pay;

- "We have incurred increases in our health care premiums and copays and deductibles that were legislated rather than bargained;

- "And, now there is an attempt to legislatively cut overtime pay and health benefits again.

- "We regularly face ongoing public bashing to state workers from our boss, the governor.

- "More than 8,000 state workers have been

laid off or privatized. Privatization has meant you get a layoff notice, and some of you are offered your job back at up to 30% wage reductions, no pension, no union.

- "We have witnessed the privatization of nearly all community health services; privatization of all dietary and housekeeping services in the department of public health, mental health, mental retardation, and corrections.

- "Privatization of all but three regions in the state public works department, proposed privatization of all nursing and psychological services in the department of mental retardation, and privatization of

many state teachers and some public schools.

- "Basically, there is not a service that is not reviewed for privatization.

- "In addition, they have closed nine public health and mental health hospitals and mental retardation schools. With several more on the chopping block, Governor Weld's goal is to have no state-operated mental or public health hospitals or state schools for the retarded.

- "And, if this were not enough, our governor eliminated legislation we had passed taxing business services, and just gutted the first-ever corporate tax reporting law, passed in our state by voter referendum last year. He also proposes to cut taxes by more than \$300 million this year."

"I should point out that all was not lost in Massachusetts. Through organizing and building power, the way you all are planning here, we elected enough senators to take back our Senate from Republican control, we defeated a ballot measure that would have rolled taxes back to 1987 levels, and working with Democrats in the state Legislature, we won a 13% pay raise for our state workers by overriding our governor's veto, and we have recently won legislation that will more equally regulate privatization, protecting public sector as well as private sector workers."

"Our next campaigns are similar to yours. We both have to decide who to support for governor. We both have to wage campaigns to convince the public that our work is valuable and worth funding. And, we both have to figure out how to work with and move the New Democrats while we build enough power to bring back the New Deal Democrats.

"We both have to figure out how to not only survive, but to create our New Reality. And, I believe we can. That with the power of the labor movement, using all our resources, we can make it a New Reality that respects the work we do."

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