

A Day Like No Other

Excerpts of SEIU Action's October 2001 Cover Story on SEIU Members Affected by Sept. 11

On Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, 60 SEIU members from five different locals were lost to terror. Hundreds of other SEIU New York City members were burned and battered escaping from "ground zero." Hundreds more served as rescuers and caregivers.

A Tragedy That Profoundly Affects the Entire SEIU Family

All across North America, SEIU members were affected by the carnage: some as friends, relatives, and co-workers of the missing and injured, and many as volunteers ready to lend a helping hand.

And, as the early shock and disbelief of Sept. 11 turned to sadness, anger, and other emotions, it quickly became clear our union was profoundly touched by the horror. SEIU members and their families are tightly woven into the multi-cultural fabric of New York City.

No less than 2,000 SEIU members were employed at the World Trade Center and nearby structures. Not all of them were at work when the floors shook and the fireballs rained—but nearly 700 of them were.

About 350 members of SEIU Local 32BJ were on duty that morning—working as elevator operators, security staff, porters, and tour guides. SEIU Local 56FO building engineers were also at their posts, while 56 members of SEIU Local 758 were at work at the three hotels in the Towers' shadows.

And 300 state employees represented by SEIU Local 4053/PEF (Public Employees Federation) were in their offices—55 of them were on the 82nd floor of Tower 1, the first tower struck. Another 186 of them were on the 86th, 87th, and 16th floors of Tower 2, the first tower to fall.

A Day of Horror and Heroism

When the first aircraft struck, Local 32BJ member Rocco Camaj was working in a place he loved to tell his children about—high on the 102nd floor, cleaning windows. He was up so high he could touch the sky, he often told them.

Local 32BJ member Esmlin Salcedo, a security staffer, was in a training class. He rushed to his command center, flung his bookbag down and quickly began to help evacuate the building.

For Camaj, an ethnic Albanian immigrant from Yugoslavia, and Salcedo, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, the World Trade Center was more than the place they went to work; it was a place they took pride in being—a soaring symbol of their new homeland. They are among 24 Local 32BJ members who are missing. Most are immigrants.

Local 4053/PEF member Rose Rizzo was on the 86th floor of Tower 2. A state tax auditor, Rizzo was one of the floor's fire marshals, a voluntary role many government workers across the country have—a role that has taken on added significance since the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. It was a role Rose Rizzo took very seriously on Sept. 11.

Rizzo insisted that her co-workers evacuate the building after nearby Tower 1 was struck. But many of the staff continued to work, recalls PEF member Dianne Fattah. "You think you're in an indestructible building," Fattah recalls Rizzo saying, urging her co-workers to leave.

Fattah and other PEF members made it to the street just moments before the second jetliner slammed into Tower 2. Rizzo was not with them. She is among 34 PEF members who are missing.

Cabrini Hospital EMT David Marc Sullins, a member of SEIU 1199NY, was coming off his shift when the towers were struck. Sullins and his partner rushed their ambulance to the chaos. Sullins stabilized the injured on the street while his partner treated another in the ambulance. Sullins was last seen running into Tower 2 to rescue others. Seconds later, the building collapsed.

"Take care of one another out

there," Sullins would often tell his co-workers. Sullins, a father of two young sons, is the only 1199NY member known to be missing.

And among the other missing SEIU members who were caught in the collapse that day is New York City firefighter Christopher Blackwell, who worked a second job as a paramedic for an ambulance company in Danbury, Conn. It was there where he helped spearhead the drive to organize with SEIU District 1199NE.

Thousands of SEIU Health Care Workers Rushed to Help Treat Wounds of Survivors

On the ground, the thousands of health care members of 1199NY and the SEIU doctors of Locals 1957/CIR (Committee of Interns and Residents) and Local 10MD (Doctors Council) treated hundreds and hundreds of survivors for burns, deep gashes, broken bones, and smoke inhalation. They all wish they could have treated hundreds more.

But survivors stopped coming.

SEIU International officers, working with local union leaders, swiftly began to put a plan in place to help affected members—including the thousands of workers who once cleaned buildings that no longer stood.

With relief fund information posted on the SEIU Web site, other donations poured in from people with no ties to SEIU—including two for \$10,000 each. A six-year old in New York City sent a \$5 bill and a schoolgirl in Pennsylvania raised \$230 for the fund. Nearly \$1 million was raised in 14 days.

Within a day of the attack, SEIU President Andy Stern notes, a large handwritten banner was draped across the major highway leading into Washington and to the Pentagon reading "Freedom Thru Strength and Unity." It is a sentiment that has a special meaning for SEIU, says Stern. "But we must remember that mere slogans do not define us as a nation and as a union. Our actions do."

