



Portland Public Schools custodians and nutrition service workers jammed a meeting of the Portland School Board in January to demand a fair contract following a boisterous rally.

Unity, Support and Resolve Win Portland Public Schools Victory

After eight months of difficult negotiations, SEIU 503 custodians and nutrition service workers at the Portland Public Schools have ratified a new contract achieved through unity at the bargaining table, strong community support and resolute will to rebuff management efforts to devalue the work they do.

The Portland Public School Board narrowly approved the agreement, 4-3, with dissenters complaining that SEIU 503 workers had done too well. Weeks before, SEIU members and their families and supporters rallied at a board meeting, inspired by encouraging remarks from SEIU President Andy Stern as well as local political and labor leaders.

Under terms of the agreement current full-time custodians continue to earn their current hourly wage. Nutrition workers received an immediate 2.5% wage increase, a second 2.5% increase this July and a third 2.5% increase in July 2009. They will also receive Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a paid holiday for the first time. The district has increased its monthly health insurance contribution, making coverage more affordable for both custodians and nutrition service workers.

The school district had initially demanded custodians absorb wage decreases of as much as 34% and continued to press for cuts of 16-26%. In 2002 the school district fired custodians and replaced them with contract janitors. The Oregon Supreme Court ruled the firings illegal in 2005, leading to reinstatement of the custodians.

Throughout negotiations the union members contended that the schools' insistence on reduced pay for custodians was a failure to appreciate the value of school custodians to the educational environment and the condition of school facilities.

"This is a victory for workers and for safe and healthy schools," said Mark Freemark, custodian at Llewellyn Elementary School and a member of the SEIU 503 bargaining

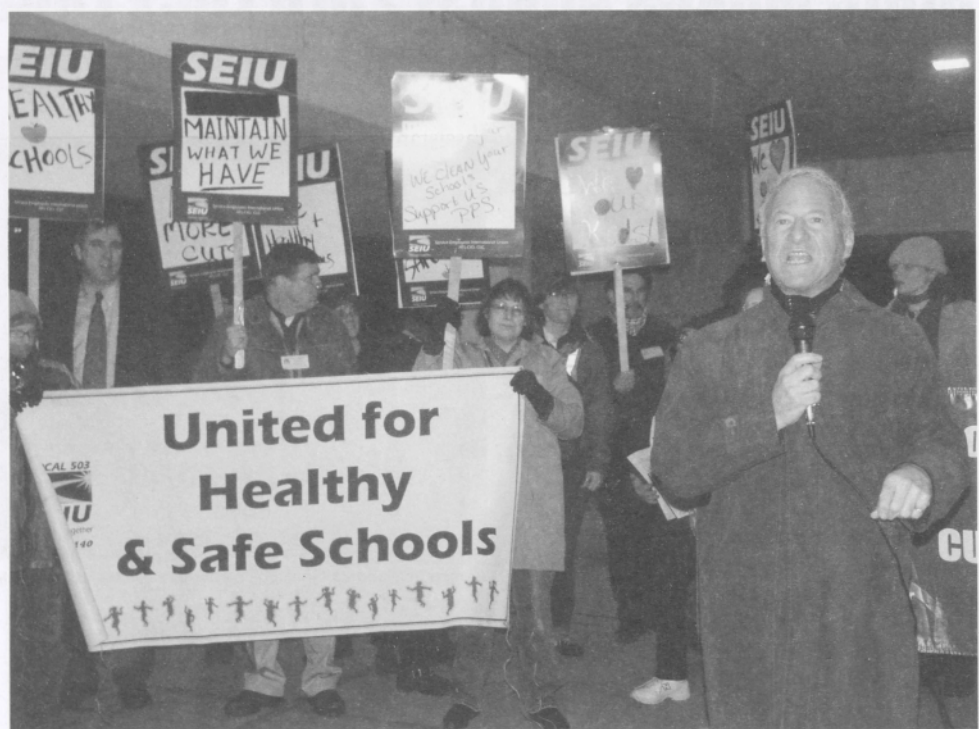
team. "It affirms that qualified custodians are important to maintaining a proper educational environment and empowers nutrition workers who play an important role feeding 20,000 children every school day. We are grateful for the support of parents, teachers, political and community leaders and members of other unions."

With a contract hanging in the balance, PPS negotiators first tried to pit nutrition service workers against custodians. When no schism materialized in union ranks, they tried again, this time seeking to divide the custodians. After that ploy failed as well, all members of the unit had a tentative deal in a matter of hours.

"There's no doubt about it," Freemark said. "They thought they could divide us, first by

trying to break off the nutrition workers, then by offering to make the new hires whole at the expense of those of us who returned. In the end we all did better by sticking together. There has to be a lesson in that."

It became even more personal for Kevin Test, another custodian on the SEIU 503 team, whose eyes welled as he talked about fighting for nutrition workers to get the MLK holiday and recalled that Dr. King was in Memphis fighting for a contract for sanitation workers when he was assassinated. "These are the lowest paid workers in the entire district," Test said. "Getting them that paid holiday became very important to all of us."



SEIU International President Andy Stern exhorts Portland Public Schools workers at a rally attended by SEIU 503 members and their families as well as supporters from other unions, community leaders and political office holders. That's House Leader Jeff Merkley at left. Campaign for a fair contract included radio ads and lawn signs in Board member's neighborhoods.