

AFD Ep 430 Links and Notes - Justice for Janitors LA 1990 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording June 20, 2022

- Intro
- June 15 1990: Justice for Janitors (SEIU) demonstration smashed brutally by the LAPD <https://twitter.com/zackpattin/status/1537163248419540992> (posted by a longshoreman unionist)
 - His summary in the tweets: *Thirty-two years ago today, June 15, 1990, strikers with SEIU's Justice for Janitors were attacked and beaten by LAPD. Ana Veliz was clubbed three times in the back and miscarried four days later. Twenty-one strikers were hospitalized and forty-two arrested, including Veliz. The police violence won massive sympathy for the strikers and boosted the Justice for Janitors campaign. LA Mayor Tom Bradley even joined demonstrations and pressured ISS to negotiate. SEIU Local 399 brought a multi-million dollar lawsuit against LAPD. Within two weeks, subcontractor International Service Systems (ISS) signed SEIU Local 399's Master Building Service Agreement. The win inspired more workers to organize. When Justice for Janitors began in 1987, only 17% of LA janitorial contractors were union. By 1995: 81%.*
- Contemporary news report in the LA Times of the police attack, which is useful for some details and for understanding coverage at the time but which of course should always be taken with a grain of salt because of the LA Times being historically a powerhouse of anti-unionism leading up to this era. Here are some excerpts in various orders that I selected out of the overall article: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-06-16-me-33-story.html>
 - The headline was "Police Use Force to Block Strike March : Labor: About two dozen demonstrators are injured during protest by janitors in Century City."
 - *A 2-week-old feud between a labor union that is trying to organize Century City janitors and the Los Angeles Police Department burst into violence Friday when 50 baton-wielding police officers cut short a march by 400 people, arresting 40 and injuring about two dozen after the demonstrators refused to disperse. Much of the violence occurred after the demonstrators, reeling from an initial conflict with police in the middle of the normally jammed intersection of Century Park East and Olympic Boulevard, linked arms and walked swiftly and defiantly toward the officers, who clubbed and pushed them back. Most of the injured demonstrators suffered cuts or bruises during the half-hour, shriek-punctuated confrontation, which took place around 1 p.m. as the demonstrators were marching toward a planned rally at several Century City office towers where janitors went on strike May 30. During the scuffles, police knocked numerous demonstrators to the pavement a second time as they were trying to rise. Other demonstrators fell as they stumbled backward over their colleagues.*
 - *James Wood, the No. 2 official in the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, who participated in the march, said police broke their promise not to interfere with the march from Roxbury Park in Beverly Hills to an office courtyard in Century City. Similar assurances were made by police in interviews with The Times. [Police Sgt. William] De la Torre [who had been a supervisor on the scene] said police decided to block Century Park East after receiving reports Friday that the marchers were going to intentionally tie up traffic. Just before the march began, organizers urged participants at a rally to be scrupulous about obeying traffic lights and crossing signs.*
 - *Sgt. de la Torre...said the fact that police were outnumbered required them to use force. "That was only after they refused to move," he said an hour after the violence. "You do not have a right to say, 'I'm not going to move.'"*

- *Friday's march was proceeding orderly as demonstrators marched west on Olympic Boulevard from the park. But when the marchers attempted to turn right on Century Park East, heading toward the office towers, they encountered a line of riot-helmeted officers. Officers told the marchers they could not continue and should turn around. In response, demonstrators moved into the middle of the street, continuing the chants they had used during the march. Many sat in the middle of the intersection of Century Park East and Olympic, anticipating arrest. They were told by a police supervisor, via a loudspeaker, that the march had been declared an illegal assembly and that failure to disperse immediately would result in arrest. However, police made no immediate attempt to arrest the demonstrators. Instead, after a standoff of several minutes, police briefly attempted to prod the demonstrators to disperse by shoving and then hitting them with batons. After that initial conflict, the demonstrators backed up a few feet. Several minutes later, they stood, many of them linking arms, and walked toward the police line. There was contact between the two sides and police began to force demonstrators back. That led to another standoff during which dozens of other officers were called in as backups. Then police, maintaining their line, began to gradually push the crowd down the middle of Olympic Boulevard. Several more skirmishes broke out. At one point police shoved and clubbed numerous leaders of the demonstration into a parking garage driveway on Olympic, where they were arrested. Early in the fray, several officers ignored calls from supervisors to stop charging the demonstrators. Three officers were pulled out of the center of the line and sent to the edge by a supervisor.*
- *Some other important context leading up to the police brutality: On June 7, police arrested 13 people on suspicion of blocking doorways. The union began circulating literature accusing the Police Department of operating as a tool of rich business interests. Many marchers Friday symbolically wore red bandanas over their face, a tactic used by labor demonstrators in Central America to avoid detection by police.*
- *Interesting angle from the LA Times considering their usual hostility to unions back then: The strike has drawn considerable emotional support from many quarters of Los Angeles' labor movement because the economic status of the janitors and the wealth of the businesses that they clean at night personifies the growing gap between affluent and poor citizens. Janitors in Century City make about \$4.50 an hour, about a dollar less than janitors with union contracts at numerous downtown Los Angeles buildings, and receive no health insurance.*
- [Rachel] <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/J4J-Campaign-Timeline.pdf>
 - The June 15, 1990 demonstration was part of a 4-year campaign on SEIU Local 399's part to organize immigrants and other marginalized workers that started in 1987, with a failed union drive attempting to organize janitors at the Gas Company, one of the biggest buildings in Downtown LA. Even though the drive failed, the union would continue to organize low-wage immigrant workers. The efforts in LA were part of a national movement to bring building service workers into the union. John Sweeney, president of SEIU, had started the "Justice for Janitors" movement in 1986, starting in Denver, and in 1988, national organizers arrived in LA. In 1989, they started a campaign targeting workers for American Building Maintenance, and Bradford Building Maintenance, one of ABM's subsidiaries. In April of that year, Local 399 signed a master contract for all of Downtown LA building service workers. After that victory, Local 399 set its sights on Century City, specifically targeting ISS (International Service Systems), a

Danish-owned international corporation. It was during this campaign that the events of June 15, 1990 unfolded. After the police violently attacked the workers, ISS agreed to negotiate with Local 399. In the 90s, Local 399 (later Local 1877 after a reorganization) continued to organize janitors and other service workers such as security guards at other workplaces, including Toyota, LACMA, Hughes Aircraft, LAX, and University of Southern California, and expanded their efforts to Orange County in 2001.

- Important context, these organization efforts happened during a time of intense anti-immigration rhetoric and legislation. In 1994, California passed Proposition 187, which prohibited undocumented immigrants from accessing health care, education and other social services in the state of California. A California judge barred its implementation, and it was struck down as unconstitutional by SCOTUS, but the sentiments behind it were clear.
- Background on the campaign and the union local:
<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/los-angeles-justice-janitors-campaign-economic-justice-century-city-1989-1990>
 - *The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) formed the Local 399 shortly after World War II. The Local 399 was a labor union for janitors which had reached its peak in the 1970s, but was struggling in the 1980s. During this time, the Local 399 fought for higher wages for its members, which motivated cleaning contractors to invest in nonunion options. The cleaning industry was extremely competitive at the time and as a result of this emphasis on nonunion cleaners, membership in the Local 399 had fallen from approximately 5,000 members to only 1,800.*
 - *Many African Americans worked as janitors, and the majority of the Local 399 was African American. In the 1980s, Latino immigrants began to supply the labor to the janitorial workforce because they were willing to work for nonunion contractors for lower wages and worse conditions. The Local 399 traditionally had good representation of the African American janitors in the workforce; however they were now disconnected from the Latino community that made up the new workforce.*
 - *Although the Local 399 was struggling during the 1980s, SEIU was growing. The SEIU increased its national staff from twenty to more than two hundred between 1984 and 1989. The SEIU emphasized training and a militant approach for changes, devising a campaign called Justice for Janitors in Denver, Colorado.*
 - *Justice for Janitors arrived in Southern California in 1988. Justice for Janitors represented the small union base that remained in California, but also organized the nonunion buildings. Justice for Janitors' plan involved targeting companies that illegally utilized both union and nonunion operations, hoping to take the labor costs out of competition. The first company that was targeted was Century Cleaning, a small local company with union and nonunion components. The campaigners started their effort by contacting workers, making house calls, signing cards, and identifying leaders.*
 - *Justice for Janitors also tried to achieve change through protests that were visible to the public. For example, Justice for Janitors performed street theater at a restaurant that the owner of Century Cleaning frequented. Justice for Janitors also took a group of workers to the golf club where the owner was a member, starting chants and screaming in protest. As a result of such practices, more of Century's contracts went to union firms. There was additional progress when Justice for Janitors targeted American Building Maintenance. By 1989, Local 399 had negotiated a master agreement with the firm.*

- *In the summer of 1989, the Justice for Janitors campaign shifted to Century City, a large office complex employing 400 janitors, of whom 250 were employed by a single cleaning contractor, International Service Systems (ISS). In order to pressure ISS, Justice for Janitors used similar in-your-face tactics as before, creating complaints from tenants of the offices and pressuring ISS to negotiate.*
- *Despite this pressure, by spring 1990 the union concluded that there was no other option except to strike against ISS. The strike began on May 29, 1990.*
- [Rachel]
 - <https://www.seiu.org/blog/2015/7/when-police-beat-janitors-but-janitors-won-justice> (co-written in 2015 by a participant in 1990)
 - (25th Anniversary retrospective) The struggle for fair wages and benefits for service workers lives on in the Fight for 15 campaign, and in the actions of janitors in the present day. In 2015, janitors with Chicagoland SEIU Local 1 won annual wage increases and fully employer-paid health care for almost 10,000 janitors. In 2015, there were labor actions in 33 cities representing 133,000 cleaners demanding better wages and working conditions.
 - <http://www.seiu49.org/justice-for-janitors-day-30th-anniversary/>
 - (30th Anniversary retrospective) In 2020, Local 49, representing Oregon and SW Washington, stood up to the owners of the Umpqua Building in Portland, and made them back down from firing union janitors and hiring non-union replacement janitors.
 - *Today, the American public is rising up in huge numbers in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. His death has reawakened the nation – and the world – to the terror that our militarized police yields over the communities it is supposed to serve and protect. While the catalyst for the Black Lives Matter protests may seem different than what the janitors did in LA 30 years ago, it’s not. There is an underlying issue that is the same: people of color and poor and working-class people in this country are treated like our lives are worth less by greedy people at the top more interested in maintaining the status quo than creating a just, equitable society. From being victims of police harassment and brutality to being the workers shoved to the frontlines of the global COVID-19 pandemic without adequate pay or safety equipment, racism and economic inequality for too long have dictated who can live safely in the United States, and who cannot.*
- <https://stansburyforum.com/2015/05/13/justice-for-janitors-a-misunderstood-success>

This 2015 article is titled “Justice for Janitors: A Misunderstood Success” and was written by Peter Olney and Rand Wilson. Olney was a longtime Organizing Director at the ILWU and Wilson was the Chief of Staff for SEIU 888 in Boston and then founded Massachusetts Jobs with Justice. Their perspective in this piece is focused on the organizing and contract dynamics of the Justice for Janitors campaign. They note that the SEIU’s May/June 1990 strike in LA was actually staged on behalf of non-union janitors in Century City and that reflected a specific way in which the contracts were written and they observe that the national union didn’t just provide resources to support the strike but also threatened sympathy strikes in other cities where they were stronger but the same large janitorial service companies also had operations.

 - *...what many union leaders and key staff strategists have missed is the fact it was not a “blank slate” campaign disconnected from the sources of SEIU’s membership and contract power... it was a campaign...deeply rooted in the existing power, base and history of SEIU.*
 - Here are a couple longer excerpts from the article:

- *By the 1980s, much of the union's market power among urban janitors had eroded as the industry restructured to a cleaning model that relied on outsourced contract cleaners instead of permanent staff. When Justice for Janitors was launched in the late 1980s however, the union still retained tremendous power and thousands of members in its traditional strongholds of New York City, Chicago and San Francisco. In these cities, the union had excellent contracts with good wages and benefits for doormen and cleaners. These were the "fortresses" that played such a crucial role in the success of the janitor's campaigns in Los Angeles, San Jose, Oakland, Denver and San Diego where the battle was to reorganize weak and degraded bargaining units and organize thousands of new members. The early janitor organizers in Los Angeles recognized the importance of first rebuilding and re-energizing their base. One of the first campaigns undertaken was the contract campaign for downtown janitors. Cecile Richards(3) skillfully directed a winning contract fight for the approximately 1,000 janitors in the core market of LA. The contract struggle gave the union a new core group of supporters; many of whom became the front line soldiers in the campaign to organize the vast non-union market outside of downtown. A key to the membership mobilization was "market triggers" that Local 399 inserted into its collectively bargained agreements. The triggers provided for automatic increases in wages and benefits if the janitors union succeeded in organizing 50 percent or more of the commercial buildings in mutually agreed upon geographic areas. **Thus, when rank and file union janitors marched for "justice for the unorganized janitors" it meant marching to increase their own wages and benefits and to gain a more secure future.***
- *Justice for Janitors was a brilliant campaign that wisely by-passed the NLRB election process and leveraged better contracts and growth through an industry-wide strategy that relied heavily on creative confrontation and community alliances. It was not however a campaign out of whole cloth. It had the power of the existing membership in major markets, leverage with many of the employers who were operating non-union in new markets and the loyalty of many members who had seen the union's power in making a better life for themselves and their families. Bargain to organize remains a successful starting point for real organizing, member-to-member.*
- *What an irony that a campaign whose very success was based on the strength of its existing membership base was — and continues to be — misconstrued into an example of how large scale organizing can take place without the fundamental imperative of engagement with our existing membership.*

- <https://www.kcet.org/shows/departures/justice-for-janitors-day-marks-25th-anniversary-in-la>

- *Summary of the 1990 attack and subsequent victory: back in 1990, over 400 striking janitors, primarily Central American immigrants, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 399, demonstrated peacefully in an effort to improve the living standards for their families by unionizing their employer International Service System (ISS), the contractor responsible for servicing most of L.A.'s office buildings at the time. The demonstration followed*

two weeks of intense organizing efforts by janitors and took place in Century City, a region in west Los Angeles that houses corporate office towers of the wealthiest businesses in the country. At first, the rally appeared to be another event in line with the organizing efforts of the strike, yet, this particular rally propelled the janitors' struggle to the national spotlight when members were confronted and injured by fifty police officers who were equipped with batons. In total, 38 janitors were injured during the incident, and many were arrested during the altercation. The violent images quickly began circulating across media outlets across the country and led to an increased public support for the janitors' cause. Rather than back down after the confrontation, janitors remained on the streets and were eventually joined by over 2,500 supporters and prominent leaders, including Jesse Jackson, who publicly decried the meager wages janitors were earning at the time -- some as little at \$4.50 per hour. The janitors' dedicated efforts, coupled with the widespread community support and the public outrage over the police brutality, resulted in janitors receiving an increase of wages over \$2 per hour, full family health coverage, and the ratification of a union contract with ISS.

- More recent objectives of the union (circa 2015 and the Fight for 15 campaign beginning): *In addition to labor and political fights, janitors are concerned with community issues, such as improving the educational outcomes their children and their families. Currently, a cohort of janitors is participating in a program that focuses on early childhood education through janitor parent engagement. The Parent Worker Program exposes janitors and their children to workshops, field trips, and cultural activities held at worksites, schools, and the union hall. Janna Shaddock-Hernández, the Director of the Project based out of the UCLA Labor Center, explains that "the program represents a low-cost way for employers to invest in their workers, and would have the potential to start a workplace model and a national trend around the workplace being the focal point where we can shine new light onto the crisis in early education."*
- [Rachel] <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2016/06/justice-for-janitors-seiu-raise-america/>
 - The Justice for Janitors campaign lives on in the Raise America campaign that seeks to raise wages for all low-wage workers. On June 15, 2016, the SEIU Local 32BJ brought together baggage handlers and cabin cleaning staff along with janitors in an action at Logan International Airport in Boston. June 15 has become a day of action to organize workers from many service industries to demand better wages and benefits.
 - Although Janitors for Justice made great strides in the 90s, their work continued into the 2000s. In 2005, they successfully organized a union drive in anti-union territory: Houston, Texas. Janitors there made an average of \$5.25/hr, about 25% of what janitors in NYC made. SEIU took on the 5 biggest custodial contracting companies in Houston, and after dozens of arrests of workers, a unit comprised of 5300 workers - mostly female and Latina - won health insurance and an almost \$2.50 raise.
 - However, the fight continues for better pay and benefits such as sick days. Even in liberal cities like Portland, janitors are working hard to bring up the minimum pay to \$15/hr.
 - *Using the history of Justice for Janitors means drawing on a huge community-labor coalition of support for public actions that shift the balance of power toward the workers when negotiating union contracts. This presents a shift for many labor unions that are beginning to again focus on an active labor movement that sees the necessity of constant organizing and agitation, rather*

than just relying on negotiators after a union election is ratified. Raise America attempts to then bring the militancy and energy of Justice for Janitors into the ongoing battle for raising janitorial wages, an organizing campaign that wins through its permanence and the constant involvement of members.

As many jobs shift, and SEIU begins to prioritize large campaigns at group homes and airports across the country, it means expanding the vision of Justice for Janitors by looking at low-wage, "invisible" positions as a united block with common interests.

"They all have the same kind of problems. They all cope with the same kind of low-wage economy," Villasante explained. "We're here to help and transform this economy and make it work for everybody."

- Other bonus materials:

- Here's info about the 2000 Ken Loach movie starring Adrien Brody, which is set in 1999 but fictionalizes a similar organizing campaign and police crackdown: <https://www.umass.edu/lrrc/pv-film-festival/bread-and-roses> The trailer is kind of crazy because I can't imagine the actual film has the tone of the trailer, based on his other films... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrDpd4sCswY>
- Photo library from various SEIU J4J demonstrations in different locations over a range of years: <https://reuther.wayne.edu/taxonomy/term/1093?page=1> This photo is from later in June 1990 in LA: <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/13001>
- Can't read due to no subscription: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/justice-for-janitors>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice_for_Janitors#Los_Angeles_campaign (This article is not very well-written and contains a number of significant errors about the basic timeline in 1990 and implying that the next Mayor was the current Mayor at the time.)
 - *In 1983, an average janitor working in LA had a salary of over \$7.00 an hour and full health insurance coverage for the janitor and his/her family. By 1986, the janitorial wages had been cut to a mere \$4.50/hour, and health insurance coverage was no longer an option. By the late 1980s, janitors began to fight against these large owners and contractors. Janitors that were members of the SEIU joined together in the Justice for Janitors campaign using militant and direct action tactics. They wanted to hold both the owners and the contractors accountable.*