

**ONE INDUSTRY, ONE UNION, ONE CONTRACT: HOW  
JUSTICE FOR JANITORS ORGANIZED THE INVISIBLE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The neo-liberal economic reforms of the 1980s changed the distribution of power in the Los Angeles union landscape. Unions were in an age of decline as immigration increased, leading to severe exploitation of the janitorial work force. The Justice for Janitors movement revitalized the presence of the Service Workers International Union (SEIU) in Los Angeles, restoring power and leverage to workers in the building services industry. The movement developed new and innovative strategies to level the playing field between building owners, cleaning contractors, and individual laborers. Justice for Janitors also succeeded in educating and mobilizing the undocumented workforce, a feat thought to be impossible by many. This essay provides a narrative review of the Justice for Janitors movement in Century City from 1990-1991, based on recovered archival data, and provides an extensive analysis of the factors that led to violent police action against peaceful protestors on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1990.

**KEYWORDS**

SEIU, union decline, building services, immigration, undocumented labor.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The City of Angels was booming in the 1980s. Population growth skyrocketed, and Los Angeles overtook Chicago as the second largest city in the United States<sup>2</sup>. New wealth poured into the thriving economy as domestic and foreign investors alike purchased property and centered their businesses in Los Angeles office parks that glittered with California sunshine. Thousands of bankers, lawyers, and businessmen made comfortable salaries in the city during the day, then returned to cushy lives in the suburbs where they basked in the luxury of the entertainment capital of the world.

But under the cloak of night, hundreds of janitors trudged in to clean up after them. These workers tirelessly scrubbed windows, vacuumed carpet, and lugged trash down to the bottom floors of the high-rise office buildings. As the sun began to rise and the Los Angeles elite climbed into their BMWs to pour back into the city, the exhausted janitors with calloused hands rushed to finish cleaning and headed to their low-wage second jobs. These janitors worked day and night, barely scraping by with wages to feed and house their families. This class of people saw no glamour, no roses, no red carpets or champagne. Un-blinded by glitter in their eyes, they saw Los Angeles for what it really was: glamour by day, but a sweatshop by night.

The economic boom that took place in Los Angeles in the 1980s created many new jobs in both professional and blue collar fields, increasing the demand for office space and laborers to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based, in addition to the existing footnotes, on various materials compiled from UCLA Special Collections: SEIU USWW Records and the UCLA Social Justice History Project. Please see the bibliography for a full list of referenced works.

<sup>2</sup> Schimek, Paul. "From the Basement to the Boardroom: Los Angeles Should Work for Everyone." Justice for Janitors, SEIU Local 399, August 1, 1989. <http://socialjusticehistory.org/projects/justiceforjanitors/items/show/265>.

maintain it. One-third of LA's office spaces was built after 1980.<sup>3</sup> Most of these new cleaning jobs in the business service sector paid very low wages, so while the Los Angeles real estate market thrived, janitorial wages decreased dramatically. The percentage of LA workers making full time poverty level wages more than doubled, and the official poverty rate increased from 11.1% in 1969 to 15.6% in 1987.<sup>4</sup> The economic boom was coupled with changes in US immigration policy that resulted in the exploitation of undocumented workers, who could not advocate for themselves individually.

This is the story of how Justice for Janitors, the campaign that organized the building service workers of Los Angeles, learned to combat the new obstacles presented by the corporate powers working against them, and achieved justice. This is the story of the movement through which hundreds of undocumented immigrants found the courage to stand up for their rights, defy exploitation, and forge their futures. This story proves that power, even when in the hands of those that abuse it, can be taken back by those who fight for it.

### **THE STRUCTURE OF THE INDUSTRY LEAVES THE UNION IN DECLINE**

The Los Angeles building boom of the 1980s was a result of the new age of the neoliberal city. The conservative government of the 1980s perpetuated laissez-faire economic policies, deregulating markets and deepening the role of the private sector in the economy. Investors pounced on new real estate development in Los Angeles, and high rise buildings popped up like weeds throughout the city. However, the new flood of neoliberalism caused heavy social damage, including the de-unionization of workers and reduced government

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<sup>3</sup> Waldinger, Robert D. et al. "Helots No More: A Case Study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign in Los Angeles," in *Organizing to Win*. New York: Cornell U Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Schimek, "From the Basement to the Boardroom."

regulation of anything that could diminish profits, including labor equality and safe working conditions.

Prior to the 1980s, the building services industry in Los Angeles was largely unionized. Building services had been a local industry, where the employers were the business owners who hired and managed their own janitorial staff. The old structure was relatively approachable for the union because organizers could sign individual contracts with each building, which would generally work with the union or risk losing all of its janitors. As a result, union janitors flourished and were paid three times the wages of non-union janitors.

The structure of the commercial real estate industry in Los Angeles changed in the neo-liberal 1980s and local building owners were replaced by large corporations, who approached ownership with an investor's eye. One corporation would typically own multiple buildings scattered throughout a neighborhood and manage them from afar. This consolidation in building ownership shifted power away from individual owners and into the hands of profit-seekers who were removed from daily interaction with the property. These corporations then leased offices within the buildings to individual tenant companies, who negotiated with the building owners for the lowest cost of occupancy.<sup>5</sup> The strict focus on profit left little interest in ensuring that the “invisible” workers, such as janitors, security guards, and doormen made a living wage.

The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), another conservative policy of the 1980s, allowed about two million undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status and resulted in a huge influx of immigration from Mexico and Latin America. Los Angeles cleaning contractors suddenly found a new population of Hispanic immigrants who

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<sup>5</sup> Waldinger et al., “Helots No More.”

would work for lower wages and could be easily exploited. Contractors often told immigrants that they would have to accept lower wages because of the risk of hiring illegal workers. Faced with the fear of deportation, threats of termination, and a general lack of knowledge about their rights in the workplace, the workers submitted to back-breaking conditions and poverty wages.

IRCA reform also required employers to attest to their worker's immigration status, making it illegal to hire undocumented workers. The corporate business owners held the responsibility of maintaining the office buildings on a day to day basis, but were also determined to keep the costs of ownership low so as to make the maximum profit. In order to bypass the law while keeping costs low, they found it more convenient and less expensive to hire from the class of non-union cleaning contractors, who employed and managed their own cleaning crews on behalf of the building owners and assumed the legal risk. Building owners could not be held legally responsible for employing immigrant workers, as the workers were actually employed indirectly through a contractor. These contractors were somewhat new to the LA building service scene and had not yet been sufficiently pressured by the union.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the structural changes in the building services industry, IRCA reform, and the increase in immigrant employment, the typical janitor's wage dropped from \$7.07 in 1983 to \$4.50 in 1988.<sup>7</sup> As the cost of the non-union cleaning service decreased, building owners dropped out of union contracts and hired the less expensive non-union contractor option at the expense of those who could not protest: the laborers.

### **THE SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION MEETS JUSTICE FOR JANITORS**

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<sup>6</sup> Massey, Douglas S. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Schimek, "From the Basement to the Boardroom."

Unions initially struggled with the problems that the new building services industry structure presented. If they were successful in pressuring one contractor to sign a union contract, the building owner could simply end the contract with that company and hire another non-union contractor.<sup>8</sup> It was crucial that union organizers adapt and develop new strategies to combat these challenges. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a strong international organization with a history of success in the Los Angeles building services sector, began to research new approaches to win just pay, benefits, and better conditions for the new immigrant workforce.

In 1985, SEIU created the Justice for Janitors campaign in response to the new problem the union was experiencing with the “flexible” work arrangements of the non-union contract cleaning industry. After experiencing success in Pennsylvania, Denver, and Seattle, the campaign’s model had been widely praised for its innovation, success, and flexibility. Justice for Janitors was initially assigned to the Los Angeles branch of SEIU, Local 399, in 1987 with a small pilot team consisting of two organizers, a servicing representative, and a researcher.<sup>9</sup> With the intention of firmly rooting themselves in the downtown area, the team worked to research the LA-specific intricacies of the building services industry. Understanding the structure of the industry was essential to the success of the campaign.

### **THE ORGANIZATIONAL LABORATORY**

The Janitors campaign began by modifying its own structure to keep up with the changes in the building services industry. Justice for Janitors is widely perceived as a bottom-up campaign, but the continued support of the resource-rich SEIU was essential to the success of

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<sup>8</sup> Banks, Andy. “The Power and Promise of Community Unionism,” in *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 18 (September 1, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Justice for Janitors. The union movement is labor intensive and requires several full time personnel to research, mobilize workers, and interact with the target companies at a local level. Justice for Janitors used loud and public strategies to pressure contractors to unionize, which came with legal risks that required financial protection. SEIU funded the campaign, investing in the future success of the organized janitors and allowing them to utilize a community organizing approach at very little cost to the community.<sup>10</sup>

Justice for Janitors approached the new challenges of their California campaign as an “organizational laboratory,” developing new tactics and conducting critical research while establishing key connections in the city. The organizers began unionizing small local contractors in the downtown area and formed relationships with the local media and government agencies such as California Occupational Safety and Health Board and the National Labor Relations Board, who intervened for workers on a case-by-case basis. Justice for Janitors also began to build relationships with local community groups, such as churches and neighborhood associations – especially those involved with the growing immigrant Latino population. Some campaigns were successful and some were not, but all provided valuable insight into what the structure of a union campaign in Los Angeles would need to look like in order to be successful. Local 399 learned relatively quickly that the key was to approach the new problems geographically by organizing all janitors in a specific area and industry at once, through a series of concurrent campaigns. This strategy leveled the playing field and made it impossible for building owners to hire and fire contractors at will: if all of the options were being equally pressured by the union, wouldn’t it be best to just give in?

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<sup>10</sup> Waldinger et al., “Helots No More.”

Another key element of the Janitors movement was the successful organizing of the undocumented Latino population that was relatively new to the city. Jono Shaffer, the campaign's lead organizer, proved to be a hugely influential and highly successful leader in the push to mobilize the immigrants. Many union organizers thought it impossible to unionize undocumented workers, but Shaffer's unprecedented and unique approaches made that goal manageable.<sup>11</sup> As depicted in the movie *Bread and Roses*,<sup>12</sup> the story of the Janitors success, Shaffer visited workers in their homes and asked questions about their pay and benefits, learning more about the plight of the people he was determined to help. He and the other organizers documented labor violations the contractors had made against the workers and educated them of their rights as employees in the United States. Workers admitted that many of their managers had demanded that they "share" their wages to compensate for the risk of hiring illegally. Others even told stories of being hired for a "training period," where they were made to work without pay, sometimes for up to five weeks.<sup>13</sup> As the movement gained membership and support, the union and its affiliates offered frequent sessions to provide assistance on immigration matters, bilingual aid in filling out legal documents, and educational workshops that helped immigrants become familiar with their rights.<sup>14</sup> This helped to build the courage of the workers and convince them that their situation was not inevitable; once they felt protected in their rights, they were determined to exercise them.

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<sup>11</sup> Selvin, Molly. "A Worker for Janitors, Guards." *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Loach, Ken. *Bread and Roses*. Drama, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Bernstein, Harry. "While Building Owners' Profits Soar, Janitors Get Poorer," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Ramsay, Tom. "How Did We Win? A History of the Justice for Janitors Organizing Campaign in Downtown Los Angeles," *The Voice of Local 399*. April 1991, Volume 15, No. 2 edition, UCLA Special Collections, SEIU USWW Records, Box 7, Folder 4.

Justice for Janitors engaged the workers in the movement in several ways. At the beginning of each campaign, the organizers identified leaders within each building and asked them to encourage other workers to join the movement. The campaign would then proceed by using brash public dramas, government intervention, and strike tactics to pressure the cleaning contractors to sign union contracts. In a unique twist, the janitors were crucially involved at every step of the process; the larger the movement grew, the harder their demands were to ignore.

Using these tactics, Justice for Janitors successfully brought the downtown janitors under a union-friendly master agreement in 1989. The efforts in the downtown area were a practice of trial and error that gave Local 399 organizers the skills they needed to successfully take on larger companies. So in late 1989, the movement turned its sights to the non-union Century City battleground. The Century City campaign is an exceptional example of the militant strategies the union used to pressure the contractors and building owners into going union.

### **THE CENTURY CITY CAMPAIGN**

Century City is a small but affluent neighborhood on the West Side of Los Angeles. Home to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Studios and the star of several infamous Fox Studios motion pictures, including the futuristic 1972 film *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, the city attracts the crème-de-la-crème of Los Angeles. During the day, the hosts of glittering high-rise office buildings and the Century City Shopping Mall attract businesspeople and consumers from all over Los Angeles.

Upon learning that International Service Systems (ISS), at the time the largest multi-national building service and cleaning company in the world, had entered the Los Angeles

market by buying out several Century City-based contractors, and at the bequest of janitors who had seen the successes of the downtown campaign, the Justice for Janitors movement turned its attention toward the West Side of Los Angeles. ISS had contracts to clean eleven of thirteen office buildings in the neighborhood, all of which were owned by JMB Realty. The company operated on union contracts everywhere in California, except Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup> “We chose ISS because they were the biggest and the richest,” asserted Local 399 President Jim Zellers. “We knew they had over two thousand janitors working for them, with a strong presence in Century City.”<sup>16</sup>

After moving to Century City, organizers took the initial steps of increasing membership and community awareness, educating janitors about their rights, and conducting preliminary meetings with the contractor and building owners. After gaining the support of one building’s workers, organizers sent janitors to spread the word and recruit within the other buildings.<sup>17</sup> One of the union’s strongest and most frequently used actions in Century City was to declare strikes based on unfair labor practices, temporarily halting the cleaning of the buildings, and then raise hell, making it difficult to conduct business as usual with the added complications of lawsuits, distractions, and public dramas.

Janitors started small in this project with a series of one day walkout strikes, which served to build their movement, strength, and courage. The strikers and large groups of community supporters held rallies, sit-ins, and marches almost daily at the target buildings. They distributed flyers denouncing the contractors or building owners and raised awareness of the

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<sup>15</sup> “Century City Demonstration Ends in Police Trap, Police Violence,” *Voice of Local 399*, June 1990, Volume 14, No. 6 edition. UCLA Special Collections, SEIU USWW Records, Box 7, Folder 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsay, Tom. “How Did We Win? A History of the Justice for Janitors Organizing Campaign in Downtown Los Angeles.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

plight of the janitors to passerby. Meanwhile, Local 399 officials held countless meetings with building managers and crew supervisors to demand better conditions for workers.

During each strike, the campaign organized public dramas intended to increase awareness of the movement, harass business owners, and build public support. They began by demonstrating along Santa Monica and Olympic Boulevards with signs reading “Century City: Luxury by Day, Sweatshop by Night,” and “ISS + JMB Equals Poverty for Janitors.” In one particularly creative action, the union marched through the city and encouraged supporters to bring their garbage and dump it at Century City, or later, in a nation-wide campaign, to mail it directly them to the owners of the buildings.<sup>18</sup> These tactics publicly embarrassed select individuals in the industry while making daily business difficult for business tenants.

The Justice for Janitors campaign was by now widely known for its brash public scenes in the Century City area. In December of 1989, when a janitor informed Jono Shaffer that one Century City office manager refused to issue gloves but demanded that his workers use harsh chemicals, he dressed up as Santa Claus and visited the building manager to present him with a gift of rubber gloves, imprinted with the Justice for Janitors logo.<sup>19</sup> “The only fair way for workers to organize is to do it in public, take action and engage in demonstrations,” Shaffer said.<sup>20</sup>

As the strikers grew in number and their supporters became more vocal, police presence at the public events increased. The LAPD eventually set up a command post in Century City, one of the safest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. In response, Local 399 conducted frequent training

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<sup>18</sup> “399 Justice for Janitors Campaign Strikes Century City: A Brief History from the Early Days to the Police ‘Riot’ on June 15,” *The Voice of Local 399*, June 1990, Volume 14, No. 6 edition, UCLA Special Collections, SEIU USWW Records, Box 7, Folder 14.

<sup>19</sup> “Santa Knows When You Are Naughty to Janitors!” SEIU 399, accessed February 22, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Selvin, “A Worker for Janitors, Guards.”

to ensure that the strikers were educated about their right to peaceful assembly and the legalities associated with protesting. Civil disobedience training prepared the demonstrators to submit to arrest and respond non-violently to provocation by the police, in anticipation of resistance from law enforcement.<sup>21</sup> Jim Zellers, President of Local 399, was determined to “follow the examples of the non-violent civil disobedience of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We reject the notion that the ‘bottom line’ is more important than people. And we are willing to make that statement in actions as well as in words.”<sup>22</sup>

Police tolerated the actions of the strikers, but cleaning contractor ISS responded aggressively to workers returning from short periods of strike leave. One young man was placed on heavy work duty, in spite of doctor’s orders, after receiving a knife wound in a mugging. His supervisor ignored the doctor’s note and the young man’s wound reopened, sending him to the hospital.<sup>23</sup>

The Janitors brought the hammer down on ISS in mid-1990 when they sparked several strikes protesting unfair labor practices in the high-rise office buildings on Century Park East. On May 30<sup>th</sup>, a large group of 127 Century City janitors walked out from all of the ISS-cleaned buildings in Century City. Local 399 proclaimed that the strike would last until ISS obeys the law and “puts employees before its own greed,”<sup>24</sup> citing dozens of unfair labor practices and violations of California Health and Safety laws. The campaign continued with its public efforts, organizing frequent marches with the workers on strike.

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<sup>21</sup> “Century City Janitors Vote General Strike, Civil Disobedience Planned.” *The ISS Organizing News*, n.d., Vol. 2, no. 5 edition, UCLA Special Collections, SEIU USWW Records.

<sup>22</sup> “399 Justice for Janitors Campaign Strikes Century City: A Brief History from the Early Days to the Police ‘Riot’ on June 15.”

<sup>23</sup> “ISS Strike Wave Hits Century City, ISS Retaliation Lands Worker in Hospital,” *The ISS Organizing News*, n.d., Vol. 2, No. 2 edition, UCLA Special Collections, SEIU USWW Records.

<sup>24</sup> Ramsay, Tom, “How Did We Win? A History of the Justice for Janitors Organizing Campaign in Downtown Los Angeles.”

Prior to a planned march on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Dave Stilwell, the Executive Vice-President of Local 399 and Bill Regan, head of the Justice for Janitor's campaign, met with representatives of the LAPD. Reagan stated that "the Department representatives assured us we had a perfect right to march and that as long as our protest was peaceful and orderly there would be no problem... We thought we had a clear understanding with the police as to our rights and responsibilities under the law. We intended to use our rights. We were prepared to be arrested if we broke the law."<sup>25</sup>

On that same day in June, the Justice for Janitors movement marched from Roxbury Park in Beverly Hills to a planned rally in Century City. The peaceful protestors, clad in red Justice for Janitors t-shirts, were met by over one hundred members of the LAPD in full riot gear as they attempted to cross into the Century City office park, a public space. The strikers remained on the sidewalks, having been previously advised in civil disobedience training that marchers had the absolute right to march on sidewalks and in crosswalks, so long as they did not block traffic.<sup>26</sup>

Jono Shaffer attempted to diffuse the tension with the police, asserting that "We have a legal right to walk on the sidewalk; we *are* going to march on the sidewalk."<sup>27</sup> Yet the police aggressively ordered the picketers to disperse. A bullhorn rang out, claiming the march was an illegal assembly.

In an act of planned and non-violent civil disobedience, the protestors moved into the street and sat down, preparing to be arrested. Among them was Ana Veliz, an ISS janitor from El Salvador who made \$4.25 an hour and worked two jobs to send money back to her mother and six children outside the United States. Veliz became pregnant in March of 1990 and fought with

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<sup>25</sup> "Century City Demonstration Ends in Police Trap, Police Violence."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Justice For Janitors: Si Se Puede*. Vol. 1. 2 vols., 2010.

Justice for Janitors for the fair wages and health insurance she would need to safely deliver and raise her child.<sup>28</sup>

Amidst the chaos, protestors were pushed from the sidewalks into the middle of the street. Police gave the protestors a thirty-second warning to disperse. In protest of the police action, some janitors and their supporters stayed on the street while others linked arms and attempted to submit to arrest. But the police charged and struck protestors, indiscriminately beating women, children, and the elderly. They swung their batons, driving the front ranks of picketers back, causing those who were hit to stumble and fall over the bodies of marchers who were not able to scramble away. The police knocked Jono Shaffer to the ground and beat him alongside the others. Pregnant Ana Veliz was clubbed three times in the back.<sup>29</sup>

Twenty-one janitors were hospitalized and forty-two were arrested, including Veliz. She complained of pain and began to vomit. Four days later, a physician told her she had miscarried. The protestors were bewildered, shocked that the situation had become violent so quickly. One injured picketer declared that “I wasn’t stealing, I wasn’t carrying drugs or anything of that sort. I’m simply asking for an increase in salary. I’m not violating the law in any way... and the policemen hit me on my back and my hip, and they shoved me as though I were garbage.”<sup>30</sup>

The police conduct on the June 15<sup>th</sup> strike was widely criticized and spurred incredible public support from the people of Los Angeles and Mayor Tom Bradley, who invited representatives from Local 399 and the LAPD into his office and ordered a full investigation into police conduct during the riot. Bradley stood beside protestors a week later at Roxbury Park and

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<sup>28</sup> “The Sacrifice Behind the Speeches,’ Los Angeles Times, Sep 1, 1990. P. 2.” *Los Angeles Times, Sep 1, 1990. P. 2, September 1, 1990.*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Justice For Janitors: Si Se Puede.*

urged ISS to negotiate a fair contract with the janitors. Local 399 filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the LAPD on behalf of the injured janitors.

## **EPILOGUE**

The violence in Century City gave the Janitor's movement unprecedented public visibility and organizing leverage. Within two weeks, ISS signed Local 399's Master Building Service Agreement, leaving only three non-union buildings in the Century City office complex. The new agreement gave all ISS workers in Southern California an immediate raise to \$5.20 per hour, and promised that another raise to \$5.50 per hour along with health insurance would take place within a year. Victory rang through Century City as eight hundred janitors and many more strike supporters basked in the success of the Justice for Janitor's campaign with a demonstration in front of the ABC entertainment center.

SEIU Local 399's incredible success inspired janitors across Los Angeles and the United States to mobilize. By 1991, Bradford Building Maintenance, Century Cleaning, and Universal Cleaning signed agreements. SEIU Local 399 had nearly completed the drive to organize downtown and Century City contractors. When the campaign began in 1987, Los Angeles janitorial contractors were only 17% union and 83% non-union. By 1995, 81% of contractors were now union. The largest success was ISS, whose cooperation now ensured the union status of over three thousand janitors.

While the 1990s saw several more years of success throughout the city, instability is a natural characteristic of the union movement and requires that the local constantly reorganize the workforce. Wages increased, but remained modest overall. Contractors grew accustomed to working with the union and became stuck in the precedent for at least a decade, while

immigrants continued to flow into Los Angeles. The overall LA economy worsened somewhat during the 1990s, but the situation of the newly unionized janitors did not decline with it.<sup>31</sup> The true success lies in the heart of the movement and the people it empowered. The relationship of a person to their employer is only a fragment of who they are as a human being. The Justice for Janitors movement did not only result in a small, quantitative shift in wealth; it shattered a wall between the elite and the invisible. It brought dignity and pride to thousands of underrepresented individuals, and crushed the notion that some people's rights may be violated on because of their background, their socioeconomic status, or the color of their skin. The future of the Justice for Janitor's movement does not lie in the past; its impact lives on forever.

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<sup>31</sup> "Los Angeles in Focus: A Profile from Census 2000," *The Brookings Institution*, November 2003.

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