

# Union for child-care workers

*Vote means coverage for 50,000 providers*

By Barbara Rose  
Tribune staff reporter

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Thousands of Illinois child-care providers have voted to join a union, ending a nearly decade-long organizing campaign. They handed a significant victory to the Service Employees International Union, an organization with growing political clout.

The election results, announced Thursday by SEIU's Local 880, extend collective bargaining rights to nearly 50,000 mostly female workers who offer government-subsidized child care in their homes.

The workers, many of whom earn as little as \$9.48 per child per day, care for about 200,000 children from low- and moderate-income families under a state-run program funded by state and federal grants.

"We're going to press for the same issues we've been fighting for the last 9 1/2 years—quality child care, better wages and health care," said Angenita Tanner, 40, a Local 880 shop steward who operates "Grandma's House" out of her South Side apartment.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich signed an order in February opening the door for workers like Tanner to bargain with the state through a union, even though they are not state employees.

His order paved the way for the election, which started with a ballot vote mailed March 16, following a brief but bitter fight for organizing rights between SEIU and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees after AFSCME launched a competing campaign.

The AFL-CIO ended the dispute by supporting SEIU, ruling that the service union had been organizing home child-care workers since 1996 and actively sought Blagojevich's commitment when he was a candidate.

SEIU's contributions to his campaign totaled more than \$800,000.

Child-care providers are the second group of state contractors for whom the SEIU has won bargaining rights with Blagojevich's help. The union reached a contract with the state two years ago covering about 20,000 home health-care workers, securing a 34 percent pay increase.

Robert Bruno, a labor expert with the Chicago Labor Education Program of the University of Illinois, said the SEIU, "has become a premier political player in the state of Illinois."

"There's real implications because this is a union that's very focused on progressive public policy and is addressing some of the most pressing social problems in the country—education, housing, health care," Bruno said. "They're not only politically very influential

but the kinds of policies they'll be focused on will have a lot to do with redistributing wealth and income to those" at the bottom of the economic ladder.

The activist 1.8 million member union, with 106,000 members in Illinois not counting the child-care workers, represents workers such as janitors and nursing-home aides.

In Local 880's election, about 16,700 of the state's 49,000 child-care workers mailed in ballots, SEIU officials said. Of those who cast ballots, more than 80 percent voted to join SEIU. The remainder voted for AFSCME or no union. The AFSCME ballots were disqualified because of the AFL-CIO ruling.

The vote gives SEIU the right to bargain for all 49,000 workers, whether they join or not.

The union's next step is to negotiate a contract while continuing to lobby lawmakers for more child-care funding-a formidable hurdle given state budget constraints.

Thomas Green, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Human Services, said the state's \$642 million annual child-care budget is slated to stay the same next year.

Keith Kelleher, Local 880's chief organizer, said the union is "encouraged by the meetings we're having with the state legislators."

Two years ago when the union negotiated a rate increase for home health-care workers, the state faced a \$2.5 billion deficit, Kelleher said.

"We think we can do the same thing today" for child-care workers, he said. "There's always money problems. We think it's not a matter of money, it's a matter of priorities."

The election results were announced at a press conference punctuated by cheers from child-care workers from Illinois and six other states.

SEIU's strategy is to gain sufficient market share in targeted occupations to improve working conditions and lift wages for the lowest-paid workers.

"Collective bargaining rights give these workers the strength to pull themselves up," Tom Balanoff, president of SEIU's Illinois State Council, said in a telephone interview while driving to Springfield to meet with Senate President Emil Jones and attend a dinner with Blagojevich.

The union has turned "unstable high-turnover jobs into real jobs, and that same wave is going to happen for child-care workers, too," said Anna Burger, SEIU secretary treasurer.

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