

Why I'm with the union

By Maydad Cohen - Wednesday May 28 2008

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The May 16 Jewish Advocate featured on its cover a picture of members of the Jewish Labor Committee and Workmen's Circle supporting 1199SEIU's (Service Employees International Union) May 8 rally in support of hospital workers trying to organize a union at their hospital.



I was one of those photographed. The caption under the photo was "We're sticking with the union." I'm writing now to tell you why I am in support of the Union and these workers.

My parents always taught me to respect all workers. Our religion commands us to treat workers with dignity and respect. Our Jewish history tells us of immigrant Jews who helped shape the labor movement in the U.S. For these reasons I've dedicated my life to fighting for the rights of workers.

The campaign to support health care workers in Boston is about dignity and respect for hospital workers, who toil daily as lab technicians, food service workers, or custodians. They play an integral role in making patients comfortable and in providing the great patient care we have all come to expect in Boston hospitals.

These very workers, however, often do not make enough money to support their families. Many of them cannot even afford to send their own family members to the very hospitals in which they are employed. How does treating workers in such a fashion demonstrate dignity and respect? This campaign is also about seeking a fair election, free from coercion and intimidation from the hospitals. Studies have consistently shown that a majority of employees would, if given the opportunity, join a union. Not surprisingly, when employers are allowed to intimidate and spread fear or misinformation among workers, the workers' ability to organize is considerably hindered. After all, the hospitals have instant access to their employees and hold their livelihood in their hands. Many companies use this leverage to instill fear into workers and intimidate workers into voting against a union. In light of this practice, 1199SEIU is merely seeking a promise by the hospital for true neutrality.

For example, the union seeks an agreement with the hospitals which would allow workers to openly discuss the union drive and provide the union with equal access to the employees to discuss unionization. The fact that the hospitals have so far rejected such reasonable offers leads one to question their motives for doing so.

This is especially true in light of the fact that other Boston hospitals have agreed to similar terms. Let the workers decide for themselves whether they choose to be organized and represented by the union and let them choose free from employer coercion and intimidation. As a member of the Jewish Labor Committee, therefore, I firmly support and stand with these hospital workers. These workers have my respect for the work they perform and the vital role they play in providing patient care.

They now deserve dignity at work, good wages, retirement benefits and the right to be represented by a union of their choosing. For all these reasons, and many more, I am happy to state that I'll be sticking with the union for a long time to come.

Maydad Cohen is an attorney and member of the New England Jewish Labor Committee.