

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By Jim Mangia and Bob Schoonover

Miguel Chaves works at a health care clinic in Compton.

While tens of thousands of working Americans are in the streets in Madison, Wisconsin battling to keep basic rights as Gov. Scott Walker attempts to usurp collective bargaining and rollback benefits and wages for fire fighters, police officers, teachers, health care workers and others, Chaves has been working with his boss to make his job and the care he provides better.

Here in Los Angeles, employees like Chaves through their union and in partnership with one of the largest nonprofit community health centers are a critical ingredient for positive change.

Is this America's post-modern "tale of two cities?"

The new partnership between St. John's Well Child and Family Center and SEIU Local 721, the union that represents clinic workers and thousands of other Southern California workers, will dramatically improve the quality of patient care, enhance worker morale and ensure the stability and growth of the organization. Our two groups are hammering out the antidote to unchecked corporate influence that is lessening the quality of life for working Americans and their families. We are creating the partnership and the focus that America needs to improve the experience of workers and the quality of goods and services we produce and provide. It's our future.

St. John's Well Child and Family Center is a network of a dozen federally qualified health centers located in the poorest neighborhoods of South Los Angeles. We provide medical, dental and mental health services to more than 125,000 patient visits each year. SEIU, one of the largest unions in the country, is committed to uniting community health care workers, to improving the lives of working people and increasing access to quality patient care.

To St. John's, an organization steeped in providing the highest quality medical care to L.A. poorest children and families, it seemed right to create a formal partnership with clinic employees. To SEIU and its membership, it seemed necessary to use our collective strength to promote quality health care and a stronger voice for workers.

At first there were concerns on both sides. Would we be able to create a positive relationship rather than an adversarial one like we are seeing in Wisconsin? Would a union contract create animosity in the workplace? Would management really listen to its employees?

Clinic leadership and the Board of Directors of St. John's decided to work with the union and proceed "shoulder-to-shoulder" in an innovative unionization process. SEIU worked in the open and in the end an overwhelming majority of employees joined the union. Frontline healthcare workers, who are those most engaged in providing the direct patient care to tens of thousands of families in need, saw the benefit to our patients of an empowered and enhanced workforce.

For example, Miguel Chaves, who is a case worker at the clinic, now has a clear path to work with management to ensure that the clinic is prepared for the changes new health care reform laws will

bring. Chaves, for one, is eager to take advantage of his new contract's provisions for education and training. "Training and new skills will help us make sure we're ready for health care reform before it happens, instead of trying to adapt later on," he said.

Patient "right-to-health" committees serve to build a unique alliance where the patients can inform healthcare workers of what their needs and desires are as well. In this model there is one city, not two, united to improve health outcomes.

While Gov. Walker is leading the charge to expand corporate tax breaks and giveaways almost equal to the concessions he is seeking to extract from public employees and Americans for Prosperity, a front group for the billionaire Koch brothers, is working behind the scenes to fund and to foment the destruction of worker rights in Wisconsin; in LA our unique partnership at a South Los Angeles clinic is a model for fairness and social harmony across America.

While some around the country seek to divide Americans once again by class and work, St. John's stands proud as a union shop. With joint employee/management quality of care committees a key part of the union contract we know healthcare services will improve for our county's most vulnerable residents.

Jim Mangia is President & CEO of St. John's Well Child and Family Center.

Bob Schoonover is the president of SEIU Local 721, which represents 80,000 workers in Southern California.