Spotlight on...

Julie Butcher
General Manager,
Service Employees
International Union
Local 347

Leader of the City's Biggest Union Sees
Job Security in Employee Efficiency and
Management Flexibility

By ROBERT GREENE
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES COUNTY employees ready their picket signs for a series of strikes this week, it's worth remembering that many of their counterparts who work for the City of Los Angeles signed off on a new four-year contract in April with little angst or fanfare.

There was no saber-rattling on either side when contract negotiations were opened—and quickly concluded—between the city and the approximately 6,000 blue-collar workers represented by Service Employees International Union Local 347.

"In terms of our actual negotiations, it was extraordinarily short," city negotiator Mario Mendoza says. "Much less traumatic than it usually is."

For the surprising smoothness of the process Mendoza credits Local 347 General Manager Julie Butcher, 41, a union leader against whom he has faced off many times. Butcher, who acknowledges that the city has always been a "pretty good employer," arrived on the local scene some nine years ago and established a reputation as somewhat of a firebrand, but Mendoza sees a shift in her approach—especially after she succeeded the ailing David Trowbridge as GM earlier this year.

"Julie was so well-in-tuned to what is and isn't possible, and I don't think she wanted to waste time" in the April contract talks, Mendoza says.

Paul Cauley, the assistant city administrative officer, notes that negotiations are still open with many of the city's nearly 50 bargaining units but that Butcher's union quickly recognized what the city could and couldn't do.

"I would say that 347 was outstanding in understanding where we're trying to get to," Cauley says. "They were the first to come in and sign. They were the bellwethers and leaders."

Butcher's enlightened view is rare in today's world of relentless union-management conflict.

Being first in line to agree to a contract and getting labeled "realistic" by management are not the traditional signals of longevity in the post of general manager of a labor union.

Does Homework

But people who know Butcher say she accepts the best deals for her members long before she or her representatives sit down at the bargaining table. She does her homework, one City Hall official notes, lobbying the City Council to bolster her position and poring over budget and finance documents to know just what the city can and can't offer.

Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg, who as chair of the council's Personnel Committee works closely with the union leader, says Butcher is "absolutely energetic" and "very, very bright."

Butcher also excels at personal relations. One long-time observer of the city labor scene calls the union leader "a regular kind of person" who can shift her conversation easily from cost-of-living indexes to youth soccer (she coaches her son's team and has a shelf full of awards for baseball and basketball coaching as well) or literature (she favors Frost and Faulkner).

But part of what makes Butcher an unusual labor leader is her fascination with management.

"I've been trying to figure out how things work because—I am one!" she jokes, looking a touch bemused to find herself heading a growing union that represents not just Los Angeles workers, but employees at the Los Angeles Unified School District and more than a dozen smaller cities in the region.

"I try to understand how to help [managers] be better at it," Butcher says. "I learned management from watching what the people that I deal with do wrong. After all, we spend all our time fighting management doing stupid things."

One of the things Butcher calls the stupidest—then-mayoral candidate Richard Riordan's vow to privatize city services—has transformed the union. Butcher says the privatization threat helped move Local 347 beyond what some labor leaders affectionately call a "mom-and-pop shop" to become a viable player in providing vital city services.

The effect was so profound Butcher says she has been tempted to send the mayor flowers.

Managers that Butcher and company had been fighting with for years suddenly realized they were working together to save their jobs.

Eighth Vote

The union—under Trowbridge's stewardship, but with Butcher offering key support—put together a march and rally that featured members of the City Council. Each council member that walked into Bethany Baptist Church to join the January 1994 rally represented a vote against Riordan privatization, and when the eighth vote walked in—Butcher remembers it was Nate Holden, pulled out of a scuffle—union members knew they had won.

"It was a watershed moment for this union," Butcher says.

The direct threat—in this case, to the jobs of city sanitation workers—was over.

"But I think, then, that we very quickly realized that ultimately the only job security that we have is making ourselves indispensable," Butcher says. "If we didn't do a good job, it wouldn't matter if we had 5 or 15 votes on the City Council. We couldn't protect ourselves from that."

Goldberg began to press for a program she saw working in the private sector—joint labor-management committees working to save money by cutting through the rigidity of union—and corporate—culture.

The councilwoman says she expected Riordan to be receptive to an idea from the private sector. The struggle was to get the city's labor and management to con-

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Goldberg says, "Julie Butcher and David Trowbridge together were the first to say, 'This is something we need to do.' There was an amazing amount of energy Julie put into those committees, into reassuring [labor] that management knew this was a partnership and not just window dressing." Many city departments now bid against private contractors for city services, and often win, in part because they feel free to experiment. Goldberg cites a Westminster custodial and maintenance contract that SEIU 347 won because the workers came up with the idea of working outside of their classifications.

"That was part of their bid," Goldberg says. "Now unions just don't do that. But they realized that if everyone's goal—labor and management—is to provide the best service and keep the jobs, the classifications are less important!"

Butcher finds another creative victory in the retention of city golf courses, which were the subject of a privatization plan. In Council committee to plead—not against job cuts or contracting out, but against raising the sewer service charge.

"A year ago we were at each other's throats," Butcher says. "We're trying to save the people money."

"Wild Child"

Butcher was born in Long Island, an only child of a factory worker and a bookkeeper. She liked to think of herself as a "wild child," and recalls one day when she hoped to shock her parents by announcing that she was a communist.

Her forbearers were not really communists, perhaps, but Butcher notes that her grandparents were typical of a generation of Jews who emigrated from Eastern Europe—activists in favor of justice and against persecution wherever they saw it.

She first carried a picket sign at age 4 or 5 when her father organized a tenants union and rent strikers brought heat to their garden apartment project in a suburb of Newark. When he was 16, she says, that was the first saw the power of people getting together to make a difference in their lives. About 500 families withheld their rent, and finally got heat and other services they believed apartment dwellers ought to be able to have.

She went to Rutgers University, majored in English and got a teaching credential to teach English at a junior college. She then got a master's degree in English at the University of California.

Butcher was never actually a union member. But in the early 1970s she was a Citizens Action League staff, and got fired for being a committee woman.

In retrospect, she jokes, maybe she should have gone on a hunger strike and come up with the different. But she did not challenge the firing because she did not want to damage the organization. "We had won a battle to bring together the communists, that were fighting for the communities, weren't the ones who fired me," she comments. "It was management. So I got fired. But everybody else got a union."

For several years Butcher went up and down California organizing and activist jobs. Married briefly, she lived in San Francisco, married again eight years ago and has a second son.

She started at SEIU in 1988. "It took," Butcher says. "It felt like I was home."

Top Managers

She acknowledges that she has grown in her view of labor relations. She didn't know how good city workers had it until she worked with some top managers, she says, until they were gone. She cites an example of Ingemar Biagi, who recently retired from the Bureau of Sanitation, and Robert Yates, who retired from the Department of Transportation.

"Bob Yates," she says, shaking her head. "He should have been around while I was around. I should have watched and learned more from him. But he was such a good manager I didn't notice what he was doing." When Yates headed the Parking Enforcement Bureau, Butcher battled with him over what she said was his attempt to get parking ticket write-offs. Now, she says, the war is on.

Well, the fact is that the city doesn't have enough money to give away, she says. "We should have been trying to get the workers to recognize that money for the city is in itself not a bad thing to do. It helps fund the parks and the cops. And if workers can feel that what they're doing is contributing to having libraries, that's not a bad thing."

"Butcher is not a different person," Butcher says. It has taken a long time for workers to be willing to talk about numbers and produce the standard.

"It was really very terrifying, to us, and to management as well," she says. "They can feel that terror now, she says, by facing the reality of the city budget. "And by working together."