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## LABOR

### Unite Here, Workers United in heated dispute over members

#### Claims of member-raiding attempts between the unions include leafleting, home visits and, court documents say, 'coercive interrogation techniques.'

By Patrick J. McDonnell

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Carmen Padron, a commercial laundry worker in Pomona, said a rival union tried to persuade her to abandon her longtime local. "They should be organizing workers who don't have a union, not harassing us," Padron said.

George Ibarra, a hotel worker in Texas, said an organizing drive in San Antonio collapsed when a competing union swooped in and made a deal with management. "That was completely underhanded," Ibarra said.

The two incidents are among numerous episodes in a vicious civil war that is roiling the U.S. labor movement and diverting attention from its core goals -- better

contracts for workers, new organizing drives and a far-reaching political agenda in Washington.

Occurring mostly below the public radar, the ferocious battle ripped apart the union known as Unite Here, with tens of thousands of workers nationwide, and assumed a tumultuous center stage in labor circles. Each side in the schism has accused the other of trying to raid its ranks and steal members.

The dispute has cost organized labor millions of dollars to fight and dealt pleased employers

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an upper hand as union shops battle each other. A broad swath of contested terrain ranges from commercial laundries in California to school cafeterias in Philadelphia.

The war has featured a blitzkrieg of leafleting, prerecorded phone calls, direct mailers, home visits and, according to court papers, "coercive interrogation techniques" used to strong-arm members. Both sides have alleged threats, harassment, lockouts, misappropriated funds and back-room deals with employers.

"It's shameful," said Bruce Raynor, a major protagonist and president of Workers United, the dissident faction that broke away this year from Unite Here. "Companies are taking advantage of it, and workers are absolutely being hurt by it. It turns my stomach."

The infighting rages as a slumping economy batters working families and union allies control the White House and Congress, creating labor's most propitious political moment in decades.

"We keep hearing from the Obama administration that it's easier to listen to one voice," said Harley Shaiken, a labor specialist at UC Berkeley.

Unite Here's Local 11 in Los Angeles has been at the front lines of the fight, dispatching organizers to Pennsylvania, Texas and Arizona to ward off what it calls incursions from Workers United.

Loyalists of Unite Here, which claims some 260,000 members nationwide, call the split an illegal power grab orchestrated by the giant Service Employees International Union. The secessionist Workers United bloc, which said it represents some 130,000 workers -- a number Unite Here disputes -- has now affiliated with the SEIU.

"This is a conscious effort by SEIU to hijack our members, our jurisdiction and our assets," said Unite Here's president, John W. Wilhelm, who is known for his organizing efforts among casino employees in Las Vegas. "They've launched an attack on our membership totally unprecedented in American labor history."

Wilhelm has gone so far as to advise employers to deposit union dues into escrow accounts, warning that to do otherwise could be illegal. Many employers have done so, depriving locals of operating funds.

SEIU President Andy Stern has repeatedly denied any effort to steal members or challenge jurisdictions.

"SEIU is not interested in raiding Unite Here members," Stern declared in calling for a "cease-fire" in the struggle.

But Unite Here stalwarts reject Stern's protestations of innocence.

"SEIU was trying to take our local away," said Emily Pridgen, a cafeteria employee and Unite

Here loyalist in Philadelphia, where Unite Here emerged victorious last month in a special vote among school-lunch workers whose representation was disputed.

The high-stakes battle generally centers on the right to represent service workers, many of whom are immigrants earning about \$10 to \$12 an hour. But a lot of assets are also in play.

Both sides claim a bevy of contested holdings, including prime Manhattan real estate, considerable cash reserves and a majority stake in Amalgamated Bank in New York, which has more than \$4 billion in assets. The right to the treasury is playing out in federal court in New York.

Unite Here was created in 2004 with a much-ballyhooed merger of Unite, a New York-based union representing mostly textile, clothing, apparel and commercial laundry workers, with Here, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union.

Labor advocates acclaimed the merger as an ideal marriage: a union of Here's organizing skills with Unite's substantial bankroll. Today's clash pits Unite and Here sides against each other.

Unite, the successor of storied unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, arose from textile and apparel industries that were headed offshore amid galloping globalization. Here was aggressively pursuing workers in the dynamic hospitality and gaming sectors.

By all accounts, the two groups' diverse cultures did not mesh well.

"It was a good concept," said Edgar Romney, secretary treasurer of Workers United. "Unfortunately, it was a failed marriage."

In California, Workers United accused Local 11 of trying to steal laundry workers, bombarding them with fliers and telephone calls assailing the breakaway faction and visiting their homes.

"The bosses wanted to take advantage of the conflict and freeze our wages," said Padron, a Workers United loyalist who works at Braun Linen Service in Pomona.

Local 11 officials acknowledge contacting laundry workers but deny trying to raid them. Moreover, Local 11 officials said, secessionists tried to woo hotel, airport and other workers in California, Arizona and Texas.

At the new Grand Hyatt in San Antonio, Unite Here accuses Workers United of collaborating with management and helping to kill a union drive.

"We were in the process of negotiating with the contract and they [Workers United] stepped in, got in bed with the company and took it away from us," said George Ibarra, a Unite Here loyalist in Texas. "Now we're back at Step One."

Workers United denies aiding management and calls the San Antonio Hyatt another example of Unite Here's failure to organize workers. The secessionists accuse Unite Here of interfering with SEIU organizing campaigns targeting public sector and laundry workers in Arizona.

Scores of labor leaders, academics and others have publicly called on the two sides to reach a resolution, possibly with an arbitrator awarding a financial settlement and imposing "no raid" guarantees.

"There are ways it could get resolved," said Nelson Lichtenstein, who directs the Center for the Study of Work, Labor and Democracy at UC Santa Barbara. "It's diverting energy and resources and goodwill that unions could be using elsewhere."

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