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Secondly, our methodology has always been to tell workers up front: what might happen. We tell them they might get fired in this campaign. We say: “We will stick with you, our lawyers will support you, but the company could do it.” But, if people understand the risk people also want to improve their conditions. They have families and are working hard and they know it could be better, and they know there are risks. Southern workers don’t need to be told that there are risks; they have been brought up to know that there are risks. Yet they also believe things could be better and are willing to fight for that. So, you do see people stand up again and again, or else we wouldn’t be successful.

Q: UNITE was founded by the merger of the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union in 1995. Since then, there’s been a lot of organizing, but the total membership has fallen by about 60,000. Why do you think that has happened? And, as the new president, how do you hope to turn that around?

BR: The drop in membership is due to the dramatic drop in employment in the apparel and textile industries. Since NAFTA, the apparel industry has lost hundreds of thousands of jobs and so has the textile industry. Collectively, these industries have lost about 100,000 jobs in just this past year. That is going to have a tremendous impact on the union, as plants close and jobs move to Third World countries. So we have to organize enough to just break even, let alone to grow as a union. Having said that, 1999 was the first time in modern history that we reversed the decline in the union. That year we broke even -- quite an accomplishment thanks to new successes in organizing. And then in 2000 we did so again. So, for two years we stabilized our membership, organizing 15,000 to 18,000 new members a year. Our goal this year is to organize enough to grow. We are also fighting to preserve apparel jobs in the United States and Canada; we are the number one union in both countries. We’re growing in Canada, where the apparel industry is not under the same pressure as in the U.S.

The ways we are fighting to preserve jobs, in addition to the anti-sweatshop campaign, include the “Uniform Campaign:” We are calling upon unions and governments to buy uniforms produced under decent conditions. Often that means in domestic shops. We are calling on governments to buy domestically, and we think that is legitimate. The City of New York should support garment workers in New York and not feel the need to go to Bangladesh for uniforms. We recognize that there is going to continue to be shrinkage in this industry. But we are organizing aggressively to overcome that shrinkage. We showed slight growth in 2000, and in 2001 we surpassed the previous year’s organizing numbers by August. This is harder than for many unions, because of the shrinkage of our industry.

Q: What share of UNITE’s budget now goes to organizing?

BR: We now spend about 32% of our budget to organizing. UNITE’s goal is to move that up to 50%. That means making choices, because UNITE can’t do everything. We have to make choices among the good things that we do in order to put more resources into organizing. You can’t organize without resources. We are increasing the number of organizers and our efforts at organizing, and that’s an expensive proposition.

Q: Why has UNITE increasingly been organizing in non

BR: Well, we have a philosophy about this. In all my years organizing in the South, we didn't compete with other unions. We think there are lots of unorganized workers. We believe, for instance, that laundry workers belong in UNITE, because we think we can do the most for them and we are committed to that industry. And there is something important about bargaining power in an industry. While it might seem fine for a hospital worker to be in, say, the steelworkers' union, the fact is that a hospital worker is better off in SEIU than in any other union. That's because it's their focus and they have leverage with national hospital chains to do more for those workers. We believe that is true in laundries and in certain other industries. We are focusing on industries where we can effectively represent workers.

In the case of greengrocers, the UFCW represents supermarket workers and had a serious interest in pursuing that campaign. We felt that the workers would benefit from one union instead of two competing. So we worked out an arrangement with them. By the same token, we already represented about 50 Duane Reade drug stores and the UFCW was talking to some workers. So, while it's a trade, I think that it's a good understanding. The word trade may connote some kind of "deal," but there's no "deal." As long as UFCW is committed to those workers, they will be better off in that union. As long as we are committed to representing Duane Reade and other retail workers in New York, as we are, then those workers will be better off in UNITE -- all the

understanding that those workers are economic, if not political, refugees. They came here to earn a decent living and they also expect to be treated right. Many of them came here under terrible adversity, whether they're Mexicans or Central Americans who crossed the border, or Chinese who came by boat. They paid a terrible price to get here and they want a taste of America. So organizing them means understanding them and their culture and speaking their language and making them feel welcome in our union. I addressed a shop steward's class in White Plains last Saturday. There were 25 stewards in the class, of whom 21 were born outside the U.S. in 11 different countries, no more than 4 from the same country. Our two biggest victories in Ontario, Canada this year were in shops that were mostly Punjabi Indians. That's a group that feels very welcome in our union. Last year, our biggest victory was in French Canada, and those workers were Tamils, the ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. We are a union that always related to immigrant groups. We are the first union in America that ever had an immigration department. We have always been outspoken in favor of amnesty and fair treatment for immigrant workers.

Q: Part of that history has been bound up with UNITE's commitment to what's been called "social unionism," in contrast to the older narrower wage-benefit focus of "business unionism." In New York City, during the postwar housing crisis when lots of people left for the suburbs, the ILGWU sponsored major housing complexes like the Hillman Houses on the Lower East Side, the East River Houses, the Penn South Houses that President Kennedy opened some 40 years ago. And didn't your union have the first union health center in America?

BR: Yes, and we still operate a number of union health centers including a fine one in New York where my two sons are getting their health care. My family goes to the clinic because I believe it's the finest health care in New York, and if it's good enough for our members then it's good enough for union officials. We have our own nonprofit insurance company. We have literally hundreds of citizenship classes that we carry on throughout the United States and Canada. We have English as a Sec

