Librarians and Working Families: Bridging the Information Divide

Gaye Williams

ABSTRACT

Access to websites, e-mail, and other Internet technology is the biggest barrier that working people face to using the Internet as a vehicle to improve their lives.

Libraries, with their computers wired for the Internet and available for free public use, and with the valuable human resource they offer—librarians to help visitors find their way—bring technology into our communities in friendly and useful ways for workers who will not soon gain access to the Internet in their homes or on their jobs.

Through unions, working people can collaborate to make their communities better for everyone. With access to the Internet, working people can reach out to public officials, nonprofit organizations, and the public, working together to improve the quality of public services and health care provided to the community. Libraries have what many working families need to carry out this vision of access, leading to community action and improvement.

INTRODUCTION

When the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, working people around the country faced some immediate challenges: how to find out the toll that the tragedy would take on people at work in those buildings and their families, and how to quickly get help to the survivors and the victims’ families.

More than 1,300 janitors, elevator operators, security guards, and public employees worked in the World Trade Center. Two window cleaners working outside on the 102nd floor of one of the towers were killed in the crash. Security guards and elevator operators were killed helping others escape
to safety. In all, sixty-one members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), along with many other working people, were killed when the World Trade Center towers were destroyed. More than 3,000 janitors and other workers lost their jobs and are expected to be displaced for a long period of time because their workplaces are gone. SEIU began efforts immediately to help the workers and their families survive the devastation.

While the news media replayed the crash footage and the burning buildings, working people were able to turn to the Internet for information and action. Through a network of Web sites called “Locals Online,” SEIU was able to quickly coordinate a response to September 11 and bring assistance to the thousands of working families affected by the tragedy.

SEIU is North America’s largest union, with 1.5 million members. SEIU is the largest health care employees union and the largest union of building service and security workers. More than 400,000 SEIU members provide public services as municipal, county, or state employees, or as providers of publicly funded services. SEIU has more than 250 local union affiliates and twenty-five state councils in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

SEIU locals work to unite working families to improve our communities. By uniting health care workers, patients, families, and patient-care advocacy groups, working people in SEIU have been changing the way that hospitals, nursing homes, and home health care services are delivered, to give caregivers and the people they serve a voice in providing quality care and the public funding needed to guarantee access to health care for all. Religious groups, nonprofit organizations, and supporters across the nation have joined with SEIU’s Justice for Janitors movement to win better pay, health care, and training programs that provide more good jobs and an improved standard of living for our communities.

In the aftermath of September 11, SEIU sprang into action to spread the word about the effects of the tragedy on workers and their families and to pull working families together to provide relief.

Using the innovative new Locals Online technology for creating Web sites, SEIU spread the word about victims and survivors and opened up a way for thousands to contribute to the union’s relief effort for workers and their families affected by the disaster. Because we could distribute Web content through Locals Online, within just a few days after the tragedy dozens of SEIU local union Web sites in communities throughout the U.S. displayed messages about how Web site visitors could assist the relief effort. Local union Web site visitors could use our secure online contribution pages to donate money to SEIU’s nonprofit relief fund. Over $2 million were raised in the first few months, and messages of support and grief were sent by e-mail from users of Locals Online Web sites.

Using the Locals Online Web network to enable working families to share information about the tragedy and send money to the victims, the
survivors, and their families, as well as to tell stories of the worker-heroes who helped others survive, proved a concept that SEIU had set in motion just over a year before. New technology, such as Web sites and e-mail, can help link working families and unite them to take action, if they can get access to the technology.

**How Can Libraries Help?**

Access to Web sites, e-mail, and other Internet technology is the biggest barrier that working people face to using the Internet as a vehicle to improve their lives.

Libraries, with their computers wired for the Internet and available free for public use, plus the valuable human resource they offer—librarians to help visitors find their way—bring technology into our communities in friendly and useful ways for workers who will not soon gain access to the Internet in their homes or on their jobs.

Through their unions, working people can work together to make their communities better for everyone. With access to the Internet, working people can reach out to public officials, to nonprofit organizations, and to the public they serve, and work together to improve the quality of the public services and health care provided to the community. Libraries have what many working families need to carry out this vision of access leading to community action and improvement.

**Access**

Since libraries are wired for the Internet, working people who do not have a computer at home or at work can use their neighborhood library to go online, set up a free e-mail account, and gain access to their local union Web site or any other Web site that meets their needs. Libraries can open the way to the Web by providing working people with the same access to Internet resources that others have.

**Training**

Librarians and other library professionals can help working people get more comfortable and skilled with using computers and surfing the World Wide Web.

**Resources for Families**

Many working people who are not sure what the Internet has to offer them do believe that their children need to know how to use computers and the Web to do well in school. Workers accustomed to seeing the library as a place for their kids to study can use it as a resource for their families to learn about and use computers.

**Education**

Libraries that offer adult education programs such as English as a Second Language, literacy classes, and classes to prepare for the high school
equivalency (GED) exam are an important resource that working people can use to get better jobs for themselves and their families.

All of these resources offer wonderful opportunities for unions and libraries to form partnerships for bridging the digital and information divide. Union leaders who are interested in having effective Web sites are potential partners with librarians who can help working people get online to use the Web, through access for those without computers, training, and encouragement to help them get over fears of using new technology.

Local union leaders who have been frustrated about how to reach workers who do not have access to e-mail and the Web at home or at work could spread information to workers on how to use their neighborhood library as a community technology center. The workers could go to the library, set up a free Web e-mail account, and use the local’s Web site to get information on action needed from their coworkers and community organizations.

When working people and their allies in the community are online, local unions can overcome many of the problems of spreading news: distributing leaflets that volunteers can use to spark conversation and to encourage involvement in efforts to improve delivery of public services; keeping lists of activists’ addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses up-to-date; and enabling workers to reach out to community groups who share their goals through those groups’ Web sites and e-mail networks.

Working together, libraries and working people can fulfill the promise of using new technology for effective communications.

How Can Unions Help?

At SEIU, President Andrew L. Stern was determined that working families would not be left behind by the exploding information age. As SEIU’s better-paid professional members buy computers and find their way online, they should be able to get information about their jobs and their union through the Internet. And the union should be able to help low-wage janitors, nursing-home workers, and school employees use the power of collective bargaining to bring computers, Internet service, and training on how to use these technologies into the homes of working people and their families. Collectively, working people should be able to bring the bright future promised by new technology into their homes and their families’ lives.

To carry out this vision, SEIU launched a program to help working families bridge the digital divide—by increasing access to computers, Internet service, and training—and to bridge the information divide, by providing local unions with the content, training, and technology to make resources for working people available online.

Using Web sites and e-mail to bring together working families and the communities we serve has proven to be an effective way to win changes and improvements that make life better for everyone.
The SEIU Locals Online program helps working families communicate and bridge the information divide by providing every local union with the ability to create an effective Web site that is free and easy to maintain. With training and content produced by SEIU, every local can have their own space on the Locals Online Web network. The goal: to use new technology to communicate more effectively with members, workers who are trying to form unions, the news media, and our allies in the public.

**What Is Locals Online?**

Locals Online is a program that provides training and Web content to SEIU local unions. It is also a software system designed to make it easy for SEIU local union staff or volunteers to set up and maintain a Web site.

Through Locals Online, all SEIU affiliates have access to:

- Model materials and communication tips.
- Best practices on message development and Web design.
- A database of SEIU contracts.
- A comprehensive online action center.
- Tools to make Web pages available in languages other than English.
- News from around the union.

**Why Locals Online?**

Locals Online was designed to solve problems that local unions confront when they try to use new technology—problems that are common to any nonprofit organization wrestling with this new medium.

A key goal of the program is to put the local in control of their Web site. Most local unions—like most nonprofit organizations—do not have Web-sawy staff and rely on free-lancers or firms to set up and maintain their Web sites.

Locals Online makes it easy to set up and maintain a Web site, without requiring any technical expertise or skills in graphic design. Working on a Locals Online Web site is within the ability of any computer-literate staff person who can do word processing.

The Locals Online software system aggregates the cost of development and enables SEIU to provide all of these Internet tools and hosting at no cost to the local union.

With Locals Online, the local's staff can share the work. Web site administration responsibilities can be easily shared with or transferred to other staff members who also do not need prior experience in Web development technology.

Locals Online takes content produced by the International union and distributes or “syndicates” it to the local union Web sites through a database system. Through an online “content library,” the Web site administrator can choose stock content to use as is or customize model content for the local union. Some content “streams,” or shows up automatically, at designated parts
of the site without requiring any intervention or work by the local Web site administrator. The local can take advantage of content that is fresh, interactive, and action-oriented—important considerations for effective Internet communications.

Locals Online provides interactive Internet tools designed to help locals use Web sites to reach out for public support to win living wages, health care, and the public resources to provide quality services.

Visitors to Locals Online Web sites can take national political action such as sending fax letters to members of Congress without leaving their local site. Locals Online equips locals with tools to assist in communications during legislative and other campaigns.

The bulk e-mail tool allows the local to build an e-mail list of visitors to the site and manage a sophisticated message system that can sort users by the kind of information they request and send them e-mail accordingly.

**Locals Online in Action**

Since the program was launched in 2000, dozens of locals have set up Web sites using the Locals Online technology.

Our national action Web pages have brought local Web site visitors information on how to take action on issues such as defeating a 2001 economic stimulus package that would have helped wealthy individuals and big corporations at the expense of working families. The national online action center has enabled users to demonstrate their support for issues such as reforming immigration laws to reward hardworking, taxpaying immigrants for their contributions to our economy and to communities with a chance to stay in this country as legal residents.

Coordinated actions that members have taken to win public support for quality public services have been publicized using Locals Online Web sites. Workers have used their local Web sites to share information with their coworkers and allies in the community to build support for the changes and improvements to services that they are trying to make on the job.

Workers who are interested in joining the union can read messages from workers who do the same kind of work about how having a union has helped them make improvements on the job, solve problems, and have a voice with their employers in how care is provided at their workplace.

Locals have posted job openings and online forms that enable members to sign up to volunteer for political action work.

To see these examples and more in action, visit the Locals Online Web sites of the locals from which they were taken: http://www.seiu250.org, http://www.seiu925.org, and http://www.seiu1199nw.org.

**Bridging the Digital Divide for Working Families**

SEIU locals have been helping to bridge the digital divide by increasing the access of working people and their families to new technology. Sim-
ply put, it will not do local unions much good to have state-of-the-art Web sites if working families are not online.

Many workers have gained access to new technology through the contract bargaining process. SEIU Local 32BJ in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey broke ground in 2000 by becoming the first union ever to bargain computers, Internet service, and training with employers, by adding $25 million to their training fund. Each of the 55,000 apartment doormen and other building service workers covered by the contract can get a new computer with Internet service and training on how to use it for only $200. The employers are also providing training that will help workers use computers and e-mail as part of their jobs, offering improved service to apartment residents. Having so many workers online helped the local communicate with them after September 11 and involve them in providing relief to members who were victims of the World Trade Center disaster.

SEIU Local 99 in Los Angeles bargained with the Los Angeles Unified School District for computers, Internet service, and training for school employees, who can put down $50 and pay back a $500 no-interest loan through payroll deduction. SEIU District 1199 in Ohio bargained with the state of Ohio to provide low-interest loans to buy computers and Internet service for 4,600 state employees with the interest paid by the employer.

But many workers who cannot afford a computer and have not attempted to bargain these benefits with their employers could get online through the growing network of community technology centers that offer public access to the Internet for free.

SEIU is participating in a program funded by the U.S. Department of Education called the America Connects Consortium (http://www.americaconnects.net) as part of the union’s effort to find ways to form partnerships to help working families bridge the digital and information divides.

Through our participation in America Connects and CTCnet, the Community Technology Center Network (http://www.ctcnet.org), we are exploring partnerships with community technology centers and SEIU locals and looking at how local unions with computer labs can plug into the resources provided by CTCnet.

Libraries, venerable public institutions that have been pioneers in providing access to new technology for everyone—really, the first community technology centers—have an important role to play in partnership with unions in helping working people and their families bridge the digital and information divide.

As unions find innovative ways to provide information and resources and ways to take action to improve our communities online, libraries and librarians can be valuable partners in increasing access to new technology, so that all working families can take advantage of the promise of the Internet and participate fully in this great information age.