

Winding Route Up Union's Ladder

Richard Berg seemed to have won a local's presidency election, despite having no job.

By Stephen Franklin | Tribune staff reporter

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He was out of work. So he took the \$7-an-hour janitor's job figuring that something else was sure to come along. This was back in 1988.

"There was no plan," Richard Berg explained with a broad smile and chuckle.

When he started working at the University of Chicago Hospitals, friends of his wife, a physician, would ask in wonder why a 28-year-old college graduate who had been a union organizer was mopping floors and cleaning hospital operating rooms.

"I'd tell them there's dignity in all work," he said.

And he would add that he had grown up among working class folks in Fond Du Lac, Wis., where his father, John, drove a truck and was a Teamsters Union member.

The work led to Berg being elected in 1990 a union steward, the bottom rung of leadership of Teamsters Union Local 743, once the Teamsters' largest local in the country.

"The union work energized me," he said. "I started looking at my job through the eyes of a steward. People would come to me with whatever injustices management had done to them. Many of the solutions could only be resolved collectively, and that was what I found exciting."

Last week Berg, running on a reform ticket, appeared to have pulled off an astonishing victory -- winning the local union's presidency despite being unemployed for nearly three years.

To pay for campaign costs Berg collected money at fundraisers and from individuals, and still has several wrinkled yellow sheets with the names of fellow janitors that lists their \$2 and \$3 donations.

But Local 743's attorney, William A. Widmer III, promptly sent a note to U.S. Labor Department officials, suggesting that the election results should be set aside. The ballots sent to members indicated that voting was to occur by Wednesday, Widmer said. But the ballots were counted on Monday. "The only fair solution is another election," Widmer said.

Election not yet certified

A Labor Department spokesman last week said that the election had not yet been certified because officials needed to look into the protest.

Still, Berg voiced confidence that he would be declared the winner as calls were flooding in from friends and well-wishers. He said both sides knew about the mistaken date on the ballots.

Last week Berg was mostly thinking about what he would do when he takes over in January. One of his first moves, he said, would be to slash the president's salary of \$159,000. "Who deserves that much money?" he asked.

Should Berg prevail he will be at the helm of a union local that has shrunk nearly in half, falling from a membership of more than 23,000 a decade or so ago to just over 12,000 today.

Over that time many of the local's members have lost their jobs due to consolidation; most work in hospitals, nursing homes, small factories, insurance offices and clerical jobs at several universities, among them Chicago State University, Governors State University and the University of Chicago.

Today many of Teamster Local 743's members are women, and they are mostly black or Latino or immigrants from nearly all parts of the world.

The local has also been no stranger to corruption.

In the past two decades two of the local's leaders stepped down amid allegations of union wrongdoing.

Berg saw the corruption as an invitation to step forward and up the union ladder. Active in the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a small dissident movement that has struggled to keep a foothold within the Teamsters, Berg ran for one of the top positions in the local in 1998 and 2001. He lost both times.

He ran again in 2004. Two days after the local began counting the ballots union officials called off the election, saying new balloting was needed because of voting problems.

Berg's side was slightly ahead in the first balloting, he said. By the second ballot it was clear they had lost by a wide margin.

Job loss leads to big decision

Soon afterward, Berg was fired from his janitor's job. He had missed work and blamed it on an injury. He supplied a note from his physician wife, he said. But the hospital challenged his excuse, and after a lengthy grievance procedure he lost that battle as well.

It came at a difficult time. His wife was out of work on and off because of illness. Most of their savings evaporated.

During this bleak time Berg decided that he would seek the top position at the local, and his team asked the Labor Department to look into the union election. Ultimately the government agreed that some things had gone wrong.

Finally, in a settlement reached in July with the local's officials, the Labor Department outlined several ways that the election was flawed. And the local agreed to let the federal agency oversee the new election, which Berg won by a 54-vote margin. All but one of his seven-person slate won. In September the U.S. attorney's office indicted the local's acting president and three former local employees on charges of trying to rig in their favor two elections in 2004.

"He's really stuck with the struggle over many obstacles. He has taken a lickin' and kept on ticking," said Ken Paff, head of the Detroit-based Teamsters for a Democratic Union. When and if Berg takes office he will be among only a "small handful" of leaders of locals who are TDU members, Paff added.

Last week Berg reminisced about how things somehow have fallen into place.

"I tried to climb up the career ladder and ran off a lot of cliffs," the Marquette University graduate said, and smiled again.

"Being a janitor is a hard job, and I wouldn't have predicted that I would have become president."

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