

Disgruntled union members say SEIU documents show waste

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Mariam Noujaim shook her head at the things her labor union had spent money on, from a \$300 meal at Sacramento's Kru restaurant to the Holiday Inn conference room where she spent four hours Tuesday reading some of the organization's financial records.

Noujaim, a state worker for 23 years, has emerged as one of the biggest detractors of Service Employees International Union Local 1000, a powerful force in California politics. She believes the union wastes money when it should be looking for ways to cut costs and lower dues that 95,000 members pay.

After two years of legal battles to force SEIU to open its books, Noujaim and fellow activist Lisa Garcia had half a day to rifle through credit card records and expenditure statements from 2009 and 2010. They were not allowed to take photos, make copies or take anyone else to view the documents.

"I'm trying to show we can achieve the same things we are doing for less than half of those dues," Noujaim said. "We don't need to travel every time and have the restaurant expenses we have."

Noujaim and Garcia emerged from the hotel conference room with spiral bound notebooks in hand, feeling as if they had just completed a high-stakes test. Noujaim wore her purple SEIU T-shirt, over which her eyeglasses dangled from her neck. Garcia likewise sported a purple SEIU shirt.

They rattled off hotel expenditures by SEIU Local 1000 leaders, at locales ranging from Dallas to Pebble Beach. They did not know why the trips occurred.

They pointed to restaurant expenditures from the lavish to fast food. Several times, Noujaim said rental of a private conference room rather than SEIU offices was a prime example of union waste.

"They splurge with our money, they travel with our money, they go all over," Noujaim said. "Why do they need to do all of this?"

The Bee was unable to confirm details reported by Noujaim. SEIU Local 1000 spokesman Jim Zamora said the union would not comment. He previously described Noujaim as a self-promoter and noted that she supported Republican Meg Whitman in the 2010 gubernatorial race.

Noujaim and Garcia are fiscal conservatives who back Republicans. But they insisted their motivation was less about SEIU backing Democrats than about how union dues are spent.

They did not find the juiciest details they were looking for – financial records showing whether SEIU leaders had taken furloughs at the same time state workers faced three unpaid days per month, equal to nearly a 14 percent salary reduction. Most of the records were financial ledgers they found hard to interpret, they said.

Noujaim said she wanted income statements for the top executives but could not find them in the three boxes she was allowed to review. As a union member, she plans to request another look at documents from other years with an accountant. She also wants to demand salary records for top union staff.

"I don't want to sound like I'm an enemy of the union," Noujaim said, "but I am an enemy of the SEIU officers."

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