

A just cause

As head of the Interfaith Committee of Worker Justice, Rabbi Laurie Coskey works with clergy of all stripes to defend the working poor. But with our festival of liberation approaching, is the Jewish community doing enough on its own?
by Micah Sachs

This Pesach, an estimated 300 religious Jews will descend upon San Diego for a luxurious 10-day/9-night vacation at the La Costa Resort and Spa. The kitchen will be fully koshered under the supervision of the Vaad Harabonim of San Diego. There will be two deluxe Seders, regular Daf Yomi services and entertainment by Yiddish comedians and Israeli singers. Don't forget the two 18-hole golf courses, four heated swimming pools and 75,000-square-foot spa, including a holistic health center founded by Deepak Chopra. Prices for the package start at \$2,799 per person (not including tax, service charges or tips).



You will be checked in by a gracious front desk attendant making under \$10 an hour. Your bed will be immaculately made and your bathroom will be kept spotless by a maid who has worked there for more than 10 years and is making around \$8.41 an hour. When you finish your Seder meal, your dish will be whisked away by a busser making minimum wage (\$6.75 an hour) to a team of expert dishwashers including a 30-year veteran making \$8.83 an hour. Luckily for them, their half-hour lunch is paid and medical benefits for themselves and their family are free.

But according to the managers of the resort, they can no longer afford these generous benefits. The managers recently made their "last, best and final offer" to the workers, which includes charging for medical care (anywhere from \$25-\$350/month) and making lunch unpaid. With a \$55 million upgrade of the facilities underway, how can they afford to maintain free benefits for 450 menial workers?

The resort has received the prestigious Four Diamond Award from AAA, and was named "Best Day Spa" in the San Diego Union-Tribune's 2002 reader's poll. It has won numerous accolades from Spa Finder magazine. According to its website, "La Costa Resort and Spa is a legendary resort known for its superb guest rooms and meeting space, nestled amidst the beautiful coastal climate of Carlsbad, California... Experience the ultimate in rest and relaxation... come to La Costa Resort and Spa." Who would have dreamed a resort so luxurious existed?

When considering the workers, Rabbi Laurie Coskey has her own question: "Would you ever dream this kind of thing existed here?"

Making the invisible visible

Rabbi Laurie Coskey is executive director of the Interfaith Committee of Worker Justice, a loose affiliation of a hundred clergymen and women from San Diego who lobby for extremely low-paid workers. They don't get involved in labor fights like last year's longshoremen strike - their interest is in the "invisible workers," the maids, the groundskeepers, the janitors, the dishwashers. These workers typically make little more than minimum wage (which comes out to \$14,040 a year), receive few or no benefits and never even consider vacation. Of course if they had vacation, where could they afford to go?

"It's really black and white," says Coskey. "You're not supposed to work full-time and live in poverty - there is no religious structure that makes that okay."

The Interfaith Committee first became involved with the labor dispute at the La Costa Resort and Spa in the spring of 2001. The union - the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Union Local 30 - came to the Interfaith Committee after several months of fruitless negotiations with the owners of the resort, KSL Corporation. KSL Corporation, a multibillion-dollar resort conglomerate, bought the hotel in late 2001 after the previous owner ran out of money.

The think tank that helps fund the committee, the Center on Policy Initiatives, investigated and verified the unions' claims, so the committee asked to meet with management. After their entreaties were met with indifference or outright rejection, the group began a series of protests. In August of 2002, Coskey and 10 other religious leaders arrived with a plate of bitter herbs to present management. The managers responded by sending out their head of security.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the union and management went nowhere, even though clergy sat in to provide moral witness. Sensing that a more public display was necessary, Coskey organized a protest for one of the resort's most visible days in history: Feb. 27, 2003, opening day of the Accenture Match Play World Championships, broadcast nation-wide on ESPN and ABC.

"We chose that day so we could embarrass them," says Coskey plainly.

In full religious regalia - collars, yarmulkes, and robes - 25 clergy (along with 30 interested citizens, and 40 La Costa workers) marched in singing, "We shall not be moved" and "Who will speak if we don't?" Jef Etchel, secretary-treasurer of HERE, Local 300, opened with a statement of the protest's purposes. The group offered original and adapted prayers from an array of religious traditions, including excerpts from Exodus and the Book of Micah.

Before the group had a chance to march out singing "We shall overcome," security from La Costa Resort and Spa disrupted the service and tried to kick them out. The group left with a guarantee of a future meeting with La Costa's head honcho, Ted Axe. That meeting, held the second week of March, left Coskey and the union disappointed. "He said essentially that they're fixing up the property and when attendance is better, the employees will do better," said Coskey. "They're basically not interested in being anything better than a middle-of-the-road hotel employer... which they're not."

Another day at the office

The series of events at La Costa Resort provide a microcosm of how the Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice operates. The group begins with a well-researched, unassailable case and, under Coskey's stewardship, does whatever is necessary to help the union achieve its goals. Sometimes it's discreet, backdoor meetings; other times, it's protests (or as Coskey calls it, "the politics of embarrassment.")

The committee was founded in 1998, based on a national model created the previous year. It essentially serves as the action arm of the Center on Policy Initiatives (founded 1997), which is the only local thinktank on economic issues not funded by business. But don't let that fool you. This is a bare-bones operation.

It has an annual budget of \$125,000. It has minimal staff: only Coskey and two members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps are paid for their work. But somehow, the committee has had significant success helping San Diego's working poor. The committee was central in securing better wages for the Hotel Del Coronado's service employees. Coskey, Levin and businessman Steve Cushman brokered a deal between the San Diego Union-Tribune and its pressmen, ending a decade-long impasse.

"I can't say we're successful as long as we have the problem before us," says Rev. Robert Ard, of Christ Church of San Diego, in National City. "But one of the basic rights of workers is to organize - in that sense, we've had some success. In the arena of raising public awareness, we've had success."

What the group lacks in funds and numbers it gains in credibility. Because the committee only takes on cases where conditions are researched and verified by the Center for Policy Initiatives, the clergy involved can be certain they're starting from the moral high ground. You can accuse union representatives of acting in self-interest, but it's hard to argue with a group of clergymen who have dedicated their lives to truth, love and justice. "Our first effort is to use moral persuasion to show clearly there is still right and wrong in the marketplace," says Rev. Wayne Riggs, of the Plymouth Congregation Church in North Park.

Sometimes their presence is simply practical. Says Coskey, "When we're around, workers don't get harassed or beat up."

Other times, it's psychological. "In some ways, it makes the employers - if they're at all religious people - feel guilty," says Nancy Browning, union rep for the La Costa employees.

Figuring out their tactics is often the hard part. While their protests garner the most publicity, their most effective work often goes on behind-the-scenes. Case-in-point: they helped negotiate a more just contract for downtown janitorial workers simply by being in the room with them. "The 14 subcontractors involved started by saying, 'We want to do the right thing for our employees. We agree that their work should be valued,'" recalls Coskey. "Great! So now the question is: Let's talk numbers. But had we not been in the room, had we not been there to say we're concerned about justice for these workers, it would have begun as a negotiation between adversaries."

One of the group's largest - and most frustrating - projects to date is the state of the janitorial staff at the seven Westfield Shoppingtowns in San Diego County (including the UTC mall).

The negotiations (if you can call them that) between the workers and their employers have gone on for years. The janitors get no holidays, no sick pay and no health insurance; if they attempt to organize, they are harassed or fired.

But Westfield, now the largest owner of shopping malls in the world, says it's a matter for the janitors' direct employer, the subcontractor Building One Service Solutions, to work out. Meanwhile, Building One says it doesn't get enough money from Westfield to offer its employees anything more.

The committee tried every tactic in the book. Coskey organized a series of prayer vigils, culminating in a march of more than 100 clergy on Dec. 18. Coskey and Rabbi Moshe Levin went to Los Angeles to meet with Westfield executives. And Levin exchanged letters directly to the head of Westfield, Frank Lowy, a 72-year-old Australian Orthodox Jew who's worth \$1.8 billion.

The janitors at Westfield are still not organized and grossly underpaid, while their direct employers - Building One - were driven to bankruptcy. But it looks like the new maintenance subcontractor may be friendlier to the workers' needs. "I think the battle is still going on, but it looks like it's being won," says Levin.

For that - and for many of the group's other successes since her arrival two years ago - members of the committee credit Coskey.

"They kept passing the buck, and she would not accept that," says Levin. "She's relentless."

One woman's role

"Relentless" is hardly the first impression you get when you meet Coskey. She is cheerful and friendly and possessed with an ever-present smile. She is quite pretty (especially for her age) and looks utterly innocent. You don't think "class warrior," you think "kindergarten teacher."

Coskey grew up during the '60s in a fairly religious home to a Sephardi mother and an Ashkenazi father (which was scandalous in those days). She recalls her mother driving children to a Head Start program, and her family was often geared toward the Jewish political issues of the day: supporting Israel, saving Soviet Jewry, etc.

At the same time, even as she climbed the ranks of the Reform rabbinate, she was never that geared into the kind of social justice she advocates now. She started a food bank at rabbinical school in Cincinnati, and helped start the Hunger Project at Congregation Beth Israel during her eight years working there ('85-'93). But this kind of work qualifies more under the auspices of "charity" than "social justice."

But a confluence of events made her concept of tikkun olam more politically oriented. While at Congregation Beth El, she heard Levin (one of the founders of the Interfaith Committee) speak about the downtown janitors' strike and the dismal conditions janitors worked under. "I wouldn't know anything about it if it weren't for him," she says.

Meanwhile, she saw the needs of the Hunger Project increase as time went on. "If you had said to me that 17 years later there would still be a need to feed people on Sunday mornings because they can't feed their families, I wouldn't have believed it," she says. "That sort of convinced me that the work we needed to do was more systemic, more advocacy for change."

So when she arrived at the Interfaith Committee a little less than two years ago, she didn't bring a lifelong passion for workers' rights. Which is, in some ways, appropriate. Much like the low-paid workers she serves, she took the \$45,000-a-year job because she needed work, not because it necessarily spoke to her deepest passions.

But since she took the reins (she's the first full-time executive director of the group), members say her stamp has been all over their work.

She demurs, saying that the other clergy are really the foundation of the group's work. After all, she's paid to do this - they're not.

Without her, the group would not have made inroads into many religious communities. Indeed, her positive, friendly demeanor is perhaps her greatest weapon when trying to persuade other clergy to join the cause.

"Finding Rabbi Coskey was the best thing that happened to the committee since I've been part of it," says Rev. Riggs. "Her ability to work with very diverse faiths is just remarkable."

Separate from her role with the Interfaith Committee of Worker Justice, she is one of the few Jewish members of the San Diego County Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Between the two groups, says Rev. Ard, "she has done more for Christian and Jewish relationships in this city than anyone I'm aware of."

She has good relationships with a number of African-American pastors and was there when Black Men United offered a reward for killers of two women outside a Lincoln Park liquor store New Year's Day. Since taking the position with the Interfaith Committee, Coskey figures she's spoken at more churches than synagogues.

Then again, synagogues aren't always the friendliest places when you're talking about the controversial issues of worker justice.

The Jewish mandate

Levin and Coskey agree that it can take some cajoling to persuade rabbis to join the committee. As of now, only Coskey, Levin, Rabbi Alexis Roberts (of Dor Hadash), Rabbi Martin Lawson (of Temple Emanu-El) and Rabbi Ted Riter (of Temple Solel) are official members. (Although the San Diego Rabbinical Association, a coalition of local Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis, recently endorsed the committee's letter urging the city to institute a living wage ordinance.)

"I've had rabbis say, (and priests and ministers) 'But Laurie, the people you're marching against are building our amphitheaters, are building our buildings, are paying my salary,'" says Coskey. When asked if it's easier to get leaders of other faiths to join, she hesitates - and says yes.

When dealing with the average, middle class Jew, social justice for workers is a tough sell. With the stock boom of the '90s, more people than ever own a piece of a corporation; cheap labor is therefore in their interest. More than that, it's a simple matter of "Out of sight, out of mind": since so few unskilled, low-paid workers are Jewish, we think about other things.

"The Jewish community has almost entirely neglected issues of worker justice for two reasons: One, we think that we have enough to worry about with our own issues, mainly Israel and Jewish continuity," says Rabbi Levin. "Two, we are a part of the establishment. We are the people who are they lawyers and the doctors and the businesspeople, who use the offices and leave the buildings at 5 or 6 o'clock and never see the people who clean the buildings. We don't live next to these people, we don't know them."

But in doing so, we ignore what Torah and the Jewish tradition tell us about worker justice. Deuteronomy 24:14-25 states, "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger." The prophets Micah and Isaiah speak about the need for fairness and justice toward workers. In Talmudic times, the rabbis codified the Torah's ethical injunctions, and required employers to pay workers a living wage. In modern times, rabbis have

recognized unions as bodies similar to the "town councils" of Talmudic times, which were empowered to set policy for workers and to make demands on employers.

And yet interest in worker justice among the Jewish community has withered since the beginning of the 20th century. All the great Jewish labor groups have shrunk or disappeared. Jewish labor's most vocal organ, the Forward, began as a firebreathing socialist daily. It is now a centrist weekly chronicling Jewish culture. Jews are moving away from socially progressive causes; more young Jews than ever say they identify as Republicans. Our most pressing work-related issue isn't a decent wage - it's preserving our 401(k)s.

This Passover, we will recount the story of the Jews' liberation from enslavement in Egypt. The youngest at our Seder table will ask the four questions. Perhaps in addition, we should ask, "Who shall I be this year: the Pharaoh, or the Jew?"

To contact the Interfaith Committee of Worker Justice, call (619) 584-5744.