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## CSU workers get own local

Custodial, health service and other employees form an independent SEIU unit.

By Rachel Osterman  
BEE STAFF WRITER

In an effort to concentrate their voice and fight harder for higher education funding, 15,000 California State University employees will form an independent local beginning today.

Until now, they have been a division of the larger California State Employees Association, a kind of umbrella organization that represents 140,000 public workers and retirees statewide.

While the new Service Employees International Union Local 2579 will remain affiliated with the larger CSEA, the new group will gain greater control of its budget, lobbying efforts and organizing. Local 2579 will represent health services, administrative support, custodial and other workers at state university campuses. Professors are not part of the local.

"We're going to be stronger and more independent," said Pat Gantt, president of Local 2579. "This will make it easier for us to communicate and lobby for higher education."

In some ways, the incorporation into a separate SEIU caps a decades-long struggle within the state employees association that had activists battling top leaders for more autonomy.

Besides the 15,000 state university employees, CSEA also has 86,000 civil servants who work as counselors, accountants and inspectors, 5,900 supervisors, and 28,000 retirees under its umbrella.

It ranks as the largest state employees' labor group, directly ahead of correctional workers. Overall, the state employs about 316,000 people.

Over the last decade, activists in the civil service division fought the CSEA leadership for control of their dues, a battle that included allegations of censorship in union publications and complaints that top leaders failed to support worker rallies.

A year ago, the dissident group elected J.J. Jelincic, a former investment officer at CalPERS, as president.

A month later, the civil service division incorporated on its own, becoming SEIU Local 1000. Like the state university employees, it remains part of the larger state employees association but controls its budget and the direction of its organizing.

"The local has the ability to speak directly with the SEIU leadership," said Jim Hard, president of SEIU Local 1000. "It's quite a difference. We have access to research help, to organizers, so that state employees can get involved and take action to defend themselves. And in the federal arena, because so much state funding comes from the federal government."

It's no accident that the civil service workers — and now state university employees — are moving closer to SEIU, the fastest-growing union in the AFL-CIO and one of the most aggressive.

In a sign of renewed activism within the civil service union, said Hard, more than 20,000 state employees flooded the governor's office with phone calls during budget negotiations in the last session.

Gantt said he will use SEIU's network of



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**Pat Gantt, president of SEIU Local 2579, said having a separate group will make it easier to lobby for higher education.**

activists to fight for higher education funding, something he said is both a social justice cause and a bread-and-butter issue for his members.

"The state university system is the main point of access for higher education for most of the middle class and working class," Gantt said. "SEIU members can identify with that and talk to their members."

Union activists said the formation of a new local will create a stronger organization.

"It's a step in our growth," said Kathryn Plunkett, a secretary at California State University, Bakersfield, and an officeholder in Local 2579. "Now we have more funds to grow our programs and be more responsive to our membership and all the employees that we cover."



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