

Instituto Laboral de la Raza's Annual Awards Dinner

By Doug Perry

Organized Labor

The Instituto Laboral De La Raza held their annual awards dinner at the San Francisco Marriott earlier this month and played to a full house. Featured speaker, Terrence M. O'Sullivan the General President of LIUNA pulled no punches in his criticism of the politics of the Bush Administration. A native San Franciscan, he made no secret of his love for San Francisco and the labor community. Other honorees included Michael J. McLaughlin Secretary Treasurer of Teamsters Local 856, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and Larry Del Carlo, President of the Mission Housing Development Corporation.

The Instituto is celebrating 24 years of community service to the working poor in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to Executive Director Sarah Shaker the Instituto Laboral operates, "As a union for the unorganized," and educates and advocates (without charge) for the labor rights of more than 1,800 working-poor families a year.

This being a political year and with the congressional elections coming up in November, it was no surprise to see many of the political bright lights of labor and the Democratic Party at the head table. U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee was honored and spoke of her commitment to social and economic justice. She was elected to Congress in 1998 to fill the seat of retiring Congressman Ron Dellums. Barbara Lee has fought hard in Congress for the cause of racial and economic equality. Dellums, who is now 70, was recently drafted to run for Mayor in the City of Oakland and will be opposed by City Councilman and labor leader Ignacio De La Fuente, and by Nancy Nadel.

Also sharing the dais were Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, Assemblyman Johan Klehs, State Senator Liz Figueroa, Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, and State Senate Candidate, Mike Nevins. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom spoke briefly and praised the Instituto for service to San Francisco's low-income working poor, and in particular for the Instituto's pro-bono legal services for workers.

Terry O'Sullivan was introduced by Oscar De La Torre, the Business Manager of Laborers Union Local 261 in San Francisco. Oscar talked about the contribution that the O'Sullivan family had made to the Laborers union in San Francisco. "We owe our pension plan and our laborers' training program to Terry O'Sullivan senior, he said." Terry O'Sullivan senior, who was sitting in the audience, had joined Local 261 back in 1947, and later became the President of Local 261 and the Manager of the Western Regional Office of LIUNA. Oscar talked about the Laborers strike in 1952 and the battle with the employers over the pension fund.

Oscar said that the New York Times called the Honoree, "The Fighting O'Sullivan." "There is not a stronger advocate for working people in this country," said De La Torre, as he introduced the current General President of the Laborers, Terrence M. O'Sullivan.

Mr. O'Sullivan brought the crowd to their feet with his opening remarks saying that he was proud to be a native of the greatest City and State in the entire country. "I salute the loud, the proud and rowdy Brothers and Sisters of the Laborers International union....," Terry said. He then launched a full-scale attack on the Bush administration in Washington. "They are hell bent on destroying the 'American Dream' by creating a nation of haves and have-nots. They are cutting health benefits and Medicare, student loans and Social Security so they can give tax cuts to the rich. There are now 46 million people without healthcare. Meanwhile we see people floating dead in New Orleans. This country doesn't understand that our greatest asset is working men and women. It's time to take our country and our Congress back."

Turning to State politics Mr. O'Sullivan criticized Schwarzenegger's Special Election in November of 2005. "In last year's special election we saw four propositions geared toward silencing the voice of working people." Paraphrasing Samuel Gompers, Terry urged the labor audience to, "Elect our Friends and Defeat our Enemies," in the upcoming November elections.

Again and again O'Sullivan returned to the need for immigration reform. "We have to acknowledge first of all the contributions of immigrant workers. Historically, immigrant workers built our roads, our highway and bridges, our buildings. They clean our hotel rooms and work in the fields picking our food. We cannot say, 'you are not welcome here.' That's not what America stands for. Unfortunately, we have a history of discrimination in the U.S.... We must make sure that history does not repeat itself. The labor movement will be defined by how hard we work for immigration reform. Immigrants need a path to earn legalization and unions can help through their training programs." "Si Se Puede."