

## Domestic Workers President To Speak On Unionization, Chávez April 15 As Part Of Chávez Celebration

March 31, 2005

Jan Jennings

"We ... have cleaned the living quarters, cooked the food and raised the children of millions of people throughout this country and the world but have not had sufficient housing or food for our children."

These are words from the preamble to the constitution of the United Domestic Workers of America (UDWA) union founded in San Diego in 1979 to organize domestic workers, home attendants and in-home care workers for collective bargaining representation.

Ken Seaton-Msemaji, founder and president of the UDWA, will speak at 11:30 a.m. April 15 in the Cross-Cultural Center at the University of California, San Diego as part of the 2005 César E. Chávez Celebration. The event is free and open to the public.

Seaton-Msemaji's topic is *Unionization in the Wake of the United Farm Workers*. He will address the connection between the United Farm Workers Union and the formation of the UDWA, his association with Chávez, and will offer an historical overview of the evolution and impact of laws and case precedence on unionization efforts in the United States.

Seaton-Msemaji is credited with building the UDWA, the first successful domestic workers union in the country, from its first contract in San Diego in 1980 to its current membership which includes 29 California counties. Its focus is on home attendants who provide care to elderly and disabled recipients of the state's In Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program available to income-eligible individuals to keep them safely in their own homes.

According to Seaton-Msemaji, the birth of the domestic workers union was inspired by Chávez, who recruited him and other leaders.

"César determined, from his own experience and learning, that farm workers and domestic workers were the most exploited groups of working people in America," Seaton-Msemaji says. "Since he and his family were farm workers, he set out to build a union for them. But he also envisioned a union for domestic workers and had always kept his eye out for someone he could convince to embrace this dream."

That someone turned out to be Seaton-Msemaji who was gradually and carefully nurtured.

"To me, like so many millions of others, (César) was not just a labor leader and not just a fighter for farm workers' rights, he was a civil rights and human rights leader," says Seaton-Msemaji. "César, like Martin Luther King and Gandhi, believed that every human being, including the enemy, was valuable, and that somehow, by trying to do the right thing and respecting the humanity of our adversaries, they would one day join on the side of justice. All of these lessons had the effect on me of almost being born again."

San Diego County's 15,000 home care workers won their most recent contract in December of 2004. It includes \$9 an hour in wages, dental services added to their health insurance package, and a reduction in health care premiums.

Earlier in 2004, California home care workers faced a major setback as Gov. Schwarzenegger proposed a budget which would have resulted in major cuts to the IHSS program. These included eliminating services for thousands of disabled children and adults, cutting home care worker wages and eliminating health insurance. UDWA and its allies launched a massive campaign to beat back these proposals, and after seven months of "organizing, fighting, and lobbying every day," they prevailed and no cuts were made.

"César taught us how to empower our people and our members, and they will never again settle for less," Seaton-Msemaji says.

"Perhaps the biggest gift César Chávez gave us was the understanding that, as he so often put it, 'The best thing a human being can do in life is to serve others.'"

Seaton-Msemaji has more than 30 years of community and political activism which started during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and included working in coalition with Chicano activists. He is the recipient of numerous awards and citations for community, political and civic involvement including a City of San Diego Special Mayoral Commendation, a special Congressional Recognition for Meritorious Achievement, a César E. Chávez Social Justice Award, a Black History Month Heroes Award, and a 2005 César E. Chávez Humanitarian Award presented by the Barrio Station.

Jorge Mariscal, director of the UCSD Chicana/o-Latina/o Arts and Humanities Program, and Cecil Lytle, provost of Thurgood Marshall College, are co-chairing the César E. Chávez Celebration Planning Committee. Olivia Puentes Reynolds is the community representative. For more information visit the web site at <http://blink.ucsd.edu/go/chavez> or call (858) 534-9689. Media Contact: Pat JaCoby, (858) 534-7404, or Jan Jennings, (858) 822-1684