

## New Union Leader Wants Group to Be More of a Political Powerhouse

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Published: May 8, 2010

WASHINGTON — As the eldest daughter among 10 siblings — and the third-eldest in all — [Mary Kay Henry](#), the incoming president of the [Service Employees International Union](#), says she was born to be an organizer.

“I was always asked to get everybody organized to get on the bus and to get everyone to the dinner table on time,” said Ms. Henry, who after three decades of leading unionization drives was set to be elected on Saturday to head the nation’s most politically potent union.

Ms. Henry will need more than organizing skills to fill the shoes of her visionary but divisive predecessor, [Andy Stern](#), who was a prominent political player.

Under Mr. Stern, the service employees became a formidable force in presidential, Congressional and governors’ races and was the nation’s fastest-growing union, expanding to nearly two million members.

Eager to make her mark, Ms. Henry, 52, is vowing to turn the union into even more of an organizing and political powerhouse, with hopes of unionizing more than 150,000 workers a year and giving the service employees even more political weight.

“I feel this ominous responsibility to take the union to the next level,” Ms. Henry, who was wearing a lavender blouse and lavender silk scarf (her union’s official color is purple), said in an interview in her office, which was filled with union and feminist posters.

When Mr. Stern announced plans last month to step down, Anna Burger, the union’s secretary-treasurer, seemed the favorite to succeed him. But within days, Ms. Henry had all but clinched the presidency as many senior leaders and large union locals rallied behind her, prompting Ms. Burger to withdraw her candidacy.

Many union officials embraced Ms. Henry as a consensus builder after Mr. Stern had angered much of organized labor by quitting the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) and picking fights with other unions.

“I’ve never seen her be polarizing,” said [Dennis Rivera](#), who heads the service employees’ health care division. “She brings people together.”

Friends say that Ms. Henry, who grew up in a middle-class Detroit suburb, is down to earth and devoid of airs. But she nonetheless said, “I believe I’m the right leader at the right moment for what’s required to win for workers.” To her, “to win for workers” means to unionize more of them to lift their standards of living and give them more political power.

While Mr. Stern often sizzled with ideas and bristled with impatience, Ms. Henry is a calming, reassuring presence who says her greatest strength is being “an excellent listener.”

She is a straight talker with a strong, comforting voice who speaks freely about how her Roman Catholic upbringing nourished her interest in social justice, about being a lesbian and about her hopes to use her new position to battle for workers’ rights, immigrants’ rights and gay rights.

Her father was a salesman and her mother was a substitute teacher. After graduating from [Michigan State University](#) in 1979, she took a job with the service employees’ union because it, unlike some others, was hiring female organizers.

In her decades of organizing, Ms. Henry became a master practitioner of the labor strategy that companies hate most: corporate campaigns. In one major success, she led a four-year corporate campaign against Catholic Health Care West, a chain of California hospitals, branding it antiworker and lining up the support of several Catholic bishops.

That campaign led to unionizing 17,000 workers at 27 hospitals.

“I would hope she moves away from corporate campaigns,” said Randel Johnson, senior vice president for labor at the United States Chamber of Commerce. “The S.E.I.U. has turned them into an aggressive art form. The vast majority of them are unfair.”

But Ms. Henry has no plans to relent. “We have to figure out how to reach out to nonunion workers like never before because of these tough economic times,” she said. By spending \$250 million a year on organizing, the union’s leaders expect to expand membership to three million by decade’s end, meaning the S.E.I.U. would represent 20 percent of all unionized workers.

Ms. Henry seems in no rush to distance herself from Mr. Stern’s policies. She subscribes to his ambitious political strategies, even planning to increase his proposed spending on governors’ races to \$14 million this year, from \$10 million.

“Our members want to hold politicians accountable,” she said. For example, upset that Senator [Blanche Lincoln](#), Democrat of Arkansas, opposed some major aspects of the recent health care bill, Ms. Henry supports her predecessor’s decision to back the lieutenant governor, Bill Halter, in a primary challenge to Mrs. Lincoln.

[George Gresham](#), president of [1199 S.E.I.U. United Healthcare Workers East](#), a 300,000-member local based in New York whose endorsement was crucial to Ms. Henry's victory, said: "Some bloggers were saying that a vote for Mary Kay was a vote to step away from the political strategy and political power that S.E.I.U. had developed. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Ms. Henry seems more eager than Mr. Stern to reach a settlement to end a bruising war with [Unite Here](#), the union representing hotel and restaurant workers. The two unions have often sought to sabotage each other's organizing drives.

But Ms. Henry said she had no intention of settling with Sal Rosselli, the president of a large California union local who led an effort to quit the S.E.I.U. Mr. Rosselli constantly denounced Mr. Stern as a top-down leader who ignored the rank and file, and he has begun leveling similar criticisms against Ms. Henry. She calls Mr. Rosselli a divisive figure whom a jury found to have illegally used members' dues to finance his breakaway efforts.

Many unions are hoping Ms. Henry will lead her union back into the A.F.L.-C.I.O., which the service employees quit in 2005, criticizing it as hidebound and doing too little to stop labor from sinking. But Ms. Henry said she had no plans to rejoin, although she wants labor to work together in this year's elections.

"It really isn't about structure," she said. "Most workers have had it with the direction of the economy and having to make ends meet with shrinking incomes, rising health costs and no retirement security. That's where I want to put our attention as a movement. Not to how the deck chairs are arranged."