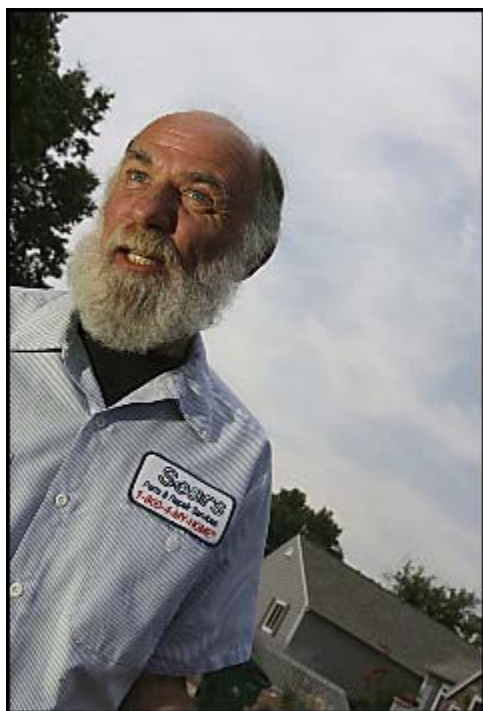


## Union gains rare victory as Sears service workers sign on

200 join ranks even as numbers shrink nationwide

By Joanne Kelley, Rocky Mountain News  
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Steven R. Nickerson © The Rocky

Ed Humbert, 55, a Sears appliance repairman from Johnstown, says unions help workers "get control of our working conditions and have a certain say in things."

Ed Humbert has spent two decades driving from house to house in his job as a Sears appliance repairman.

But at 55, the Johnstown resident has added a new twist to his working life: He's joined a labor union. He and roughly 200 other Sears workers in Colorado and Wyoming recently signed their first collective-bargaining contract, which gives them annual raises, extra job security and more control over their schedules.

"I've got 10 years left of working," Humbert says. "I'm doing this more for the (younger) guys. If you want to have a future, you've got to stand up for yourself as an employee."

The contract comes during an era of declining union membership both locally and nationwide. In Colorado, the number of union members slipped by 5,000, to 165,000 at the end of 2006. That represented just 7.7 percent of the state's growing work force.

Nationally, the 12 percent average has fallen steadily from 20.1 percent in 1983, the first year the government began tracking comparable data.

Despite the declines, labor observers say workers still attempt to form unions at work.

"It's unusual that they actually get to have a union and even more unusual that they actually have a contract," said Gordon Lafer, a University of Oregon professor who testified before Congress recently about proposed legislation governing union organizing.

Lafer also released a report this week describing the barriers workers face in forming and joining unions.

During the past two decades of declining union rolls, appliance technicians at Sears, for instance, have had a string of local successes in securing labor contracts aimed at improving the terms of their employment.

Roughly 24 Sears service centers around the country now have unionized workers.

A Sears labor negotiator declined to be interviewed for this report, referring a request to company headquarters. Sears spokesman Chris Brathwaite offered this written statement: "We're happy that we were able to reach an accord, and we are committed to providing our Denver area customers with the best possible customer service."

The latest organizing campaign was not the first for local Sears technicians.

"Each time, the company promised that we'll take care of the issues and you'll be fine," said Henrietta Kelly-Sperry, an organizer with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 68. "And each time, they did not keep their promises."

The IBEW local represents Sears service technicians and support staff in Colorado, and in Casper and Cheyenne.

"They felt that together they had more to gain," Kelly-Sperry said.

While the new contract includes some small pay increases and helps to even out wages, Humbert said it goes beyond those issues.

"It was to get control of our working conditions and have a certain say so in things," he said.

Humbert, who says he tries to look out for consumers, became irked when the company tried to tie compensation to whether technicians sold customers service contracts when they came to repair appliances.

"I almost feel like it's a conflict of interest," Humbert said.

Under the new contract, Humbert still has to offer customers the choice of buying a service package, but he no longer gets part of his pay in commissions based on what he sells.

The union says it also negotiated to keep employee health care premiums from surging.

Among the major gains: more predictable hours. Humbert said his son, who also repairs Sears appliances, would routinely put in 60 to 70 hours a week. But now that he has young children, he appreciates having more of a say in his schedule, as well as knowing he can't be replaced as easily by someone willing to work for much less.

Congress has wrestled with legislation this year that labor groups say would make it easier for workers to form unions. The bill, known as the Employee Free Choice Act, won approval in the House but died in the Senate.

Union contract

Roughly 200 Sears service technicians and support staff in Colorado and part of Wyoming signed their first labor contract in May that gives them the following:

- **Wage increases:** The contract set starting pay for a Level I technician at \$14.60 an hour. Hourly pay had varied widely, meaning that some workers got sizable increases to bring them up to par. Those who were already making as much or more than base got a 3 percent raise this year and will get annual 2 percent increases in 2008 and 2009.
- **More job security:** In the event of layoffs, company can't hire new workers within 1 1/2 years without first offering jobs to previous employees.
- **More control over work schedules:** Company needs to provide advance notice and obtain employee approval before scheduling weekend overtime. Workers also can get time off if they provide 36 hours of advance notice.
- **Disciplinary and grievance policies:** Formal policy that involves a four-step process with union representation.

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