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From the Los Angeles Times

Nurse assistant works hard to pay her SEIU dues

Spending by local's president hits hard when you are schlepping bedpans for \$10 an hour.
Steve Lopez

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Alba had a smile on her face last week when I arrived at the Los Angeles nursing home where she hustles through long, hard shifts night after night. Hard to believe she'd be in high spirits after changing the diaper of an elderly woman, but she had one thing going for her:

She hadn't yet heard about the financial shenanigans of her union president.

If you've missed the ongoing stories by The Times' Paul Pringle, you've missed some doozies.

While Alba and thousands of other workers have been schlepping bedpans for \$9 or \$10 an hour, Tyrone Freeman, head of the United Long-Term Care Workers local of the Service Employees International Union, has been living the high life thanks to the union dues of his struggling members.

For starters, the state's largest union local and a related charity paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to firms owned by Freeman's wife and mother-in-law. That alone was enough to raise a few eyebrows.

But then there are the other goodies dug up by Pringle -- \$300,000 worth of union funds spent at a Four Seasons Resorts golf tournament, Morton's steakhouse and the celebrity-rich Beverly Hills Grand Havana Room cigar lounge, among other hot spots.

"Every expense has been in the context of fighting poverty," said Freeman, who denied any wrongdoing.

I, for one, am hoping for a public reckoning. Maybe we'll discover the secret of how to end poverty by rushing to the nearest Four Seasons for a good time.

That cigar lounge tab alone, by the way, came to nearly \$10,000 and was listed on the union's financial report as a "lodging" expense. I suppose it's possible union officials smoked cigars so big they passed out on the floor. But the expense raises more than a few questions, since the Grand Havana offers no lodging.

If space allowed, I'd love to get into the \$16,000 paid by the union to a minor league basketball team coached by Freeman's brother-in-law, or the claim of an \$82,000 union contribution to a Florida video firm that says it never received the money.

And what's with SEIU leadership? Not only did the spending go unchecked, but national union officials were in the process of steering more locals under Freeman's control until Pringle's stories broke. Now there's an investigation into similar problems at a Michigan local headed by Freeman's former chief of staff.

More than ever, American workers need protection against the relentless squeeze on wages, benefits and retirement plans. What they don't need is the kind of "representation" that gives some organized labor a bad name.

Speaking of labor, let me take you back to the nursing home, where Alba has worked for eight years.

She washed her hands after tending to the elderly woman, then we went out to a patio to talk. The facility's patients have severe physical and/or neurological problems that keep Alba on her toes constantly.

"They're totally dependent on me," she said.

As a certified nurse assistant, she feeds them, bathes them, soothes them when they're sad or scared or in pain, and helps them in and out of beds and wheelchairs and onto toilets.

"I like the work," she said, because she's helping people in need.

But she isn't thrilled about the pay -- a little above \$10 an hour after eight years on the job, with no great package of benefits. And she doesn't like the nonstop pressure of caring for 14 to 16 patients who need constant attention.

When I told her about the problems in her union, she shook her head.

"This is a surprise to me," she said.

Alba, 46, has a 17-year-old son in high school, and her husband doesn't work after suffering two strokes. When I asked how she gets by on just \$10 an hour, she reached for the ID badge that hangs around her neck and shoved it aside, revealing another badge under it.

"I have two jobs," she said.

The other badge was for a hospital in Hollywood.

"I work there from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., and here from 3 p.m. to 11."

How many days a week?

"Four days, each job."

"That's eight shifts in one week," I said.

Alba raised her hands in surrender. What can she do?

The combined income from both jobs, minus union dues of about \$70 a month, doesn't leave much after she pays the rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Hollywood. They work it out, she said when I asked how three people manage with just one bedroom.

At her other job, she said, she's represented by a different SEIU local and has a better deal. She's responsible for only five or six patients there, instead of more than twice as many. It's a more humane pace for her, and the patients get better care too. Plus, she's due for a significant raise in January.

But as for the local run by Freeman, I showed Alba the Times story on SEIU's investigation.

It said Freeman had stepped down pending the outcome, and 55 of the local's board members had been relieved of their duties.

Alba read the details of lavish and fishy expenditures and looked to me for my opinion. I didn't say what I was thinking, which was:

For shame, for shame, for shame.

"Beverly Hills," she said, reading about the cigar club. "Four Seasons? I'm paying for this. They're doing this with my money."

Yes. But it's all in the name of fighting poverty.

steve.lopez@latimes.com

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