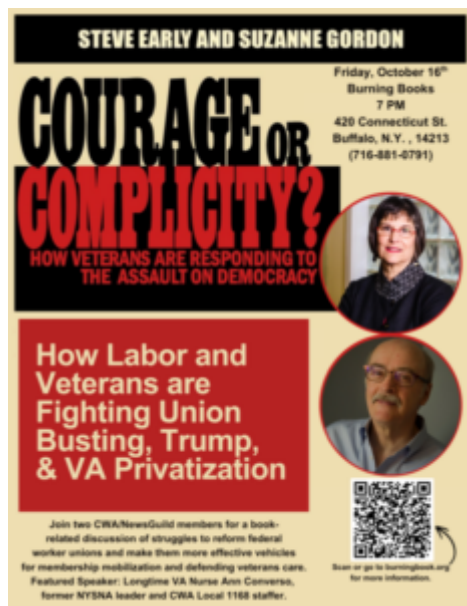


A Trusteeship in Buffalo

written by Steve Early, Suzanne Gordon | October 9, 2026



In 2009, a political disagreement about organizing and bargaining strategy, involving the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and its second largest healthcare local, led to a costly and disastrous trusteeship in California.

Tens of millions of dollars was squandered on this bitter internal fight. Thousands of SEIU members angrily protested the removal of their elected leaders, who faced trumped up charges and a multi-dollar damage suit. In response to their rights being trampled, rank-and-filers, who only wanted to democratize and reform SEIU, instead created the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), an organizational rival.

SEIU worked closely with major employers like Kaiser and Sutter to keep its dissident members in line. Talented organizers were driven out of the union, never to return; others, across the country, quit in protest.

As a result, SEIU's reputation as a progressive union—and low-wage worker champion—was badly sullied, locally and nationally.

Dave Regan, the appointed trustee of United Healthcare Workers-West, installed seventeen years ago, now makes \$400,000 a year as its president for life? He continues to be an embarrassment to California labor. His thuggish behavior, inside and outside SEIU, has even endangered passage of a union-backed ballot measure to tax the state's billionaires—a good cause that his bad press is helping to defeat.

A Landrum-Griffin Flaw

Why bring up this old (labor civil) war story now? Well, the abuse of union trusteeship powers has abated quite a bit in SEIU. In the last five years, according to Association for Union Democracy (AUD), only two of its locals have been put under trusteeship.

Meanwhile, our own union, the often more democratic Communications Workers of America (CWA), now ranks third on the AUD's list of national unions seizing control of the most locals during the same period. Just this month, the home-local of CWA national president Claude Cummings, Jr. was

put under trusteeship, at the request of his successor as CWA Vice-President in the southwest, Derrick Osobase.

In Houston Local 6222, the president, Belinda Aguilar, and two other principal officers got scheduled elections this fall cancelled by calling for a national union take-over. They insisted this was “not for the purpose of retaliating against any member of Local 6222 or faction within the local...” Rather, they sought “temporary administration” of indefinite duration because of mounting internal “discord,” “political dysfunction,” and membership representation problems— in short, a “breakdown in governance” which occurred on their own watch!

As AUD director Josh Soffler acknowledges, there are valid reasons for taking over a troubled local. They include a need to consolidate local unions too small to be effective. This was the reason for a recent NewsGuild/CWA trusteeship over a tiny unit in Bakersfield, CA. which was then merged into our regional local of the Guild.

Teamster Trusteeships

In the 1990s, trusteeships and related removals of local officers were very necessary in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Under IBT President Ron Carey, some Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) activists—long critical of old guard trusteeships directed at reformers—became trustees themselves. They were given responsibility for root outting out financial corruption, stopping sweetheart deals with employers, and ending mob control of some Teamster benefit funds.

But, once elected officers or executive board members, in any union, are ousted from their positions, their appointed replacement, a full-time official from the national union, wields enormous power—subject to few checks and balances.

One major weakness of the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959—and its “bill of rights” for union members—is the presumption of legitimacy that federal judges have given to national union take-overs of locals, whether warranted or not, for a minimum period of 18-months.

So, historically, some trusteeships have definitely been used to oust newly elected union dissidents, leaving them with no legal recourse during half of their three-year term of office. And well-timed, pre-election take-overs can be employed to rescue local incumbents-unpopular with the membership but backed by national union officials—from impending defeat at the polls. As noted above, once a local is put under the labor equivalent of martial law, no elections are conducted until the trusteeship is ended.

In the meantime, leadership critics can be removed as stewards, brought up on bogus internal union charges (to disqualify them from future office holding), or even more conveniently, be fired by their employer who would rather deal with an appointed staffer than rank-and-filers chosen by their fellow workers.

Elections Cancelled

These many pitfalls of top-down bureaucratic interventions—to sort out internal disagreements over union strategy and policy—are on dramatic display right now in CWA Local 1168.

This affiliate of CWA’s Public, Healthcare, and Education Workers Sector—the largest sub-division of the national union— has 4,500 members in Buffalo. They work mainly at Kaleida Health, the largest hospital system in Western New York. A local reform group, called the Caucus of Rank-and-File Healthcare Employees (CORHE) was planning to run a slate of candidates in 1168 elections scheduled for this fall, after getting themselves nominated at a Sept. 16 membership meeting.

As explained on the group's Facebook page, CORHE seeks, in Labor Notes fashion, to create a "more democratic, transparent, and participatory local union, where members are involved at all levels in discussions of workplace concerns and helping to create plans to address them," through rank-and-file education, mobilization, and, where needed, "job actions."

In late June, right after 1168 Vice-President Patrick Weisansal declared his candidacy for the union presidency, national union allies of Cori Gambini, the local's incumbent leader for the last 12 years, intervened on her behalf.

CWA Regional Director Debbie Hayes, a founder of 1168 in the early 1980s (but a national staffer for three decades) declared that "there will not be any nominations or elections while the local is under temporary administration." Once "all of the local's problems are resolved," the temporary administrator, International Rep. Erin Spaulding will decide when "the Local should be turned back over to the members."

Loyalists Favored

While Gambini and her e-board allies were officially replaced, they are, in fact continuing to act as workplaces representatives and coordinators of steward activity. There have been no face-to-face, local-wide membership gatherings since the trusteeship began, just Zoom "town halls" tightly controlled by Spaulding and Hayes.

Many stewards opposed to the trusteeship have quit in disgust or frustration, leaving big gaps in the local's previously more effective contract enforcement network. The result is a major opening for Kaleida to exploit. According to COHRE, "The employer has capitalized on this leadership vacuum with aggressive cost-cutting. Positions are being eliminated and unit scopes are being altered to change nurse-patient staffing ratios that may lead to potential lay-offs." Kaleida has also been selling off some of its long-term care facilities with little union pushback against that management decision.

Weisansal, the CORHE leader who was elected 1168 Vice-President in 2020 was forced to return to his job as an X-ray technologist with no such union role. With the apparent complicity of CWA, this 16-year employee of Buffalo General/Kaleida—whose father was a union member there before him—was then investigated by management for alleged time-sheet irregularities, involving work time paid for by the union and/or the employer.

On Oct. 7, Weisansal was fired for failing to clock out for four hours to do approved union work two years ago—and then getting paid for that time by Kaleida, an error he notified his manager about, by text, at the time. Patrick had no prior disciplinary action since he was hired in 2010. He has filed an unfair labor practice charge against Kaleida at the National Labor Relations Board and is getting legal advice from Atty. Louie Nickolaides, a longtime defender of union democracy in N.Y.C.

In her role as trustee, CWA Rep. Spaulding summarily dismissed Ann Converso, a revered figure in upstate nursing union circles. Converso was a longtime president of the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) and, for the last fifteen years, a staffer for 1168 or the national union. As part of Spaulding's purge of staff viewed as disloyal, RN Mary Nowocien, 1168's director of organizing and mobilizing for the last six years, was also sacked.

Internal Union Charges

Like Weisansal, even before his dismissal, Nowocien faced an internal union trial this winter; but as of late September, information about the identity of the 3-person National Trial Panel coming to Buffalo to be her judge and jury was still being withheld from her, an apparent deviation from past

NTP practice. A much longer list of internal charges filed against Gambini, by her opponents, was quick dismissed by a local “prosecutor” supportive of the trusteeship.

Retired teacher union organizer Ellen David-Friedman is the author of a new Labor Notes book called *Keep Going: A Guide to Organizing When it's Hard*, and a longtime advisor to CORHE. She believes that grassroots support for caucus is growing and its candidates have a good chance of winning- if and when democracy is restored in the local.

“This is an internal struggle between two different approaches to unionism,” David-Friedman says. “COHRE wants a fighting local that organizes and empowers members from the bottom up. The 1168 old guard wants to keep control at the top and be a more compliant labor-management partner. It should be up to the workers to decide which approach is better for them.”

The Membership Speaks

To resist the trusteeship, CORHE supporters have circulated a protest petition backed by more than 1,000 members. The signatories object to the “demonstrably partisan decisions” made by Spaulding, demand an end to her role, and the quickest possible officer and e-board elections, conducted by the American Arbitration Association (AAA), a neutral third party.

Despite labor and management interference with CORHE’s signature gathering, almost as many dues-payers backed the petition as participated in 1168’s last contested election, by voting for one union faction or another. Support for the petition reached the required 20 percent membership necessary to call for a general meeting to address the crisis in the local.

CWA District 1 Vice-President Dennis Trainor says that doesn’t matter because the local’s by-laws have been suspended. In a letter sent Sept. 30, Trainor defended Spaulding’s actions and rejected any allegations of misconduct by his appointed overseer.

In an Oct 5 email in response to queries related to this article, CWA Communications Director Moira Bulloch claimed there “is no evidence of a pattern of increasing use of trusteeships” by CWA. According to Bulloch, opponents of the TA in Buffalo have “chosen not to avail themselves of the process provided for in the CWA Constitution for challenging a temporary administration.”

She did not specify what that might be, in addition to the petition and a letter of protest already sent to the CWA executive board on July 27 by more than 30 past or present 1168 officers, board members, chief stewards, stewards, mobilization coordinators, or elected contract negotiators.

A Bad Trusteeship Record

The trusteeship record of CWA District 1—including Trainor’s own as trustee appointer- is not confidence inspiring. After District 1 removed the leader of a CWA-affiliated newspaper union who embezzled \$375,000 in dues money, the staffer appointed by D-1 to run the local, stole another \$60,000 from it, leading to two embarrassing scandals (and jail sentences) instead of one.

As the *Chief Leader*, a pro-labor publication covering public worker issues in N.Y.C, recently reported, a former telephone local official named Ricky Morrison was put in charge of CWA Local 1182. This public sector unit represents several thousand traffic enforcement agents.

Morrison diverted \$383,000 from the local treasury to a company that he controlled, resulting in 1182 members being “fleeced,” according to its current president Alexander Sadik. Adding insult to injury, when Sadik and his lawyer, Arthur Schwartz sued to recover the money, CWA claimed that Morrison was “not acting as its agent during his tenure as administrator.”

According to Bulloch at CWA headquarters, Sadik and his local “failed to exhaust their internal remedies before filing a lawsuit so the national union is “actively litigating” the matter.

A Better Approach

Such legal messes have been avoided in the past when CWA responded to local crises—not with internal trials and unaccountable trusteeships –but with AAA-conducted elections that let members decide who should run their local.

This approach worked out well when the president of Local 1400, the largest Verizon local in New England, was caught by her International Rep, trying to steal a local election, in which she faced her first opponent in 20 years. She also tried to get him fired by the phone company!

Yet, no trusteeship was imposed, no one was brought up on charges.

Instead members got a quick re-run election, conducted by the AAA, and a reform slate took over. Local 1400 revitalization continues to the present day, under the activist leadership of Don Tremontozzi, a co-founder of Labor for Bernie in 2016.

Local 1400’s now more diverse regional membership has won multiple awards for new organizing and is now deploying retirees and rank-and-file volunteers to help Troy Jackson, a Bernie-backed working-class progressive, win a U.S. Senate seat in Maine.

Fifteen years ago, then CWA national president Larry Cohen rejected a call for trusteeship over Manhattan-based Local 1101, the biggest Verizon local in New York state (and Dennis Trainor’s home local).

Instead a national union monitor was appointed to mind the 1101 treasury and arrange a AAA-conducted election. As a result, a Labor Notes-oriented reform slate called 1101 Rebuilders ousted incumbents responsible for misuse of union dues money and past intimidation of opposition candidates. In 2016, the Rebuilders provided strong strike leadership during a 49-day regional work stoppage at Verizon in 2016.

Sadly, that better path was not taken in Local 1168. So, while CWA’s mid-term election messaging around the country calls for “electing pro-worker leaders” this fall, the only thing many Buffalo nurses want is the chance to vote for them in their own local union.