

# Victory!

For Puerto Rico local, hard work at the bargaining table pays off in wage increases and more.

BY GONZALO BAEZA

Seven months of arduous contract negotiations paid off in September for Puerto Rico's Vocational Rehabilitation Employees Union, Local 3251 of *Servidores Públicos Unidos (SPU)/Council 95*. The unit's members, who work for the island's Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, won an exceptional three-year contract with wage hikes, productivity bonuses and increased benefits.

"Our negotiation was extremely successful, especially if we look at the fiscal situation that Puerto Rico is going through, where only a few months ago we had a government shutdown that left thousands of people temporarily unemployed," says Local 3251 Pres. José Ramírez Montalvo.

Nearly 98 percent of the unit's 805 members voted in favor of the agreement, which established a \$100 per month wage increase

as of last October, and two more \$100 monthly hikes this year and the next. Until now, the average salary of an ARV employee was \$1700 per month. The contract also raises the employers' share of medical benefits from \$100 per employee per month to \$150 a month for the next two years and \$160 a month during the third year.

"This is in all likelihood the best possible contract we could get," adds Ramírez Montalvo after the end of negotiations.

Rehabilitation employees will receive additional lost-time pay for union activities and contract ratification bonuses of \$100 to \$130 depending on the employee's rank and years of service.

This is the first contract negotiated and ratified by SPU since the fiscal crisis and the government shutdown that affected Puerto Rico during the first two weeks of May.



Katherine Dill

José Ramírez Montalvo (center), president of the Vocational Rehabilitation Employees Union, Local 3251 of SPU, signs a new contract for his unit after seven months of arduous negotiations. SPU Pres. Ellie Ortiz (right) and Vocational Rehabilitation Administrator Dorcas Hernández (left) accompany Ramírez during the signing ceremony.

At press time, Puerto Rico's *Servidores Públicos Unidos (SPU)/AFSCME Council 95* scored an important victory by winning Dec. 14 elections for the *Departamento de la Familia*. In unit A, the incumbent SPU received 1,883 votes, to the challenger's 929. In unit B, the vote was 1,199 to 834 in favor of SPU.



Paul Rodriguez

**TIRELESS ORGANIZER** — Luis Fuentes poses for a group photo during AFSCME's 2001 Organizing Convention in Los Angeles.

## IN MEMORIAM, LUIS FUENTES

The playwright George Fabricius once said: "Death comes to all. But great achievements build a monument which shall endure until the sun grows cold." Few words could describe more aptly what the life of Luis Fuentes Ayala, 48, meant to his family and *Servidores Públicos Unidos (SPU)/AFSCME Council 95*.

Fuentes, who died on June 4, 2006, due to diabetes-related causes, was a founding member of SPU and served for the last four years as president of Local 3227, Unit A, representing the clerical personnel at Puerto Rico's social services department, known as the *Departamento de la Familia*. He worked for over two decades at *Familia's* offices in the Municipality of Canóvanas, about 15 miles east of San Juan, and leaves a wife, Jessica Benítez Castro, a daughter and a son.

As one of SPU's first Volunteer Member Organizers

(VMOs) in the wake of Puerto Rico's unionization bill of 1998, Fuentes' work was fundamental. Between 1999 and 2001, he played an active role in the organizing campaigns at *Familia* and several other commonwealth agencies. Described as a "model VMO" by SPU Pres. Ellie Ortiz, Fuentes contributed his time to help unrepresented workers all over the island gain collective bargaining.

"Luis was one of our most outstanding organizers and was a founding member of SPU in 1995," says Ortiz.

Primarily known as a tireless activist for the rights of public employees, Fuentes' interests went well beyond his organizing tasks. He was an accomplished "salsero" (salsa musician) and often displayed his talents at union meetings.

Fuentes was buried in the northeastern coastal town of Loíza in a ceremony attended by over 100 of his SPU brothers and sisters. — G.B.