



DATALYST MEDIA PRODUCTIONS

Members of the Service Employees International Union cheer in support of Barack Obama. Filmmaker Glenn Silber, who made "The War At Home," follows the SEIU's effect on the campaign in "Labor Day." The film will make its world premiere at Madison's Barrymore Theatre.

# Going into 'Labor'

Director of famed Madison antiwar documentary focuses on union role in Obama's rise

By ROB THOMAS

The Capital Times  
rthomas@madison.com

Glenn Silber calls his new movie "Labor Day" "The War at Home Part II." That's quite a statement for anyone who has seen the Oscar-nominated "The War at Home," Silber's searing 1979 documentary about antiwar protests in Madison. Silber is a 1972 UW-Madison graduate who saw much of the struggle first hand.

"Labor Day," which gets its world premiere in Madison at the Barrymore Theatre on Wednesday (preceded by a 30th anniversary screening of "War at Home" on Tuesday), is also about a large political force mobilizing itself, but this time things are much less chaotic, and the results are more immediate. The film follows members of the Service Employees International Union, the 2 million-strong fastest-growing union in the country, as they mobilized in support of Barack Obama's candidacy for president.

What ties the two films together, Silber said, is what's at stake.

"It's a really emotional film for me," he said. "It feels like the 'War at Home Part II,' only this time it's the real war at home. It's not about stopping a war in Afghanistan or Iraq, which is very important, or what we did in Vietnam. This really is the final throwdown."

"Labor Day" officially opens for one-week runs in New York and Chicago on Friday, and possibly spreading to other cities after that. But Silber said he wanted to premiere the film in Madison because the city has played such an important role in his filmmaking career.

When "War at Home" had its premiere in Madison in 1979, there were lines around the block of patrons wanting to see it at the Majestic Theatre. Then it moved to the Orpheum Stage Door, and then to the Union Theater, playing for weeks and weeks in the city.

That initial success, Silber said, gave the filmmakers enough funding to take the film for short runs in other cities, including Boston, where the Boston Globe gave it a hugely positive and prominent review. That review catapulted "War at Home" into national attention.

After "War at Home," Silber went on to a long and suc-

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "The War at Home"

**When:** 7:30 p.m.  
Tuesday

**Where:** Barrymore Theatre, 2090 Atwood Ave.

>>>

**What:** "Labor Day"

**When:** 7:30 p.m.  
Wednesday

**Where:** Barrymore Theatre, 2090 Atwood Ave.

>>>

**Tickets:** \$8 in advance through [barrymorelive.com](http://barrymorelive.com) or by calling 241-8633, or at the door.

Both screenings will feature post-show panel discussions featuring Silber and others.

cessful career as a producer at ABC's "20/20." But, as the 2008 presidential election approached, he began to feel disquieted.

"I was very happily ensconced in my job at '20/20,'" he said. "But I was upset with what was going on (with the election). My wife and I were talking and said, 'If we don't turn it around this time, it's basically over.'"

So Silber left network television and cast about for something else to do, some meaningful way he could use his filmmaking skills to make a difference.

Eventually, he started looking at the Service Employees International Union and noticing that the union seemed poised to play a major role in the Democratic presidential nomination.

Silber contracted with the SEIU to do some video work for them. As he was shooting, he thought he saw the outline of a larger story about the movement, and his affiliation with SEIU gave him the access he needed to tell it.

"I started shooting things beyond what they were asking us to do for their use," he said. "Like at the concert, besides the stage with the big video screens, I hired three other crews on my nickel to cover other things, like talking to people about what Labor Day means or doesn't mean for them."

The closing credits say that the film was partially financed by SEIU. While SEIU owns the copyright to some of the material in the film, Silber had final cut authority and would have been able to simply kill the project rather than release something other than what he wanted.

While there are extensive interviews with SEIU leadership, as well as journalists like Time's Karen Tumulty about the clout that the union holds, the most fascinating footage of the film is of boots-on-the-ground union workers uprooting themselves and moving halfway across the country to canvass neighborhoods and knock on doors in battleground states.

Nearly a year after the historic election, when many progressives seem a little underwhelmed by Obama's first year in the White House, it's an interesting time to look back on the forces that put him there.

"We want to tell the story of the passion and urgency of that led us to the moment that we're in now," Silber said.