

# Sukari Pinnock-Fitts

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***“Workers don’t organize because they have rights,  
workers organize because they want rights. So why don’t  
we just organize them?”***

The woman behind the largest union election victory in 70 years  
shares her winning organizing strategy

*Before becoming an organization development scholar and practitioner, Sukari Pinnock-Fitts was a leader in AFGE, the largest federal employee union in the nation.*

*Her first win came at age 22, when she successfully organized a unit of 30 black women workers at a service branch of the Internal Revenue Service in Los Angeles where she worked. After a career of organizing federal government workers across the country, Pinnock-Fitts’ skills were put to the test in 2001, when she approached then AFGE President Bobby Harnage about organizing the 45,000 new employees hired by the government as Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workers in response to the tragic September 11th terrorist attacks. In 2011, after 10 years of struggling to organize TSA workers, AFGE finally won the right to formally represent them.*

*Pinnock-Fitts’ story not only recounts that victory but illustrates the centrality of identity in winning organizing strategies. Lifting up Pinnock-Fitts’ role in that historic win is proof of the expertise of black women as innovative and winning organizing strategists.*



**T**he TSA campaign was a long organizing campaign and probably the best experience in my life as an organizer. When President Bush created the agency after the 9/11 tragedy, he said this workforce will not be unionized. It will not have any collective bargaining rights.

At the time, I was director of organizing at AFGE. We knew that if we let that stand in a new agency with 45,000 brand new federal workers, the government would likely want to start rescinding

We knew it was a huge campaign that would take a long time. We wanted to at least organize three of the largest airports first, file the petitions when we got the 30 percent showing of interest, and see whether the Federal Labor Relations Authority—the companion to the National Labor Relations Board in the private sector—would accept the petitions so that we could go forward.

What happened when we filed was just what we expected. They said, “These workers have no collective bargaining rights, so we can’t accept

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rights for other unionized workers. Our fear was that they would say, “See we created TSA and they didn’t have any rights, and everything is fine.”

After some thought about it, I said to the union president, “Workers don’t organize because they have rights, workers organize because they want rights. So why don’t we just organize them and then make the claim for the rights?” He was great. He said, “You know, I don’t see why we shouldn’t. Let’s try.”

your petition.” We went back to the drawing board. But by this time, we were seeing a real interest in unionization among this workforce. Because they did not have any rights, they were being treated atrociously: fired for any reason; fired for no reason; stuck with very bad working conditions; forced to buy their own uniforms. And they were among the lowest-paid federal workers in the country.

At the end of the campaign, we had invested more than \$9 million to organize this workforce.

It took us over nine years to finally have an election, and it took another two years to negotiate a contract. But we won. The union's board kept investing, and we grew the organizing staff. When we started the campaign, we had 23 organizers nationwide. There were 450 airports in the TSA system, and of those 300 were major hubs. Our strategy was, if we could organize the major hub airports and get a "yes" vote, then the "no" votes that were out there in pockets would be overcome. The strategy ultimately worked.

By the end of the campaign, we had a lot of support from our sisters and brothers in other unions. They wore bag tags on their luggage saying "Union Yes." And they'd go through the airports and hand out cards to the TSA employees saying, "Union Yes! You have an election coming up. Vote yes for AFGE."

Initially I had a lot of people saying to me, "You can't do this. AFGE can't do this. You can't do this." Until I won the campaign,

they believed that we would never be able to do it. And I don't know if they would have held that belief had I been a white male.

What labor has to understand is that people want to see themselves in the leadership, in the people talking to them about organizing. The AFL-CIO never paid much attention to that. They tend to take what I call a color-blind approach to organizing work. "Oh, we don't see color."

If you don't see color, you don't see me because my color informs everything I am. I can't live in this country without my color informing every relationship I have and every transaction I have. And when you have leaders at the top of the labor movement who literally don't see us, it's not surprising that union membership is down to 11 percent from 20 percent in 1983. It's because they haven't changed any of the things that they have been doing, despite research that organizing is more effective when organizers reflect the workforce they're organizing.