

BWFJ Celebrates and Reflects on 20 Years as a Black Workers Organization!

The International Struggle Against Racism is a Fundamental Aspect of the Fight Against Global Capital



BWFJ was formed in Rocky Mount, North Carolina in January 1981.

As the super-exploitation of African American workers has been a main pillar for the development of US and global capitalism, a Black worker's perspective becomes critical in shaping an effective struggle against capitalist globalization.

The history of Black Workers For Justice (BWFJ) is one of trying to forge an African American national, women's and working class political consciousness as an organized expression of the African American

liberation and US workers movement.

Organizing the US South as a strategic flank in the struggle against global capitalism has guided the political perspective of BWFJ.

Building an African American and labor alliance in the US South based, on organizing a strong rank-and-file democratic, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-capitalist struggle is a major task reflecting BWFJ's strategic orientation on the radical struggle against global

capitalism. As is the fight for an internationally linked trade union movement and movement for Black political power.

Building African American, workers and women's power from the bottom up best represents the political direction of BWFJ.

Organizational Origins

The organizational origins of BWFJ began in a struggle around racial discrimination against African American workers at a K-mart department store in the city of Rocky Mount, North Carolina in late 1981.

Three Black women workers were

fired from K-mart for challenging the racial discrimination by the local K-mart management.

The fired workers tried to gain support from Black civil rights organizations and church leaders who while receptive, were cautious. Male chauvinism was clearly a factor. The workers often had to give details showing they had obeyed work rules-raising the bar for them to win support.

What was lacking in the initial appeals for support by the K-mart workers, was a Black working class perspective and organization that allowed them as Black women workers to take the initiative in developing and presenting their own demands and, in call for a united struggle that involved other community forces.

Organizing the US South as a Strategic Flank in the Struggle Against Global Capitalism has Guided the Political Perspective of the BWFJ

With some assistance from Black worker activists in Rocky Mount, the early stage of working class organization was started. From its inception, BWFJ faced varying degrees of red baiting, but was not intimidated.

The political perspective that sought to transform the local K-mart struggle into a movement to organize Black workers in the US South and nationally into a conscious and leading political force, was partly influenced by an emerging trend within the US African liberation support movement in the mid 1970s.

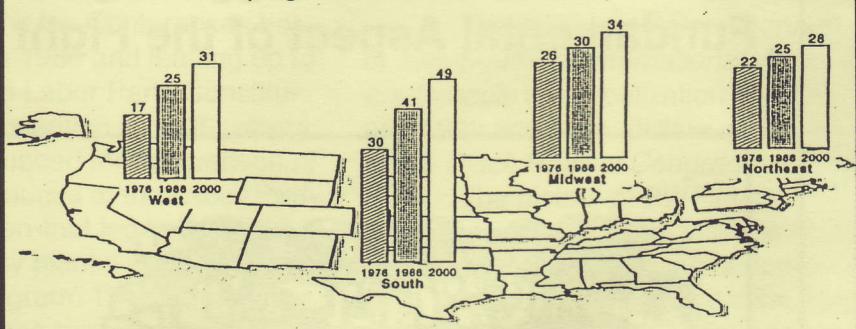
Black Workers Take The Lead

The slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead" (made prominent during the late 1960s by the *League of Revolutionary Black Workers* based mainly in the auto industry in the mid-west), re-emerged in the mid 1970s, and led many Black stu-

Historically, the various institutions built by the BWFJ sought to involve workers of color and white workers- in an effort to forge working class unity from an organized Black working class base.

The South has the biggest labor force

(Regional labor force in millions)



dent activists to go into the factories, post offices and other employment sectors to become part of and re-attached to the working class. Black workers were seen as a key base for the new communist movement ("new left") that was developing during the 1970s.

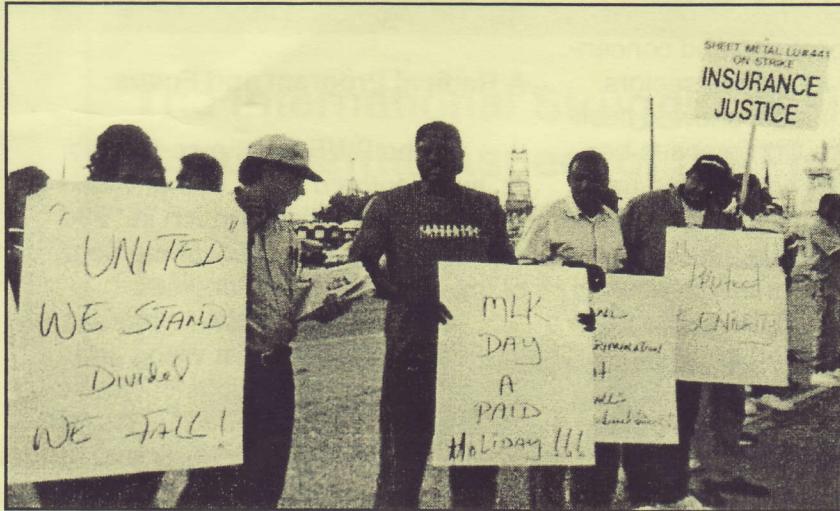
Some Black liberation organizations who were not defined as part of the "new left", but as revolutionary nationalists, also began to place an emphasis on organizing Black workers at the workplace as a primary base for their political, organizational and ideological development.

This Black worker's trend had two main tendencies. The first tendency viewed the main task of Black workers as challenging, exposing and isolating the Black bourgeoisie as a collaborator with US capitalism and imperialism. This tendency saw the African American liberation movement as an auxiliary

to a multi-racial revolutionary worker's movement. Thus while advancing the slogan of the right of African American self-determination, this tendency did not express itself as part of the African American liberation movement, and did not go deep into the African American working class political struggle against national oppression.

The other tendency saw the main task of Black workers as organizing into a conscious, radical and independent mass base and leading pole within the African American liberation movement; and as a leading force in the US workers movement promoting the struggle against racist national oppression-thereby contributing to an anti-racist and anti-imperialist radicalization of the US working class. The formation of the BWFJ was influenced by this latter tendency.

Building African American, Workers, and Women's Power from the Bottom Up is a Strategic Question



Taking Shop Floor Struggles to the Community

The BWFJ focused on making the issues at the workplace key issues of the larger African American community. Raising shop-floor issues in the churches, and bringing them to the community organizations and civil rights groups was a standard practice of BWFJ members.

In 1983, three of the 4 main plaintiffs of a Black voting rights lawsuit in the city of Rocky Mount were members of the BWFJ. Abner W. Berry, a main plaintiff was a founding member of BWFJ, veteran Freedom Fighter since the 1920s and member of the US Communist Party until the 1950s. Being plaintiffs on the lawsuit was key in helping to shape the political identity of the BWFJ as an indigenous worker organization in the Black community—which was contrary to the image of labor organizations projected by the

trade unions.

Abner urged BWFJ members to step forward as plaintiffs on the suit. He said that it was an opportunity for the BWFJ to bring forward its leadership in a key struggle related to the fight for African American self-determination—that it would help to promote the importance of organized Black workers to the broader North Carolina Black communities. It would also provide some community protection for the organizing work of the BWFJ.

With the trade union movement being on the defensive from the Reagan administration's attack on the Air Traffic Controllers Union (PATCO) in 1980, it was felt that the BWFJ would become isolated and defeated without the support of the Black community.

Key BWFJ organizational components developed out of various struggles that were led or supported by BWFJ. Justice Speaks Newspaper began in 1981 as a regu-

lar leaflet during the K-mart struggle, becoming a newsletter by 1983 and a newspaper in 1985 to connect the various struggles and BWFJ committees that had developed by that time.

The BWFJ annual *Dr. Martin L. King Support for Labor Banquet* began as a fundraiser for buses to the 1983 Dr. King National Holiday demonstration held in Washington, DC.

Workers and activists from 4 main workplace and community struggles formed the initial core of the Fruit-Of-Labor—the BWFJ cultural arm.

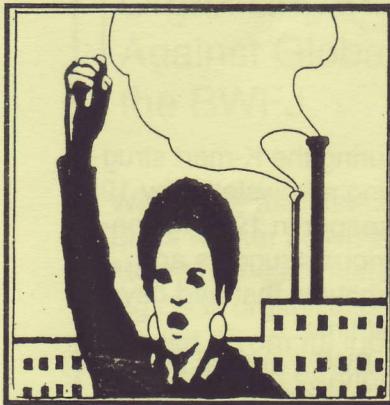
The Workers Schools

In 1985 the first BWFJ Workers School was organized involving workplace and community leaders and activists from 6 North Carolina counties. African American history, labor history, the role and use of a workers newspaper, importance of Black working class culture and the need for women's leadership were some of the main topics. Abner Berry and former SNCC leader Don Stone taught at this 3-day Workers School.

Following the 1985 Workers School, the various BWFJ embryonic organizational components began to develop more qualitatively. This allowed the BWFJ to better focus on implementing its program and summing up the work.

The various institutions built by BWFJ also reached out to involve workers of color and white workers—attempting to forge working class unity from an organized Black working class base.

The history of BWFJ has shaped its anti-capitalist vision and program around questions of democracy, social and economic justice, human rights, women's equality and international solidarity



The Women's Commission

The formation of the BWFJ Women's Commission in 1987 was an important development for BWFJ, and for the general Black worker's trend whose leadership was mainly Black men.

Instead of a commission formed mainly to review and sum-up work, the BWFJ Women's Commission became an internal and semi-external women's organization that included non-BWFJ members.

The Women's Commission led the organizing work at the Rocky Mount Undergarment plant beginning in 1989.

The Black Workers Unity Movement

BWFJ began to forge links with other Black worker activists with the formation of the Black Workers Unity Movement (BWUM) in 1985. BWUM was an agitational, educational and organizing network focusing on regrouping and expanding the

Black workers trend and promoting a call for a national Black workers congress.

BWUM was limited in its geographic locations and concentration in key industries/sectors. However, its impact showed itself at Labor Notes Conferences beginning in 1986 and leading up to and at the Labor Party Constitutional Convention in 1996, where BWUM pushed for the creation of a Black caucus at the Labor Party Convention—that led to the inclusion of key planks in the Labor Party Program. This exposed the BWFJ to the trade union democracy movement and labor left that was made up mainly of whites from areas outside of the South.

Hamlet

In late 1991, following tragic Imperial Foods fire in Hamlet, NC killing 25 workers and injured 56, due to fire exits being chained by management, BWFJ sent two cadres to Hamlet to organize the surviving workers into the *Imperial Workers For Justice* (IWFJ). The IWFJ spearheaded a broad coalition for justice that mobilized 6,000 from around the country to march in Hamlet. This further helped to draw attention to the BWFJ Organize the South movement.

UE Local 150

In 1994, BWFJ helped to form the North Carolina Public Service Workers Organization of rank-and-file and labor support activists in public sector workplaces at 11 locations in 7 counties. This laid the foundation for the eventual emergence in

May 1997 of the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150 as a statewide union with over 2500 members to date.

A Radical Program and Focus

The BWFJ was a co-sponsor of two *Southern International Workers Schools* on globalization in 1998 and 1999 and is an affiliate member of the *Black Radical Congress*.

The history of BWFJ has shaped its anti-capitalist vision and program around questions of democracy, social and economic justice, human rights, women's equality and international solidarity as fundamental pillars for a radical social transformation and new society.

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