

International Worker Justice Campaign:

Building A UE150 Led Movement to Increase Workers Power and
Defend Democracy!



Memphis Sanitation Worker Picketing for Collective Bargaining Rights

"The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its Public Servants, who happen to be sanitation workers.... When we have our march, you need to be there. If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school, be there. Be concerned about your brother [and sister]. You may not be on strike, but either we go up together or we go down together."

A quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered this speech "I've been to the Mountaintop" in support of the striking sanitation workers at Mason Temple in Memphis, TN on April 3, 1968 — the day before he was assassinated.

Black Workers League Pamphlet

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The struggles for social justice, workers power and self determination must become key pillars of a mass movement for democracy and progressive radical change. Central to such a movement, is a campaign that defends the social safety net which the US government should be obligated to provide for the working and poor, especially during periods of economic crisis.

This campaign must help to build a movement that challenges the use of government resources, laws and institutions (the state) that shift public wealth and unchecked power to private corporations and the super rich, to use as finance capital and political leverage for their exploitation abroad. This shifting of public capital has caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of US jobs, the deterioration of inner cities and the continued underdevelopment of rural areas, particularly in the US South and Southwest.

This campaign must be able to tie together the issues of public policy, worker rights, grassroots political empowerment, human rights, global solidarity and global justice. Because of the increasing concentration of global capital and the role of the US government in driving the global restructuring that facilitates and defends this concentration, the demand and movement for democracy can constitute an opposing and powerful pole to unite the various movements in struggling for key areas of power to enforce basic democracy, and that helps to alter the balance of power in favor of global justice.

The UE150 International Worker Justice Campaign for collective bargaining rights in North Carolina can serve as a catalyst for building a movement throughout the US South that contributes toward developing a national movement for democracy.

Public Sector

Public (and private) sector workers in the US South and throughout the world are faced with major challenges in US and the global economy. The problems workers face today are not just from having “bad” supervisors; they are the result of the restructuring taking place in the US and global economy.

Attacks of the public sector has been a major focus of the US and global policies. Often referred to internationally as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP's), the restructuring of US capital seeks to turn essential public services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, utilities, recreation, transportation and emergency services into corporate owned profit making ventures, thereby privatizing these services and institutions. This has been a main focus of the US government since the early 1980s regardless of which political party held the presidency and controlled the congress.

In the early 1980s, US SAP's were referred to as Reaganism. In the 1990s under Clinton's “Welfare Reform Bill” the poor began to be forced off government assistance, the Crime Bill was passed, and trade agreements like NAFTA were established.

Privatization of public services and jobs remove them from the basic democratic control of those elected by the people. This would be a major downward sparrow for the already declining democratic rights won by workers, African Americans, women and others throughout society over the years and reopen old wombs and prejudices that have divided workers and society based on nationality, race and gender.

In addition to jobs and benefits, these essential services provide a basic social safety net for workers and the poor, especially for those who are unemployed, single women with children, the elderly and the disabled; but also for many employed workers who are dependent on these services because their wages are so low and the cost of benefits and other needs are so high.

The most oppressed strata of workers in the public sector are comprised largely of African American and workers of color and women. Their demand for collective bargaining rights is linked to their demands for workers power, self determination and against patriarchy. Their leadership in this campaign has the potential of uniting their political and social struggles for democracy and social change to a worker led movement.

Features of US Economic Restructuring

The state budget crises and the reduction of federal funding for states that impact wages and conditions of public workers and the services relied on by millions of people in states throughout the country are an example of how federal and state SAP policies favor the rich and not the workers and the poor. Some Features of the Restructuring:

- Wage Freezes
- Raiding of pension funds
- Short Staffing/downsizing
- Forced Overtime

- Outsourcing/Privatization
- Temporary workers
- Unsafe Working Conditions
- Management Flexibility
- Discrimination—hiring, promotion and firing
- Favoritism
- Refusal to honor bonus promises
- Plant Closings
- Reversal of favorable Labor Laws
- Management by Stress—Harassment
- Use of prison labor to replace paid labor
- Plans to privatize social security
- Deregulation
- NAFTA and loss of jobs

Technology is not being used to lighten the loads of workers, including the amount of hours they work to allow them more time with their families, to further their educations and to travel to meet other people and be exposed to their cultures to better enrich their lives. It too often displaces workers causing massive unemployment and intensifying competition among low wage workers and communities for jobs and services. As a result tensions are created that further divide people, wrongly defining the main reasons as cultural, language and religious differences.

The US government, despite its history of enacting laws that enabled corporations to make super profits and accumulate massive wealth off of the labor and consumer goods sold to working people, now wants to remove the role of government in providing workers and communities a social safety net. It does not see its role as helping to create jobs and a public works program patterned after the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s and 40s. The WPA built streets, highways, bridges, post offices, public buildings; restored forests; developed parks and recreation areas; built reservoirs; extended electrical power to rural areas and financed the development of theater, arts, music, dance and writers projects. Yes, the government can and must play a major role in helping to resolve the crisis facing working people.

Collective Action & Solidarity: Key to Building Workers Power and Democracy

The dismantling of legal segregation in the South brought about employment for large numbers of African American workers and women, even though they were the lowest paid jobs. It created basic laws meant to protect against discrimination. These laws provided basic protections for all workers regardless of race or gender. Along with the Voting Rights Act, breaking into the public sector positioned Black workers to more directly defend worker rights and public services—essential factors in a real democratic society. However, voting rights don't have any real impact, if there are no public institutions, services and workers for our vote to influence or shape public policies for.

Dr. King as a leader in the fight for democracy and equal rights to public services and accommodations recognized that these rights needed to be protected, not only by Black voting rights and fair politicians but also by public workers having collective bargaining rights as one element of its power.

Today many workers believe that the way out of the problems they face is to get more education to advance up the career latter. This may be an answer for a very small percentage of workers, but not for the majority. Many professionals are also being impacted by the restructuring. Some workers feel that if they become friends with management their jobs will be protected. Some workers feel that a good lawyer will force companies to change their unjust ways. Lawyers can help in some areas, but they will never on their own be able to force employers to change how they exercise power over the workers.

In order for workers to build power to improve and change their working and living conditions and to provide leadership to a broader social movement for a more democratic society where all people benefit from society's resources, their unions and worker organizations, leaders, stewards and activists and the communities who rely on public services, must have a greater understanding about how to wage the working class struggle. Basically this means acting collectively, planning collectively and being an organized force of collective power to challenge injustices and to bring about real democratic alternatives.

The Memphis Sanitation workers struggle in 1968 that was supported by Dr. Martin L. King was motivated and sustained by their basic understanding and collective commitment to a movement to change and improve the conditions for African Americans and all working and poor people in US society. Dr. King saw the Memphis workers struggle as part of the Poor People's Campaign which he was organizing during the time of the Memphis struggle. This workers struggle that was receiving national and international attention, was becoming a central focus of the Poor People's Campaign, thereby posing the possibility of popularizing the demand for unionization for Black workers throughout the South and nationally and within the African American liberation movement that was taking shape and transforming the demands and character of the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. King's support of the Memphis sanitation workers helped to make the link between the day to day struggles of Black and all workers on the job to struggles for self determination, workers power, social justice and social change. Without workers power, the gains won by workers and African Americans through the labor and African American liberation movement, can be more easily undermined and taken away by management and government.

Unions, leaders, stewards and worker and social justice activists who lack this understanding and basic commitment to change and improve society, will give up when the going gets rough, will lose patience with co-workers when they don't come to meetings, and will try to operate as a few committed individuals doing things from the top down, instead of as a rank-and-file union and workers movement always trying to involve and educate its members.

For unions to build confidence among workers in the US South, especially African American workers whose struggles against legal segregation were not won overnight, they must not limit themselves to organizing time frames that are dictated by labor boards or inter union struggles over industry and sector jurisdictions which often have little or nothing to do with the real issues facing the workers and their communities. The workers want to know that they are being organized for the long haul and that the unions will become an organic part of their lives and the struggles of their communities.

The IWJC: A UE150 Led Campaign to Increase Workers Power

The struggle for workers power means that in addition to demanding that racist, sexist and homophobic supervisors be fired, and that working conditions be made safer, with living wages and benefits, require that workers must fight for structural changes that empower workers to be able to refuse to work under abusive supervisors and unsafe conditions and to bargain for decent wages and environmental justice.

All of the main demands for structural changes will not be won immediately. However, the IWJC is helping to build a mass movement to begin raising and organizing around demands now to help educate workers and communities about what's really required to improve and change working conditions and essential services that benefit working people. It is putting in place an infrastructure in North Carolina to help further organize and support trade unions and worker organizations who commit to uniting with the struggles against the oppression of African Americans and other people of color.

North Carolina and Virginia have the two worse laws denying collective bargaining rights to public sector workers of any state throughout the US. And while they have not stopped UE from forming fighting public sector unions in these states, they have restricted UE150 and UE160 from exercising key areas of formal power. US government policies under both political parties and especially under the Bush administration seek to smash major worker rights both in the public and private sectors that empower workers to act collectively.

The odds against UE150 surviving for almost 8 years in NC were high. Many expected that the UE National union, being small with limited resources compared to other national unions would have pulled out before now. Many thought that the state would not recognize or meet with UE150. Many thought that public sector workers would be too scared to be active in their workplaces. Yes, there have been difficulties, but we have been able to survive and make some basic improvements especially in winning some dignity for UE150 members and other public workers.

Having to mobilize the rank-and-file around every major grievance and around democracy in the work place—using bulletin boards, passing out newsletters, meeting with management, assisting with grievances and having meeting spaces, UE members understand that real power is based on involving the membership in addressing problems and bringing about changes. Collective bargaining rights will only increase power for the workers; not substitute for rank-and-file action. If the workers don't wage a struggle to win these rights, chances are they won't wage a struggle to defend these rights.

There are other union approaches that try to buy the loyalty of politicians as a pre condition for organizing in the public sector. They toss around money to politicians of both political parties even though they attack worker rights and social programs of the poor. This is narrow interests "business unionism"; not social justice unionism which starts with organizing around the needs of workers and the poor. It does not build confidence or real class consciousness in the rank-and-file.

There is a view among some trade union leaders, that merging the unions like the corporations are merging creates a stronger bases to bargain with government and corporate management and that democracy for the rank-and-file members is less important. If trade unions are to aid the struggles of African Americans, people of

color, women and others who are oppressed and discriminated against throughout society, then rank-and-file union democracy is a must.

Organize the South

The US South is the most vulnerable to this attack on public sector workers and public services because all US Southern states have “right-to-work” laws that deny public sector workers collective bargaining rights to one degree or another, preventing them from collectively bargaining for decent contracts that provide protections that help to defend the public sector.

Right-to-work laws are part of the US South’s structure as a low wage labor region with the lowest percentage of unionized workers. The system of African American national oppression the racist form that capitalism takes in exploiting the Black working class and the African American people, serves as an anchor lowering the wages, benefits and rights for all workers. In addition to African American voting rights and political power being under constant attack, diluted and systematically disenfranchised, the working class in the US South is the most divided by race, community, nationality and gender.

When the Taft Hartley Act was enacted in 1947 placing major restrictions on trade union rights throughout the US, Southern segregationists demanded that a section be included in the Act that gave states the right to implement special laws known as right-to-work laws. Denying public sector workers collective bargaining rights was part of a larger strategy to keep workers divided and to prevent Black workers from becoming an organized and leading force in a Southern based labor movement, anticipating the possibility that Black workers would push labor to fight for Black civil rights and political power. This potential was shown by the leadership of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who initiated the March on Washington Movement and called for a massive march on Washington prior to Taft Hartley, demanding that Black workers be allowed to work in the defense industries and federal agencies which had been denied up until World War II.

The threat of a march on Washington by the March on Washington Movement, a developing mass movement lead by Black workers, compelled President Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning discrimination in the defense industries and federal agencies. He understood that if this national demonstration took place around their demands, that there was a strong probability that Black workers would spur on a Black worker led movement to organize labor throughout the US South and nationally as a major force in the struggle against the racist system of national oppression.

The Black Workers For Justice, who played a central role in helping to build the foundation among public sector workers in NC that led to the founding of the NC Public Service Workers Union-UE150, is committed to organizing and developing the leadership of Black workers and women to help build a strong social justice oriented labor movement in the US South. As African Americans are exploited and oppressed as workers and as an oppressed nationality, one of the main elements for establishing self determination is the formation of politically conscious and social justice oriented labor movement that links Black political power with workers power in the struggle for a revolutionary transformation of society.

The struggle for collective bargaining rights for public sector workers and the defeat of right-to-work must be seen as part of the unfinished struggle for African American national democratic rights and self determination that was not won during the Civil Rights period. It must also be seen as a vital part of a struggle to defeat Taft Hartley which has helped to weakened US trade unions nationally.

The US labor movement’s failure to recognize the importance of organizing the South and of Black worker leadership in not only organizing the South, but in helping to transform the labor movement into a more conscious social justice force for the broader and diverse US working class and society, is a the major factor of organized labor’s declining ranks, power and crisis of direction.

The formation of a Southern Alliance for Collective Bargaining is a new and developing strategic and independent coalition seeking to unite unions, worker based organizations and supporters throughout the South to build and carry out a coordinated South-wide movement.

This Southern based movement must build a national network of support throughout the US, especially within the trade unions and help to make the connection between fighting for collective bargaining rights and organizing the South with the goal of strengthening the national presence and power of the labor movement. Trade unions, worker organizations and activists outside of the South could build Organize the South Solidarity Committees to help promote the campaign as a national priority, including helping to raise resources to support the work.

The UE National Union and other progressive national and local unions, especially encouraged by their rank-and-file members, could help to build a national organize the South solidarity movement. The Million Worker March Movement, a developing and independent national network and movement would also be a key vehicle in helping to build national and international support for this movement for collective bargaining rights.

Private Sector Workers Benefit from IWJC

State laws denying collective bargaining rights to public sector workers also help to create a climate that makes it even harder to unionize in the private sector. This is why private sector workers and unions must see the relevance of the IWJC for creating conditions that strengthen the overall labor organizing climate. Collective bargaining rights for private sector workers who form non majority unions, because corporate greed and minimal penalties for employer violations have created a climate of fear in the majority, should also be promoted.

Worker Centers that organize temporary and welfare (no wage) workers and communities must play a major role in building this movement for collective bargaining rights, serving as a key link between workplace and community struggles, especially in the South where unions are the least organized. Part of the demand for government programs that train and subsidize unemployed workers must be the right to organize and bargain.

In fact, this movement can help to foster new forms of worker organization and support committees within faith based, community and student organizations that help build the infrastructure for the workers movement and its collective voice within those institutions.

Independent Political Action

The labor movement must develop an independent political base and culture that becomes a major component in building workers power. Politics does not only mean electing candidates; it also means raising demands and mobilizing in the places where formal political decisions are made. We must take our demands into the city council meetings, county commissioner meetings and the state legislatures. We must send worker delegations with demands to the offices, homes, businesses and even religious institutions of elected representatives. Every candidate that runs for political office should be judged partly by their position on collective bargaining. We must push for referenda around worker rights and run worker candidates for political office.

Building a massive public sentiment in favor of collective bargaining is also political. We must get endorsements and resolutions passed by faith based, student, labor, civil rights, civic and community organizations. T-shirts, stickers, banners, pamphlets, forums, marches and rallies must express the politics of this movement.

A petition campaign throughout the state with thousands of signatures in support of collective bargaining rights helps to build popular sentiment and public opinion and serves as a form of a people's referendum around this demand. Workers must link their organizing to a struggle for political power.

The early efforts so far of the IWJC in holding the public hearings in 4 cities have begun to bring out favorable responses from some elected officials in support of collective bargaining rights. We need to make these hearings more widespread throughout the state.

When the formal arenas of power and the media are slanted in favor of corporate interests, the public hearings serve to help promote a people's mandate for justice and workers power by providing workers with a forum to present evidence of the abuses they face and calling for an investigation into the abuses and a change in the power relations between workers and management.

International Labor Standards and Solidarity

The IWJC as a movement to mobilize the rank-and-file and to build public opinion and pressure will create conditions to help draw attention to and support for the filing a complaint with the United Nations International Labor Organization (ILO) charging the state of North Carolina and the US with failing to implement international labor codes. This is a very important part of the campaign because the US is in the spotlight claiming to bring democracy to the rest of the world. This could help to win international support from workers and unions in countries who are being exploited by US companies and oppressed by US foreign policies, including unjust wars and military occupations.

Despite the current limitations of the ILO and the United Nations, the IWJC must call on it to challenge US lack of compliance with international codes and standards that promote living wages, democracy and human rights. The IWJC must participate in international alliances, tribunals and conferences that help to generate a wider international mandate for justice on international bodies.

These are the activities that will draw out the media and press and help to bring more visibility to this movement. Even when some of the press coverage opposes collective bargaining, the coverage shows that there is growing activities around the issue. This will help to build confidence in UE150 membership and encourage other public workers to join UE150 and continue the struggle.

International solidarity will help toward forging a greater unity among workers of different nationalities, races, languages and religions, and place the various struggles throughout the globe within a global context that allows for better coordination of campaigns such as been shown in the anti war movement with demonstrations of millions throughout the world held on the same day.

By building a Southwide campaign it begins to show the role of the US South as a global regional of international capital, and helps to point out why winning collective bargaining rights and organizing the US South should be an international priority of the global justice movement.

The IWJC Must Have Support from Social Justice and Social Change Activists (The Left)

North Carolina's State agency managers and elected officials know that UE150 is a fighting union in spite of its size and limited resources. This fighting culture exists, because there is a basic core of committed leaders, stewards, activists and staff with community allies. But UE150 needs more! It needs the support of progressives and radical activists—just as the CIO did when it began organizing during the 1930s to broaden and increase power for trade unions.

The CIO was able to expand the ranks and increase the power of the trade union movement because it had this combination of a dedicated layer of committed local union leaders, stewards, staff and worker activists in the union and non union workplaces, and many progressives who either took jobs in the workplaces or built administrative and broad support to help build the movement.

North Carolina has about 640,000 workers in the public sector. This would be a mighty force on the side of social justice, increasing the power of the many working and poor people's movements around education, the environment, healthcare, housing, land loss, political empowerment, the disabled, and opposition to unjust wars and global domination among other important struggles. UE150 has not yet waged a campaign of this magnitude. Yes, it is ambitious; but this is what the times call for.

Building such a workers movement that helps to train and politicize new working class fighters must be seen as a central task of the left. Absent an organized working class movement which champions, helps to organize and unite the struggles of its most oppressed sectors, people of color and women and engages in international solidarity with workers and oppressed peoples globally, the left's politics and vision of social justice will remain fragmented and not be taken seriously.

Without the progressive forces, this movement cannot be built fast enough and of the scope that really makes the impact that a working class movement for power and democracy needs to make in order to bring about radical structural changes for this period. The IWJC needs the resources and skills within the left to help further develop the rank-and-file character, strength and capacity to lead this movement. It must be a non sectarian participation and contribution.

The influence of the religious right, which has been gaining political influence within the US government, now has a formal foothold by way of the government's faith based initiatives which has started to gain support among some African American church leaders. Such an "unholy alliance" threatens to justify the denial of democratic rights under the guise of protecting "moral values."

The IWJC must involve progressive clergy in mobilizing their members and promoting democratic values and demands consistent with a liberation theology—that questions the moral values of a rich nation that denies and eliminates democratic rights and allows massive poverty.

The IWJC can be a vehicle that not only recruits new members into the union, but can serve to involve and expose many young people and students to a type of mass movement that will have similar characteristics of the civil rights and African American liberation movement that has not taken place since the 1960s and 70s, which served as a transforming experience for thousands of young people from different back rounds and races, many of whom went on to build the anti Vietnam War movement and other social justice movements among women, immigrants and labor.

Expanding UE150 union membership and developing more rank-and-file union leaders, stewards and activists is also a major goal of the IWJC. UE150 believes that rank-and-file union organization is one of the important

pre-conditions for building a powerful and democratic movement for collective bargaining rights; not the other way around.

There are other unions now coming into North Carolina because the ground has been broken by the work of UE150 to build a statewide union without having collective bargaining rights, gaining the right of members to have their union dues voluntarily deducted from the pay, winning some improvements and being able to survive in a hostile anti union climate.

It is important that UE150 protects the base that it has built, and improves and expands the politics and culture of rank-and-file unionism to empower workers in both the public and private sectors throughout the South. This has been the aim and work of UE150 over the past 8 years and of the UE National Union since it was formed 69 years ago during one of the turbulent times facing workers in America's history.

This culture is best preserved and expanded by a rank-and-file democratic movement grounded in principles of national union and local autonomy which has been the foundation of the UE culture. The left is needed to help defend and expand rank-and-file unionism in NC and throughout the US South by supporting the IWJC.

UE150, in taking the lead in building the IWJC is helping to link the struggles around immediate issues to demands for structural changes in the power relations between workers and management and capital and labor that help to build working class political consciousness and confidence. This will help to lessen and eliminate fears among workers and propel them forward in struggling against the repressive forces and anti democratic political climate that came in with the new millennium. 3/26/05

The Black Workers League (BWL) is a revolutionary working class based organization made up of activists in the African American liberation movement, the labor movement and working class social justice movements largely based in the US South.

BWL believes that the capitalist system and its main pillars—the system of African American national oppression, patriarchy, global domination of oppressed people and countries throughout the world (Imperialism) and its culture of white supremacy and white skin privilege is at the core of the problems facing African Americans, people of color, women and the working class.

BWL believes that struggles for democracy, social justice, workers power and self determination must be linked to a vision of transforming US society into a truly democratic society where the wealth is distributed to benefit the needs and growth of the majority, including protecting the environment and its resources, and where domestic and foreign policies bring peoples together within the US and throughout out the world to share in improving the conditions of humankind.

BWL believes that socialism would begin to put in place a system of democratic planning and implementation that benefits from the varied experiences of all peoples in trying to improve the conditions of their societies. African Americans, oppressed people, women and the working class must have organization and power to transform US society and build socialism. The revolutionary process of arriving at socialism is not yet clear. However, the BWL believes that the struggle for African American self determination must be a central factor both in the revolutionary social transformation of US society and in the process of building socialism.

Please send feedback to BWL c/o P.O. Box 2951 Rocky Mount, NC 27802