

Raleigh City Workers Exercise Power and Build Their Union!

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Black Workers For Justice Pamphlet

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Like all employers challenged by the organized power of their workers, Raleigh City management wants to divide and create pockets of workers fragmenting around different issues and agendas. The aim of management is to form an anti union committee to try and shift worker and public opinion against forming a strong union among Raleigh City workers.

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On Wednesday and Thursday, September 13 & 14, sanitation workers in the city of Raleigh, NC conducted four and two hour strikes demanding overtime pay, an end to forced overtime and respect.

The North Carolina Public Service Workers Union-UE 150 has been organizing among Raleigh city workers for the past year, building an organizing committee in the Solid Waste and other departments. However, the strike was largely spontaneous and was not called by the union. UE organizing committee members in sanitation immediately contacted UE organizers requesting that they come to the site of the strike to assist their struggle. The majority of the workers at the site immediately began signing UE 150 membership forms.

Even though largely spontaneous, UE Organizers were able to connect with key leaders to try to get an accurate assessment of the conditions, worker sentiment, degree of organization and the particular dynamics that triggered the strike.

Workers Need Unity to Win Struggles

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individuals. It soon became clear that a couple of these workers wanted to be supervisors and were being encouraged by the City Manager to speak to the media in order to give the impression that the workers are divided on the union question.

It is important that workers incorporate a culture of solidarity and resistance into their workday early on to give a group identity to the spontaneous movement as it is becoming more organized—slogans, handshakes, songs and something that defines their collective image. The Raleigh sanitation workers refer to themselves collectively as the “Orange Brigade” because of the orange shirts and jumpsuits they wear. This helps to isolate management encouraged or celebrity seeking individualism.

Keeping up worker morale is an important part of combating the disunity that stems from demoralization—something that easily occurs when there is no sense of what the next steps are or how to measure progress in the struggle. There will be some workers who will constantly say that “Nothing is being accomplished; and that all we are doing is meeting.”

It is important that the workers have regular updates on the growing support for their struggle and an analysis of the snags and setbacks along the way. This helps to build worker confidence—not suggesting that the union does everything right, but that it can help workers solve problems and rebound from setbacks.

The dynamics of the struggle is helping to show Raleigh Sanitation workers the importance of organization in waging and sustaining their struggle against an organized employer like city government.

Raleigh City Workers Join UE Local 150

The announcement by the Raleigh City Manager of the City’s intentions to address their concerns was not enough for the workers. The workers lost trust in management’s promises and some understood that these problems would happen again unless there were some changes in the basic power relations between workers and management.

The strike established how far the sanitation workers were willing to go to demand justice. It was also a statement that sanitation and all non management City workers want a voice in shap-

ing policies and decisions impacting working conditions and the delivery of City services.

By joining and organizing North Carolina Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150, Raleigh City workers began to engage in collective planning and democratic decision making, got access to resources, and began to consciously build allies that increased their power to get the City to start meeting their demands.

On Thursday, September 14, after work, the workers packed the UE 150 Union meeting, held at the Black Workers For Justice Fruit of Labor World Cultural Center.

The workers wearing their bright orange work shirts and jumpsuits voted to form the Raleigh City Workers Union as a chapter of the statewide NC Public Service Workers Union-UE 150 and took the UE Oath of Membership to become dues paying and voting members of their Union.

The workers discussed and debated their issues and voted on the core demands of their program of action. They elected interim spokespersons that presented their demands and Program of Action to the media that was waiting outside of their meeting.

The Program of Action seeks to further unite the majority of the workers around the main demands that led to the strike. It also includes other demands that reinforce the core demands and that seek to institutionalize a framework for negotiations between workers and management which is often rejected within the public sector as being a violation of the anti union laws.

Program of Action Demands:

- An immediate end to forced overtime
- Overtime pay after 40 hours worked and no comp time unless requested by workers
- Make temporary employees permanent and hire more workers to reduce workloads
- No harassment or retaliation against workers for speaking out against these problems
- City to meet-and-confer with elected UE150 representatives.
- City management should address above demands by Friday September 22, 2006!

The September 22 deadline voted on by the workers at their union meeting for Raleigh city management to meet their demands was very important. More than a cut off date, the deadline helped to establish a framework for employer accountability to the worker demands and enables the workers to influence the pace and rhythm of a negotiations process whether formal or not.

It has also positioned the workers to better influence the media coverage and to build wider community support. Despite efforts by the media to avoid showing the identity of the workers as being organized into their Union, the deadlines, planned activities and growing community support has forced the media to seek out the Union's positions first and the City management's reaction to the Union's decisions and actions.

The Raleigh City Workers Union voted to begin a Raleigh Workers Justice Campaign around their Program of Action.

The Raleigh Workers Justice Campaign has the following main goals:

- Using the Program of Action to further deepen and consolidate the unity, militancy and organization of Raleigh City workers as a chapter of UE 150
- Winning the core demands of the Raleigh sanitation workers
- Expanding UE 150 to other City departments by recruiting new members, setting up a steward system and committees that involve the rank-and file in carrying out various aspects of the campaign and running the union
- Establishing a meet-and-confer framework for negotiations with the City of Raleigh
- Building community support
- Shaping public opinion about the importance of unions and the right to organize;
- Promoting the movement for collective bargaining rights for public sector workers in North Carolina and the need to repeal NC 95-98*.

Community Support is Very Important

Raleigh City workers have seen the further development of

support for their demands since forming their union. The union has contacted faith based, community, student and environmental justice groups who are speaking out publicly in support of the worker demands. For example, the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN) held a press conference on September 16 at its quarterly meeting in Raleigh in support of the Sanitation workers. The NCEJN stated the struggle of the Raleigh Sanitation workers was also a struggle for environmental justice—saying that the work they do places them on the frontline of the work to protect the public and environmental health of the residents of the city of Raleigh.

The Union sent out sound trucks and leaflet teams throughout Raleigh communities to educate people about the strike and to win support for the worker demands. Hundreds of residents throughout the City have put Union distributed signs in their yards supporting the demands of the workers.

Youth from some neighborhoods rode sound trucks and read chants and worker demands over the loud speakers. Some residents brought cakes to Sanitation workers and gave them money to support their struggle.

Various independent coalitions have formed or reengaged and community meetings are being held to take positions in support this struggle.

Some want the current white City Manager who they feel is racist to be replaced by a Black person. Others are concerned about how these problems relate to the City growth policies. And others want to know what they can do to further support the workers and their Union. Raleigh UE 150 members are attending these meetings.

The Black Workers For Justice hosted a reception for the Sanitation workers at the Fruit Of Labor World Cultural Center that was attended by representatives of various community groups and elected officials.

* NC 95-98. Contracts between units of government and labor unions, trade unions or labor organizations concerning public employees declared to be illegal. Any agreement, or contract, between the governing authority of any city, town, county, or other municipality, or between any agency, unit, or instrumentality thereof, or between any agency, instrumentality, or institution of the State of North Carolina, and any labor union, trade union, or labor organization, as bargaining agent for any public employees of such city, town, county or other municipality, or agency or instrumentality of government, is hereby declared to be against the public policy of the State, illegal, unlawful, void and of no effect. (1959, c.

These activities and developments are helping workers to see the widespread impact their organized leadership is having on the broader working class population and other sectors that support social and economic justice demands.

The Union is enabling workers to discuss their interests and to better understand how their demands are critical to influencing the decisions made by these various groupings related to their struggle.

Fighting for the Right to Organize and Bargain

UE 150 has been fighting for the right to organize and bargain collectively since its formation in May 1997. In 1999, UE 150 led the four month long "Dr. King From Birth to Death Campaign" resulting in the UNC System issuing Administrative Memorandum No. 383 mandating that staff assemblies be set up at all state system universities allowing input from workers elected from the various departments, grievance assistants to attend hearings and the right to hold meetings on site.

In 2004, the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHS) issued Office Directive 105 stating that DHHS workers had a right to join and be active in unions and listed certain union rights such as use of bulletin boards and holding meetings on site. UE 150 also gained meet-and-confer at various DHHS facilities and with a director of the DHHS Division.

An Executive Order was issued on August 25, 2006 by NC Governor Mike Easley, formally granting access rights to state institutions for worker organizations to recruit and educate their members, is another important victory resulting from the leadership of UE 150.

While the Executive Order is not necessarily a reflection of the governor's pro-labor politics, it does reflect the impact of a growing grassroots movement for worker rights with collective bargaining rights emerging as a central demand.

The Executive Order also sets up an annual meeting with the Governor, or his designee, and the worker organizations "regarding issues of mutual concern prior to the annual convening of the General Assembly."

Short of a collective bargaining law, a system of meet-and-confer opens up an opportunity for unionized workers to collec-

tively bargain with their employers even though no formal contract will be signed.

UE Local 150 recognizes the importance of having formal collective bargaining rights and signed contractual agreements. However, strong rank-and-file unions are necessary to enforce contracts employers have been able to get around areas of some contracts.

The Memphis Sanitation Workers Struggle

Although nearly 40 years ago, the Memphis Sanitation workers strike and campaign has given special meaning to the struggles and leadership of Southern Black sanitation workers for the cause of civil and human rights and shows their potential as public servants to rally major support from the larger African American and working class communities.

Like the Memphis, Tennessee sanitation workers that were supported by Dr. Martin L. King in 1968, Raleigh City workers are beginning to understand, that their main power to change public policies is their power as workers to impact the flow of essential city services that affect the larger working class communities and economic establishment.

The union further organized and helped to empower Memphis sanitation workers to win respect for the demands and image of "garbage workers" throughout the country. This struggle moved Dr. King to make the profound statement that "There is Dignity in All Work."

Like the Memphis workers, the Raleigh workers are not only demanding economic justice, but also dignity, respect and democratic rights on the job. As the lowest paid and most disrespected by City management, the working conditions of Raleigh and Sanitation workers throughout the South are often viewed as an extension of the treatment of the larger African American community by local and state governments.

This struggle also helps to remind the larger African American community of the turning back of the clock on civil rights and public services won from the struggles of the 1960s and 70s.

The Raleigh Sanitation workers while majority African American are fighting for fair treatment for all of the workers regardless of race. This struggle has the potential to build worker unity

across race and gender lines, but it must have the courage and union leadership to confront the issues of race, nationality and gender oppression where all workers take a stand on these issues.

The Memphis Sanitation workers struggle is being used as a source for political education of the Raleigh City workers struggle—videos, small pamphlets and quotes from Dr. King have been incorporated into the campaign.

Defiance of "Right-to-Work" Laws

Strikes are unusual in North Carolina. They are illegal for public sector workers and as symbolized by the Memphis Sanitation workers strike, represent an act of defiance by African American workers against an unjust law.

The anti union national Taft Hartley Act enacted in the 1947 during the period of legal segregation established a section (14b), allowing states to establish additional laws to compliment their racist state laws.

The racist oppression of African Americans in the South and the division of Black and white workers was and continues to be the foundation for dividing the Southern and larger US working class and maintaining the South as a region of cheap labor.

Racist segregationists and big capitalist corporations wanting to deny power and rights to Black people and to super-exploit Black labor, continue to use these laws today to try and intimidate, divide and discourage all workers from uniting to form strong democratic unions. Right-to Work laws are one of the major institutionalized links connecting racism and worker exploitation in the South.

These restrictions on public sector workers right to organize and collectively bargain with management are major reasons why job classifications have a racial factor making non-administrative departments with a majority Black and women workers among the lowest paid.

These laws are also one of the main reasons why union membership in the US South is lowest of all regions in the country. North Carolina has the 2nd lowest percentage of unionized workers.

The strike while a tactic to draw public attention to the un-

just practices and policies faced by Raleigh Sanitation workers became a political act of workers power to demand government accountability to the rights and conditions of workers and citizens. As was the case in Memphis, it helps to embolden the larger African American community. It also points out why political power must be more than the numerical strength and turn out of voters on Election Day.

The strike sent a message to heads of Raleigh City government and to state government, that workers are prepared to violate unjust laws when working conditions and management respect for the workers become eroded.

Business Unionism Rears its Head in Raleigh

Even though UE Local 150 has been organizing among Raleigh Sanitation and other city employees for nearly a year, and despite the fact that workers at the site were visibly signing UE 150 membership forms and holding UE 150 signs expressing clear affiliation with UE 150, organizers from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) were at the site trying to urge workers to join their union. This caused a bit of temporary confusion, as some workers thought these organizers were connected to UE 150, as the name of the union does not always immediately register among workers, especially in a state and region where union membership and union consciousness is at a low level.

After UE 150 organizers leafleted the gates the evening of the strike calling for a meeting at 5:30pm the next day on September 14, SEIU organizers were at the gate the morning of September 14, passing out leaflets for a SEIU sponsored meeting also set for the evening of September 14.

The fact that such a large number attended the UE 150 meeting and voted to form a Chapter of the UE 150 statewide union hopefully sends the message that the workers have decided what union they want to belong to.

Such interference gives Raleigh City management and the press the opportunity to take the focus off of the real worker issues and the growing support from Raleigh residents for the demands of the workers by trying to make the campaign look more like a competition between two unions for members.

UE 150 and SEIU representatives have held talks facilitated

by faith based worker justice allies to try and work out a fair way of organizing to avoid conflicts between unions. SEIU was informed more than 8 months in advance that UE Local 150 was organizing among Raleigh City workers and that it had formed a member organizing committee.

SEIU representatives put forth a view stating—that since they have put money into supporting NC local and state politicians, that it somehow gives them the right to claim jurisdiction over organizing in those cities and institutions even if SEIU has not made contacts with or built an organizing committee among the workers. It also makes no difference whether the workers in those cities have input or support the politicians being financed by SEIU. This is top down business unionism that does not empower the workers nor include them in making major decisions about agreements with management or what politicians to support—somehow taking the position that workers either don't care or don't want to be involved in making these decisions and running their union.

UE Local 150 and its national union disagree with this view of organizing. UE believes that unions must earn the right to organize and to claim representation of the workers by doing the hard day-to-day work of meeting with the workers, listening to their concerns and organizing them to begin taking actions as leaders of their own struggles that the union helps to strengthen by bringing its experiences and resources to help them form into a fighting rank-and-file democratic organization. Size and money while important factors in union strength, mean very little if the workers don't have direct democratic control of the decisions and the life of their union—something that UE has a Proud 69 year history of organizing and promoting.

Movement for Collective Bargaining Rights

The Raleigh City workers struggle is taking place amidst a growing movement and sentiment in North Carolina in support of collective bargaining rights for public sector workers. UE 150 has been a leader in this movement. It launched the International Worker Justice Campaign (IWJC) in 2004 that included public hearings across the state, rallies at the Governor's office and filing a formal complaint against North Carolina with the United

Nation's International Labor Organization for being in violation of international conventions among other actions.

The IWJC has helped to build supporters among faith, labor, community and student organizations in support of Collective Bargaining. UE 150 is also a founding member organization of Hear Our Public Employees (HOPE) a coalition of trade unions, employee associations and support organizations representing thousands of public sector workers working for the repeal of NC 95-98.

The Raleigh Sanitation struggle is helping to draw attention the issue of collective bargaining for public sector workers. Some are saying that if the City workers had collective bargaining rights, the strike probably could have been avoided. The threat of strikes has been the main argument used by management to opposed unions.

The fact that Raleigh citizens were supportive of the strike action, allows for a greater opportunity for the pro-collective bargaining movement to take the strike issue away from the anti union forces at least for a period.

The Raleigh struggle offers a perfect opportunity to bring the issue of collective bargaining for public sector workers front and center to help shape the mass consciousness and further movement on this issue more than any other time since the formation of UE 150. It also creates conditions to educate and step up the pressure on state legislators to repeal NC 95-98.

With more than 640,000 public sector workers in North Carolina, the repealing of NC 95-98, will create conditions for a massive organizing drive among public workers and can set a tone for the labor movement to begin serious organizing throughout North Carolina and the US South.

A Struggle for Democracy and Human Rights

The Raleigh City workers struggle is taking place within an increasingly repressive political climate where the federal government is eliminating civil liberties and making major cuts in funding for public services that protect basic democratic rights

and human needs. The struggle for the right to organize and join unions and to collectively bargaining with government employers also becomes a major flank of the struggle to defend and advance democratic and human rights.

Today, the Bush led government tries to justify eliminating democratic rights by saying "it's in the best interest of US national security."

It is important to remind workers that part of the reason for cuts among public sector workers and public services is because the federal government is using the budget to finance unjust wars in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

Also that democracy requires organization and power among those who have been historically the most oppressed in society.

Progressives Must Support Raleigh Struggle

During the 1920s, progressives and trade unionists formed the Trade Union Educational League to help organize industrial unions in key industries that laid the foundation for the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1930s.

Those that believe that workers are the collective agent for social change, must support the Raleigh City workers struggle and UE 150's efforts to build a statewide rank-and-file democratic union.

Organize the South!

10/7/06

Memphis City Workers Union Celebrate Victory in 1968!



Dr. King's assassination was not in vain!