

Pierrette Talley

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“You’re not really a secretary, you’re an organizer.”

How putting African Americans in the fight against anti-union legislation helped repeal
anti-union legislation in Ohio

Pierrette “Petee” Talley is the first woman to hold one of the two top offices of the Ohio AFL-CIO, which represents more than 500,000 workers in fields ranging from construction to medicine. Talley was first elected secretary-treasurer in 2002 and was re-elected in 2006. Before that, Talley worked as the Ohio State Director for the AFL-CIO, where she worked with the state federation and central labor councils to engage union affiliates in various political, organizing and legislative campaigns and activities.

In 2011, Ohio Governor John Kasich signed into law Senate Bill 5, which was designed to limit the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions. In a historic repeal referendum, Ohio voters overwhelmingly rejected the law. Talley’s work to organize the African American community’s support in this referendum fight was critical to its success and offers powerful lessons on derailing other efforts to quash labor rights. The victory was especially impressive considering heartbreaking losses for state employees in Wisconsin, where Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker had signed and successfully put into action a similar anti-union law. The political acumen Talley displayed and her work today reflects her skill, passion and knowledge of the importance of building stronger alliances between African Americans and unions.



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In 1980 when I landed the job as office secretary at the union, I got a chance to go out and give leaflets to workers and work on political campaigns. That really piqued my interest. In 1992, my union called upon me to coordinate the “Get Out the Vote” effort.

I was talking to African American would-be voters when I was doing voter registration. We organized and registered about 7,000 people in the span of a two-and-a-half month cycle. Ultimately, we turned out about 78 percent of registered voters in that community. What had started out as office work evolved into a passion around civic engagement for African Americans.

It was at that point that someone called me on the phone and said, “You’re not really a secretary, you’re an organizer.” That encouraged me to apply for positions in the union outside of the office secretary realm. Ultimately, I was called upon to become political legislative director, which was a huge leap.

In 2011, I watched events unfold in Wisconsin. I witnessed thousands of demonstrators pouring into the streets protesting Governor Walker’s anti-union “budget repair bill.” The bill pretty much stripped most state employees of their collective bargaining rights. When I looked at the crowds gathered there in Madison, I saw a lot of white union members at the state capitol. Only sprinklings of African Americans could be seen among those hundreds of thousands of people who gathered.

I wondered, “Where are the black folks?” They were certainly affected by what Governor Walker was doing. When the anti-union issue came to Ohio, I started witnessing a bit of the same thing. If you look at any of the video footage from some of the earlier campaigns, you will see very few African American union members coming to the state capitol or the public hearings.

Then *The Root*, an online magazine that focuses on African American issues, ran an article

showing that African Americans have been historically overrepresented in the public sector because of the sector's strong affirmative action policies. In 2011, for example, nearly 13 percent of state and local public sector employees were African American—while less than 11 percent of all private sector workers were African American. And the wage differentials between African Americans and whites were significantly smaller in the public sector than in the private sector. When I looked further, I learned that nearly one in five public workers in Ohio was African American and I thought, “This is not just a union issue, this is an issue that is impacting the African American community.” But unfortunately it was being portrayed as a union issue because you only saw union leaders and members there voicing their concerns.

So we came up with a strategy to engage the black community. We reached out to churches and talked about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and how he went to Memphis to join the fight for the collective bargaining rights of black sanitation workers. We linked the history of that

struggle to the campaign against Senate Bill 5 in 2011. We began to talk about and put together presentations that showed what the law would do not only to union members but to African American families. The pastors understood. Slowly but surely we started to shift the message to make sure that we didn't talk about this campaign only in terms of its impact on the union. We talked about how the law would affect a sector of workers who had managed to get out of poverty because of those good jobs and who would now be hurt by the legislation.

We not only had that conversation with churches, we had it with those union leaders who were sitting in the room. We convinced them to nuance the messaging so that we could go out and talk about the impact of this in the African American community. They were a little concerned about how best to do that. They messaged people and pollsters and focus groups. Finally we convinced them that—in addition to the overall union campaign—we needed to nuance messaging in the African American community. That helped us win the campaign.

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