



Rosalyn Pelles

Retired Director of the Civil, Human and Women’s Rights Department,
American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) | Washington, DC;
Advisor, Forward Together Moral Monday Movement | Raleigh, North Carolina

“A labor movement has to be part of a social justice movement.”

Retired civil rights and union activist continues to build bridges in North Carolina’s
Forward Together Moral Monday Movement

In 2013, Rosalyn Woodward Pelles retired after nearly four decades as an organizer, interim director of the North Carolina National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and director of the Civil, Human and Women’s Rights Department for the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the United States representing 12.5 million workers. Before retiring she also served as the national representative for the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU), the executive director of the National Education Association Staff Organization (NEASO), and as special assistant to Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr.

Since retirement, Pelles has been a key advisor to North Carolina’s Forward Together Moral Monday Movement, one of the most important social justice movements in the country today.

The statewide movement began in 2012 when Republican Pat McCrory was elected governor. This was the first time since 1870 that the Republican Party had full control of each level of government in North Carolina. Since then, North Carolina legislators have enacted conservative laws attacking the rights of poor communities, especially communities of color. The laws have slashed unemployment benefits, attacked a woman’s right to a safe abortion, and rejected federal funding to provide Medicaid to thousands of people. In response, the Moral Monday movement has organized thousands of people to peacefully protest in front of the legislature building in Raleigh, North Carolina. Since the movement began, events on Moral Mondays have attracted crowds in the tens of thousands, and North Carolina officials have arrested more than 1,000 participants.

Pelles’ story sits at the nexus of workers’ rights and civil rights and gives insight into labor’s role in the Forward Together Moral Monday Movement, suggesting what labor must do to grow and stay relevant.

“

If something happens at the plant or when something happens in Ferguson, Missouri, workers should be there in full colors and in full motion. That's what unionism is.

This movement that we're building in North Carolina is really putting us in a position for lasting social justice and economic justice, and I think that people in all the different movements are learning that the movements are connected.

The North Carolina AFL-CIO has been a part of the slow-building, slowly-expanding Forward Together Moral Monday Movement from its early days. It has been important to me to see labor taking a big role in activities and in the larger coalition. The AFL-CIO in North Carolina has done a lot of education with their members about what's happening. They're really trying to help people understand that a labor movement has to be part of a greater social justice movement. As the labor movement has become more active in the coalition, the coalition has gained from this. Now people outside of labor are saying that we need to take on North Carolina as a "right to work" state. I think that shows the power of this coalition and the power of this experience.

Labor is finally seeing that workers don't live in a vacuum. Workers go to church, are in clubs and fraternities like the Rotary Club. Union members are everywhere. This movement helped labor put all of our members back

together, removed all those false compartments and helped people see that we're more than workers. When we reach out beyond ourselves to build a stronger movement for workers' rights, we can draw on all of that. And more than that, people are ready to be drawn into that.

The Forward Together Moral Monday Movement does not shy away from race. It is very diverse racially. And there is a recognition that the attacks are against minorities and women and poor people—and that crosses, in many instances, race lines. In the South, it is impossible to have an authentic movement that doesn't recognize that race is an issue.

I think that the labor movement has been hesitant to lift up race. Unions have held back and been timid and unwilling to organize in the South, which is where black workers are. This makes no sense when you think about it because black workers are the most likely to join unions. But unions have not wanted to put in the resources or the time. It takes time to organize the South. It's not a place where you can bring in a team of people and organize in a month. Nothing happens like that in the South. There's a way you have to go in to organize in the South, and I think our unions don't want to do it. But I think we have to. If we don't, we can't grow.

Black workers don't sit back and just see labor's lack of investment as neutral. People ask themselves, what does it mean that they don't want to organize us? Then in some instances, the unions aren't as active—or they have left. When you talk to older black workers, they sometimes say, "I didn't leave my union, the union left me." That's very serious, and the result is you don't have black workers in unions. You are not growing, and you do not benefit from the skills and talents of folks who've been organizing, in one way or another, all their lives because they had to. That's a tremendous loss for the trade union movement in this country.

We have to have bold, creative labor leadership, or we won't make it as workers. We need leaders who can take a stand on issues in the workplace and issues in the community. I hope labor moves out of a small notion of what the labor movement is toward a notion that the labor movement is part of a social justice movement. If something happens at the plant or when something happens in Ferguson, Missouri, workers should be there in full colors and in full motion. That's what unionism is. We've got to get a hold of that as part of our tradition. I think we've lost that. Getting it back is so important to me.

If more black workers were organized, we'd have wages lifted and higher benefits for people, which would translate into stronger communities. Towns would be stronger. You'd have a greater tax base. And social interactions would continue to build power. When people are in unions, they learn how to work together, how to organize, and how to build power. I think we're missing that when we don't have unions in the South.

My vision for black workers is that we are given the chance to fully participate in building a real labor movement in this country. A movement where there is full participation, where every skill and talent is utilized, where people come to the table and make decisions and help build something that's greater than we have now.

The Forward Together Moral Monday Movement really has been a great coming-together of all my strengths and talents. I'm so excited to be able to give back in this way and to bring all that I've learned back into this movement. I'm learning a lot, and I'm bringing a lot. And I owe a lot of that to my work in the labor movement.

I think that the labor movement has been hesitant to lift up race. Unions have held back and been timid and unwilling to organize in the South, which is where black workers are.

”