



Sandra Joyce Bellamy

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“Not just for black women, but for everybody.”

A T-Mobile worker on the challenges and importance of unionizing the South

Both of Sandra Joyce Bellamy’s parents were union members, so she naturally gravitated toward union employers when she started working in her native Charleston. But it is not easy to find a union employer in the state. South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley is openly hostile to unions and does not want manufacturing employers to bring jobs to the state if they are bringing a union workforce with them. “It’s not something that we want to see happen. We discourage any companies that have unions from wanting to come to South Carolina because we don’t want to taint the water,” Haley says.

Bellamy, who started working for T-Mobile in 2004, has seen the effects of this anti-union sentiment take a hold of her fellow co-workers. When Bellamy learned that T-Mobile Workers United and the Communications Workers of America union (TU-CWA) wanted to organize her T-Mobile workplace, Bellamy began to tell her colleagues about the benefits of joining a union. But, according to Bellamy, T-Mobile management worked hard to stop TU-CWA’s attempt to unionize the T-Mobile workforce. Indeed, a 2009 report by San Francisco State University Professor John Logan documented similar anti-union tactics by the company in multiple U.S. stores. Despite encountering resistance by management, Bellamy is committed to educating workers about the benefits of organizing to make T-Mobile a better workplace for the next generation of employees.

I am a customer service rep with T-Mobile. I'm in a small group called a closed loop. It's a resolution department. If a customer has an issue or wants to cancel, we see what it is we can do to try to maintain customers. The team of 15 is all women, except one. And all black, except one.

Why do we need a union? It's just about fairness, work ethics, sick leave—small things that any job should want to offer you. I've been out with pneumonia, but then I don't have sick leave. And if I don't have paid time off on the books, I don't get paid.

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T-Mobile came up with this rule that everyone has to work holidays—Christmas, Thanksgiving, every holiday. If we had a union, we wouldn't have to worry about that. They'd have to negotiate it before they could just say, “Oh Joyce, you'll be working every holiday effective December 25, 2014.”

A lot of women are single parents and need to be home with their families if they get sick. They have no protection. Yeah, we have Family and Medical Leave, but it's still up to the discretion of somebody to say if it is or isn't approved. Why not just give me sick time?

I'm just trying to help organize. I'm an organizer, and I just love it. I just love mingling with people. We would go out and try to get people to sign cards and try to educate the workers about what the union can do.

When we first started to try to unionize, we were pretty successful. We needed a certain percentage of signatures, and we were getting a lot of signatures. But then we had a huge amount of turnover in the company, and we had to start all over again. Management tells new hires what the union could not do and that it only wants the money. The job also tells new hires not to

talk to the union people. We try to educate them, but a lot of them really don't want to talk with us because they are afraid of losing their jobs.

If one of them asks me anything, I give them the information I know. If we become unionized, only a small percentage of your check goes to make sure you have representation if something happens. You're not paying thousands of dollars. Also, I let them know that we can't make changes without negotiating first. We have to take everything to the negotiation table. I'm not saying we would get everything we want, but it would be negotiated. We would try to get at least some of the things you want.

I just feel if we get together and work together it will be a much better workplace for everybody. Not just for black women, but for everybody.



I tell them that the union gives you more freedom and flexibility for your family. It allows you to make plans. It allows you to have quality family time. Without a union, they can come and say, “Bonuses are gone,” and that’s something you depend on. Or, management can say, “You have to work this holiday,” even though you’ve made other plans with your family. Without any kind of protection, you are subject to their will. I just feel if we get together and work together, it will be a much better workplace for everybody. Not just for black women, but for everybody.

I would really love to see T-Mobile get organized. I would love to see workers getting unionized in South Carolina. If we do, it would be a stepping stone for other companies and show that it can be done.

Organizing in the South is extremely hard. But I think if you get passionate about it and do it on a continuous basis, the unions will come. And black women are good organizers because we are passionate.

In 2014, the average U.S. union membership rate was **11.1%**

But in South Carolina, the union membership rate was only **2.2%**, one of the lowest union membership rates in the country.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>, January 2015, Economic News Release